TIGHT BIHDIHG BOOK

VANISHED TRAILS

The Last of the Veddas

By

R. L. SPITTEL

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PREFACE

THIS work has been written as one continuous story depicting the lives of three generations of Veddas in their transition from the troglodyte, food-gathering stage to the crude beginnings of the hut-dweller and food-producer. It is the true story (allowing something for the demands of the novel) of the last remnaht of Ceylon's most primitive aborigines—their swan-song.

The device of presenting social anthropology in the form of a novel that stresses the human interest, rather than after the severely detached manner of the purely scientific investigator, was begun in my previous book, *Savage Sanctuary*, and has been continued here—with more success, I hope; for here the action is in a lower key that permits the introduction of domestic details without marring the movement of the story.

R. L. S.

COLOMBO
November 1944

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INTRODUCTION

HERE and there in the arid lowland jungles of Ceylon there are still to be found destitute remnants of an aboriginal race whose life is that of the primitive food-gatherer. Veddas they are called, from the Sanskrit word meaning 'one who pierces, a hunter'. There are very few of them now left; the wonder is that they (with the elephant) have survived to this day in so small an island set on the ocean highways.

Old chronicles have little to tell us of these people. To glean facts from the early chapters of the *Mahawansa* (the ancient Pali chronicle of Ceylon) is like doing so from the sagas of the Norsemen. It is idle here to conjecture whether the Yakkhas whom Buddha is said to have found on the earliest of his three legendary visits to Ceylon, and whom Vijaya (about 543 B.C.), the banished Aryan prince of northern India from whom the Sinhalese claim origin, is also said to have found, were Veddas. If they were, they must have been a section that had already come under civilizing influences.

That the Veddas were the true aborigines of Ceylon is supported by their physical characteristics, their exogamous clans, and cult of the dead, which bring them into line with the half-savage jungle tribes of India. Scholars are agreed that they are a people of great antiquity, one of the primitive types of the human race.

Origin

To understand how the Veddas came to Ceylon we must go back to a time when the Island formed part of the great Indo-African-Australian continent.

The primitive races of the world today are the Australian aboriginal and the Negro. There is evidence to show that the Veddas derive from both these strains.

The Australian race (originating perhaps in the jungles of Chota Nagpur) moved south and east through the Malay peninsula, at that time continuous with Java and Borneo, on to New

Guinea and the neighbouring islands then joined to Australia. There was always a break between Borneo and the Celebes—Wallace's Line—a gap between the Indo-Malayan and Australasian-Malayan regions as shown by a difference between the fauna and birds on each side of the Macassar Strait. Early man must have crossed Wallace's Line in rafts or boats. Evidences of Australoid migration are seen in the scattered peoples found all the way across from the Deccan (Maravars, Pulayans, Vedans), the plateau of Chota Nagpur (Mundas, Santals, Hos), by way of the Malay peninsula (Sakai), Sumatra, Java, and the Celebes (Aetas) on to New Guinea.

Similarly the Negroes (originating probably in Africa) wandered far east to Papua and Melanesia along the southern littoral of Asia. There are two groups of the Negro race—the African and the Oceanic—the latter intermingling with the Australian in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and Fiji. In the intervening areas the easterly migration of the Negroes is seen in the Negritoes of the Travancore jungles, the Negroid strain in the Veddas, and the pygmy Negritoes of the Andaman Islands.

The only way to account for the presence of the Australoid and Negro races in widely distributed regions of the world is by assuming that the intervening land areas subsided when the Himalayan ranges were upheaved from the ocean bed. This at long intervals of time caused a severance in the land connexions between Australia, India and Africa which originally formed part of one vast continent, submerged Gondwanaland representing the connexion between India and Africa.

Paleolithic man was then cut off in the islands of the Eastern Archipelago and never advanced beyond that stage. He must have reached Ceylon from India with the leopards and langurs by a then existing land bridge.

The earliest historical reference to the Veddas is in *de Moribus Brachmanorum*^ written about A.D. 400, probably by Palladius, where the story is recorded of a Theban traveller who reached Ceylon in an Indian trading boat from Axume. Reconnoitring inland he came upon the Besadae—a shy people of low stature,

with large heads and shaggy unshorn hair. 'These people', he relates, 'are by far the smallest and the weakest, they live in rock caves, and know how to climb over the most intricately massed rocks, and thus gather pepper from the bushes,'

In the seventh century the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang speaks of the *Yakkhos* as having retired to the south-east part of the Island. In the eleventh century the Arabic geographer Alberini described the 'silent trade' with the savage *Ginn.* Only one writer during the Portuguese occupation of the maritime parts of Ceylon (1506-1608), Pedro Teixeira, writing in 1610, alludes to the Veddas, whom he calls *Pachas.* Captain Joao Ribeiro refers to them as *Bedas* in 1681, twenty years after the Dutch ejected the Portuguese from the Island. In 1675 Rijklof van Goens the elder, Dutch Governor of Ceylon, gave a fairly full description of the Veddas.

To Robert Knox, who wrote in 1681 after twenty years' captivity in Ceylon, is due the credit of the first precise account of the Veddas. He divided them into the wild and the tame. The former never showed themselves, but the latter traded with the people, and supplied the Sinhalese King's officers with ivory, honey, wax, and venison in exchange for arrow-heads and cloth.

They never cut their hair. Their clothing was scarcely enough to cover their buttocks. Their language was Sinhalese. They never tilled the ground; but were expert archers and carried at the waist a little axe with which they cut honey out of hollow trees. They preserved flesh in honey poured into the cavity of a tree, the opening of which they stopped with clay. They lived by streams under trees, with boughs strewn around them by night to give warning of approaching beasts. They had their bounds in the woods, beyond which they were not permitted to shoot or gather honey or fruit. They captured an elephant by striking an axe into the sole of its foot while the animal slept, and so laming it.

They gave hunting dogs with their daughters as portions. They were courteous, but if displeased went where they were better treated. They had a god peculiar to themselves. The

tamer sort built temples, the wilder sort placed their sacrifice under trees and danced round it—both men and women.

The wilder sort acquired arrow-heads by stealthily hanging a load of flesh in a blacksmith's shop with a leaf cut to the pattern they desired. The smith would fashion the arrow-heads and substitute them for the flesh; if he failed to do this they killed him at night. They were 'so curious of their arrows' that no smith could please them; not even the King, though he gave them of his best, for these they ground on a rock into another form. The King once used the Veddas in an expedition against the Dutch, 'and with their bows and arrows they did as good service as any; but afterwards they removed further in the woods and would be seen no more'.

There have been scores of writers on the Veddas since Knox's time. Pre-eminent among them were the Sarasins (1893) who described most accurately their physical anthropology and arts and crafts, and Seligman who made a careful study of their sociology and analysed their ceremonial dances and language.[1] Virchow, without leaving Germany, summarized in 1881 what was known of the Veddas up to that time, and gave measurements of Vedda skulls available to him,[2] while among other observers with greater opportunities for investigation, who contributed largely to our knowledge, were John Bailey, Hugh Neville, and Henry Parker.

It is likely, says Seligman, that when Sinhalese history began, inhabitants of Ceylon with enough Vedda blood in them to be called Veddas, had reached a far more advanced stage than others; and that Vijaya and his settlers may have intermarried with these. The Veddas in certain parts of the Island must have been more numerous than the Sinhalese; Vedda chiefs, time and again, rose to positions of trust and power under Sinhalese kings. But such chiefs could only have come from partially civilized semi-Veddas, and not from the wilder and purer representatives of their race.

[1] C. G. Seligman and Brenda Z. Seligman, *The Veddas* (Cambridge University Press, 1911).

[2] Professor R. Virchow, 'The Veddas of Ceylon and their Relation to the Neighbouring Tribes', *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1886).

As the Sinhalese tended to predominate, the Veddas withdrew towards the jungles of Bintenne and Wellasse, which are designated Maha Veddi Rata (Great Vedda Country) even in maps of the present day. In various parts of the Island, fields, villages, and families still retain Vedda names.

Language

The Veddas provide the remarkable phenomenon of a savage race speaking an Aryan dialect. Whatever language they spoke they lost, long ago and adopted a Sinhalese dialect in its place while still retaining their ancient customs and mode of life.

This dialect the Veddas gradually evolved from the limited vocabulary of the jungle Sinhalese, adopting those words suitable to their wild life. It is of respectable antiquity, for it contains many non-Sinhalese Aryan words derived from Hindi or Sanskrit as well as an archaic element akin to old Sinhalese, now called Elu. Many of the expressions of the Vedda dialect arose from *(a)* the tendency, as in all hunting languages, to avoid common names of animals, the bear for instance being called *hater a,* the enemy; and *(b)* an intentional effort to mystify strangers by the use of circumlfccutory speech—thus the monitor lizard *(munda* or *talagoya)* is called by them *bimbada ganeka,* one whose belly touches the ground (Seligman).

Physical Characteristics

Physically and culturally the Veddas are not a pure race, but were originally produced by a fusion of Australoid and Negrito strains with a later admixture of Dravidian and Sinhalese blood.

They are a dwarfish, sturdy, wavy-haired folk, with long narrow heads (dolichocephalic), low foreheads, marked superciliary ridges, and moderately broad noses (mesorrhine). Their colour is a dark chocolate-brown. The average stature of the men is just over five feet and of the women about four feet six inches. Taller individuals are suggestive of admixture with Sinhalese and Tamils.

In spite of his small size, the Vedda is lithe and muscular. His body is short and stocky (due to a tendency for a reduction in the lumbar vertebrae), but his limbs are long and muscular; his hands and feet are small, with a splaying out of the toes, especially the big toe. His anatomy manifests the persistence of certain juvenile features and primitive ape-like characters, such as incomplete differentiation in the muscular system, not usually found in more highly developed races.[1] The skull is small; the cranial capacity averaging about 1,200 c.c. The lowest cranial capacity ever recorded in normal human beings has been found in female Veddas; two specimens are extant with a capacity of only 960 c.c.

Being schooled to hardship from the cradle to the grave, the natural expression of the Vedda is one of apathetic taciturnity; but there is no mistaking the alert wild-eyed look bred of his dangerous environment. Ordinarily they are shy of strangers, harmless and peaceable, but reserved and independent. Their temper is easily roused. They say what they think and behave as they feel. They lie when necessary to protect themselves. They have been said to be incapable of laughter, an absurd myth perpetuated by show-Veddas. They are not savage barbarians, but children of Nature, genial and benevolent. A Vedda once said to me: 'You should not come into these jungles unless you have to. Life is uncertain. How do you know what's happening to your wife and children when you are here? How do they know what is happening to you? We never leave our wives and children like that.'

Social System

This consists of a clan organization with female descent. Every Vedda worthy of the name will tell you his *waruge* or clan—Morana, Unapane, etc.

The daughter and son represent the mother's family, and no one must marry one of the same family. A daughter should marry her father's sister's son, or her mother's brother's son, neither of

[1] **W. C. Osman Hill, ' Veddas', in *Loris*, vol. III, No. 6.**

whom would have the same clan name. The children of two brothers or two sisters cannot marry each other; that would be considered incest. They are monogamous as a rule, but occasionally one meets a man like Gama with two or even three wives.

In former times each Vedda group had its own boundaries, defined by such natural features as streams and rocks or prominent trees marked with the *dhuna-hena* or bow-mark. These boundaries were well known to each group and were seldom transgressed. Rock-shelters were guarded with special care, and also hills favoured by bambara bees.

Religion

The Veddas have no legends regarding the origin of man and the universe. They believe in spirits that haunt natural features such as rocks, trees, and streams. They have a more definite faith in tutelary spirits of the dead or Nae Yaku who live unseen around their homes, and in the spirits of a few long-dead heroes. These they propitiate with ceremonial dances.

Arts and Crafts

Among the wilder Veddas these are few and simple. They practise no magic. They have no musical instruments, but accompany their dances merely by rhythmically clapping hands or slapping them on the abdomen. Their songs consist of invocations and lullabies. They neither paint nor tattoo themselves, and wear few ornaments.

Their caves are embellished with crude drawings of men and animals wrought by a finger dipped in moistened ash or powdered charcoal.

Their pottery is such as a child would make.

The bow and arrow and the hatchet are the Vedda implements. But nowadays muzzle-loaders have replaced bows; and iron strike-a-lights have supplanted rubbing-sticks as sources of fire.

Traps and snares were probably unknown to the Veddas, but

they have learnt to use the sprung noose and the dead-fall from the Sinhalese.

Their hunting is done with dogs. Honey, monkeys, monitor lizards, yams, and wild fruits are their mainstay.

Present-day Veddas

About two hundred years ago, in the time of the Dutch occupation, the Veddas were to be found all over the Island, even in the Jaffna peninsula. Today, through miscegenation with the Sinhalese and Tamils and an appalling death-rate, they are only to be found in scattered groups.

The old classification of the Veddas was into (i) Rock Veddas, (ii) Village Veddas, and (iii) Coast Veddas. The first of these can now be said to be no more. The primitive nomadic food-gatherers have now become more or less settled food-producers like the jungle Sinhalese.

As long ago as 1881, Virchow wrote: 'May the zeal of the observer know no flagging, that before the utter extinction of this already much depleted race, the language and customs, the physical and mental constitution of the Veddas may be in all particulars firmly established..'[1]

This I have striven to do in this book in my own small way.

[1] **loc. cit.**

CHAPTER I

THE CAVE-DWELLERS

JUNGLE dawn! One by one the human occupants of the Pihilegoda cave awoke to face another hungry day. Food, the sole concern of their lives, had to be snatched from burrow and brake. Food, wary and fleet-footed, slinking in daytime lairs; buried food with only a slender vine to betray its presence; food cached in the crevices by industrious little creatures that suck the nectar of wild flowers.

Here in the year 1902, in the island of Ceylon, which is no more than half the size of England, were food-gatherers living troglodyte lives in their ancestral dens. Here the last remnant of Ceylon's aborigines, the Veddas, consisted of no more than about six families under the patriarchal protection of their good chief, Neela. They hardly knew the meaning of the word agriculture, even that elemental form of it known as the chena, adopted by their more sophisticated brethren. Nor could they fashion the craziest bark and wattle shack. They were nomad hunters; their food was entirely of the forests, their weapons the bow and arrow, and the little axe they carried hitched over the shoulder or thrust under the waist-string for handiness in a moment of sudden peril. Meagre loin-cloths were their only attire.

Bundling up in strips of cloth their monkey-skin pouches containing bark chews, and knotting them round their waists, three of the men, with their hounds at heel, took to the jungle—*randanawa* they called it. Whether they would return that evening, or not for a day or two, depended on the luck of the chase.

The women and children left behind nibbled what fragments of food they could lay hands on. A few of them went scrounging for yams and edible herbs. The boys—naked, dusty, tousled scallawags—grouped themselves under the leadership of the seven-year-old Poromola, second son of the chief Neela. His

brother, Vela, was three years older, but Poromola was their acknowledged leader.

'Today we'll cut bambaras,' he declared.

An immense nuga tree stood on top of the great boulder that roofed the cave. Its trailing aerial roots strung the face of the rock like the strings of a cello. Clambering up these like a pack of monkeys, the boys reached the summit and deployed in search of kiri-vel vines with which to construct a means for the descent. Lining two of these out parallel, they dextrously interwove the rungs, and soon had dangling down the vertical front of the boulder a ladder which they firmly secured by its end to a stout sapling on the brow. Then they set about fashioning the appurtenances of the honey-gatherer—a smoker, made up of a bundle of green sprigs ensheathing dry litter, a stake pointed at one end and four-pronged at the other, and a lashed fragment of gourd to receive the honey.

Descending the ladder, Poromola plastered the rock face with lumps of mud in imitation of a colony of bambara honeycombs. Then, armed with his ungainly implements, he climbed down the ladder to the level of the make-believe hives. He first smoked the combs to scatter the imaginary bees, spitted them with the stake, and transferred them into the gourd. Regaining the summit, he made a great show of beating off attacking bees and rushed into the jungle to escape them, his companions joining in the fun. Finally they collected round the gourd and pretended to eat the 'honey'.

This, their favourite game, was done in exact mimicry of their elders; though it was pantomime, it fitted them in after life for the hazardous role of honey-cutter of the precipices, which only the bravest and hardiest of them would eventually attain. And nowhere was rock better adapted to this purpose than at Pihilegoda cave in the Sitala Wanniya hill, where generation after generation of Veddas had received their training.

Tiring of their play, the boys roamed the jungle with their pellet bows, chasing birds and lizards, observing spoor, climbing trees, and eating wild berries, however unsavoury. Quantity, not quality, was what mattered to their hungry stomachs.

By noon the women returned with yams which they boiled and ate. Then they settled down, patiently, to await the return of their men.

It was late in the evening when the hunters arrived with honey, a few monitor lizards, and a brace of wanderoo. These were impartially divided among the family groups according to their number. Soon the fires were alight and savoury flesh simmered in a concoction of wild yams, herbs, and fiery little chillies. During the day the men had satisfied something of their hunger off a roasted monkey, and now saw to it that the women and children had their full share. Eating to repletion when food was in plenty, and resigning themselves to privation in times of scarcity, was the routine of their existence.

The Pihilegoda cave was cunningly concealed by Nature; like all Vedda rock-shelters, it was set well up the tree-mantled side of the Sitala Wanniya hill, strewn with boulders and packed with innumerable dens of bear, leopard, and porcupine, and every cranny was the likely habitat of some deadly reptile.

A herd of elephants homed on the lower slopes of the hill. Awakening towards evening from their daytime slumbers, they would trumpet their challenge, to the jungle, proclaiming they were afoot. The chena-dwellers of Kaluwinne, five miles away, would hear it and be troubled. To them it was the alert that betokened the raid on their plantain groves and manioc plots—for there is no food more savoury to the elephant than that of men's growing. If the vigilance of the watchers were to fail a single night, months of labour would be wasted.

As darkness closed on the jungle, the Vedda family groups, each in its allotted nook of the cave, lay round the comfort of their fires. Scantily clad as they were—the men in merest scraps of loin-cloths, the women in rags barely sufficient for their hips, the younger children wholly naked—their fires were their only source of warmth against the chills of the night. Some lay on deer skins, others on a spread of pana leaves which served to smooth the unevenness of their rocky beds. The children snuggled up so close to the fires that they awoke in the morning all ashen. As

for the dogs, dawn usually found them curled up in the very midst of the warm ashes.

Fitfully during the night one or other of the Veddas would awaken in the cold and stir up the dying embers giving warmth to the group. He would squat by the fire a long while before resuming his slumbers. The petulant whimper of a hungry child fumbling at its mother's breasts could be heard at intervals, or the uneasy growl of a cur disturbed by some ominous footfall.

So, while the creatures of the night roamed around them, the Veddas of the cave slept tranquilly.

Tonight, however, it was to be otherwise.

Selli, Neela's wife, heard it first—a strange cry away down in the jungle.

' Did you hear that ?' she asked her husband who lay beside her, in an awed whisper.

'Hear what?' he asked drowsily.

As if in answer, it came again—a frail, eerie sobbing from the darkness. A dog wailed and was silenced with a curse; it cowered down moaning.

Soon all the Veddas were awake, the younger ones clinging to their parents. No one spoke. After a long while they heard it once again for the last time—feebler and farther away it seemed.

The silence that followed was ominous. 'Hetha', the dread whisper went round. None knew better than those children of Nature the luring ways of jungle demons. Sometimes in the form of human beings, sometimes of animals, they decoyed men to their doom.

One by one the Veddas lay down again; but only to the children did sleep come. It was still dark when the pied cuckoo on its lofty roost heralded the imminence of dawn, fluting its doleful call, *'Botua kappan'* (cut the throat)—to be reiterated like a knell all day long. A shadowy form arose and was leaving the cave, when Neela asked, 'Who's that?'

' I , brother,' answered Bandaradua-rala. They were both about the same age, forty-five, and married to two sisters.

'Where are you going?'

'To learn the cause of those cries.'

'Wait till dawn, brother,' Neela advised. 'Darkness still lingers.'

*I cannot. Those cries lay on my chest all night. I should have gone sooner', and Bandaradua slipped down the lip of the cave and melted into the shadows.

The sense of direction is developed to perfection in the Vedda; with eyes closed he can reach his objective as the arrow flies. The man had not even picked up a firebrand.

He was groping his way cautiously along, not to be taken unawares by any prowling creature, when the roll of a pebble behind him made him turn sharply round. Gripping his axe, he stole cautiously towards it, and saw something crouch behind a boulder. He raised his axe to strike. . . .

'Don't!' exclaimed a childish voice, and Poromola, Neela's little son, revealed himself.

'What are you doing here?' asked Bandaradua in surprise.

'I followed you.'

'Go back,' the man snapped.

'Don't send me away,' pleaded the boy.

The man pondered a moment. 'Well, come along. Keep close behind me.'

They had reached the foot of the hill, when sniffing, and ripping sounds arrested them. Abruptly these ceased, as a porcupine that had been gnawing a root bustled off.

Reaching a rocky streamlet, Bandaradua followed its course for some distance. Then he circled about, pausing often and peering intently into the gloom. Somewhere here, he reckoned, was the source of the mysterious cries. But strain his senses as he might, nowhere could he discern the least movement or sound.

A scarcely perceptible lifting of the darkness revealed to the Vedda that he had halted near an enormous banyan tree whose wide-spreading branches dropped a profusion of aerial roots enclosing a network of recesses around its giant stem.

Suddenly he stiffened to attention. The faintest of sounds had come from very close. Was it a sigh of the wind? No, the air was close and breathless. He moved cautiously, his eyes probing the crannies. In one of these there seemed to be a heavier shadow than elsewhere. A sleeping bear perhaps? Bandaradua gripped

his axe, and cautioning the boy with a gesture, he emitted a low grunt holding himself against attack. Nothing stirred.

He stooped and groped with his hand expecting to feel fur—but touched something smooth and cold. Instinctively he withdrew his hand and shrank back, his skin prickling. Fascinated, the man stood rooted there with his eyes riveted to the object, until the first faint flush of dawn revealed dimly the naked form of a woman, cuddling to her breast a bundle of dirty cloth. He approached and touched her again. Her clammy rigidity told him she was dead. Gently he disengaged the bundle from her clenched hands and tremulously felt within its folds to discover an infant. The woman had stripped herself of her only garment to give warmth to the thing she bore.

Without waiting to ascertain whether the child lived, Bandaradua hastened back to the cave, Poromola following excitedly at a run.

'Take this,' he said handing the frail burden to Neela's wife.

Reluctant at first, Selli handed the child she was suckling to another woman and tremulously uncovered the foundling.

'Has it life?[5] she asked dubiously.

'I didn't wait to see,' Bandaradua replied.

'Give it your breast,' suggested one of the women.

Selli adjusted her nipple to the infant's lips, and moved closer to the fire that Neela kindled. There was no response. She squeezed a few drops of milk into the little mouth, only to see them dribble away.

With tender solicitude she coaxed and fondled the lifeless form for a long while without result. She was about to abandon her efforts, when, revived by the fire's warmth, the infant gave a slight gasp. There was a faint grip of the nipple, a mere tremor of the lips, then a spasmodic sucking and a feeble cry.

Thus it was that the child they afterwards called Gama, because he was born on a journey *(gamana),* came into the clan.

Inspecting the body of the mother later that day, they saw that she was young, perhaps fifteen, emaciated and bruised.

'What devil could have treated this poor girl so?' pondered Neela. 'Who can she be?'

But among those Veddas there was one who knew.

CHAPTER 2

DANCE TO THE NAE YAKU

THE Veddas vaguely believed in a multitude of phantoms that haunted rocks and trees, glades and springs. They had besides a firm faith in the guardianship of the living by the spirits of the dead; not only of the forgotten nameless dead, long merged into a general spirit world, but more especially of the recent remembered dead, called collectively Nae Yaku.

The prevalence of cousin-marriage among them created a close inter-relationship between the various members of the clan; and the Nae Yaku stood towards their living kindred in the light of friends and relatives who, if revered, manifested benevolence, but if neglected, remained indifferent to their sorrows or evinced active hostility.

Dominant over the Nae Yaku were the spirits of a few traditional heroes, chief of whom were the brothers Kande Yaka and Bilindi Yaka. The legend went that Kande Yaka, when seven years old, was entrusted with the care of his infant brother, Bilindi Yaka, while their parents were out hunting. Bilindi, feeling hungry, began to cry and would not be comforted, so Kande Yaka dashed him on the ground and killed him. Kande Yaka afterwards became the patron of hunters, and both brothers were always supplicated at the beginning of all propitiatory ceremonies.

Next in importance to Kande Yaka was Bambura Yaka, also called Ala Yaka, who, though he might provide yams and help to kill pigs, might also, if angered, cause illness or lead dogs astray and have them killed by leopards. Similar in nature was Panniki Yaka.

Here then was the very birth of religion; the postulates of the groping mind of primitive man to account for the enigma of good and evil. Beyond that stage the Vedda religion did not go. They had no conception of a Supreme Being, a God of the Universe. 'Where is he?' they might ask, 'On a rock, or a tree, or an ant-hill? We never saw a God.'

Closed in by their jungles, rife with malign influences, their minds did not aspire to the heavens. They paid no obeisance to the sun or moon.

Intimate as was the bond between the living and the dead, there was nothing that the Veddas feared more than a corpse. To that inert husk, they imagined, must cling something of life itself, and that a period of some days must elapse before the spirit of the deceased could pass into the general spirit world. Until such time it haunted the place of death. So attached to a loved one might a spirit be that it would endeavour by throwing sand or stones, or assuming the form of a suddenly vanishing beast, to inspire fear that would cause sickness and death, thus ensuring reunion in the spiritual sphere. Or so earthbound might some forlorn soul be as to endeavour by such means to draw the attention of the living to itself, and be freed by a propitiatory rite.

The Veddas of the Pihilegoda cave, having covered in all haste the corpse of the wandering Vedda girl, most scrupulously shunned thereafter the spot where she lay, making a wide detour on their passage into and out of the cave, to avoid even the sight of the vast and gloomy tree that was her sepulchre.

That all was not right with her restless spirit soon became manifest. One night, within a week of her death, a centipede bit a child; the boy, Poromola, fell ill with a fever, probably caused by his alarming experience; there was no luck in hunting; and most significant of all, stones kept falling into the cave. All were signs that the spirit of the dead craved the attention of the living.

The morning of the seventh day found all the Veddas, men, women and children, gathered at their dancing place by the foot of the hill—merely a flat clearing of the jungle that also served as their bartering ground. *Wadipola* they called it. This was their sylvan temple amidst the towering trees. It contained no emblem of God, no altar. Here they were now to enact a ritual as old as the rocks around them—the dance to the Nae Yaku.

Neela, chieftain, priest and dancer all in one, stepped into the middle of the space, stabbed an arrow into the ground, and set beside it a gourd of water, and some boiled yams on a tripod of

sticks. Holding an arrow in both hands he moved round the offering and began the ancient incantation:

> My departed one, my departed one, my God!
> Where art thou wandering?

The monotonous chant, inviting the spirits to the feast, went on and on. Almost imperceptibly the kapurale's walk became a shuffle, his paces lengthened. With each step he patted the ground twice with the ball of the advanced foot and his body swayed rhythmically from the waist in a half turn. His movements gained momentum as his excitement increased. Each half turn of the body forward was accompanied by a lowering of the head, the dishevelled hair falling over the face; and at each half turn backward the head was tossed up.

Some of the men joined in with snatches of song and dance, marking the rhythm by tapping their chests or abdomens, while the onlookers clapped their hands in unison.

The general invocation now gave place to one in which each of the more prominent Yaku was individually addressed. Kande Yaka, Lord of the Dead, was the first invoked. His prowess in hunting as a man was recalled.

> Going from hill to hill, tracking from spoor to spoor
> The path of the sambhur.

The vehemence of the dancer's movements, his utter obliviousness to his surroundings, soon indicated that the ceremony was gathering to its climax. Neela, imbued with a belief in the reality of the Yaka about to possess him, surrendered himself to a frenzy. Streaming with sweat, he panted and gasped, his shaggy hair tossing wildly. Then, as the Yaka entered him, he moaned and screamed, and with a tremor of the body collapsed, unconscious, into the hands of one who closely followed him.

Worked to a contagious excitement, two of the other Veddas became possessed.

Recovering dazedly from his fall, Neela bent over the offerings as if inspecting them, and, to show that the Yaka within him was pleased, he sprang suddenly away, shouting, 'Ah! Ah!'

Other Yaku were invoked in turn: Bilindi Yaka, Bambura Yaka and the rest of them. With each possession the kapurale, going into paroxysms, panted out instructions he received in hoarse, guttural accents and shouts of 'Ah! Ah!'

The spirits, having declared their approval of the gifts, promised protection from evil and help in hunting. The kapurale, pointing to the sky, indicated the auspicious hour for starting; like a nosing hound he gave the direction it should take; and marked on his forearm the length of the quarry's horns. The ceremony ended with an invocation to the Nae Yaku:

> Hail! Hail!
> Come wherever you may be;
> On a tree, on a rock, or in the forest, come!
> Come and partake of this.
> Grant us your aid as you did when alive.
> Eat and drink. Think no wrong of us.
> We also eat and drink.

Neela paused a few moments, and then continued:

> You who sought us, whom we failed to save,
> Grieve not, whoever you may be,
> But lie at rest. We have your child;
> He shall be as one of ours.
> And should the man who wronged you live,
> May his fate be as he deserves.

Going up to Selli, who stood with the foundling in her arms, Neela passed his hands over its face and chest. Then Bandaradua, who had been a silent spectator, stepped out and with bowed head stood before Neela for his blessing. The Veddas thought that a strange thing for the dour old Bandaradua to do.

Finally, all, including the children and even the dogs, gathered round the simple offering of yams and water and partook of them.

Thus did those folk of the woods make communion with the spirits of their newly dead.

CHAPTER 3

POROMOLA WEDS

EIGHT years had passed. Sickness and misadventure had reduced the Vedda clan to barely a dozen individuals.

Poromola, second son of Neela, was now a sturdy lad of fifteen. He was the constant companion of Gombira, his brother-in-law, who was twice his age, and a splendid hunter. Always on the trails together, Gombira taught Poromola all the jungle craft he knew. To become as accomplished as his mentor was the boy's sole desire. It was a grand day for Poromola when under Gombira's guidance he climbed down a cane ladder and for the first time took from the face of a precipice a bambara comb—a fine achievement for one so young.

But Poromola was marked out for other duties as well. His father, the kapurale, had chosen him as his successor. Into the esoteric mysteries of that calling he had to serve a long and rigorous apprenticeship, as the boy increasingly realized from that first day when Neela led him up to the isolated ledge that was to be his place of instruction, and initiated him with the solemn invocation to the Yaku.

'Ayubowa! May your life be long. From today I am rearing a scholar of the mind. Take no offence, I pray. I but unfold to my pupil how to give offerings to you![5]

The novitiate was exacting. During all that period both teacher and pupil, as the kapurale before any ceremony, had scrupulously to avoid even touching those food taboos, pig or fowl. Sambhur or monitor lizard was the only permissible flesh.

Poromola was an apt pupil, and in the course of time imbibed all the knowledge imparted to him. But as long as his father lived he was not permitted to perform ceremonies by himself, though he might occasionally assist in them and become possessed of the Yaku.

Of his two accomplishments Poromola inclined more to the chase than to the ceremonial dance; and if he responded willingly

to his father's behests, he sprang to his feet with greater alacrity when Gombira the hunter called.

It was now the month of July, the dry season of the year, the great hunting time of the Veddas, when game frequented water-holes, and honeycombs were at their fullest. Taking their dogs, the men would set out for their favourite resorts, about Galmede and the Nuwaragala Hills, and return days afterwards with smoked flesh and honey. Most of this was used for food, but some was reserved for barter with the Sinhalese chena-dwellers or the pedlar Moors who from time to time visited, with their laden pack-bulls, the scattered forest communities.

The Veddas, proverbially jealous of their women, permitted no strangers to approach their caves, which were always well concealed in the enforested hill-sides. The paths to these caves were a carefully guarded secret, not indicated by even a snapped sapling or blazed tree. Every Vedda child soon learnt to pick its way through the wilds by observation of natural landmarks with no artificial aid whatsoever to guide it. They were a folk as shy and silent as the deer in the dappled shades.

If a stranger wished to make contact with the Veddas, it was the acknowledged custom for him to approach within calling distance of a cave, shout, and await the arrival of its occupants, without expecting an answering call which might betray the position of their refuge.

One morning the Veddas of the Pihilegoda cave were having a restful time, their men having returned the previous evening from a successful three-day hunt, when a faint 'Hoo!' reached them from the direction of their wadipola at the foot of the hill.

'Who can that be?' asked Neela.

'The Moor, perhaps. He usually comes about this time,' said Gombira, who was whittling an arrow shaft.

The 'Hoo' was repeated.

'Let's go down and see,' Neela said, rising. Gombira and Poromola followed him.

They found, awaiting them, Agamilawa, the Moor from Kattankudi on the coast, with his son. A pack-bull, bestraddled

with sacks, was cropping what grass and shoots it could find in the heavy shade.

The Veddas grunted a greeting and seated themselves. They were a people of few words even among themselves. Their language, a Sinhalese patois, interspersed with archaic Aryan words and circumlocutory expressions, after the manner of jungle folk, was easily understood by anyone with a knowledge of Sinhalese.

'Anything for barter?' asked the Moor, as they sat chewing the fragments of tobacco he distributed.

'We have,' said Neela.

'Whatever you need is here.' The pedlar nodded towards his beast of burden.

At a sign from Neela, Poromola left for the cave. He returned after a while bearing on his shoulder a bulging sack constricted at the middle, and a gourdful of bambara honey. Undoing the knot at the mouth of the sack he tumbled out a medley of dried meat of sambhur, monkey, pig, and monitor lizard; and, releasing the middle constriction, a heap of swiftlets' nests and the medicinal herb, *bin-kohomba,* both of which the Veddas collect, solely for barter.

Agamilawa, helped by his son, heaved the packs off his sumpter beast, very much to its relief, and set them down before him.

'What do you want?' he asked.

There was an awkward pause.

' Say, son,' Neela bade Poromola.

By a tacit understanding the two older Veddas had decided that this was to be the lad's day. Seated on their haunches, chewing their quid, they watched the proceedings with a quizzical interest.

'Let's see some cloth,' Poromola said.

Rummaging in his sack, the Moor extracted a bundle of Batticoloa sarongs and displayed them.

'Not this kind,' the boy said hesitatingly, having pretended to examine them.

'Women's cloths?'

Poromola nodded.

'Ah, is that the way of it!' the Moor commented, directing a smile at Neela; but receiving no encouragement, he suppressed the jest that rose to his lips, and proceeded to lay out before the boy's bewildered gaze a garish display of flowered chintzes.

After prolonged consideration, Poromola's choice fell on a pink one. The Moor tore off a length, folded it deftly and handed it over. ' Any thing else?'he asked.

Seeing the lad's hesitation, he plunged his hand into his sack and drew out some bangles and bead necklaces. 'What about these?' he asked.

Poromola picked out a pair of nickel bracelets and a red bead necklace. Contented with his purchases he moved off.

'Nothing for yourself on a day like this?' the pedlar suggested, snapping open a tempting clasp-knife.

* Such things are not for me,' Poromola said, though his eyes gloated. ' I have all I want. Now give them something,' nodding towards Neela and Gombira.

'What more can we have?' Neela asked the Moor.

'Not much. Those things I gave the boy about cover the value of what he brought. But I can't let you go empty-handed.' He lugged out of his sack a pungent bundle of tobacco leaves tied by their stems, detached half a dozen of the worst he could find, and set them aside. To these he added a handful of areca-nuts, about two dozen betel leaves, a measure of salt and a packet of chunam —articles which he knew the Veddas prized. ' You may have the lot,' he said with a generous air.

These pedlar Moors travel far and are hard bargainers. The ignorant Veddas were always easy prey, taught to look upon their own commodities, got by the sweat of their brow and at the peril of their life, as of little value compared with the shoddy stuff deemed good enough for jungle folk. So the Veddas felt they had done very well.

'Give the boy that knife,' Gombira suggested.

'How can I do that, when I have already given so much?' Agamilawa protested with an injured air. . . . 'Hmm . . . All right! Considering the occasion I give it as my present', and

with a twinkle in his eye, he thrust the knife into Poromola's eager grasp.

When they returned to the cave Poromola went up to where the dark-eyed, tousy-haired girl, Kalu, was seated, and placed in her hands the gifts he brought. For them it was to be their wedding-day.

The girl was only thirteen, Poromola two years older. Veddas mated at an early age, the girls often before puberty. Cousin-marriage was the custom, but with this strong distinction—that it had to be between the children of brother and sister; never between the offspring of two brothers or two sisters, which they regarded as incest, punishable, in former times, by death.

Who Poromola's wife was to be was a foregone conclusion. He had no eligible cousin, but there was Kalu. She had come as a little girl of three with Bandaradua-rala and his wife when they first joined the clan some ten years previously, their own folk, the Veddas of the Bandaradua rock, ha\ring died out.

Bandaradua and his wife were an ill-assorted pair, always bickering. The man's natural moroseness and irascibility was heightened by a sinister scar across his scraggily bearded face, and a blinded eye caused by a bear's claws. The woman was a nagger. Quarrels between them were incessant. Her ill humours were usually vented on her step-daughter, the innocent little Kalu, of whom Bandaradua was very fond. Her retaliation against him was to persecute the girl.

That their squabbles did not seriously interfere with their marital relations was evidenced by the birth of a child, which was followed two years later by another. The coming of these served only to aggravate Kalu's misery. Added to her duties as common drudge, she had now to tend the children. If one should cry or meet with any mishap, it was she who was to blame. Her every childish delinquency was punished, mainly in Bandaradua's absence, by chastisement and starvation.

Arriving tired one afternoon after a long hunt, when a man's temper is frayed to breaking point, Bandaradua found Kalu crying bitterly outside the cave. Her frail body was wealed with blows and there were burns on her thighs. The man beat his

wife so unmercifully that day that it was all the men could do to prevent her being killed. Then he retired into the jungle, as Veddas usually did, to work off his ill-humour.

As he had not returned for two days, Gombira went in search of him. Not until he had scoured the enforested Sitala Wanniya hill through many arduous hours did he come upon him towards evening, in the wind-swept Galapita cave at the very summit.

Gombira was a young man of thirty, Bandaradua some fifty years or more. Gombira's mission required finesse. He made the meeting seem accidental, and, affecting tiredness, seated himself beside the other.

Unfolding his monkey-skin pouch from his waist cloth, he extracted his last fragment of tobacco and offered it to Bandaradua who tossed it into his mouth and began chewing; he had been starving for two days.

Allowing time for the soothing properties of the narcotic to take effect, Gombira essayed his first remark: 'A strong wind beats here/

Bandaradua deigned no reply.

Gombira began ruminating audibly on the hard conditions of their life, putting a discreet question now and then.

Bandaradua's grunts gradually became articulate. Subtly the younger man directed the talk to their women and children, and then slipped in the subject on his mind.

'I know, uncle, it's none of my business,[5] he said, 'but don't you think that these quarrels between you and your woman might one day end seriously?'

'It nearly did the other day,' growled Bandaradua.

'That girl Kalu seems to be the cause of your troubles.'

' What can she do, poor thing? She's treated worse than a dog.'

'Don't we all know that?' Gombira agreed. 'Then why not give the girl to us. My wife and I will look after her.'

Bandaradua pondered a while. Coming to a sudden decision, he rose, saying:'Good. Let's go down. It's getting late.'

No sooner did they arrive at their cave than Bandaradua took Kalu by the hand and led her to where Handi, Gombira's wife, was seated, and said,' From today your place is here'.

He sprang aside just in time

'They may have the bitch,' was the parting benediction of the girl's tormentor.

But soon she was to realize the extent of her loss. And this, added to Kalu's obvious happiness under the new arrangement, served only to increase the harridan's ill-humour, though an affected disdain was all the retaliation she dared.

Responding to the kindness she received, Kalu blossomed into a fine girl.

Even as a child Poromola had always been sensitive to Kalu's ill treatment. Of a kindly and generous nature, he felt for her most when chastisement was the aftermath to some innocent escapade she shared with him and the other children, whose parents never minded what they did.

Poromola and Kalu now often found themselves coming upon each other in lonely places. But each was ignorant that it was of the other's contriving. One day he surprised her adorned in a necklace of jasmine blossoms strung on a fibre, with red ixoras stuck in the holes of her ear lobes that Gombira had made with a thorn. That day, had Poromola been of a more impetuous nature, he might have brought to a natural culmination, after the fashion of primitive folk, his passion for the girl. But Poromola had a sense of rectitude rare in one so young.

The feelings of the two for each other were not lost on the older folk. And so when, in a single day, thanks to the opportune arrival of the pedlar Moor, the affair reached its rapid climax, it seemed as if all had been pre-arranged, and created no surprise except to Kalu, whose heart fluttered with a sudden rapture as Poromola placed his gifts in her hands.

Having done this, Poromola sat down beside his parents, while the women and children grouped round Kalu admiring her rare possessions. The first excitement over, the women addressed themselves to the preparation of the marriage feast.

Gombira called Kalu away, and together they clambered up the hill to a crevice from which sprouted long, pale-green mottled tufts of bow-string hemp. Wrenching off half a dozen of the leaves, Gombira split them in halves and peeled off their outer coverings. Then, one by one, he squeezed the pulp off the fibre

by drawing them repeatedly between his palm and a low bough, until there only remained a silken wisp of tough pliable filaments. These he handed to Kalu, who twisted them deftly into a neat cord about a yard long—her sole contribution to the wedding ceremony.

When the feast was ready, and the girl dressed in her finery, Poromola went up and stood before her. She rose and knotted round his waist the hempen cord she had twisted. He adjusted his loin-cloth over it, and with an arrow tip cut away the old string. That trifling ritual made them man and wife. Henceforth, as long as Kalu lived, Poromola would wear no waist cord but of her twisting.

Standing thus a few moments side by side the pair presented an odd contrast: the boy in his statuesque nudity; the budding beauty of the begrimed, frowzy-haired girl robed in a cloth of startling newness. It would, however, not be long before the cloth became sobered to a fitter drabness.

They sat down to the feast—a stew of dried meat and wild yams seasoned with tiny, red-hot chillies and pungent leaves, followed by honey. Large kenda leaves served for plates. Kalu shared out her husband's portion first, and did not eat hers until he had finished. Soon afterwards Poromola picked up his weapons and led his wife away, his dog, Kadiya, following at their heels.

Many days passed and they had not returned. Neela, becoming anxious, sent Bandaradua and Gombira in search of them. They had not gone many miles when they met the pair returning, Poromola with two langurs on a carrying-stick, and Kalu with a honeycomb between two bark slats bound together.

'Where have you been so long?' Gombira asked.

'Just wandering about,' Poromola casually replied.

'You should have told us you meant to be away so long.'

'We didn't know ourselves. It just happened. Day followed day and we were happy, weren't we?' He looked at Kalu and she smiled back.

CHAPTER 4

PIHILEGODA CAVE ABANDONED

THERE was not a Vedda of the Pihilegoda cave but manifested some stigma of his environment. Most of them, even the very young, had enlarged spleens—Nature's defence against malaria. Parangi (framboesia), so like syphilis except for its mode of infection, first introduced by the Portuguese through their African slaves, was endemic in the arid jungles. Contracted in childhood, the malady lay dormant in the constitution throughout life, recrudescing every now and then and leaving crippled joints and distorted bones. Ringworm was rife. Every tousled head was lousy. Foul bandages secured herbal poultices over many an ulcer or infected wound. Yet, despite it all, they were a brave little group who accepted their ills as implicit in existence.

Neela was getting too old for the rigours of the chase. Bandaradua, about the same age, was taciturn and moody. So most of the hunting fell to Gombira and Poromola and the loutish Kanghireliya.

Gombira was the very exemplar of the Vedda hunter. No more than five foot four inches in height, shaggy-haired and sparsely-bearded, his eyes, deeply set under prominent brow ridges, sparkled with a constant alertness that missed nothing on the trail. Soft-footed as a panther, he stalked his quarry close, never returning from a hunt empty-handed. He was as tough as hemp, capable of great endurance, and imperturbable in peril. Generous-hearted to a degree, he cheerfully accepted the role of mainstay of that community.

Such was the man who had had the training of Poromola in his formative years. Now, even at the age of sixteen, the lad could creditably take his stand at Gombira's side. They were an inseparable pair.

The bond between their wives, too, was close. When the men were out hunting, they would wander away with an axe between them, gathering herbs, poisoning fish in pools, seeking honey,

and often routing out with their dogs a monitor lizard or a pangolin. Sometimes they accompanied their husbands on the trails.

Kanghireliya owed his name to pendulous appendages in his ears. He was a good-natured simpleton of forty, and was more useful as a beast of burden when some large quarry, such as a sambhur, was killed, than as a hunter. Smaller animals, like mouse-deer and monitors, were, however, within his competence, thanks mainly to his well-trained bitch, Mukulu, easily the best of the Vedda dogs.

His matrimonial affairs had been unfortunate. His half-Vedda wife had abandoned him for a Sinhalese some years previously. Since then he had forsworn the sex.

One day Neela told him of a Vedda woman he had seen in a Sinhalese chena some miles away who should suit him well.

'No woman for me. I've had enough with one,' scorned Kanghireliya.

He lost no time, however, in visiting that chena, and contriving, with a deal of patience, to meet the woman alone.

She was not much to look at, but then neither was he. Being a widow, she did not stand on ceremony, and their wooing was swift and complete. He promised to call for her in a couple of days. On the eve of doing so, he confided his intention to Neela and Gombira, giving them a naive account of his adventure, much to their amusement.

The morning dawned and the Veddas awoke one by one, sitting up and lazing off the inertia of sleep.

'What ails Kanghireliya that he sleeps so late?' observed Neela, glancing towards the end of the cave where the man lay with his brindled bitch, Mukulu, beside him. Gombira walked up and prodded him, saying: 'Cousin, get up. It's your wedding day. Your bride awaits you.'

There was no response. He turned the man over, only to spring aside just in time, as a great cobra that had snuggled unseen beside its victim reared its awful head.

With cries of fear the women and children tumbled over each

other as they rushed from the cave. The dogs cowered, whining. But Mukulu, her hackles up, pounced on the reptile with an angry snarl. She seized it, shook it violently and flung it aside. The snake hissed ominously. As the dog flew at it a second time, it lunged out and buried its fangs in the animal's flank. Mukulu wrenched the cobra free, and before it could recover, got a securer hold and shook it fiercely. That broke the reptile's spine but it was still full of fight. The cobra was a large one, and snakes take a lot of killing. With its hood gamely poised on the unscathed half of its length it kept its antagonist in play. Bereft of power to strike hard, it struck again and again while being savaged by the dog. It was an hour before she left the snake a writhing mass of shreds and tatters.

Not until then did Mukulu move unsteadily away to crouch down beside her beloved master, slavering at the mouth, panting in distress—soon to relax in death.

The Veddas watched the fight fascinated. To them that avenging creature was more than a snake. The motionless form of him who had been their daily companion shook them to their depths, and left them with but one course—the immediate abandonment of their cave. Hastily bundling up their meagre belongings, they began their pilgrimage. Nor did they rest until they came late that afternoon to a stream many miles away. Darkness found the men grouped on a rock apart from the women and children.

'Pihilegoda cave will never see us again,' Neela said sadly. 'Generations of us have grown up there. No more will the children play at honey-taking on that rock.'

'Why, father, some day we may go back there,' Poromola faltered.

' Never again, son. Our people are few, our caves everywhere the lairs of bears and leopards. This remnant of us is all that is left of five separate clans I knew as a boy.'

Bandaradua, who had been silent and moody all day, asked: 'Where do we go from here?'

' I don't quite know. Balana cave perhaps,' Neela replied.[c] What do you think, cousin?'

'That's best for you; there are chenas close by there. But I have a mind to return to my old home.'

'There's no one in Bandaradua now,' expostulated Neela in surprise. 'The last time we passed that way, a few endaru plants and a cadju tree were the only signs that men had ever lived there.'

'Nevertheless that's where I mean to go.'

'You'll do better to keep with us, cousin. There are your wife and children to consider. You will have no one to help you there. And if you leave us now, with Kanghireliya also gone, we shall be few enough ourselves.'

'What you say is true. But my way from here is not yours.'

'Might we have done you some wrong?' Neela asked.

' None whatever. You've all been very good to me, though I have often been but a poor companion. My burden is here,' and Bandaradua touched his chest.

With that cryptic utterance Neela had to be satisfied, knowing the obstinacy of his kinsman.

When the Veddas began to move next morning, Bandaradua said to his wife who, with their two little boys, was about to follow the others, 'Not that way for us'.

'Where are you going, then?'

'You'll soon know. Follow me.'

' You may do as you like,' the woman retorted angrily,' I and our boys go with our lokka.'

'Come!' her husband exploded, gripping her arm and thrusting her back. With a cry of pain the woman nursed her wrenched shoulder.

'Go with him. It is best,' Neela advised kindly. 'We'll meet again.' Then turning to Bandaradua, he said, 'Brother, we are going'. An acquiescent grunt was all the man's farewell.

Neela shepherded his loitering flock, and with Gombira and Poromola, slowly led the way. For a long time they heard the wrangling voices of the pair they left behind, and the forlorn cries of their children.

The first violent outburst over, Bandaradua and his wife walked on in morose silence. Gradually the man's preoccupation

relaxed to an awareness of his surroundings. Food had to be found; but without a dog this proved difficult. Towards noon they came to Wapuran-penela, a slope of rock streaked with a dribble of spring water, trickling down to a wooded gorge at the foot of the towering rock called Ethbeddagala. Here they satisfied something of their hunger off a roasted monitor lizard and a comb of the dammar bee they had got on the way.

After a rest they resumed their tiresome journey, with the younger boy astride Bandaradua's hip. The night was spent on the sandy bed of the Tota Oya. In the cool of the morning they trudged northwards down its course. The sun was well up when Bandaradua stopped, turned to his sons and said, 'Boys, you stay here. Your mother and I will go and look for yams. Don't move from here until we return,' This the little fellows of eight and six were only too glad to do. They lay down on the soft sand under a shady tree and were soon asleep.

Bandaradua led his wife up the river bank into the jungle. A half mile beyond he began searching about until he found a taut and slender vine of a yam.

"This one will do,' he remarked, squatting down. The woman did likewise.

'There's something I want to tell you,' he said. The strange quietness of his tone surprised her. 'You remember that girl who died in childbirth one night under the nuga tree near our cave many years ago—the mother of the boy we call Gama?'

'Yes,' she murmured.

'Do you know who she was?'

'How could I? I didn't even see her body.'

'That was—my daughter.'

The woman gave a startled exclamation.

'Yes, that's who she was,' he continued in a smooth voice. 'She was so thin and worn out that even I would not have recognized her but for that burnt mark on her shoulder—you remember it . . . She was not your daughter, but she was mine by another woman, and for that you hated her, as you did her sister, Kalu, Poromola's wife. Your cruelty drove her away when she was

still a child. I searched for her everywhere but could not find her. Then we left our home. Now I am going back there again.'

The dreadful sorrow of his words fell like a knell upon her ears. She sat speechless with downcast eyes, afraid to look him in the face for what she might read there.

' When I saw her, starved, naked and dead, after all those years, and thought perhaps she had come seeking me, I could have killed you for what you did. My sorrow now is that I shall never know the man who drove her to that.'

Bandaradua rose and looked about him.

' I'll cut you a stick to dig out that yam,' he said.

Hacking a sapling with his axe, he pointed it and threw it towards her saying, 'That gonala vine by the ehela tree there. I'll look for another.'

Listlessly she rose, picked up the stake, knelt down and set to work. The tuber was a large one and buried deep. By dint of much digging and scooping, she reached it at length. With her arm sunk to the axilla, she sprawled prone, working her fingers round the yam.

All the while he watched her unseen. Like a panther he stalked closer and closer. So silent was his approach, so sure the thwack of his axe-head on her skull, that she was dead before she knew anything. Just one shattering blow nerved by the cumulated exasperation of years, no more.

Dragging her aside he completed the work she had been engaged in. Then he resharpened the stake, dug a shallow grave and buried her together with the axe he had used. Taking the yam, he returned to the children.

He found them playing knucklebones with pebbles.

'Get up,' he said, 'let's be going.'

'Where's mother?' they asked.

' Don't worry about her ... She'll come later.'

'Father, there's blood on your foot.'

' I stubbed it on a root', he said irritably, and tossing some dry leaves on the smudge with his other foot, he cleaned it off.

'Mother, mother', moaned the boys as their father, carrying

the younger and taking the elder's hand, led them away at a quick pace, for he had far to go.

At the first cry of, 'I am hungry', from the smaller boy, Bandaradua set him down, rubbed a fire out of two velang sticks and roasted the yam. It was large enough to fill all their stomachs and leave something over for another meal.

Quitting the river, Bandaradua struck eastwards, north of Friar's Hood, through a wild and desolate region infested with bears. Two of these, taken unawares, suddenly rushed upon him, but he stood his ground and shouted them off. Had they pressed home their attack he would have been at their mercy, for he had no axe. But a bold front and unfaltering voice are man's strong weapons in the jungle.

Emerging on the more open country round Divulana tank towards nightfall, they ate the remains of the yam and slept.

They were now nearing a village, and on resuming their journey at dawn it was not long before they struck a footpath which brought them to a cross-track showing signs of recent use. Here Bandaradua paused.

'Now, you two,' he said bending over his sohs and placing his hands tenderly on their shaggy heads, 'go along this path until you come to where there are people. It is not far. Don't stop until you find them. They will ask you how you came. You, Randuna, say your father, Bandaradua-rala, sent you, and that he will follow later. Your uncle is there. He will look after you.'

'I'm very hungry', Pema pleaded, reluctant to lose hold of his father's hand.

'Poor things. You've had little enough to eat and we have travelled far. Soon you'll have plenty of food. Now go', and embracing each, he urged them on gently, saying, 'Randuna, look after your brother'. Reluctantly they obeyed him.

Unseen by them, their father followed, until the bark and wattle shacks of the Seerangamadu Veddas came in sight. There, in the house of their uncle, the boys were to grow to manhood and only to remember that day as a far-off dream.

The tired and sad old man retraced his steps, and walked all day. Night overtook him in the jungle, and he slept.

Listlessly he resumed his journey at dawn. Life henceforth held nothing for him; his work was done. He was thirsty and hungry, but he did not care. With bowed head he trudged on like an automaton, oblivious of his surroundings. Instinctively he homed through the trackless wilderness, straight as the heron flies, towards the small Bandaradua rock buried in the jungle.

The sun was setting over the treetops when he staggered up to the small cave that had been his childhood home. Placing his bows and arrows beside him he sat down. Long he remained so, gazing towards the evening sky. Like a garment darkness covered the world when he lay down.

He drowsed far into the morning and lay there all day, not rising to satisfy the gnawings of hunger or thirst. He only wanted to die. For many days he lingered, through sunshine and through dark, through heat of noon and dews of night, until life slowly ebbed away, and the creatures that prey on the dead became bolder and bolder. The flies hovered, the black ants swarmed, while life still lingered. When the panther, whose lair had been usurped, and the mongoose had done their work, only the scattered bones were left for porcupines to gnaw.

CHAPTER 5

MONKEYS AND MEN

NEELA'S depleted company continued its journeying at a leisurely pace, while Gombira and Poromola hunted food.

On the third day they came to the Balana cave, bordering the great Balana game glade. Here they found two other Veddas and their wives who were glad to throw in their lot with them. One was Donga, Neela's son by a previous wife; and the other Ado his brother-in-law. These made up for the loss of Kanghireliya and Bandaradua.

After a short stay there they took to the time-honoured hunting trails, camping now beside some stream, now in some rock shelter, the length of their sojourn in any locality determined by the amount of food available in its precincts. Beside the bald dome of Bimbaliya crag they fed on jack-fruit; at Galmediya water-hole they poisoned fish; in the glades they stalked deer.

Leaving the level lands they climbed, by the 'Pass the elephants descend', to the wooded highlands. They were now in the strongholds of the fiercest creatures of the jungle. These were the hills the hunters loved. None but the Veddas knew these trails; none but they could find sustenance there. Here, also, was the domain of the wanderoo or grey langurs, the favourite food of the Veddas. In the security of the towering trees that cover the steep sides of the hills, the langurs live and love, ranging the leafy highways, browsing on the succulent leaves all day long. Shy and vigilant are the leader monkeys in these wild hills. But with all their cunning and vantage of terrain they are no match for their immemorial foes, the Veddas.

'Kako, kako, kak-kak. Kako-kak-kak'—the raucous warning startles the jungle, warning its creatures, hushing its song.

The wanderers were *en route* for a new camping site. Gombira, always leading, glanced significantly at Poromola and paused for the stragglers to come up.

He pondered awhile, then glancing at the seven-year-old

foster brothers, Kaira and Gama, said, 'Shall we show these boys some fun?'

'Yes, let's/ Poromola assented, greatly to the urchins' delight, 'You two follow us. You others rest here.'

'Anay, can't I also come?' pleaded Kalu, Poromola's wife.

'And I, too,' pouted Gombira's wife, Poromola's elder sister.

Gombira wavered. 'Very well, but no more,' he said decidedly. 'Now you four keep some distance behind us,' he cautioned. 'Follow very quietly. Don't make the least sound, or you'll spoil the play.'

Guided by the langurs' intermittent blasphemies, Gombira, with Poromola close behind him, led the way down the hillside. Quickly at first, but warily, step by step, he crept, with frequent pauses as he neared the objective, eyes and ears alert.

It was a good half-hour before Gombira suddenly froze, glimpsing what he sought. He slipped behind a great tree-trunk and signalled the women and boys to approach very softly behind its cover. Placing a hand on his wife's shoulder he pointed to the fork of a tree about thirty yards ahead. It was quite a while before she could discern the dappled death lying stretched on a branch about twelve feet up. Soon they had all seen it.

'Now sit very still and watch', Gombira said, extracting a bark chew from his monkey-skin pouch, and offering Poromola some.

They were set for a drama of the jungle.

The great leader monkey, whose first warning cries had sent his flock scuttering to the topmost branches, the mothers clutching their mewling brats to their breasts, was still vociferous. In that raucous blending of defiance and dread the brooding menace of the jungle found expression.

The langur's revilings, highly provocative though they were, had not the least effect on his arch enemy, who remained through it all a limp and immobile figure. Very gradually the monkeys' sense of fear seemed to abate, and instead of going when the going was good, one by one they emerged from their hiding-places, becoming bolder and bolder. Moved by a magnetic curiosity they crawled cautiously down, with their foe always in view, occasionally hurling an imprecation at him.

Finding him still oblivious, they quietened, and crowded closer, the youngsters the most venturesome. Now they were cutting capers about him, quite convinced he was dead—dead, as a scoundrel like him deserved to be.

' Let's make sure', thinks a stripling, and timidly touches the dangling tail, ready to leap away in an instant. The tail is lifeless. He gives it a tug; there is no response.

One by one the others emulate the little daredevil. Soon they are all over him, admiring his markings, stroking his silken coat, tugging his whiskers, even sitting on him, and making a ludicrous plaything of him.

It was as much as the watching Veddas could do to refrain from laughing outright. The panther slumbered through it all, his breathing barely perceptible, his eyelids closed. Now even the bigger langurs, who should have known better, were within his reach.

Thwack! Thwack!—the 'corpse' had sprung into murderous activity, and two of the largest wanderoo lay writhing at the foot of the tree. He leapt at a third, lost grip and fell to the ground. There was panic in the branches, a wild scramble for the heights.

With a vicious crunch the panther quietened a maimed victim that grinned defiance at him, and gave a *coup de grace* to a third that had fallen from the tree with fright.

'Kako-kak-kak. Kako-kak.' What did those cries avail them now but to supply macabre music to the feast? The futile maledictions became fainter and fainter as the simian clan hurried on.

'You'd think that would teach them a lesson—but no, the panther wins every time,' Poromola murmured.

'Not this one', Gombira said, adjusting an arrow to his bowstring, and creeping up for a clearer view. A trodden twig snapped. The animal reared its head and sprang at the intruder —but the great bow, drawn to the level of the archer's ear, twanged to the second, even as the beast rose in the air. With an angry roar, terrible to hear, the panther fell, transfixed through the chest, straightened out, writhed, snarled, and snapped the embedded arrow with its teeth; then hurtled violently into the

scrub and let out its life in a deep groan, while the women and children huddled together trembling.

That morning's diversion provided the Veddas with both thrilling entertainment and good feasting.

The leopard has another ruse for trapping its favourite food. Watching the approach of monkeys on the tree-tops, he crouches in his lair, and patiently awaits their arrival overhead. Then suddenly he lets forth a volley of roars. Paralysed with fear, or muffing a leap in their flustered flight, one or more of the monkeys fall into his clutches.

Should that fail, he rushes about here and there with a great commotion and then lies quietly in concealment, baiting them with their own curiosity as before.

The Vedda's way with the langur is different. He has neither the patience nor the thunder of the leopard, but he too has his peculiar strategem. The langurs know the Veddas for their mortal enemies, and always freeze to stillness at their approach. But the dropping of a green leaf, the faint whimper of a young one, or the least stir in the branches, betrays their presence to those astute hunters.

When taken unawares, the monkeys spring noisily from bough to bough and, gaining the security of a forked branch or leafy crown, hide so cleverly as to escape detection. The Veddas, wise to this, sprint after them in their stampede to mark their trees of refuge. Should the creatures gain on the hunter, he shouts, 'Ho-Ho! Ho-Ho!', that the echoes may bewilder them and create a halting indecision, enabling him to catch up. When the animals stay hidden, the Vedda whines like a baby langur and so entices some anxious female out of her security. Or he mimics the fierce growls of a panther to fluster them.

Often a monkey is isolated on some dominant tree from which escape is impossible except by way of the ground. There it ensconces itself on the very summit. The hunter then climbs up and shoots it; or presses it so hard that it dashes down in a desperate bid for safety only to be set upon by the watchful dogs.

When the Veddas, having scoured some likely patch of jungle, fail to find wanderoo, they have a sure method of detecting their

whereabouts by striking with their axe-heads the flattened root-buttresses of certain trees. The booming echoes made are mistaken for rolling boulders or a panther's muffled roar, and evoke startled cries not only from red monkey and wanderoo, but even from sambhur or leopard.

Set to a more seductive key is the manner in which the magic of music is exploited to pique the ungovernable curiosity of the creatures. Often would Gombira and Poromola be hunting, silent and alert as only Veddas can be, when they would halt in their stride and cock their heads listening, the petulant moan of a baby langur having reached their ears. But search the leafy strata as they might, they could discover nothing. One of them would then stay concealed behind a tree-trunk with his arrow fitted to his bow, while the other, laying down his weapons, moved about quietly crooning the enticing refrain:

Ohong oho, ohong bali!
Along the branch come creeping down,
Nor linger at the tufted crown,
Kok, Kok! crying, come you down
From pinnacles where you belong.
Chik, Chik! calling steal along.

Hark, I'm singing, hear my song;
Look not round you, fear no wrong.
You heed me not—Ho-ho, ho, ho!
A glance behind—and there you go.

All would be quiet save for the song repeated many times; while the vigilant marksman intently watches the tree-tops. Sooner or later a wary little head peeps out of a crotch trying to locate the singer. Unable to see him, the monkey stealthily emerges on to the branch and cranes its neck peering downwards, shifting a little now and then to keep the moving figure in view. The bow twangs, and the wounded animal hurtles down to be pounced upon by the dogs.

CHAPTER 6

YAKINI BALIYA

HONEY is the very staff of the Veddas' existence. In this possession the Vedda is more fortunate than civilized man; for what could be sweeter than the honeycomb flavoured with the manifold nectar of wild blossoms?

There is always honey in the jungles. Though June, July, and August are the great honey months of the aristocrats of the bee world, the bambara and the mee massa, yet the humble little kanava builds its long dun combs in tree crevices all the year round.

The Veddas had eaten much honey in their wanderings, but not of the bambara, the taking of whose combs from the faces of precipices was yet to come—of all Vedda exploits the most hazardous and spectacular. These great bees, though they often hive on towering trees such as the upas, favour the sheer sides of the high rocks where colonies of them may be seen flaunting their challenge to beast and man.

The Veddas were nearing the limit of their northward journey when suddenly there loomed through the tree-tops the great bulk of Nuwaragala, dazzling in the noonday sun. The five hunters stood gazing at the small dark splotches on the bald rock, barely visible through height and distance.

' Yakini baliya, the She-demon's Cluster,' Gombira murmured meditatively.

'What's the good of looking at that?' Neela remarked.

So deep set were the combs under an overhanging brow that the honey-cutter, poised on his ladder let down from the top, would find them beyond the reach of his longest stake. None dared attempt the taking of those combs, for the angered demons, tradition said, would cause the rock to split with the sound of thunder and hurl the cutter to his doom. Those fierce guardians were believed to inhabit invisible caverns there, the mouths of which were sealed with blocks of stone that rarely were seen ajar.

But today the oracle was dumb

The Veddas moved on towards the base of Nuwaragala where was the Ash cave—a mere tunnel roofed by a massive slab supported on two lateral outcrops. Its sloping floor was bossed with boulders that held no promise of comfort; but in a cleft here, a hump there, those hardy folk contrived to make themselves at home. A never-failing spring nearby provided water even in the driest months. There the Veddas stayed when they came to 'skin' the rock, which was their hyperbole for stripping it of its hives. For two days they rested in the cave, feasting on the jack-fruit and pineapples found on the lower slopes, the survivals of a long past era when Nuwaragala formed a bastion for the Sinhalese.

The dangerous work of securing the bambara combs was done at night, for the rock bees build in colonies, and if the attempt was made to assail them by day, the bees from the adjacent partially smoked combs would attack the gatherer. The entire swarm might even fall off, and then God help the man suspended there between heaven and earth. But at night the bees are less truculent, and flounder in their flight, crawling about helplessly where they drop. Even so the cutter seldom escapes unstung.

Early in the day Neela and his men set off for the summit of he hill, leaving the women and children below. Looking like mething evil, Nuwaragala dominated the jungle for miles und. Evidence that civilized man had once homed on that ht was plentiful. There was a cistern of limpid water hewn f the living rock, open to the sky; a great cave on its very overlooking a vast drop, with a weathered Sanskrit epiat told of 'Mahatissa, beloved of the gods', and below n drip-ledges. Tumbled monoliths showed where a e stood. For the most part, however, the top of the 'ungle, with patches of bare stone and grass here and and cactus. Little life was in evidence—a squirrel a barbet sing, a hawk soar, and swallows circle. It ; of old romance and mystery.

gh designedly, Nature had provided the bambara rocks aKes of cane for the benefit of man. Several of these, each . fifty feet long and an inch in diameter, the Veddas cut and

dragged out of their entanglement to the summit. There they were lined and split in halves, which were held apart and lashed with kiri-vel vines, forming the rungs of a ladder which were elongated to the required extent by interlocking loops with fresh lengths of cane.

The crude equipment of the honey-cutter consisted of a six-foot stake pointed at one end and four-pronged at the other by a crucial split wedged with wooden pins; a deer-skin receptacle for the honey; and about half a dozen smokers made of bundles of green sprigs ensheathing dried leaves and litter.

An end of the long ladder was carefully secured to a stout tree, standing on the edge of the precipice in a direct line with the hives below. A stack of logs, to be fired later, provided for the protection of the watchers against the attacks of the disturbed bees. All was now ready for the work of the night.

Meanwhile the women and children left below had not been idle. They heaped a great bonfire, the smoke of which would swirl up the side of the rock towards the hives at the appointed time.

But for the starlight that imbued the jungle with spectral shapes, darkness was soon in possession of the heights; while far below murmurously slumbered the masses of bees, oblivious of impending harm. The fires at the base and summit of the rock were soon ablaze. Smoking torches were lowered on long vines towards the hives. There arose a muffled hum, heard which the Veddas grew merry and raised shouts to add to the confusion of the flustered bees.

The air about the combs was in turmoil. Into that whirling winged stinged fury the honey-cutter must now descend. The ladder was let down to an ancient incantation that echoed the lurid wastes.

Hail! Hail! O Spirits.
You who in these lands have died,
And been reborn anew,
Grant us, we beseech you, your aid—
In all things we shall strive to please you.
And you, O bees, flee into the forest,
Flee into the forest. Flee into the forest.

On the brow of the precipice, with smoking torches looped to his arms, and a long stake slung on his shoulder, Gombira stood. Turning his back to the void, he stooped and gripped the cane ladder, stepped on a rung, and was soon over the edge. He groped his perilous way down, hampered by his clumsy trappings. Poromola, his brother-in-law, guarded the ladder's anchorage, on which his life depended—a duty always scrupulously assigned to one who by relationship was ineligible as a mate for his wife.

An angry susurrus of sound told the watchers that Gombira had reached the level of the hives. They heard his signal and lowered the honey receptacle on a vine. This he secured to the ladder. He was now swaying free, with the cluster of great combs plastered to the rock some feet in front of him. He tossed his dishevelled hair over his face to shield his eyes from attack. Thrusting his head between two rungs he pressed the nape of his neck against the upper. Then steadying himself with one leg extended on a lower rung, he flexed the other knee and wedged it against an intermediate rung. Thus painfully secured, he had his hands free to manipulate his implements. Smothered by the smoke of his two torches, he set to work. He stuck the butt of a smoker on the end of his stake and applied it to the combs, mattering the clinging bees. Then, disengaging the smoker, he lung it on his forearm, and with the pointed end of the stake i comb into vertical sections, spitted them on the pronged ietached them from the rock, and shook them into the deer- ceptacle.

, surely, was the test of a man's courage and endurance— e Vedda, not only was there the physical danger, but also ous fears of the vengeful demons of the frowning rock. der that not every Vedda was a honey-cutter, but avest and strongest of them—those who, when they le ladder, had no thought of life or home or wife or vonderful to tell, there was no work the Vedda, tiptoe . of eternity, loved more than this, for as he toiled he .he cutter's song:

Borri, borri, borri, borri:
Borri, borri, borri, borri.

Ama, ama, aramaya—
Ye gods, ye gods, ye gods!
This prayer I learned of olden time
Swaying o'er the gulf, I offer you,
Trusting in your will to aid,
To guard this ladder of vines.
Bearing the load of my travail,
I clamber down, I clamber down—
Grant, O grant me the honeyed freight
—O you, our Lords reborn.

Then followed, incongruously enough, a rollicking repertoire of bawdy ballads in strange contrast to the long-drawn notes of solemn invocation.

One by one the combs were worked at, until the container was full. Then he released it from the ladder and shouted the signal, 'Lift!' which the watchers above faintly heard. They hauled intermittently, helped by the cutter who eased up the freight as he ascended rung by rung, until it was safely delivered. Gombira, besmeared with sweat and honey, threw himself down, bereft of the stamina that had sustained him so long, while the others picked off his stings by the light of firebrands, and soothed his skin with the pressure of cooling leaves.

Soon he revived and joined the others in a feast of honey.

'I took three combs,' Gombira said. 'There are two mo that cluster. I must go down again.'

'Let me go,' Poromola suggested.

Neela looked at Gombira. 'What do you say?'

'He has a good head. Bimbaliya and other hills are him. But he's too young yet for this rock.'

'Do let me go,' the lad implored.

After some hesitation they gave in. Gombira re moorings of the ladder, cut a foot off the stake, sayii long, and, with a reassuring hand on the boy's shou him down.

His father's fervent invocation ringing in his ears„ descended steadily, full of confidence in himself. w anxiety his return was awaited. How relieved they were to

his 'Lift!' It was a proud day for the lad. He had stood the severest test of the honey-cutter's art in all those jungles.

'There's nothing more I can teach him now,' Gombira declared, proud of his pupil.

'Tomorrow we'll give thanks to the Nae Yaku,' Neela said, lying down to sleep.

It was well past midnight when Gombira rose, saying: 'There's another cluster I must take tonight. Come, all of you, help me with the ladder.'

'Who can draw up a ladder of that length once it's down?' Ado objected.

'Have you forgotten the spare one we made?' Gombira asked.

'What cluster is this you speak of?' Ado inquired. 'I don't know of another on this side of the rock.'

'There is another,' was the laconic reply. 'Come on, get up.'

'We've honey enough for many days,' Neela said drowsily. 'You've done quite enough for today.'

'I've a mind to do this job, father. You rest. We'll attend to it.' Gombira's tone was deferential but decisive.

'Well, if you must, you must,' Neela said, sitting up.

'What a length this bothersome ladder is. I've never known one so long,' Ado grumbled, as they dragged it laboriously past obstacles of stone and scrub.

'I only hope it's long enough,' was Gombira's cryptic comment.

'How much further?' Donga asked. They had come to the limit of the hill.

'That weera tree over there,' Gombira directed, indicating a stunted solitary tree leaning out over the very verge of the precipice.

Neela stood contemplating his bearings. The more he thought the more puzzled he seemed.

'Why,' he exclaimed suddenly,' we are over the Yakini cluster. You surely don't mean to attempt that!'

'Only to see what it's like,' Gombira said airily.

His helpers were aghast, and desisted from their work.

'Are you mad? What's come over you?'Ado exploded. 'You

cannot do such a thing. The Demons will kill us all.' There was a general murmur of agreement.

'Have we not filled their mouths with honey enough?' was Gombira's comment, a flippant allusion to the demon's maw, as the honey vessel is called in deference to the guardian spirits.

' Be careful how you speak, son. That kind of talk isn't good,' Neela admonished him. But Gombira was ever the hunter, not the shaman.

'Listen to me,' he said. 'Whenever I looked at those hives from below, I have felt that one day I must descend to them and see what they are like. And now that day has come.'

'But no man can take them,' objected Neela.

'I know; that is the tradition. But haven't I taken many hives said to be untakable? I don't say I will succeed with this one. Anyway, I'd like to try.'

'Don't do it, son,' Neela pleaded. His word was usually law.

'I must, Chief; today or never. Let me have my way.'

They all did their best to dissuade him, but to no avail. Fascinated by the dare-devilry of the man, they gradually warmed to their work. The ladder was dragged to the slope of the precipice, and an end securely fastened to the over-hanging tree. As they pushed the vast length of it over, it writhed into space, jarring its anchorage with a creaking tug.

For the third time that night, and now more earnestly than ever, Neela besought the succour of their gods.

' Mark my words well, all of you,' Gombira stood harnessed to smokers and stake, 'this ladder, I reckon, should just about reach the level of the combs. I have judged the distance carefully, and have lengthened it on purpose. Once I am down there you won't hear my call. I'll take this long vine, the end of which, Poromola, you must not leave hold of. When I tug thrice, so, send me down the receptacle. Father,' he said to Neela, 'see that the ladder is guarded well.'

Gombira had gone. The watchers disposed themselves patiently to await the appointed signal. An anxious hour went by. Seated there in a bunch they were mumbling their fears,

when to their great relief, the signal came. The receptacle was lowered.

There followed a period of suspense even greater than before. Not the faintest echo of the usual song fell on those straining ears in all that stillness; not the slightest stir was there of the signal vine Poromola's fingers never left.

'What can he be doing?' Neela asked uneasily.

' He should never have gone down,' Ado despaired.

' Could you have missed the signal, Poromola?'

' Not likely! The line is lifeless.'

Poromola handed the vine to his father, and climbed the tree slanting out over the precipice as far as he dared while the others held their breath. Long and intently he strained his gaze into the depths below.

' There is nothing I can see, not even smoke,' he said regaining the rock. 'He may need help. I am going down the ladder.'

'Wait a while longer,' Neela said.

' I'm light, father. We've waited long enough.'

Poromola gripped the ladder and was about to descend, when Neela cried out,'Stop! I think I feel the line move.'

Donga and Poromola laid their fingers lightly on the signal vine. Yes, there it was again—and yet again. Cautiously they drew on the vine and were relieved to feel the weight of it.

'He has taken the Yakini cluster!' Ado gasped.

Gently they hauled, pausing at accustomed intervals to permit the climber to help up the load. They had the pace of it nicely now, and felt the easing from below.

'Lift!' Faint as a whisper of the wind it came. Then clearer and clearer as man and load ascended.

With a final effort they heaved the load over the brow. Poromola, gripping the tree trunk with an extended arm, leaned down and helped Gombira up. He staggered a few paces, and fell spread-eagled on the ground. They did not disturb him.

'Let's see what he has,' Ado said to Donga, and the two of them carried the honey vessel to the firelight.

'Why, look at this!' Donga exclaimed. 'Nothing but a great heap of wax!'

'No wonder it was so heavy,' said Ado.

' All that trouble for this,' Donga sneered.

' It's enough we have him safe,' Neela said.

The stars had begun to pale with dawn when Gombira awoke and sat up. Accepting the chew offered him, he began the tale all were anxious to hear.

'You've seen what I brought—merely wax. But there's plenty of it, well pressed down, that should make good barter. That ladder was just long enough. I had judged the distance well. One look at those combs told me they could never be taken. They lie beneath a ridge, beyond reach of the longest stake a man can carry down. I nearly lost my life there.'

'Would our forefathers have handed down to generation after generation of us what isn't true?' Neela solemnly said.

'Yes. One of them must have tried, even as I did, and failed. But to tell you what happened to me. Half-way down I dropped a smoker and was left with only the one.

'Had not the thin moon topped the hill just then, I would have returned. Those were combs worth seeing! Each the size of a sambhur skin—about a dozen of them, all clustered together. And what a multitude of bees! I would not have disturbed them for anything. Their rumble was like the torrent over the boulders of Gama-ela when it rains.

'A length of the ladder still hung below me. I descended to the lowest rung, and found myself level with a shelf of rock on which stood a mound that looked like a great ant-hill. I set the ladder swinging to and fro, and by the light of the torch saw that it was a heap of wax that must have collected there for ages, dropped from the hives above.

'I stopped swinging and thought for a while. If I could get on to that ledge, I might be able to gather some of that wax—but how? There was no foothold there. Then an idea struck me. Snapping my stake against my knee, I kept the pointed half. I set the ladder swinging again, and each time I was within reach of the mound, applied the torch to it, gradually melting it down. This took a long time. When I thought the wax sufficiently soft, I swung hard, swiftly pressed my neck and knee to

the ladder, and with both hands stabbed the stick into the mound. It sank deep, as if into mud, leaving a foot's length sticking out. I left it there to harden, and signalled for the receptacle which you sent down.'

'So that's why you were so long,' Neela said. 'We thought something must have happened to you. Poromola was just about to go down when your signal came.'

'Was he?' said Gombira, placing an affectionate hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Good lad.'

He paused before continuing: 'Then I did a desperate thing. What drove me to it I cannot say—perhaps the Demons. It just happened. I tied the end of the ladder with a long slack of vine to my waist. I moved my neck from the rung. My mother! how it ached! Then I swung hard, let the ladder go, and clutched the buried stake with both hands, sprawling on the heap. Slowly the stick gave under the strain, and most of me sagged into space. I thought my end had come. With a last effort I wriggled up, and letting go a hand embraced the mound as if it were my wife, and lay panting there. Phew! that was a close call.'

A murmur of incredulity rose from the listeners.

'I sat there getting back my breath. Then I plucked out the stick and began to dig, packing the wax tightly into the receptacle: there was so much of it. When the thing would hold no more, I kept poking out the wax on the ledge, and pushing it over. At the foot of the rock tomorrow you'll find many times the amount I brought up. As I dug, the point of the stick struck something hard. I loosened it and scraped off the wax with my nails. It felt round like a gourd with two hollows. My skin prickled all over when I suddenly knew the thing I handled was a human skull. That was enough for me. Quickly I drew up the ladder's end, by the line attached to my waist, signalled to you to draw up the wax, and swung off. . . and here I am.'

The silence that followed was broken bv Neela.

'That man whose skull you found must have tried to do the sort of thing you did, lost his ladder, and been left there to starve and die. The bees covered him with wax. That must have been very long ago.'

'Is there much wax still left there?' Ado asked.

'Any amount of it, though I worked till my arms ached. It's your turn now.' At which all laughed.

'To he down and sleep,' murmured Ado, suiting the action to the word. An example they all followed.

CHAPTER 7

THE DEATH OF GOMBIRA

FOR about a year after leaving the Pihilegoda cave, the Veddas led a wandering existence. Their trails led across the streams and over the mountains. The elephants, those grand road-makers, had blazed those trails in ancient days and kept them open ever since by their annual roamings timed as to a schedule. It was wonderful where their paths led; no escarpment was too steep, no crest too high, no foothold too precarious for their soft, lumbering stride. These were the highways of the jungle, used by all its denizens. These were the Vedda trails, from which they would deviate to honeyed height or crannied home. And where the hunters led, their women and children followed. After many months of roaming, the nomads felt the need of a more or less permanent rock-shelter, like the Pihilegoda cave, to which they could always return. Their choice fell on the Balana cave in the Galmede hills, where on their earlier visit they had found Ado and Donga and their wives and absorbed them into their company.

They arrived there to find it again tenanted; this time by Madana-rala and his son, Randuna, and daughter, Kapuru, seventeen and fourteen years old respectively. Neela greeted his old friend, and after a short palaver they agreed to share the cave, adjusting themselves to the accommodation which was just sufficient for them all.

The Balana cave was set low in the rock of that name, and bordered an extensive glade from which it was screened off by a belt of ebony, and satinwood trees burdened with massive vines of boulanga-vel and bambara-vel which, in the absence of canes, served for ladders to negotiate precipices, when gathering bambara combs. It was less of a cave than a mere rock shelter, shallow and shelving like a cobra's hood. Occupying a round of the rock it had an angular shape. A single drip-ledge, quite

inadequate to keep the cave dry during heavy rains, ran high along its brow.

Like many another cave of those jungles, it was a traditional Vedda home, as the worn grinding stones, fragments of crude pottery and drawings on the rock face testified. This gallery of primitive art was wrought with a finger dipped in moistened ash or powdered charcoal, and represented the sun, human beings and such animals as elephants, horned stags, monitor lizards, leopards, and dogs.

The Veddas now settled there consisted of six families: Neela's, Madana-rala's, Gombira's, Poromola's, Donga's and Ado's—the last four just man and wife—in all about a score. But small as was their number, it included the remnants of three separate clans, each with its own ancestral territory, demarcated by ancient landmarks such as a stream or rock or dominant tree scored with a bow-mark.

Neela's territory embraced the tract from Galmede to Nuwaragala, with Balana-galge, Dhik-galge and Alu-galge in Nuwaragala as the three main caves. To Madana-rala belonged Embillene Kumbura, and the surrounding hills. Gombira's was the Walimbe or Friar's Hood terrain with but one small habitable cave in that dominant crag.

But the strict observance of territorial rights, with death as the penalty for transgression, was for other times when the clans, though never large, were worthier of the name. Now that the scattered communities consisted merely of a few family groups of merged clans, with individuals among them who could lay claim to more than one territory, restrictions of range were more a matter of tradition than of practice.

These and other topics relating to their latter history Neela and Madana-rala discussed, with the younger Veddas as interested listeners.

'Why have you left Embillene?' Neela asked at last.

Madana-rala's brow clouded, and he fumbled with his grey goatee beard as he answered. ' There are goings-on there I don't like.'

'What are they, cousin?'

'A man from nowhere settled among us, and wanted to be bigger than ourselves.'

'But you are chief; Embillene is yours.'

'Be that as it may, I am not going back there again.' There was a finality in his tone that allowed of no further prying.

Poromola, however, was afterwards luckier with Randuna, Madana-rala's son, a lad of his own age.

To his question, 'Who is that man your father spoke of?' Randana replied.

' His name is Tissahamy. They call him Murderer, but not to his face. He's a tall black-bearded man, a great hunter. He is afraid of no one, and does just as he likes. He came to Embillene with my eldest sister, Valli, whom he carried away from a Sinhalese house where she was staying at the time. Father liked him at first and welcomed him amongst us. But when he began growing ganja—a thing father would never allow any of his people to do for fear it might entangle us with the headmen—there was a big quarrel and father told Tissahamy to leave the place. The man refused. "If you don't go away from here, I shall," father said to him. To which Tissahamy answered, "You may please yourself. I came to settle here, and here I stay." So father left with my other sister and me and came here.'

'What happened to the others of your group?'

'Who knows? There were only three other families besides ourselves; but they, too, must have left by now. No one can live with that man for long.'

That was the beginning of a close comradeship between Poromola and Randuna.

Neela's eldest son, Vela, was nineteen and unattached; Madana-rala's daughter, Kapuru, was fourteen. What was more natural than that they should unite? And when, within a few weeks of their arrival at the cave, the two were found missing for an entire day, and returning quietly together in the evening sat beside each other, all knew what had happened. No one was surprised and the fathers especially were pleased. Consent was tacit and no explanation needed.

Not long afterwards, Madana-rala, now that his son and

daughter had formed their attachments in Neela's clan, left them. It was never the way of a Vedda, however advanced in years, to be without a woman; and old Madana-rala had lost his fifth wife shortly before leaving Embillene. So one day he took leave of them and disappeared. They learnt afterwards that he had met his heart's desire in the form of a young girl of Pollebedda where he settled. But he was not destined to enjoy her long. He was killed by a bear a few months later when he was out honey-gathering by himself.

Balana-talawa, the great glade, owed its origin to chena cultivation, so wasteful of forest. Once the crops were taken, the land was neglected and allowed to run rank. If lalang grass then crept in, the jungle was never able to reassert itself. Thus, with successive contiguous clearings year by year, the Balana grassland came into being, affording pasturage to wild herds specially partial to the young shoots that sprouted after a firing. Flanked by the Magalavatavan river (Tota Oya) on its eastern side, and encircled in the mid-distance by mountain ranges, the vast plain stretched in picturesque beauty, studded here and there by magnificent trees such as upas and wild mango, the acrid unsavoury fruit which was edible only to hornbills and Veddas.

About two miles from the Vedda cave, beside a tributary of the Magalavatavan river, was the semi-Vedda hamlet of Galmede, consisting of about half a dozen families of mixed Sinhalese and Vedda descent. These were the folk responsible for the chenas; but illicit ganja growing, under the encouragement of the coast Moors, was their main means of livelihood—ganja having a barter value greatly superior to chena produce. Of this nefarious activity the Government officials at Maha Oya on the main road, about fifteen miles away, were not ignorant; but to give effect to their suspicions in that remote jungle was quite another matter. So in their nest Galmede, 'Amidst the Hills', these folk carried on their contraband trade more or less unmolested—as also did Tissahamy at Embillene, three miles away.

Gombira's wife, Handi, Neela's daughter, had borne him a daughter two years previously. Now she was again nearing her time. This time Gombira fondly hoped for a boy. Malaria had

sapped Handi's health and her husband's main concern was to provide her with such simple dainties as her capricious appetite craved.

Gombira said to Poromola one dawn: 'Come with me. You and I will go to the rock of the edible-nest swiftlets and collect some nests to barter with the Galmede Moor. Your sister is very weak and must have some kurakkan and maize to keep up her strength as her time is approaching.'

That meant a strenuous journey of two days to the swiftlet colonies built in the caverns on the summits of high hills. These nesting places were a closely guarded secret of the Veddas, the nests having better barter value than most jungle products; even so it was little enough.

A stiff climb brought them that afternoon to a fearsome cave at the pinnacle of a heavily wooded hill. With shouts of * Cho-ho-ho. Cho-ho-ho! Karia, karia!' to warn off a possible bear they crept through a narrow entrance under a precariously poised boulder and gained the dark interior of the cavern. Waiting till their eyes were accustomed to the gloom, they began detaching with their arrow-heads the tenacious attachments of the dainty little cup-shaped nests, fashioned of saliva and moss, that studded the dome, and collected them in sacks improvised by knotting the four corners of a square cloth. Meanwhile, the flustered swiftlets darted in and out, twittering their frail protestations—*kata, kata, kata; chara-chiris; kisiri bisiri; che-week, che-week*—came the scarcely audible music of their cries. One of the brooding birds Poromola caught and set free with a laugh. They were ruthless in their pillage of the nests, but a few with eggs in them they had the sense to leave unharmed, lest the colony scattered.

Gombira, balanced on a stone, his arms up-stretched, was securing the highest of the nests, when, with a reverberating roar, a tawny form flashed past him as he instinctively ducked, tumbling off his foothold. That, and the shouts they raised, saved him, for they could see nothing. Recovering their composure they were relieved to find the leopard gone.

They knew what this meant—the cave was a notorious whelp-

ing lair. Gombira lay flat on his stomach and wormed himself into the tunnel with a groping hand ahead. It was not long before he wriggled backwards, gripping by the scruffs of their necks, a couple of snarling cubs a few days old. Taking them outside, he dashed them one by one on the rock, and flung them down the hillside with an obscene oath.

They had amassed a pile of about fifty nests. Sorting these out, they found, tumbled among them, a number of nestlings, each no bigger than a marble. These they roasted over a small fire and devoured with relish, crunching bones and all—a mere bonne-bouche. Then, slinging their bulging sacks on their shoulders, they descended the rock.

On an adjoining hill they set about gathering bin-kohomba, a barterable medicinal plant. It was too late for them to think of returning to their cave that day; so having had a meal of honey, they spent the night on a slab of rock.

On their homeward journey the next day they hunted in the forest, and this delayed them.

'Cha, we've not had much luck today, and it's time we hurried back,' Gombira sighed.

'Never mind, we have these,' Poromola said, holding up the mouse-deer and a couple of monitor lizards he carried.

'Your sister wanted a langur. Anay, if I hadn't stumbled against that stump I'd have got the one my Boriya chased when it fell in its leap.'

'We may yet have luck,' Poromola said.

They hurried on to avoid being benighted.

'Here's the milla tree we marked with the honeycomb,' Gombira said, pausing before a towering giant growing against a hump of rock. 'Let's take it quickly. There's nothing like mee honey for a pregnant woman.'

Poromola, to whom Gombira's slightest wish was a behest, set down his load and was about to climb the tree when his cur suddenly cocked its ears and streaked away. Poromola ran after him. Gombira listened a while, and as the dog's yelps receded in the distance, he left Poromola to it, and went on with the task of securing the comb.

The tree was branchless for about forty feet. To negotiate its vast bole was out of the question. He looked about for other means and soon decided. Scrambling up an adjacent sapling, he swung on to a massive vine and clambered to the outermost reach of a long horizontal limb of the tree. Along this he proceeded on all fours like a monkey, and reaching the crotch, climbed up from branch to branch with swift deliberate ease until he attained the withered bough that forked up obliquely from another. With feet thrust firmly against the branches, he steadied himself, and releasing his hands wielded his axe.

As the forest echoed to his strokes, Gombira paused to hear amidst the excited yaps of the dogs and Poromola's cautioning shouts, the langur's death cry—and his heart was glad.

Soon afterwards, Poromola heard the crash of the branch that told him Gombira had not been idle.

Poromola hugged his trusty animal and solicitously examined the deep gashes inflicted by the vicious teeth of the monkey his axe-head had brained.

Dragging his quarry by the tail, Poromola arrived at the foot of the milla tree, and was puzzled by the absence of any sign of his friend.

'Uncle, where are you?' he called.

There was no answer. A glance upwards told him the dead branch containing the comb had been felled; and there it lay.

'Uncle . . . Uncle . . .'he shouted more urgently. Except for the cackle of a rock squirrel there was no sound. He examined the fallen branch; the comb had not been hacked out—and some yards away was the axe.

Poromola searched about agitatedly. Could Gombira have gone into the jungle? Repeated calls produced no response. The man's dog had followed him back and now whined, sensing something amiss. Poromola climbed the boulder against which the tree leaned, his heart pounding with the fear of what he might find there.

Wedged in a cleft between tree-trunk and stone, he saw the huddled form of Gombira. Gently he eased him out, and seating himself on the rock, laid the sagging head on his thigh. Blood

frothed at the mouth, the eyes were closed, the body limp, life seemed extinct. As he moved gently to ease the stricken man's position, a shadow as of pain seemed to cloud the expressionless face. Watching intently for the least sign of revival, Poromola heard Gombira breathe again in feeble, irregular catches. Not knowing what else to do, he kept fondling the cheeks, uttering compassionate sounds. His tears poured down; some fell on Gombira's lips, and his eyelids lifted wearily.

' Son,' came the scarcely audible whisper at last.

'It is I, Poromola. What happened?'

'My foot slipped. . . . Did you get the langur?'

'Yes, a fine big one.'

'It's for Handi. . . . I won't be there.'

'I'll carry you.'

'Do not move me. I am finished. . . . My back's broken.'

'I'll go and bring help.'

'No use. . . . Look after my wife and children.' The effort made him choke feebly and cough blood.

' I will surely do that,' Poromola promised, wiping Gombira's lips with his fingers.

'Darkness falls. . . .'

The voice, that had been growing almost inaudible, and was only sustained with great effort, now ceased abruptly. Poromola waited long for another sound, but it never came.

Night was fast closing in. Poromola sadly lowered Gombira's head to the earth and rose. The hound sniffed at the inert form of its master, whined, and lay beside him.

It was now too late for Poromola to make the seven miles to their cave. Descending the rock, he picked up the kill and slung them on a tree out of the reach of predatory beasts. Whatever his sorrow for the dead, the living had to be thought of. Then he remounted the boulder and sat by the body of him whom he loved more than any other.

All night long he kept his vigil. The spirit of his friend had no fears for him. He could not think of him but as yet alive. Perhaps he might need him in the lonely hours.

The nakedness of dawn disillusioned him. The sight of flies

already settling on the body drove home the reality that Gombira was now but carrion. Collecting the man's weapons, he placed them by his side—the great bow of kobbe-vel: the arrow so broad of head that any two such, placed edge to edge and held over a man's head, it was said, would shield him from rain. The other three arrows and the axe Poromola kept for himself as, he knew, Gombira would have wished. Then he covered the body with fallen boughs and slipped down the rock.

He hacked out the honeycomb that had cost Gombira his life, and packed it between two bark slats which he bound together with bast. Cutting a carrying-stick, he slung to one end the monitors, the mouse-deer and the sack of nests, and to the other the langur, the bundle of honey and Gombira's implements. His own axe he hitched under his waist string, and picking up his bow and arrows, set off with all speed.

Not until he had covered several miles did he discover that of their two dogs only his own had followed him. Hoping the other would find its way back, he continued on. But Gombira's faithful Boriya never came, choosing instead to guard his master's body against nosing creatures as long as strength remained, and then to starve slowly to death, as they long afterwards discovered from the scattered skeletons.

CHAPTER 8

INTRODUCING TWO CHARACTERS

THE death of Gombira in his prime, at thirty-seven, was a cruel blow to the Veddas. They had learnt to depend on him so much that they could not conceive of life without him. As a hunter there was not his match in all Veddi-ratte. He was a bowman worthy of any of their legendary past. His remarkable feats of marksmanship were known only to themselves. Soft and silent as the loris, he could stalk an animal to within a few yards. He seldom loosed an arrow that did not find its mark. It was well for those Veddas that such a man had been the tutor of Poromola, on whom their future lives were to depend.

The time was now very near for Handi, Gombira's wife, to give birth to her second child. So prostrated was she with grief at her husband's death that it was only with the greatest difficulty she could be induced to take any food at all. She wanted to die. Malaria too had sapped her strength so that she could scarcely leave the cave.

Poromola, true to his promise to the dying Gombira, was the very soul of solicitude for his elder sister; and so was his wife, Kalu, who could never forget what she owed Gombira and Handi for having delivered her as a child from the clutches of Bandaradua's wife.

The monsoon burst over the jungle; the wind threshed the trees, and drove the rain in sheets within the cave, drenching its occupants, extinguishing their fires. The lightning danced in the dreary night, and the thunder rumbled, drowning the moans of Handi in the pangs of childbirth. The women propped her back against the rock wall, and set two stones at her feet to help her strain. A child was born, a male as Gombira had hoped, but the effort was fatal to the frail mother.

At some other time such a calamity would have meant the desertion of the cave, the awe of the dead outweighing the sorrow of the loss; but the flooded rivers islanded them and held them

prisoner. Even the wise old Neela seemed at a loss how to act. In the grey dawning Poromola rose. T i l take her away,' he whispered to his father.

'How can you do that?' Neela asked.

'I can.' And stooping Poromola lifted the light form of his sister in his strong arms, and bore her out in the blinding rain.

Immersed to his chest, he carried her head high, across the rushing river. On the opposite bank he dug a grave with axe and stake and buried her.

The child Handi bore survived. It was lucky that Donga's wife, who had lost her infant a fortnight earlier, was in milk. They called the boy Handuna.

Neela was now too old and crippled to hunt. Food-providing fell to the lot of his three sons—Donga, Vela and Poromola—under the leadership of Ado, the oldest of them, and himself a good hunter.

Neela said to his sons soon after Gombira's death: ' Take care of your precious limbs. On you the lives of all of us depend. Always go into the jungle together, never alone.'

One day, the three set out on a hunt together, Ado and Randuna, Madana-rala's son, having gone on some mission together to a distant hamlet. They had not gone far when Donga said, 'You two search the jungles round Bimbaliya. I'll go towards Walimbe.'

'You know very well that father forbade any of us to go alone,' Poromola protested. 'Walimbe is very far away. We'll go there with you another day.'

'I can look after myself/ Donga retorted. 'We'll get more if we search separately. I'll be back tomorrow. Don't worry.' And with that he disappeared along the trail.

The next day came, but Donga did not return.

'You should never have let him go by himself/ said Neela to Vela when they returned home.

'What could we do? He would not listen to us.'

'You must go and search for him,' Neela ordered.

They scoured the jungles for two days without success. A steady rain rendered tracking difficult. They were about to give

up the search and return when they came upon a tree from which a honeycomb had been taken. Farther on were the remains of a sodden fire with cracked sambhur bones scattered about. That told them Donga had rested there, for he was always partial to marrow and had set out, to their amusement, with a bundle of the bones of an animal they had recently slain.

At last they found him—or what was left of him. The signs showed that he had been attacked by no less than four bears that had killed and eaten him.

Settled in the half-Vedda hamlet of Galmede was Peena, the coast Moor. The real reason for his presence there was the ganja trade, though he camouflaged that nefarious occupation by rearing a herd of cattle in the Balana pasturages. That provided an excuse for his residence in so remote a jungle. Not that the Sinhalese headmen of the scattered villages, many of whom were ganja traders themselves, were hoodwinked. Peena played a safe game; for while he provided the seeds to the villagers around, and gave them every encouragement, he himself had no crops of his own. If in the course of an Excise raid a ganja plot was discovered, he could disclaim all knowledge of it. So, while his simple dupes had all the trouble and risk of tending the precious plants throughout the greater part of the year, Peena would sit at home dreaming of his profits.

The bargain he drove was always a hard one, and the gain that accrued to him from trading the ganja in the coastal towns, such as Batticoloa, was out of all proportion to the pittance he paid the cultivators. By giving advances of food and other commodities to the villagers, he secured a lien, not only on their ganja but also on their food crops, which he purchased at his own price. Knowing the location of the various secluded ganja plantations, he had it in his power, by secretly divulging his knowledge to the authorities, to sacrifice one or other of the growers to pay off a grudge, or ingratiate himself in the eyes of the law should occasion demand. In effect, he was a parasite on the little community, sucking their blood under the pretence of being their benefactor.

Peena was a powerful man. He had a half-Vedda woman for temporary wife. But, with his hold on the families, no village maiden was secure from his attentions. With hungry eyes he watched the girls blossom into womanhood.

With the people of Galmede, the Veddas of the Balana cave had little communication. Only occasionally, perhaps once a month or so, would a couple of Vedda hunters enter the hamlet for barter. Peena, to whom all was grist to his mill, was always ready to exchange their small hoardings of flesh and honey for the salt, tobacco, betel leaves and areca-nuts which were luxuries to the Veddas; and it was to him they usually went.

There was another occasional visitor to Galmede—a tall sinewy, bearded man of thirty whom they called Tissahamy or Murderer—a title earned in his youth by a murderous assault on a man in a remote village for which, after two years' outlawry, he had served a term of years in jail. Himself a Vedda, truculent, crafty and fearless of man and beast, Tissahamy lived alone with his family at Embillene, from where he had driven old Madana-rala and his Veddas to seek homes elsewhere, leaving him in sole possession.

Embillenne being only three miles from Galmede, it was here Tissahamy came on those rare occasions when he found it necessary to make contact with fellowmen. Though he would go in and out of jungle villages when it pleased him, he resented any intrusion on his own privacy. No visitor to Embillene dared enter his chena except at his invitation. Anyone desirous of bartering with Tissahamy—and there were many, despite his reputation, for he was a great hunter and chena cultivator—was expected to stand at his stockade and 'hoo' to him. Tissahamy, if at home, would emerge with gun and axe, accompanied by fierce mongrels. If he approved of his visitor, he would conduct him to his guest hut—an open shack in a corner of the garden well away from his own house, which stood secluded in a plantain grove, far within. To those in real need, Tissahamy would be very kind, giving freely of his produce and taking little or nothing. But with traders he was astuteness itself.

CHAPTER 9

STORMY BARGAINING

PEENA was seated outside his hut one early morning chewing a quid of betel, when Tissahamy walked in, and placing his gun and axe close beside him, sat down. He had come to shoot deer in the Balana glade with two Sinhalese who had begged him for meat. Telling the men to go ahead and wait for him some distance away, he visited the Moor. Undoing the bundle at his waist, he extracted his betel bag and rummaged inside.

'Cha, I've finished all my tobacco,' he murmured as if to himself. And as Peena, taking the hint, went indoors to fetch some, Tissahamy added self-commiseratingly,' It's weeks since I tasted betel and areca-nuts. My mouth's boiled with chewing bark substitutes.'

Peena emerged with the desired dainties, and presented them graciously with both hands to his visitor.

'If this drought continues,' remarked Tissahamy, slicing an areca-nut with his cutter, 'there'll be nothing left of our chenas.'

'That's so,' Peena assented.

Now Peena knew quite well that this was all preamble, and that his visitor's presence there was not merely on a mission of condolence. He never came without a definite object. What its nature was he could well guess, for it was about the time of the ganja harvests.

'Have you had a good crop this year?' They had come to the point at last.

' Not so bad,' returned Tissahamy.

'I'll take all you have.'

'What will you give?'

'Seventy-five cents a pound is what I'm buying the crops here for.'

'You might get it for that from these poor fools, but not from me."

'It's a good bargain.'

' For you, not for me. You sell it at Batticoloa for ten or twelve rupees a pound, I am told.'

'Nothing like it,' Peena lied. 'And I've got to convey it to the coast, haven't I? See the risks I run, with all those excise men waiting there like sharks.'

'What of all our trouble? Having to water our crops in this waterless land, and guard them against thieves and,wild animals for months on end, while you sit snugly here.'

'I was nearly caught by the police the last time. There are writs against me.'

'So are there against me, they say. And that was a dirty trick you played Kiri Banda who is now in custody. You informed about his having a plot in order to keep on the good side of the headman when you found things getting too hot for you.'

'You've no right to say that,' the Moor retorted heatedly. 'It was none of my doing.'

'How then would the headman who lives miles away from here know? He seems to have walked straight on to that plot all right.'

'Am I a liar then?' The burly Moor raised his voice threateningly.

'You've said it.'

'Be careful how you speak to me at my very door.'

'There's more I'll tell you,' Tissahamy said, picking up his gun and axe and springing up. ' You are a snake in the grass; a poison here; getting these poor folk into your clutches and taking all they have. Look at them. They were happier before you came here, to graze your cattle forsooth.'

The Moor was pale with rage. If Tissahamy were the taller, Peena was the stockier and more muscular man. 'Don't think that because others are afraid of you, I am,' he said. 'Dogs that bark loudest bite least.'

'Don't be too sure of that,' snarled Tissahamy, looking him straight in the eyes.

There is no saying how the matter would have ended, had not Poromola, all unconscious of what was toward, walked up just

then and stood staring at the defiant attitude of the two men, one merely clad in a loin cloth, the other in a sarong.

'And who are you?' asked Tissahamy, surveying the lad with interest.

'A Vedda,' Poromola answered shyly.

'I haven't seen you before,' said Tissahamy with a puzzled expression, for most of the Veddas were known to him.[c] What brings you here?'

'To exchange these lizards for some salt and tobacco.'

'Don't. This man is not good to know,' gesturing towards Peena. 'He'll rob you.' The thought of the simple lad having dealings with the Moor galled him—but there he was not quite just to Peena, who was kind in his own way to the Veddas.

'Begone from my garden,' shouted the Moor, addressing Tissahamy. 'There's a limit to what I'll stand.'

'That limit seems long in coming,' Tissahamy scoffed. 'Do your bartering, boy, and come with me. This place stinks.'

The scowling Peena gave Poromola somewhat more than he would have given had Tissahamy not been there.

'Come, let's get away from this jackal's den,' Tissahamy said, leading the way.

'Don't you ever come here again,' the Moor called out.

'That's as may be,' Tissahamy threw back.

Soon they joined the two Sinhalese who were waiting impatiently for Tissahamy, for the mounting sun would soon drive the deer they came for into the coverts.

Tissahamy walked ahead, bidding Poromola keep near him, and the others followed at some distance. Stalking within the jungle border his alert eyes probed the periphery of the tall grassland. About an hour of this, and he suddenly straightened up and took a quick shot. A young buck staggered a few yards and fell. Even as the herd stood undecided as to the source of danger, Tissahamy quickly rammed a load into the muzzle of his gun, and was just in time to bowl over a doe as it bounded past.

As the Sinhalese dragged up the two animals, Tissahamy asked Poromola, 'Where do your people live?'

'In the Balana-galge.'

'That's barely a mile off. I'd like to see them,' Tissahamy said; then turning to the Sinhalese, 'You two cut up the buck and take it away, leaving me a haunch in that tree fork. And you', he said to Poromola, 'can have the doe. Let's see you carry it.'

With a pleased grin the lad stooped down, seized the quarry by the fore-legs, heaved it athwart his shoulders, shrugged it into balance, and tottered up.

'Well done. You are stronger than you look', Tissahamy approved, as Poromola swung into his stride.

On their arrival at the cave, Neela at once recognized Tissahamy as the man Madana-rala and his son, Randuna, had spoken of. He welcomed him. The generous gift of the deer put all the Veddas, men, women and children alike, in good spirits.

Tissahamy was interested. Always a good talker, he could listen, too; and Neela was soon recounting to him the story of the Sitala Wanniya Veddas and the fate that had befallen them.

'In a few years there'll be none of our people left,' ended the old chief wistfully. 'My wife and I are the last of our generation; and this will perhaps be our last resting place.'

'The only thing that's not too good about this spot is its nearness to that Galmede Moor,' Tissahamy observed. 'Don't let your lads go there more than you can help.'

'The man has been good to us,' Neela said.

'So you think. One day he will be asking you to grow ganja, and then you'll be in his clutches. That's where his kindness leads. Be wary of him. Ganja is not a thing for simple Veddas to play with. You want to be very clever for that.'

Neela quite agreed, but had to repress a smile at the thought of what Madana-rala and Randuna had told them about Tissahamy's ganja-growing proclivities.

Kaira and his foster-brother, Gama, the foundling, both now bout te n years old, had taken possession of the skin of the deer Poromola had flayed, and were pegging it out. Gama was a fiery and wilful urchin with a skin as black as ebony, a contrast to the light-skinned, gentle-mannered Kaira.

As Gama and Kaira were engrossed over the deer skin, suddenly a quarrel arose between them, and Gama set upon his playmate, had him down, and began belabouring him unmercifully. Tissahamy, close to whom the scuffle occurred, seeing it was unequal, said quietly, 'That's enough now. Stop it.' But Gama took no notice. Tissahamy rose, seized the boy by the scruff of his neck, and thrust him violently aside. Gama glared daggers at Tissahamy, but the foul word that came to his lips froze at a glimpse of that stern face, and he walked away with a sulky scowl.

'A bear's cub, that,' observed Tissahamy, resuming his seat. 'One of your children?'

'No,' Neela said in a subdued voice. 'He came to us in a strange way.' And he proceeded to relate the eerie circumstances of Gama's adoption by the clan.

Tissahamy listened intently. 'How long ago was that?' he asked. 'Perhaps ten years, to judge by the boy's size?'

'Yes, about that. My son Kaira, whom he had down just now, was only three months old then. They were both nursed by my wife.'

'Did you ever find out who the mother was and where she came from?'

'No. I've told you all I know,' said Neela.

Tissahamy's mood seemed to change after that. He became less conversational and more preoccupied, and would glance every now and then with a strange interest towards the boy. At last, with an encouraging word to Neela, and a vague invitation to Poromola that they must hunt together again, he rose to go. As he passed Gama, who sat sulking apart, he paused and placed a hand on the boy's head; it was angrily shaken off. Tissahamy gripped Gama by the hair, tilted up his face, and gazed at it. Then he released him with a kindly pat. ' You must check that temper of yours,' he said. ' Be kinder to your brothers and those who feed you.' With that he went his way more wistfully than he had come—for he knew that Gama was his son. And his mind recalled the incident, forgotten as a story told, that had brought sorrow and death to the fawn-like creature he had

casually met in the jungle, and fondled under the moon, long years ago.

After that meeting, whenever Tissahamy visited those Veddas, he always took them something from his chena. They welcomed him, not only for his gifts, but also for his lively company filled with anecdote, pleasantry and song, and for the dances he playfully indulged in with the boys.

However harsh a man Tissahamy might be, he always relaxed in their company. With Poromola he occasionally hunted, and gave the finishing touches to the training that Gombira, using more primitive weapons, had placed on so sure a foundation. He admired the lad's skill as an archer so much that he never encouraged him to handle his gun.

Whenever the Veddas visited Embillene he would load them with plantains and manioc from his chena; but even they had to observe scrupulously his laws of entry. And all knew as well as he that he was not a man to live among men, and that Embillene, in full view of Friar's Hood, would never know another owner as long as Tissahamy lived.

CHAPTER 10

MENIKA

PEENA'S hold on the Galmede families was strong. The half-dozen bark and wattle, grass-thatched huts of the hamlet were spaced somewhat apart on undulating ground. In the most ramshackle of these, and about a hundred yards from Peena's hut, there lived an elderly Sinhalese couple with their daughter, as lovely a blossom as ever flowered in the jungle. Her lissom grace against the background of their tumble-down hut was like the vision of some rare orchid on a gnarled and withered tree. She was thirteen—a crucial age for a jungle girl. Avid eyes were on the watch to catch her unawares in the jungle and work her undoing. And not the least intense of those eyes were Peena's. But of all this Menika, as she was called, was superbly unconscious—though her brother Banda, the hunter of the village, living apart with his wife and family, had cautioned her never to stray into the jungle alone.

One day as Poromola and his fidus Achates, Randuna, both eighteen, approached Galmede for barter, Menika was gathering kurakkan pods in a corner of their chena. Randuna, spying her, stopped while Poromola went on, and, finding he did not follow, waited for him. Randuna, like so many others, was susceptible to Menika's charms—but Poromola had no eyes for any other woman than his good wife, Kalu.

'May I have that melon?' asked Randuna, leaning over the fence and indicating a fruit within.

The girl looked up and was taken aback. ' Why do you want it?' she asked.

'I'm very thirsty.'

'Then take it,' she said indifferently, resuming her work.

Randuna climbed the stockade and plucked the fruit. Having devoured a few juicy mouthfuls he set about plucking kurakkan pods.

'What are you doing that for?' grumbled the girl.

'To give them to you,' he said.

'I can gather all I want myself,' she said. 'Go away. There'll be trouble if anyone sees you here.' But Randuna lingered.

'Come', shouted Poromola, very concerned at his friend's familiarities. Such a thing had not happened before.

'Who's that?' Menika asked, looking towards Poromola. She had seen him occasionally before, and had felt an interest in the bashful boy, so unlike the forward youths, and even the married men of the settlement, who would stare embarrassingly at her bare breasts, while Poromola had only to glimpse her to turn away.

'You must be thirsty too', she said, and plucking a melon she threw it towards him. But Poromola did not pick it up.

'Come away, Randuna,' he repeated urgently. 'Someone is approaching.'

Randuna had barely leaped the barrier when Peena sauntered towards them. The girl seeing him, hurriedly withdrew.

'What are you two doing here?' the Moor asked.

'We were coming your way to barter this,' Randuna said, indicating a pangolin Poromola carried.

'Then why tarry here?' he inquired, glancing significantly at the retreating form of Menika.

'What's that to you?'

'Saucy talk for a Vedda boy. You two may go. I want nothing of yours.'

'All right; then we'll go elsewhere,' retorted Randuna. Making a detour of the scattered huts, he approached the one in which Punchi-rala, Menika's father, lived. Poromola hung back, trying to dissuade him.

'If you won't come, give that to me,' Randuna said, taking the pangolin.

He went up to Punchi-rala, who was seated in his compound, and said to him: 'Will you take this creature and give us a little kurakkan?'

'Yes,' said the man. 'We can do with flesh. It doesn't often come our way. Menika,' he called, 'bring some of those pods you've just gathered.'

The girl did as she was bid and, seeing who it was, suppressed

a smile, and withdrew indoors. Randuna dawdled, bundling up the grain.

'I see you Veddas often go to the Moor,' Punchi-rala said. 'Why not bring us something occasionally?'

'1 certainly will,' Randuna assured him.

From that day Randuna's visits to Punchi-rala became increasingly frequent. The more often he went, the more he wanted to go again, though he saw little enough of Menika, for it was not the custom of village girls to loiter in the presence of strangers. A single monitor or a skimpy kanava comb would be excuse enough to take Randuna there, and frequently he would accept nothing in return.

Peena, by whom Randuna's visits had not passed unnoticed, said one day to Punchi-rala, finding him alone: 'Those Vedda boys seem to like coming to your house.'

'They are kinder to us than others,' said the cripple significantly. 'They bring us honey and lizards for a little grain.'

'Are you sure there's no other attraction?'

'What do you mean?'

'You have a beautiful daughter.'

'What silly talk is this?' Punchi-rala retorted impatiently, getting up and limping into his hut.

'I thought I'd just tell you,' said the Moor.

Punchi-rala did not like Peena, nor did he trust him, having seen him cast hungry eyes at his girl. However, the poison took effect. Punchi-rala now watched Randuna more closely when he came, and felt that there might be something in Peena's warning. His welcome of the lad gradually cooled off, though of this Randuna was sublimely unconscious.

One day Poromola with his young brother, Kaira, set out to hunt some animal to barter for grain with which to make gruel for their ailing mother. They were working up a hillside when their dog, sniffing about, suddenly roused a mouse-deer from its shelter in the cavity of a fallen tree-trunk. The shy, nocturnal creature, smallest of the deer tribe, no bigger than a hare, whose dainty cloven hoofs would find a footing on a quarter-inch of space, bounded out, rushing madly from side to side with curious

twittering chirps, while its pursuers tried to circumvent it. Darting past them, it was about to enter a deep crevice when Poromola shouted, *'Barigula, bariguW*—a charm meant to fluster and divert it—or, as they believe, to weaken the power of its limbs. A moment's hesitation on the part of the little beast, and it was pounced upon by the dog.

Taking it to Galmede, they went to Peena's hut, but they found he was away from home. All the men and most of the women of the settlement too were out at work on their chenas some distance off. Passing Punchi-rala's house, Poromola diffidently looked in; but it was one of those rare occasions when the old man and his wife had left the hut for a bath in the stream. They were leaving the place when Menika, appearing at the doorway, inquired what he might want.

' We only came to exchange this creature for a little kurakkan, but there's no one about,' he stuttered, much embarrassed.

'Wait. I'll give you some', she decided, and going in she rummaged in a small loft, and soon emerged with a bundle of spikes.

Laying down the mouse-deer, Poromola was about to go when Menika said,' Don't leave this here'.

' Why ?' he asked surprised. ' Don't you eat Large-eyed Ones ?'

She smiled. 'We do like it very much, but I've only given you very little.'

'More than the Moor would have given us.'

' Take it away,' she urged.

Seeing she was serious, he reluctantly obeyed, with a distressed expression.

' Don't look like that,' she smiled. ' I didn't mean to hurt you.'

The incident had not passed unnoticed by an old woman of the hamlet, occupying a hut near Punchi-rala's. She later told Punchi-rala's wife about it, and she told her husband. The next time Raduna called with a couple of spur-fowl eggs for Menika, Punchi-rala brusquely told him that he wanted no Veddas near his house. If they wished to barter they could go to the Moor. He had nothing to give them. So Raduna, wondering what was amiss, made a dismal departure.

' I cannot think what has come over Punchi-rala,' he confided to Poromola as they hunted the next day. 'When I went there yesterday he forbade me his house.'

'Then why go?' asked Poromola unconcernedly. 'I'm never going to that settlement again, and don't you either. Those people were never our friends.'

CHAPTER II

PEENA'S WOOING

THAT Menika would not long go unmolested was inevitable. Many hungry eyes watched her movements, awaiting an opportunity to surprise her alone in the jungle.

One evening Peena saw her enter the forest border to gather firewood. Casually he rose, and sauntered in another direction as if to look for a stray calf. Once under cover, he turned swiftly round, and stealthily approached Menika. Months of restraint were concentrated into those reckless moments. Come what might, today he would satisfy his desire. Suddenly he was on her. Startled by his silent approach, and terrified by the bestial look on his face, she was about to cry out, when he clapped a hand to her mouth, imprisoning her neck in the hook of his elbow. She struggled violently but it was of little use in his strong arms that almost smothered her against his body.

He would have had his will of her, had not a rustle of leaves arrested him. Slightly relaxing his hold, he peered into the undergrowth. A dark form seemed to be approaching. It was no later than six, but the close jungle was already engloomed. The girl, recovering her breath, tried to wriggle free. This startled the animal—a she-bear with two cubs, the most dangerous beast to encounter. The next instant there was a coughing bark, a furious rush, and before Peena could evade it, he was hurled to the ground with the bear on top of him. The girl fell too at the impact, but with the nimbleness of youth, leapt up and fled for her life. Reaching her hut she fell into a swoon.

The terrified cries of the man, mingled with the ferocious barks of the bear as it savaged him, were heard in the hamlet. A couple of men, picking up any implement that lay to hand, rushed to the rescue, not knowing who the victim might be.

Taken at a disadvantage, the man had been knocked off his feet by the impetus of the charge, and before he could shield his

face with his forearms the bear had secured a good hold. There Peena lay, apparently lifeless, smothered in blood from horrible gaping wounds on face and chest. His scalp, torn from his head, masked his shattered features. They bore him to his hut and laid him on his bed. With strips of cloth they staunched his oozing wounds as best they could.

'It's too late to take him anywhere now,' said Banda, Menika's brother. 'We'll see about it tomorrow.'

'If he's alive,' commented another, as they left him to the ministrations of his wife.

But Peena was strong, and when they returned at dawn, they found him still breathing. He seemed conscious, but unable to speak. They debated what they should do with him.

'Let us sling a sambhur-skin on two poles and carry him to the Maha Oya hospital,' Banda suggested.

They were setting about this, when Peena's wife came out of the hut saying he seemed anxious to say something. Banda bent over him and said: 'We are going to take you to Maha Oya.'

Peena shook his head in protest.

'Where then? There's no one here who can attend to you.'

'Tissahamy,' came the scarcely recognizable words, through the lacerated lips.

The men went out. 'We can ask Tissahamy; but whether he'll come is another matter. We all know how things are between them.'

'Anyway we can try,' advised another. 'That'll be easier for us than taking him the fifteen miles over the hills to Maha Oya.

Two messengers were despatched. When Tissahamy came out in answer to their 'hoos' and learnt what had befallen Peena, and the man's request that he should be called, he peremptorily refused, saying, 'I've no love for the man'.

'If there's anyone who can save him it's you.'

That challenge to his skill made Tissahamy waver. He pondered a while. The desire to test his knowledge outweighed his aversion for the Moor. 'I'll come,' he decided. 'Wait for me here.' Returning to his hut he provided himself with a little

packet he always kept against such an emergency as this, and joined the men.

Within the hour Tissahamy was at the patient's side. He had him brought out on his bed into the garden, removed the sodden rags and exposed the wounds, now rendered the more ghastly with swelling. Each of these he plastered liberally with the powder he had brought: it was a mixture of equal parts of pamba, timbiri and damba root, chopped up, pounded, dried, and ground to dust on a stone. The scalp and face wounds he left to the last, as they required suturing. This he did with a strand of bast threaded on a thorn. The operation over, Tissahamy had the man borne within his hut, and settled down to a chat.

'Will he live?' asked one.

'That we shall see', Tissahamy replied with the cautious evasiveness of a wise surgeon who, having done his work, knows that the rest is beyond his power. 'Now tell me how it happened.'

'It was not a hoo cry from here,' said Ukkua, the gossip of the hamlet. 'Only this morning did the details leak out. Punchirala's daughter, Menika, seems to have been mixed up in it, though she doesn't say much. She rushed into their hut at the time and fainted. She seemed more frightened of the man than the beast, thanks to whom she's still a virgin—perhaps.'

'Aha! so that's what the blackguard was up to,' exclaimed Tissahamy, his eyes gleaming with interest. 'Well, I must be going home now. Moisten the dressings if they get dry. I'll be back in two days.'

At his next visit Tissahamy found his patient rambling in delirium and in a high fever. The face was bloated out of all recognition. The wounds were a septic mess. Tissahamy changed the dressings, and said charms over a decoction which he poured down the man's throat through a leaf funnel.

Thereafter he visited him every few days, not too concerned for the patient's life, but plying his art to the best of his ability. For three weeks Peena lay between life and death.

Gradually Peena's fine constitution began to tell, his fever to decline, his appetite to improve. The sloughs separated, and

when the pus and maggots were wiped away, clean granulating surfaces, Nature's solid bastions strongly resistant to infection, were revealed. The patient was now set on the road to recovery, but the journey before him was long and tedious.

At the end of three months Peena was a healthy man once more, with every prospect of renewing his amours. What he did not quite know for certain was whether the abashed Menika, in view of the overwhelming catastrophe that had attended his wooing, had kept her experience to herself or not. There was nothing in her behaviour, nor in the attitude of the others, to give him a clue.

During his convalescence, Peena's expressions of gratitude to Tissahamy were profuse. Many were the promises he made of recompense when he had fully recovered. Tissahamy, his saviour, could have whatever was in his power to give.

'What I have done,' Tissahamy had said, 'was not with any hope of reward. I am no professional medicine man. All I ask is a square deal when I come to you.'

'That you shall always have, but it isn't enough,' Peena protested. ' You've saved my life, as no other could. Now what do you say to a nice new gun?'

'That would be fine,' agreed Tissahamy, who could never refuse such an offer.

'You shall have the best money can buy—a double-barrelled muzzle-loader.'

'Now don't forget that word,' Tissahamy said.

But alas, as often happens, when the recompense does not swiftly follow the service, the sense of gratitude that inspires generosity tends to pale, and offices that once seemed inestimable appear trivial with the passage of time. The year was drawing to its close when Tissahamy called on Peena one day, determined to keep the Moor to his word.

'This gun of mine is worn thin, and will soon be bursting,' said Tissahamy. 'What about the one you promised me?'

'I am going to Batticoloa in a few days. I'll bring you one on my return,' Peena assured him.

'Good. I've waited long enough. I'll be back in two weeks.'

Tissahamy called in due course only to learn from Peena's wife that her husband had not yet returned from the coast.

He was said to be still away, a week later. But this time Tissahamy had his suspicions, and, before revealing himself, had stayed hidden in the jungle watching the Moor's house, and seen the man make a hasty retreat indoors at his approach.

' So he hasn't come yet,' said Tissahamy smoothly. Advancing to the door of the hut, he shouted: 'Will you come out, or shall I come in and fetch you?'

'Ah, it's you,' said Peena, emerging shamefacedly. 'I asked my wife to say what she did because I am always being pestered by beggars these days of dearth. I didn't know it was you.'

'I see,' sneered Tissahamy. 'Well, it's not a beggar this time, nor food that is required, but the gun that is my due.'

'Be seated,' smirked the Moor affably. And going in he brought out a large bundle of tobacco and betel-leaves and presented it graciously to his visitor. Tissahamy took the gift and laid it aside.

'Where's the gun?' he asked tensely.

'I couldn't get a suitable one on this occasion, though I searched all the shops at Batticoloa. There were guns of a sort, yes; but none such as I would like to give you.' The truth was that the seventy-five rupees asked was more than his niggardliness would let him part with.

' So that's it. None such as I would like to give you,' Tissahamy mimicked. 'I can quite believe that, for you mean to give me nothing. Your grand promises are as hollow as that gourd. No gun good enough for me? We'll see.' Kicking away the chews Peena had given him, he brushed past the man and entered his hut. He came out with a gun, saying, 'I'll have to be content with this'.

'Give me my gun,' said the Moor attempting to wrench it from his grasp.

'No, you don't.' Tissahamy plucked the weapon away and thrust the man aside. 'I'll keep this in token of your gratitude, you vile pig'—than which no greater insult can be offered a Mohammedan.

As he left, he turned to dehver his Parthian shot: 'Now don't go on your love affairs again, and send for me to repair the damage.'

And that was the first intimation Peena had that the cause of his accident was common knowledge.

CHAPTER 12

THE DOOM OF GALMEDE

PEENA was not the man to forget such insults as Tissahamy had offered him. His crafty mind now cast about for means to accomplish his revenge. If there were writs against him for trading in ganja, he knew there were some against Tissahamy, too, who, unlike himself, was a ganja grower, and not *persona grata* with the headmen whom he had often openly defied and insulted.

Where Tissahamy grew his ganja was a secret known only to himself. Living apart as he did, for anyone to go prying about his precincts was to invite trouble. So the task Peena set himself was both difficult and risky.

But patience brings its own reward. A Moorish pedlar whom Peena casually met one day told him of a fine patch of ganja he had accidentally discovered by a stream near Embillene where he had gone to water his bull. Peena redoubled his vigilance. A few days later he saw Tissahamy pass by Galmede, armed with muzzle-loader and axe, and followed by his two hunting-dogs. The direction he took was towards the Balana cave. And when Peena heard, far into the night, the sounds of distant chanting he knew that the Veddas were invoking their gods for success in hunting on the morrow. Here was the opportunity Peena had patiently awaited for months. Rising at dawn he lost no time in making the ten-mile walk to Bingoda to inform the headman that the time had come when they could have their revenge against their common enemy.

Tissahamy's arrival at the cave was, as usual, hailed with delight by the Veddas. Quieting with a curse his fierce mongrels that growled defiance at the Vedda dogs, Tissahamy squatted down, saying, 'Tomorrow we must start early for Gona-maru-wala\

'Good,' said Poromola, his eyes gleaming. Nothing pleased him more than to hunt with Tissahamy.

' Ado's bow is unreliable,' Neela remarked.

'I've brought you these,' Tissahamy said, undoing a bundle and displaying some rice, a coconut which was a rare luxury in those parts, some betel leaves and a few other oddments.

Neela was pleased. Here were the things the Demons liked. The kapurale in him could have full play.

'That boar you wounded some time ago,' said the ten-year-old Gama to Poromola, 'must be in the mud-hole under the etamba tree by now. Kaira and I saw it there at this time two days ago.'

'How far away is that?' Tissahamy asked.

'Only a short journey,' Poromola said.

'May I come to show the way?' Gama asked.

'All right,' Tissahamy smiled.

Within the hour they found the boar in the wallow, and Tissahamy killed it immediately. Poromola's arrow-head was still embedded in its haunch. The thigh-bone had been fractured and calloused over, imprisoning the iron and fragments of dead bone. Mud baths had helped the wounded creature wonderfully. Given a few weeks, the arrow-head would have worked its way out and the soundness of the limb been fully established.

Cutting away the diseased portion, Poromola quartered the carcass and carried it back to the cave, while Gama trotted gleefully behind with the offal.

There is no flesh the Vedda relishes more than pork; wanderoo coming next. Besides, here was just what they needed for the *aduku mangala,* the propitiatory ceremony to the hunting spirits.

It was now evening, and the Veddas repaired to their dancing ground within the forest bordering the Balana plain. While the men prepared a framework of sticks and embellished it with bundles of green leaves, the women cooked the food for the offering. The heart, lungs and liver of the pig were chopped up and stewed with a seasoning of salt and chillies; rice was boiled. Six portions were shared out on broad kenda leaves and set on the platform. To each of these was added seven betel leaves, which, proving insufficient, were substituted by leaves of jungle pepper of similar appearance.

The crescent moon had risen over the hill-encircled plain when the ceremony began. Neela, clad in a white cloth Tissahamy had brought for the occasion, holding an arrow-head in each hand, paced round the offerings to the throbs of a drum of langur skin. Up and down, and round and round he danced and sang the long night through, adjuring the jungle gods.

As in all such rites, the spirits first invoked were Kande Yaka and Bilindi Yaka, and also Indigola Yaka, male and female. Then followed a list of beings who, as their names implied, were once men. These hunting spirits were the god who fell from a hill, the new god pierced by an elephant, the new god of the hunting plain, and the phantom of the foothill.

The ritual reached its climax when the priest, taking a betel leaf from the trestle, placed it against the right shoulder of a hunter and split it down one side with the arrow-head; then against the left shoulder, cleaving it on the other side; and finally against the chest, dividing it through the middle. Then he cast the leaf down. If it fell smooth surface uppermost that man would have luck, but not if it fell reversely. And thus each hunter—Tissahamy, Ado, Poromola, Vela—was tested in turn to ascertain who would be favoured and who not.

It was long past midnight when the ceremony ended; and all the Veddas, together with their dogs, partook of the oblation, leaving nothing to the spirits. Finally they lay down and slept.

At dawn, keen and confident in the portents, the men set out on the trail. After three days of successful hunting, they returned laden with meat, dried and fresh, of sambhur, pig, monkey, and monitor lizard. And Tissahamy returned home—where the news awaiting him was bad.

Gamandi, his brother, whom he had left to guard his ganja plot, had been taken into custody, and his entire crop had been despoiled. Tissahamy's anger knew no bounds, not only at his loss, but at the humiliating thought that anyone should have dared to treat him so.

A very crafty man was Tissahamy; and though inwardly he

seethed with anger, outwardly he was all injured innocence when he visited Galmede, and laid his troubles before none other than the man he suspected most—Peena himself.

[1] Who could have done this injustice to me who mind my own business and live a life apart?' he bewailed. 'Why should they have seized my brother who is a fool, and not me? What must I do about it, Peena? You are a man of wisdom, give me your advice' . . . and so on in a strain of helpless self-commiseration and humility. And all the while he was as vigilant as a cat for a stray word or a guilty look that would give one or other of his audience away; but they, realizing this only too well, observed a discreet silence. Had he spotted the culprit, it is possible that he might have departed as sleekly as he had come, and had his revenge in his own time in his own way. But now, having failed in singling out an individual, he decided to make sure of him by avenging himself on the entire village. He knew that his reputation as a sorcerer, a worker of destructive spells, even outdid that as a bully; he resolved to exploit it as his instrument of vengeance. No sooner decided than done.

He rose to his feet in that twilight when the menace of the jungle seems at its worst. Suddenly the storm broke out in a flame of anger. For a good hour he poured pollution on their mothers, wives and sisters. Then he laid the most awful curse on the entire hamlet. His deep sonorous voice thundered out their fate with paralysing effect. Horror-struck, they slunk into the seclusion of their homes, leaving the darkened stage entirely to him. But scattered as were their huts there was not one beyond the reach of that booming voice.

' I shall cast a spell on this village that will blight it. You will all die, one by one, of sickness and want if you remain here—every man, woman and child of you. This place will become desolate and gathered into the forest once more.'

The words fell like doom upon his cowering audience. For many days after that they would start up from their dreams at the memory of that dreadful voice—though of Tissahamy they saw nothing in the sad days to come. And when a few nights later,

a devil-bird, that harbinger of evil, shrieked three times from the towering tree in their midst, it confirmed their sense of impending calamity.

Two months had passed when a couple of men who had spent a night at Damanegama returned to the hamlet with influenza, which at the time was raging throughout the Island. And, as usually happens when a new disease is introduced for the first time, it spread with devastating effect among a people whose resistance was undermined by chronic malaria and scarcity of food from failure of crops. Futile charms against the avenging demon Tissahamy's magic had let loose amidst them were their only treatment. The death rate was rapid and appalling. In some homes every inmate succumbed. And soon the few survivors forsook Galmede, leaving it utterly deserted as Tissahamy had foretold.

Misfortune was soon to settle too on the Veddas of the Balana cave. Randuna, loitering at Galmede for a sight of his beloved Menika, caught the disease. For days he lay raving in delirium. Neela, scared that the insatiate demon of Galmede would destroy them all, used what arts he knew to identify and appease him. He strung his bow, and squatting down in a quiet corner of the cave, set his finger to the centre of the taut string balancing the weapon. This was the ceremony of soothsaying by the bow to determine the particular demon responsible for misfortune. Then he began his invocation:

[1] Long life! Long life! Kande Vanniya, Lord of the Dead, reveal to me through my bow the name of him who brings us sickness and suffering. Cause me to seize today, O guardian god, him who wreaks his vengeance on us, that we may appease him with offerings. Riri Demon, is it you? ... or you Indigola Demon? . . . Rahu Demon? . . . Patta Demon? . . .'

Long he crooned and fervently, watching intently for the sway and over-balance of the bow at the mention of a name. But today the oracle was dumb. Wearied out at last, he laid it disconsolately aside.

The next to be stricken with the disease was Neela himself. Then, Ado and his wife were very frightened and left them for a

small hut in a Sinhalese chena at Dhikagama, where soon afterwards they both contracted the illness and died.

Neela tepidly declined. Fearing his illness might prove fatal, he called his eldest sons to him, Vela and Poromola, and said to them between paroxysms of coughing: 'Each day I get worse. There's no one here to help us, now that Galmede is desolate. If your mother and I continue here any longer, we too shall die, for we are old. You have enough to do to find food for the women and children. You cannot look after us as well. It's best that I go to Damanegama where there is a good medicine man I know, and food more suitable to the sick than can be got here. You stay on a while, my sons, and look after these. But not for long. Make for Bingoda as soon as you can. There you will be close to the Sinhalese. We shall join you there, if we are alive.'

They parted in tears, Neela and his wizened little wife to totter along the ten miles to Damanegama in charge of Randuna who, miraculously enough, was now convalescing, and Poromola and Vela to go in search of food, of which there was hardly any in the cave.

Within the week Neela died in the house of his friend, the headman of Damanegama—but it was not till long afterwards that his children heard of it. As for Randuna, he never came back to them, being contented with his life among the Sinhalese.

With the passing of Neela the older generation of Veddas was no more—the generation that included Bandaradua-rala who killed his wife, Kanghireliya who succumbed to a cobra bite, Gombira who fell from a tree, Madana-rala whom a bear slew, and Ado who left them only to die.

But fate was relentless, and those Veddas were to receive yet another devastating blow. Vela, the elder brother of Poromola, the only other breadwinner there, fell ill with the disease; his wife soon contracted it, and one morning they were both found dead.

They had now no choice but to abandon the cave that had been their home for five years.

On Poromola's young shoulders had fallen the sole responsi-

bility for that dwindled band, consisting of only nine individuals; Poromola and his wife Kalu; the widow of his half-brother Donga; Vela's two orphans, Thutha a boy of five and Thandi a girl of two; the foster-brothers, Kaira, son of Neela, and Gama, the foundling, both eleven; and Gombira's two children, the girl Punchi now five and the boy, Handuna, barely a year old—all, except Poromola, mere women and little children. Unwitting vestals of the dying flame, they were to delay yet a while the passing of an ancient race that had outlived its day, lingered too late, and was no longer wanted by the world.

CHAPTER 13

THE FISHERS

POROMOLA, at twenty-two, faced his duty like a man. It was well for that little group of human driftwood that the youth in whose care Providence had left them was worthy of the trust.

So this residue of the merged clans, the last wild Veddas of all that terrain between the Bibile-Batticoloa road and the eastern littoral known as ancient Veddi-ratte forsook their cave and took the trail, as defenceless and undaunted a gallant little band as Fate ever bludgeoned.

They were a ragged group, these derelicts of the human race who to the rest of the Islanders were but an echo of the past. Clad in the scantiest of filthy rags—the sum of which would not have decently clothed, by urban standards, a single individual—the only warmth they knew in the chilly jungle nights was that of their fire. Their only weapons were Poromola's bow and six arrows, scrupulously retrieved after every delivery, and his axe, and the axes of Donga and Vela that Gama and Kaira now proudly shouldered. Their main defences against the fiercer animals, especially bears, were shouts and charms and their agility in climbing trees when attacked. The jungle drought was in its stride when the Veddas vacated their cave—a time when their feet pointed irresistibly to the trails. It was this coincidence that decided Poromola to linger on in the forest rather than resort to the environs of men. Their company being composed largely of children, the stages of their journey were necessarily short—the first day no further than a mile. Skirting the Balana plain they came to the sandy bed of the Karandatte Ela, a tributary of the Tota Oya. It was as lovely a camping site as could be desired, though of this the Veddas were oblivious. The place owed its name, Galmedia-wala, to two adjacent rocky pools in the sandy stream-bed. They were glad to find these squirming with little fish. As the fierce overhead sun played on the stony basin of the smaller pool, the fish kept leaping out at the edge,

hoping by some subtle instinct to reach the freer water of the larger pool, divided from it by about four feet of rock, on which most of them landed to wilt and die or to flop back whence they came; while a few of the luckier wriggled on to gain their objective.

Poromola contemplated the pools for a few moments, and then said to Kaira and Gama: 'You two, catch us these fish', and seeing them hesitate added: 'Be quick about it, we're all hungry.'

The time had come when he would have to depend increasingly on the co-operation of these urchins; and the sooner he began with them the better. Experience had taught him that the best way to learn a thing was to do it oneself.

'Come, Kaira', said Gama, leading the way into the jungle, while Poromola sat down on the bank to a chew of bark.

The boys were soon back each with a section of the climber, pus-wel, about half a yard long and the thickness of a man's fore-arm. Pounding these on the rocks with their axe-heads to release the juices, they swished them about in the water, whipping up a soapy foam, dashing them on the rock at intervals. Satisfied with having done enough, they awaited expectantly the floating of the drugged fish to the surface. But the number secured was disappointing.

'These aren't a mouthful,' quizzed Poromola. 'What now?'

' If only we had kukurumun,' Kaira bewailed.

' Well, go and get some. We are waiting.'

The boys disappeared once more. Soon they spotted what they sought, a spiny shrub full of yellowish ovoid fruit. With sticks they struck down about a dozen of these and brought them back. Having crushed the fruit with stones, they cast them into the pool. They had not long to wait before they saw, to their delight, the stupefied fish float belly upwards in large numbers. The haul consisted of a variety of small fry, averaging about three to four inches, very bony, but savoury enough, to stomachs more concerned with quantity than quality. While these were cooking Poromola returned with two honeycombs and a monitor lizard, and praised the boys when he saw their catch.

They stayed there two days and then followed the stream to

where it joined the Tota Oya, along which they proceeded until they came to a large pond on the dry river-bed, known as Bodagaha-wala—after a bodagaha tree that had once stood there, but was there no longer, its place having been taken by two rival giants, a water-loving kumbuk and an etamba tree.

Bodagaha-wala, a favourite resort of the Veddas in the arid months, was a deep, capacious pool never known to dry out, even when most of the water-holes along the wide bed of the Tota Oya had disappeared. It was specially deep by the exposed roots of the great kumbuk that leaned over and shadowed it. The dark recesses there were known to be the haunt of two large crocodiles that were wont to vary their menu of fish with the flesh of thirsting animals. It was a place treated with respect by man and beast.

Having settled the women and children on the gravelly river-bed in the shade of bordering trees, Poromola, uttering a word of caution that no one was to approach the dangerous part of the pool, called to Gama and Kaira and entered the jungle. Here a more potent and pervasive poison than pus-wel or kukurumun was necessary, and also the supplementary aid of small bows and arrows with which to spike the partially stunned fish. It was in search of these that Poromola and the two boys now went.

First they sought ulkandhe or gatawela boughs which furnished both bows and arrows. The sticks were cut, and whittled down with the edges of arrow-heads, the boys sedulously emulating Poromola's dexterity. Five small bows, strung with twisted aralu bast and about a dozen sharply pointed unfeathered arrows were made in all. To each bow stave was secured an arrow by a long strand of bast to ensure recovery of a harpooned fish making for the depths. As the hitting of a wobbly object, at however close a range, requires training, Poromola provided this by trailing a leaf in imitation of a fish before the practising boys.

For the poison they had to go about a couple of miles to where cactus trees grew among boulders. They had only to slice the bark, and hold a gourd beneath to catch the milk that welled out. A few such slicings and the gourd was soon full.

The pool itself now received attention. On one side it overflowed into a broad channel which had to be dammed against the diffusion of the poison and the escape of the harried fish. This was done merely by a sand ridge in the shallower part, and in continuation of it, in the deeper portion, by a fencework of closely implanted sprigs.

All being ready for the final act, Poromola walked round the pool splashing it with cactus milk, marbling its umbered surface. Now, armed with bows and arrows, they took up their stations ankle deep in the shallows by the dam, awaiting the concentration there of the fish, distressed by the poison, seeking an outlet. The earliest signs that the poison was proving effective were the flustered leaps of the carp as they thwacked the leafy barrier only to plop back; though many jumped the sandy ridge quite easily and so escaped. Singularly enough, the Veddas made no attempt whatever to secure these silvery springers, which owed their immunity to the presence in the pool of velvety makulu berries which these fish are fond of nibbling, and so imparting to their flesh a quality poisonous to man.

Poromola's wife, Kalu, joined the archers; but Donga's widow knelt down at a slight breach she had made in the sand barrier, and with her scanty garment outspread gathered into her lap quite a catch of small fry, while the acrobatic carp, which she ignored, leaped about her.

Meanwhile Poromola and the two boys were busy exercising their archery on the stupefied wobblers rolling drunkenly about. Poromola seldom missed. Scarcely had he disengaged a spiked victim, and strung it on the vine at his waist, than another and another followed in quick succession. Not so the boys, who found the targets tantalizingly elusive—until Poromola, calling them to him, bade them carefully watch his technique, which was to place the drawn arrow-point almost against the squirming quarry before releasing it.

Gama, always the apter of the two, was the first to secure a hit; and when he saw his arrow dance like a mast in choppy water instead of sticking inert in the sand, and whisking it up found impaled there a murrel, the tastiest of these fish, he let

out a whoop of mirth in which all joined. Kaira was slower in learning, but before the day was over he too, like Kalu, had made his modest contribution to the hoard accumulated on the sand.

The fish, averaging about six to eight inches, were quite twice the size of those in the smaller pool at Galmedia-wala, but of precisely the same varieties. Of these murrel and catfish were the most prized; the rest included labeo, goby, eels, bitterlings, snake-heads and a few other varieties—in fact, the young of every kind of fish inhabiting Ceylon's rivers found sanctuary in that deep pool, awaiting release with the coming of the rains.

Some of their catch they boiled with herbs and chillies and ate that night; but most of it they dried on small trestles over slow fires.

Except for a very few dead fish found floating about the following morning, there was nothing to indicate that the pool had been poisoned. The bigger fish in the depths were untouched, and also, strangely enough, the very little ones which were to be seen frolicking in the shallows.

The Veddas spent three days there, varying their fare of fish with wild yams and honey. Once more they were a happy family, with their recent woes already forgotten; the insecurity of their lives left little inclination for contemplation of the past.

Bodagaha-wala was a place of danger, apart from the crocodiles hidden in its depths. The only water-hole for miles around, at that season of the year, it attracted thirsting animals, especially at night.

Night in the jungle is furtive and unquiet and more to be feared than the day, and wherever that small group of humanity roamed, the evenings echoed to the voice of Poromola supplicating ancestral spirits:

> My great man, my great man, my God,
> Where art thou wandering?

Poromola spent many wakeful hours kindling his fires, and shouting off rustling footsteps which might mean a harmless porcupine or a truculent bear; but the approach of the leopard that drank nightly at the farther end of the pool was always

noiseless and unnoticed. When, however, one moonlight night, a small herd of elephants sauntered up and disported themselves in the pool, regardless of the shouts the Veddas raised, Poromola decided it was time to move on.

CHAPTER 14

A SAMBHUR HUNT

AND now Poromola did a brave thing. Instead of making for the precincts of some jungle hamlet as his father had advised, and as so many other Veddas, faced with similar predicaments, had done, he decided to lead his little band of women and children right into the heart of the hilly wilderness, along trails which he alone knew. So far they had kept to the flanking water-ways of the Balana plain. Now, buried in the tall illuk grass, they recrossed the great glade, and entered the jungle across their dancing-ground, within sight of their cave towards which they dared not even glance, knowing what it contained.

Poromola's main concern was the long journeys that would be imposed on the children by the scarcity of water at this season of the year. Throughout the greater part of their adventurous wanderings, he carried Gombira's children, Punchi and Handuna, one on his hip and the other bestraddling his shoulders; while his brother Vela's children were borne, one by his wife Kalu, and the other by Donga's widow.

Labouring up the tortuous 'Pass by which the elephants descend', resting a while here and there for the little ones to regale themselves on fallen berries, they gained the higher lands. Past a grove of ironwood, towering mast-like to the sky, they came to the bald dome of Bimbaliya rock, where, during their noon-day rest, they feasted on the jack-fruit.

Three more arduous miles that afternoon, and they were at Gona-maru-wala, a muddy pool in the bend of a dry stream-bed in which swine had wallowed. This was the first water they had come upon that day. Even as they quenched their thirst in a pit scooped out at the margin of the pool, a bear approached to drink. Poromola walked towards the beast and shouted an abusive charm: *Usate vallate passate vallai, thalate the valalli, che karia, thu-ihu*— spitting contemptuously. It was the bold front and unfaltering voice, rather than the magic of the words, that did the trick.

Just about a loud 'hoo' cry from here was Dhik-galge, which Poromola had chosen for their stay; to it they went taking with them two gourds full of water, none being available nearer the cave.

Gona-maru-wala was a favourite resort of Vedda hunters; there any animal chased in the surrounding hills always came to bay. For four days Poromola and the two boys searched those jungles from dawn to dusk, bringing back only a sufficiency of honey and small creatures for their needs. But Poromola was out for bigger game—a sambhur or a boar. On the fifth morning they had ranged farther than before, when Poromola's sharp eyes noticed the fresh tracks of a sambhur at the base of a steep hillock which he knew had but one path of ascent. There was no spoor to speak of, merely the turning over of a dry leaf here and there on the heavily carpeted ground, which would have conveyed nothing to any but the most practised eye. Assuring himself by a closer scrutiny that the animal had not yet descended, Poromola cautioned Gama and Kaira, and together they crept warily up the hill. Reaching a spot near the summit, he instructed the boys to take the bitch, Karape, with them, and making a careful detour of the rock, urge her on with shouts and drive through the patch of jungle towards him, while he took his stand behind a tree, within a few yards of which the animal must pass on its way down.

Soon, the barks of the dog and the excited clamour of the boys warned him of the quarry's approach. A clattering of hooves, and there came towards him a magnificent sambhur. Drawing his bow to the utmost, his strong, lithe body swivelling on his hips, he released his arrow just as the animal slowed its paces to negotiate the hazardous turn of the path. The effect of the shot was merely to prick the creature to a spurt.

Now they were after it in full cry down the precarious hillside. The dog bounded past them hard on the quarry's heels. Handicapped by its horns, the sambhur negotiated the hampering undergrowth with its spread of tines pressed back against its withers. Deer and hound were soon beyond earshot of the human pursuers, compelling Poromola to spoor the tracks which, as the animal had not bled at all, was a slow progress.

Two hours of this, and Poromola had almost given up hope, when a faint yelp from the far distance sent him hurtling past all obstacles, straight as the arrow flies, to the 'Pool where the sambhur was killed', a half-mile off. Breaking out of the forest border on to the open river-bed, he saw a sight to thrill a hunter's heart.

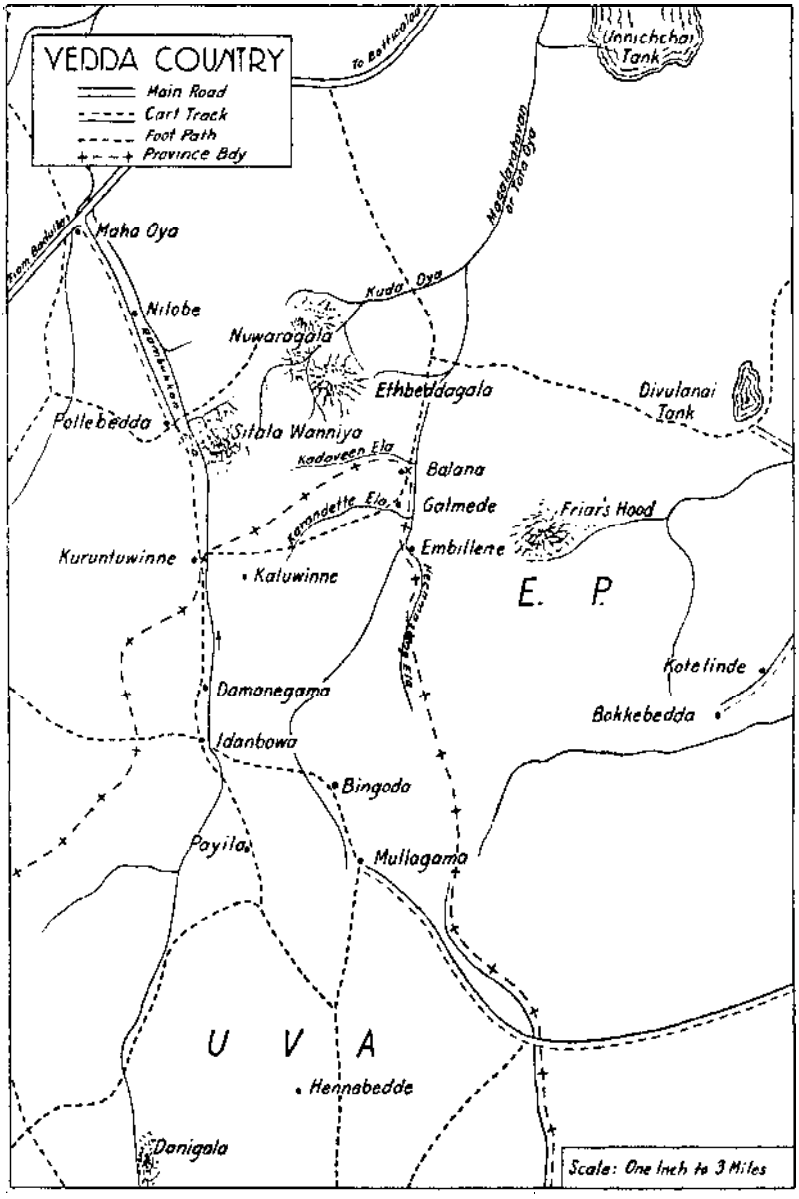
In the midst of the pool stood the sambhur, a broken arrow implanted in its chest, bleeding from many wounds the hound had inflicted. Mired, fatally wounded, at the limit of its endurance, it presented an easy mark. Poromola's arrow, aimed this time at the base of the neck, stood out three inches on the other side; but the sambhur seemed not to feel it at all. One last shaft he loosed into its shoulder. Then, axe in hand, he waded into the pool.

Evading a thrust from those still dangerous horns, he seized a tine and hacked at the forehead while the dog clung to the animal's throat. It floundered and fell, struggled vainly to rise, and lay still—just as the breathless boys, long out-distanced by Poromola, burst into the clearing and raised a shout of triumph.

The carcass proved too big to be moved from the puddle in which it lay, and there Poromola, joined by the women and children from the cave, skinned and cut it up with arrow-head and axe. And as they worked they feasted on the liver and heart and gobbets of bleeding meat browned on the glowing logs.

Not many hours of daylight were left for the necessary work; every bit of the flesh had to be removed to the cave before nightfall. As evening closed they filed off with their last loads on carrying-sticks, proportioned to the strength of the carriers. Poromola staggered under the massive quarters, Kaira and Gama and the women under great chunks of muscle; even the little three-year-olds stumbled on with morsels threaded on loops of vine. Only the ribbed skeleton was left in the bloodied pool for the marauders of the night.

The whole of the next day was spent in drying the meat on trestles, ensuring a food supply for weeks to come. Their stay at Dhik-galge thereafter was one of pleasant idleness. Tiring of smoked flesh, but fully revived, and carrying what remained of


VEDDA COUNTRY
Main Road
Cart Track
Foot Path
Province Bdy
To Batticaloa
Unnichchai Tank
Maha Oya
Nilobe
Nuwarogala
Kuda Oya
Ethbeddagala
Divulanai Tank
Pollebedda
Sitala Wanniya
Kadoveen Ela
Balana
Galmede
Friar's Hood
Embilliere
Kuruntuwinne
Kaluwinne
E. P.
Damanegama
Kotelinde
Bokkebedda
Idanbowa
Bingoda
Payila
Mullagama
U V A
Hennabedde
Danigala
Scale: One Inch to 3 Miles

it, they resumed their journey through the mountainous labyrinth.

About noon one day they came to Wapuran-penela, a spring on the steep side of a gorge. From its deep source in some crevice of the rock, the water flowed in a silent trickle, broadening into a shallow pool in a green glade, before spilling over the dome to the depths of the ravine. The runnel bestraddled an elephant track, the only way through the defile. Here any animal of the environing hills must pass on its way to the lands beyond, and here at all times they would quench their thirst, whether by day or night.

So much in awe did the Veddas hold this bottle-neck that even their hunters never spent a night there. But today the wanderers had no choice; the next water-hole was too distant for tender limbs. As the sun sank behind the crest of Ethbeddagala that walled the other side of the gorge, even Poromola, always so calm and self-possessed, could not help communicating something of his uneasiness to the others.

Nearby was an inviting cave, with shelves and crannies such as Veddas love—but it lay in the very path of the beasts. As their pitch for the night Poromola chose instead a steep boulder difficult of access. Early in the evening he had them all on top of it by means of a ladder of creepers which he afterwards drew up. They lit no fire lest it betray their presence; but the stored heat of Ethbeddagala kept their naked bodies warm. There was little sleep for any except the children, that night. Poromola remained seated through the long hours, watching, by the glow of the young moon, the sinister shadows come and go; hearing the incessant rustle of feet, the fierce bark of fighting bears, the lapping of water, the cracking of branches where the elephants fed; their backs, as they filed past, almost within reach of his hands.

Dawn found them lingering on the summit, reluctant to descend for fear of loitering bears. It was not till the sun had flooded the jungle that Poromola had them down, one by one. Carrying the little ones, as usual, they travelled most of the day, until they came to the Nilgala Wadipola only to find the water-

hole there quite dry. Then on to the ' Stream that fell from the rock' of Nuwaragala where they were relieved to find a little water by deepening a hole clawed out by bears. Evening was fast closing when at last they reached Alu-galge at the base of Nuwaragala, with its perennial spring, the goal of their wearisome journey.

It was here the Veddas came annually to take bambara combs from the formidable hill. It was from here Gombira, some six years previously, had braved the Yakini baliya. But now, with only two boys to help him, Poromola had no thought of such exploits. What had attracted them this time were the jack-fruit and pineapples of the foothills. A week of feasting on these to repletion and they started on the return journey southwards, by another route—the steep pass of Madamoratte-kade where, did they but know it, tragedy awaited them.

CHAPTER 15

TRAGEDY AT PITIYA-HELA

THE training of Kaira and Gama proceeded apace. Wherever Poromola went they shadowed him. Theirs was nature study, not for its own sake, but as a means to a livelihood, in strongholds of beasts where the battle went to the cunning.

The shredded bark of some looping vine or springy sapling told them where a buck had rubbed the velvet off its horns. They could differentiate between the claw-marks on tree-trunks of bears and leopards. Poromola taught them how to stop a running doe with a whistle; and a buck with a moan as from a doe. They fashioned their own bows and arrows and practised on live elusive targets. They snared birds by smearing a dead branch by a water-hole with the sticky milk of jack or nuga or cactus.

The little children too had their lessons in that wild kindergarten. They could soon tell the harmless kodigota, a nest the size of a football built by a largish ant, from the somewhat similar structure of the fearsome wasp. Black ants and ticks daily demonstrated their viciousness. The scorpion and centipede were their bedfellows; the giant spider in the creviced tree was a thing to be abhorred; the hump-nosed viper under the dead leaves was a snare to be watchful for—and so with many another of Nature's instruments of doom.

After weeks of wandering, they came one day, by way of the steep defile of Madamoratte-kade, littered with boulders as by a giant's hand, to the hill of Pitiya-hela. A climb from the neck of the pass, so steep as to necessitate clinging to saplings, brought them to a small cave on the summit of the hill, overlooking a frightful drop. Here, having ousted a she-bear and her cubs, Poromola settled his meagre flock.

The cave gave access at its further end to a hazardous path along the precipitous hillside, better suited to wild cats than to men. Its most dangerous section was a mere V-shaped crevice,

just beyond the cave, which could only be negotiated by an abdominal wriggle like a monitor lizard's. At other parts, a stunted shrub, here and there, gave precarious foothold. Occasional gaps in the path were bridged with crumbling buttresses of stone, evidently built by the ancient Sinhalese; for Veddas never indulged in such refinements. The track led far around Pitiya-hela and contiguous peaks, bringing honey-gatherers within easy access of the bambara combs which plentifully studded the rock faces.

Here Poromola gave the boys their first lessons in the gruelling art of taking rock bambaras. Nor did he desist from his efforts until he had made them conquer all fear. To induce striplings of twelve to descend the ladder for the first time, and, all unaided, to tackle the formidable bees, was no easy task. But with firmness tempered with patience and encouragement he succeeded.

On the eighth morning of their stay there, Poromola rose, saying: 'Today we'll collect all the honey we can, and tomorrow we'll descend. The rock water-hole has run dry.'

' *Chik-chik-chik?* warned a gecko.

Poromola hesitated, and sat down a while in deference to the ill omen. Then he left the cave, accompanied by the two boys and his wife, Kalu, placing the children in charge of Donga's widow. They spent most of the morning attacking a colony of four large combs, more difficult to take than any they had got previously. The two gourds they brought were soon filled and Kalu was sent back to the cave for their last gourd.

An hour passed and Kalu had not returned. So Poromola and the two boys, carrying their honey, returned to find out what had happened.

'Where's Kalu?' he asked Donga's widow, not seeing the girl in the cave.

'Why, she came here a long time ago, took the gourd, and left,' she exclaimed.

Poromola was aghast. There was but one passage to the hives, and they had not encountered her on the way. He hastened back, shouting 'Kalu! Kalu!'

He was worming himself through the angular crevice, when he paused. He could not go on without satisfying himself that here at least, the most dangerous part of the track, all was well.

Lying prone as he was, he gripped a stem at the verge of the precipice and peeped over, in a manner that made the boys gasp. He focused his gaze long on the blurred depths, four hundred feet below. Something there seemed out of keeping with its surroundings of tree and boulder. Might it be the gourd caught on a tree top? Faintness overcame him at the thought; his grip relaxed momentarily; his body sagged over and disappeared.

Even as he fell, Poromola's senses returned to him. He snatched wildly, only to clutch the air. As he hurtled headlong, something seemed to rush up at him. He grabbed desperately with both his hands. One held, and he was jerked to a halt that almost wrenched off his arm. With an agonizing effort, he drew himself up a little, secured a firm hold with the other hand, and hooked a knee over a branch. Thus he rested, laboriously recovering the breath that was knocked out of him. He straddled the yielding bough and backed towards its stouter part.

There he rode, clinging hard with both his hands, to prevent himself being blown down by a strong wind that ricocheted off the rock. Slowly his wits returned to him, and he remembered the events that had brought him to that pass. He glanced up at the shimmering rock. Then at the yawning gulf below. He had fallen about a third of the way. His head reeled, he swayed, but somehow he maintained his balance.

He could now see more plainly the object he took to be a gourd. There could be no doubt about it. Then he scanned his tree, only to discover a shred of cloth fluttering like a streamer. Kalu's! He shivered at the thought that, somewhere down there, among the boulders, was the naked body of his wife. Shifting his position, he looked along the trunk of the sturdy weera that bore him, to find that its stem fitted like a bung into a hole in the smooth baldness of the sheer rock wall. That way there was no hope whatever.

What a fate would be his, and of the women and those children trapped in the mountain wilderness into which he had

brought them. For him death would be swift; for them slow and lingering. Long he brooded in utter despair; sorrow for the living almost outweighing that for the dead.

A peregrine falcon floating serenely, shrilling an occasional cry, attracted his attention. After hovering about a while, the bird descended and perched on a solitary tree, about seventy-five feet below. Soon it took off again to hunt for food, leaving his gaze impassively riveted on the tree. It jutted, like his, out of the bare rock directly beneath him, and seemed to beckon him. He decided to take a chance of a fall.

Uttering a prayer to the Nae Yaku, he gripped the branch he bestraddled and swung off to the full length of his arms. He swayed a little so as to hit the branches full in his descent. He let go. As the leaves whipped his spread-eagled frame, he groped wildly with the strength of despair. An arm barely held; a knee barely locked; a moment he wobbled insecurely, like a squirrel in its drop—and all in one flowing movement he swung over with a bough in his embrace. The nicely planned fall, the braced muscles at the moment of collision, their yield, their rhythm, from the training of a lifetime—to these he owed the miracle of being alive. He squirmed down the branch and wedged himself into a crotch where he could relax. He tried his limbs, and was surprised to find them whole.

Facing round, he took stock of his position. The tree he was now on, a hardy weera like the last, grew out of a horizontal crevice which seemed to lead round a hump towards a cluster of scrub. Whether it extended beyond that he could only surmise. To secure foothold on that fissure—his sole means of escape—was impossible owing to the jut of the rock above. There was another desperate way. But before adopting it, he rode down the fluted trunk towards its base, and resting his back against the rock, spent a good half-hour rubbing the stiffness from his wrenched arms which would now have to serve him for legs.

Then he hooked his fingers on the ledge, released himself from the tree, and hung down on extended arms. Inch by inch he groped his way laterally with his hands. If that groove petered out he was done. For a full fifty yards he proceeded in that

manner. It was a gruelling test of endurance; his cramped fingers were numb with pain; his arms quivered. He was at the very limit of his strength, when a slight bulge in the rock gave his abdomen just sufficient support to ease somewhat the agony of his fingers.

Resting thus a space, he drew himself up with a mighty effort bringing his eyes to the level of the rift. He was relieved to find that it widened out towards the bushes which seemed to stand on a narrow shelf. Braced by the discovery he resumed his progress. Reaching his objective, he levered himself up, thrust out his elbows securing support on his arms, and with an agile twist of his body, slumped down on the scrub to his unutterable relief. He immediately swooned into a heavy sleep.

Awaking, he found his nails had been torn away, his fingers rasped and bleeding. He tugged at them to restore their pliancy, wincing with pain, for it was now evident they would have to serve him through a further ordeal. Splayed out like a lizard on that blistering wall, he made his way in a gradual descent towards the straggling vegetation that began to mantle the foot of the hill.

So far his trials had engrossed his mind. Now that he stood on the blessed earth once more, the dead weight of the thing he must do overwhelmed him. At last he found her naked form grotesquely huddled among the boulders, and knelt down mumbling soft words of despair and sobbing out his heart. He gathered her sagging softness in his arms and laboured up the mountain he had so amazingly descended. Two hours of climbing, with never a stop, brought him to the top of the pass. On a bed of leaves he laid her down as tenderly as a mother would her babe. Then he ascended to the cave.

To that forlorn tearful group, with doom on their faces, he seemed a fearful apparition, all bloodied and woebegone. They cowered away making feeble sounds. Not for a moment had they thought that he could survive that fall.

' Don't be afraid. It is I , ' Poromola said dispassionately.

'Did you find her?' whispered Donga's wife.

His look answered her more than words.

' Let's go from here,' he said, picking up Gombira's children.

'I only want to be with you until I die,' Mcnika said

At the Madamoratte pass he bade them rest and left them saying he would be back soon. Going to where he had left the body of Kalu, he carried her up to the cave. He placed her in a nook and covered her with a cairn of stones. There she would be with the spirits of those who had died there—the last of that long line.

CHAPTER 16

THE DESERTED HAMLET

JOURNEYING southwards, stage by stage, the Veddas arrived once more at Galmedia-wala, their first camp on leaving the Balana cave. Poromola decided on a longer stay here than usual. Soon the October rains would come and he must secure a stock of dried flesh against those days when the torrential downpour would make hunting impossible.

The Balana plain and the surrounding jungle swarmed with wild animals. So Poromola built two trestles high on the forks of adjacent trees to which they climbed every evening by means of flexible ladders which they afterwards drew up.

Secure on their perches they heard all night the creatures calling—the rallying chorus of the jackal pack, the timorous 'hoos' of deer, the sambhur's clarion, the panther's roar, the blare of the elephant, and the fierce barks of bears fighting over the ant-hills.

Two weeks they hunted incessantly, accumulating much flesh of deer and pig and monkey. Poromola said to Kaira one morning: 'You and I will go to the Galmede chenas today to see if we can find some kurakkan and maize. We haven't tasted grain for months.'

'Why can't I come too?' pouted Gama.

'No, Gama, you stay here and look after the children. Poison that upper pool for fish if you like. There are a few still left.'

Poromola and Kaira approached the deserted hamlet with a sense of awe, for Veddas feared nothing more than scenes of death, and well they knew that the place was littered with the graves of hastily buried corpses. Yet here Poromola had come, drawn by some strange attraction. There was little to be gathered from the chenas: a spike of kurakkan here and there, a maize cob or two that had escaped the parrots, a melon, a few chillies. These they picked as they sauntered along in silence, passing

many a grave dug up by animals, as the scattered human bones testified. Still Poromola lingered on.

Regardless of Kaira's appeals that they should leave the accursed spot, Poromola walked on at a leisurely pace. Near one of the huts, more dilapidated than any other, was a fallen tree. On it Poromola seated himself, and was soon lost in reverie, while the resigned Kaira snuggled himself down. Where, Poromola wondered, were those last survivors of Galmede now who had scattered in such haste—those few women and children? As he ruminated thus there fell on his ears a strange sound. He turned and looked towards the hut nearby, obscured by a tangle of growth, sinister even in the light of day.

'Let's go, uncle,' whispered Kaira. 'It might be the hetha.' That thought had occurred to him too—some earth-bound spirit. Picking up what little they had gathered, they walked away. But Poromola's paces gradually slowed, and then stopped.

'What if it were some human being?' he ruminated aloud. ' Kaira, you stay here. I'll go and see.'

Nearing the hut, he scrutinized the ground. The pug-marks of a leopard were much in evidence. She might have a litter within. He paused, straining his ears for the least noise.

Nothing happening, he stooped beneath the sagging thatch and came to a doorway clumsily obstructed with a few criss-crossed sticks. Pushing these aside, he peered into the dark, musty interior. As his eyes adapted themselves to the gloom, he saw a crouched form by a fireless hearth in a corner. He entered softly and bent over the object. It seemed bereft of life. Turning it over gently, he saw that it was a young girl, shrivelled up, but still alive.

He carried her out into the open and stood wondering what to do, when a slight movement of her lips told him. Nearby was a dry stream-bed. Putting her down, he dug till he found water and dripped it on to her mouth with his cupped hand. Barely did the life-giving liquid touch those parched lips before they responded avidly.

When he thought she had had enough, he shouted to Kaira to come up with their bundles. He dipped his finger into some

dammar honey he had gathered and dabbed it on her lips. Thus he continued patiently until she seemed to revive ever so slightly. Just once she opened her eyes, blinked, and focusing them dreamily on his face, uttered one incoherent word, and closed them languidly again.

Had he heard her righdy? It seemed to him that it sounded like'mola\ He gazed at her gaunt, begrimed face intently. His mind went back to that hut. It must have been Punchi-rala's. Then this girl he carried must be Menika. Strange that she knew his name, since she had only seen him very rarely.

Reaching camp, Poromola entrusted the girl to Donga's widow. On a sambhur skin in the grassy shade she slept most of the day, awakening fitfully to be fed on honey and gruel made of the few ears of kurakkan they had gleaned from the chenas. At evening Poromola carried her up to the trestle on the tree and left her in charge of the older woman, while he shared the other platform with most of the children.

When Menika awoke after a deep sleep, with the warm sun shining on her, Poromola and the two boys were out hunting. His quest that day was mee honey, gonala yams and monitor lizards—the most nourishing foods of the jungle. Having secured the first two of these, they returned about noon, the best time for hunting monitors, to the Balana grassland studded with termite mounds, the lairs of the lizards. Deploying over the plain, each of them stole up warily from mound to mound through the tall grass in the blinding heat. A glimpse of a tail at an orifice, a sudden snatch before anchorage could be secured with the claws, and Poromola had whipped out a writhing monitor and dashed it dead on the mound all in one action. Examining the hole, satisfied with the signs he saw, he set about hacking it open with his axe. Soon he was asprawl over the mound with his arm buried to the shoulder, extracting handful after handful of round white eggs, nineteen in all.

'See what I have brought you,' Poromola said to Menika when he had carried her down from the trestle and laid her on the sunlit grass. Her look was his reward.

Under such care and nourishment the girl gradually regained

her strength. But it was not till many days had passed that she was able to tell them her halting tale. When Galmede, in the grip of the fatal epidemic, was being hastily abandoned, Menika, whose mother and brother had already died, begged of her uncle to take her and her crippled father with him.

He callously said to her: 'You may come with us if you like, but as for carrying your dying father, that's more than I can do with these children and these loads on my hands.'

The others too, in their desperate hurry, had no thought for any but themselves, as they left in little batches day by day. What was her horror then to realize one morning that she was left utterly alone with her father, in that jungle where she had spent all the fourteen years of her life, and the way out of which she did not know.

She nursed her father as best she could on gleanings from the chenas. He lingered on some weeks before he died. Then she dragged him out and left him under a bush.

Losing all count of time and growing feebler and feebler, she eked out her miserable existence. One evening she fell asleep, tired and hungry, and woke next day to find the fire she had so carefully tended dead. She then put a few sticks across the doorway and lay in a corner to die. She knew nothing after that, until she found herself among the Veddas.

CHAPTER 17

BINGODA

THE Veddas stayed on at Galmedia-wala until Menika regained something of her strength. Poromola had lost his last arrow-head on a wounded boar he had failed to track down. That had put a stop to his hunting the larger animals. Monitors, and an occasional pangolin or mouse-deer, supplemented with yams and honey, now formed their bill of fare. Their stock of dried flesh rapidly dwindled.

Banking clouds and the rumble of distant thunder gave warning that the monsoon was close, which when it comes, comes in a stride. Soon the jungle would be deluged.

Poromola had planned his return southwards from Nuwaragala so as to reach Bingoda in time; but the rescue of Menika had delayed him. It was to Bingoda his father had exhorted him to go from the Balana cave. On the dawn of their departure, Poromola was awakened by the excited barking of his dog. It came from a rocky part of the river a few hundred yards above their camp. Rushing out with his axe, he found a stag at bay, with a broken shoulder caused by a fall into a crevice. That meat came from heaven, for he had no storage against the September rains when hunting would be impossible.

Bingoda was only twelve miles away. But it took them three days to reach it owing to Menika's enfeebled state. Hardly had they settled in the small Eryminiangpane-galge, Bingoda's only rock shelter, when the monsoon broke in all its fury. For two weeks the torrential downpour held them prisoners in that dismal den, into which water poured for lack of drip-ledges.

Once the incessant rains gave place to intermittent showers, the food-gatherers could go searching again for the sustenance they badly needed. Hunting in the wet forests, where game is scattered, is quite a different thing from what it is in the drought, when animals are never far from drinking-places. It was therefore not long before Poromola and the two boys, taking a couple

of monitors and some honey, sought the Sinhalese homes three miles away to make human contacts for the first time in five months.

Bingoda was a name as famous in Vedda annals as Danigala, Hennebedde and Kolongola. In each of those places the Veddas lived in the foothills within easy reach of the Sinhalese settlements. These contacts through the long years made for miscegenation of the Veddas, mergence of cults, and similarity of language. Yet there was always a residue of Veddas living their lives apart, jealous of intrusion, proud of their lineage. So it had been at Bingoda until the influenza epidemic had destroyed and scattered them.

Travelling about as jungle folk do, some of the Bingoda Sinhalese had known the men of Neela's clan. The headman of Bingoda, in whose sphere was also Galmede, had met Poromola a few times, and it was to his house that Poromola now inquired his way through the scattered chenas.

The headman was surprised to see him. Listening to the artless, incredible tale of Poromola's wanderings, but with great events, such as Kalu's death and the finding of Menika, omitted, the headman was moved as much by admiration of the lad's prowess as by sympathy for those dependent on him. He lost no time in accompanying the Vedda to Mullagama, where he got the blacksmith to fashion arrow-heads to the design Poromola had shaped from a leaf. Equipped with a new axe, and a liberal gift of grain from the headman, Poromola returned to the cave with a rejoicing heart. Now he would have no difficulty in hunting food.

Within the week Poromola was on his way to Damanegama by himself to see how his mother fared. He found her in the hut of the local headman who had befriended his father during his last days. The emaciated woman's delight on seeing her favourite son was unbounded.

He carried her the fifteen miles back to their cave.

'Now I can die in peace,' she murmured as he set her down.

Two months sped by, during which Poromola requited abundantly, with flesh and honey, the Bingoda headman's

CHAPTER 18

A MAIDEN'S WOOING

THE report soon went abroad that there was a beautiful Sinhalese girl living with the Veddas of Bingoda.

The visits of the Sinhalese to the Vedda chena, on one pretext or another, became embarrassingly frequent to a shy folk unused to having their privacy disturbed. This caused Poromola concern, though he was too young and good-natured to forbid them entry.

Not so his mother. She was a true Vedda of the old type—dour and clannish.

One morning the Bingoda headman arrived in the chena when Poromola was away. Old Selli, warming her racked bones in the sun, asked him what he wanted.

'I merely looked in as I was passing,' he suavely remarked.

'My son isn't here,' she said sourly.

The man lingered, watchful for a sight of Menika.

'Why do you people always keep coming here?' grumbled Selli. 'Don't you know that we Veddas wish to be left alone?'

'Why such words to me who have always been your son's good friend?' the headman protested in hurt tones.

Just then Menika appeared. The man fixed his admiring gaze on her.

'Go away, I tell you,' Selli urged. 'And you, girl, stay indoors.'

'You have no right, you know, to keep a Sinhalese girl here.'

'Who could have told you that lie?'

'Your own son.'

This staggered the woman, and quickly she shrieked, 'What if he did? Go away, go away.'

When Poromola returned that evening, he was told what had happened and was greatly troubled. Unable to sleep that night, he rose quietly, walked out into the garden and sat on a log some distance away. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts and

think things out for himself. Long he pondered what he should do. Whatever his feelings, he feared that, if her people wanted her, Menika would have to be surrendered, for her own sake.

Hearing a soft footfall behind him, he turned, and to his surprise, saw Menika.

' Why have you come here?' he asked nervously.

' I couldn't sleep,' she said, sitting down beside him.

After a silence she said to him: 'You heard what happened today?'

'Yes,' he said. 'They want to take you away from us.'

'I don't want to go.'

'Perhaps you'll be happier among your own people.'

'Don't you want me to stay, Poromola?' she asked sadly.

'I am only thinking of you. What I feel doesn't matter.'

'Why do you say that?'

'We must do what's best for you.'

'Is there no way for me to show you my gratitude?'

'No payment is necessary. I only did what any man would have done.'

Menika was at her wit's end. How simple he was in affairs of the heart, this boy so brave in danger.

'Do you know why the headman wants to take me away?' she asked.

'To return you to your folk, I suppose.'

'No. He wants me for his son who sometimes comes here.'

'How do you know that?' he asked sharply.

'He told me so at the stream a few days ago.'

'What did you say?'

' Keep your son for someone else.'

'That was good.'

'Why? If you don't want me.'

'You mean . . . you'll... be ... my wife.'

' That's what I've been trying to say.'

' I've nothing to give you.'

'I only want to be with you until I die.'

' Why then, so it shall be', he said, taking her by the hand and drawing her up.

. Poromola was twenty-two, Menika fifteen. The hour for loving and lovers had come. On that night all Nature was set for the consummation of an undying love—the languorous moon, the humming of insects in the quiet air, the nightjar's sombre epithalamium—all these bade the man and girl seize the moment before it passed and take their fill of love. Menika longed to embrace him and pour out all the love and gratitude that surged within her virgin soul. At the gentle touch of his hand she quivered.

But it was not in Poromola's code to profit by the occasion. His love had more in it of adoration than of desire; it could not leap into flame in an impetuous moment, but would glow unswervingly to the last ember of life; a love that would leave him bankrupt of other loves. Here was a matter not to be settled on sudden impulse, but to be consummated by a traditional ritual, however simple that might be.

'Go now and sleep,' he said. 'We'll see about it tomorrow.'

Dawn sent the children out into the chena. Donga's widow and Menika had gone in search of edible plants. Selli sat crouched by the fire warming her crooked shins. Poromola entered and sat beside her.

'Mother,' he said. 'I've heard what happened yesterday. Would it be wrong for me to take Menika for wife?'

The woman was surprised. It was not the way of this self-reliant son of hers to ask her advice.

'Why, son,' she answered, 'that's for you to decide.'

'Perhaps she's too young to know her mind.'

'What ideas you have! No girl's too young to know whom she loves.'

'How about these Sinhalese who keep coming here?'

' Curse the lot of them. Don't mind them. Take what's yours and be quick about it, or she won't stay a virgin long with those dogs nosing round. And then we'll leave this place and return to the jungles where we belong.'

'All right, mother, we'll do as you say.'

'Go now, and stay under that nuga tree on the other side of the stream. I'll send the girl to you. Take her, and roam the

jungle for some days. We have food enough here. That will teach these sons of bitches how things are,'

'No, mother, not today. Tomorrow, after we've eaten the wedding feast which I go now to hunt. Tell Menika what I said. Take care of her till I return.'

'Don't be too long, son.'

Kaira accompanied Poromola, but not Gama, whose foot was poisoned by a thorn. It was rather late in the morning for hunting; the beasts would be in their lairs. But to Poromola no time of the day was devoid of possibility. Within the hour he was tracking the spoor of a lone buck, adhering to it doggedly in spite of tempting distractions. But it was not till noon that he stole upon his quarry securely ensconced in a heavy brake.

While Kaira guarded their silent hound at a safe distance Poromola carefully reconnoitred the buck's place of concealment. It would be a matter of hours before the creature moved out, he concluded, and decided to take a chance. Returning, he said to Kaira: 'I'll stay by that tree over there. When I signal to you that I am ready, go quietly round with the bitch as close to that patch of scrub as you can, set her free and rush in.'

Poromola, choosing the heavier of the two bows with which he always hunted—one for smaller animals, the other, demanding great strength, for occasions such as this—lay down on the ground. With his knees flexed, he adjusted the middle of the bow stave to his toes, set the arrow between his feet, and held its notch firmly to the string with both hands. Settled in that doubled-up posture, he sent out a low whistle to Kaira, who proceeded to do as he had been told.

As the buck bounded past within fifteen yards of him, Poromola, in one swift movement, thrust forth his knees, straightened his arched back and released his arrow as from a spring. The beast sped on without a falter, the dog after it.

Poromola leapt up and followed the direction of the arrow's flight. Kaira found him contemplating the buck's tracks. 'The spoor shows no stumbling,' he said, 'and yet I couldn't have missed.' He looked about, and his face fell: there embedded in a tree was his arrow! 'Cha,' he commented, pulling it

out despondently, 'to think that all our trouble has been in vain.'

He had scarcely uttered the words, when a yap from his dog came to their ears,

'Come,' he said to Kaira, rushing on. Not a hundred yards away lay the buck, dead in a pool of blood.

'How could this be?' he puzzled, bending over the carcass. There was a small wound in the middle of the neck. Seizing an antler, he twisted the head round, displaying a similar wound on the other side, with the blood welling out. His arrow had gone right through, piercing the carotid.

'Now, look at that!' was all his comment. And sharpening the head of an arrow on a log sprinkled with sand, he started flaying the beast.

'We won't be able to get home tonight,' he said as they shouldered their sagging carrying-sticks. 'We'll stop at Mullagama and barter some of this flesh at Nondia's for presents for Menika.'

CHAPTER 19

DISASTER

IT was twilight when they arrived, very weary with the weight of their burdens, at the Moor's *boutique.* Quite a half of their venison the unscrupulous huckster exacted for three yards of coloured chintz, a bead necklace, a pair of bangles, and some salt.

They slept the night under a tree in the man's garden. At dawn they set out on their journey home. On the way Poromola, with a beautiful shot, brought down a langur that was sunning itself on the topmost branch of a tall tree. Later they cut down a honeycomb.

'A fine feast we shall have today,' Kaira observed as they jogged along. 'Look! Another monkey.'

'We have enough. We must hurry,' Poromola said.

They reached their dwelling to find it in strange silence. There was no Menika to greet them as usual. The women and children were seated clustered together disconsolately.

'What could have happened?' Poromola puzzled in a husky whisper.

Gama was the first to see them. He limped up excitedly, saying: 'They have taken her away!'

'Whom?'

''Menika.'

'Who did that?'

'The headman and two others.'

The news was a dagger in Poromola's heart. The load he had carried so buoyantly weighed on his shoulders as he staggered towards the hut and laid it down.

The rumour of the presence of a Sinhalese girl of Galmede among the Veddas of Bingoda had travelled far. A Galmede man, settled at Damanegama, hearing of it, had a shrewd suspicion who the girl might be and determined to make sure. Accompanied by his son of twenty-two, he arrived at the house of the Bingoda headman whom he knew.

'Let's go and see this girl,' he suggested. 'It looks as if she might be the daughter of my brother, Punchi-rala.'

So on the very morning, as it happened, that Poromola had set out on his nuptial hunt, the three men walked into the Vedda chena. The children were playing in scattered groups. Donga's widow and Menika were grinding kurakkan. Little Handuna crawling about on all fours was every now and then making his first experiments in walking, only to tumble in the dust, to the quiet amusement of old Selli. Hearing of the men's approach, Selli sent Menika indoors, and muttering an obscene curse, glared at the intruders.

'Where's your son?' the headman asked ingratiatingly.

'He's out hunting.'

'These are relations of the Sinhalese girl you have here.'

'We know nothing about that.'

'We've come all the way from Damanegama to see the girl,' said the elder of the two strangers.

'Why are they so anxious to see her now, who left her there to die?'

'We would never have deserted her had we known,' the Galmede man protested.

'That's what you say now!' It was Menika who snapped out the words. She had been listening to it all, and unable to bear any longer the unequal fight the old woman was putting up decided to take a hand.

'Menika, don't you know me?' asked the man, recovering from his surprise.

'Can I forget you?' she retorted with scorn.

'It grieves me to see you in this state.'

'Does it? Have you forgotten then how I begged you to take me and my father with you when you left Galmede in such haste, and you refused, like everyone else?'

'We ourselves were ill at the time, and didn't know what we were doing.'

'So you left us there to starve and die.'

'What's the use of all that now? We've come to make amends.'

'How are you going to do that?'

Menika bent over the wounded Poromola

'By taking you away from here.'

M prefer to stay where I am.'

'We'll be kinder to you than these people can ever be. Be sensible, girl. You belong to us and will be happier with us.'

'You may talk as much as you like; this is where I stay.'

'You are too young to decide.' There was an ominous note of decision in the man's words. He was piqued that the girl had outwitted him. He turned to the headman, saying, 'You are the headman here. You must see that justice is done.'

'If this man is your uncle, you should do as he says,' the headman advised.

'Aiyo, gamarala, don't let them do this to me,' Menika pleaded.

'What can I do, child?' he said kindly. 'You are under age, and your uncle has a right to decide for you.'

'You are Poromola's friend,' she urged. 'Think what he will say.'

'So, it's Poromola who keeps you,' her uncle sneered. 'A fine husband a wild Vedda will make you.' And seizing her bodily, he lifted her out struggling, his son helping him.

Gama, all his pent-up fury breaking loose, lifted his axe to strike, and was kicked aside. He rose and returned to the attack. One blow he delivered, bruising the man's shin, no more, for a heavy blow in the face knocked him senseless.

Deaf to the shrill expostulations of the two women, and the howls of the children, the man and his son carried Menika away, shrieking, biting, struggling.

'Poromola! Poromola! *Aiyo,* where are you? Why don't you come?' she wailed. And those were the last words they heard her utter; for forcing a wad of cloth into her mouth, the two men carried her away, pinioned like a pigeon.

Poromola heard the disjointed story with a breaking heart.

'Mother, if I had only listened to you, this wouldn't have happened,' he sobbed. 'She called to me, you say, and I wasn't here to help her.'

'What could you have done? That dog of a headman was on their side.'

Afternoon and evening came but still Poromola lingered in the forest, sometimes walking, sometimes resting. Donga's wife had cooked a savoury meal of venison, langur, and yams, seasoned with chillies and aromatic leaves—the wedding feast! When all was ready she and Kaira had gone to find Poromola and failed. So, as they were all hungry, they ate and left his share. Night came and closed their tired eyes.

In the lurid moonlight Poromola returned like a spectre, and seated himself on the log where Menika had come to him two nights before. What a gulf of time had intervened since then. He lived again those golden moments, recalling every word that had passed between them. Oh, that she were there now! A slight rustle behind him made him turn with quick expectancy —it was only a mongoose.

What a fool he had been to think so much of ceremony as a prelude to mating. Why had he given up the old ways, and exchanged for the friendly jungles the unfriendliness of men? Had he not done that, things might have been so different.

The night sped all unheeded. The moon had long sunk behind the encompassing trees of the scrubby chena. A bird twittered. Poromola raised his bowed head and saw the faint flush of the sky. Dawn, so soon! He rose and re-entered the jungle. Day must not find him there. He could not face people yet. There was something he must first do to allay the hounding unrest in his heart.

Listlessly he moved towards the headman's home; often loitering, diffident to reach his destination, fearing what it might reveal. How to act when he got there he did not know. But go there he must. The man had been with Menika when she was abducted. The wound must be opened again. He must learn how things were with her—and yet he had no hope.

The headman was rubbing his teeth with crunched charcoal on a finger when he saw Poromola before him, his face a mask.

' So you've come,' the headman said quietly.

Poromola gulped. His throat was dry. He had no words. Seeing that lad, always so bright, now the picture of such utter

misery, the man, moved with pity, said kindly: 'Is it about the girl you have come?'

Poromola nodded his head.

' You must not distress yourself so much. She's only a girl and her people have a right to her. Had I tried to prevent them, they'd have petitioned against me.'

' She didn't want to go.'

' She's but a child, too young to decide for herself. It's best for her as it is.'

' If only I could have seen her when she left!'

' It would have been harder for you. Don't take it so hard. She'll be all right.'

Had Poromola an inkling of how unhappy Menika was at that moment, he would have done far otherwise than he now did, which was to give up the struggle and move away.

The headman's wife, who had been listening indoors, came out and stood beside him.

'Poor boy,' she commiserated. 'How he must love that girl.'

'And she him. You should have heard the agony of her cries as she called his name. It was a nasty business. I wish I had nothing to do with it.'

'Their love will never die,' were the woman's prophetic words-

CHAPTER 20

THE LAST OF THE BOWMEN

As insidiously as Nature covers the ravaged places of earth time softens human sorrows. During the weeks that followed Poromola found escape from haunting shadows in the ardours of the chase. Outwardly he seemed to have outlived his sorrow.

So the months wore on, with Menika becoming less and less of a reality and more and more of a dream. Her coming into his life had imbued his character with a sedateness singular in one so young.

As for Menika herself, for days she fluttered like a caged bird beating against the bars of restraint. Repeatedly she slipped off into the jungle only to lose her way, be found, and brought back. She sulked and brooded despite all cajolements and revilings.

' There's only one way to tame her,[5] said her uncle to his wife one day. And with their connivance, within a week of her abduction, she was raped into submission by their son. That killed her spirit. Though thereafter she submitted to the embraces of her husband, he was to her but the husk of a man, her heart being with Poromola.

As loveless as was Menika's mating, so too did Poromola's prove to be.

A year had passed when one day his mother, unable to bear the sight of his loneliness any longer, said to him: 'Son, it's time you took a wife.'

' I want no woman,' he said. ' I'm all right as I am.'

'There's your half-brother Donga's woman.'

' She's old and I am young.'

'When a man dies his wife goes to his brother.'

So it was that when Donga's scrawny widow, at old Selli's bidding, went and lay down by Poromola one night, he made no demur. He accepted her as a duty, and treated her with all consideration; but it was evident that his heart was dead. A

couple of years later he had one daughter by her, destined to be the last and staunchest of Gama's wives.

Meanwhile the training of Gama and Kaira, now thirteen, proceeded apace. Poromola realized that if anything befell him, the clan would have to depend on the boys. Their education in the taking of bambara combs, begun on the easier heights of Pitiya-hela, was graded through increasingly difficult hills. Of the two, Gama, vigorous and masterful, gave early promise of being the future leader.

They had been five years at Bingoda when, one day, Tissahamy came upon Poromola and the boys roasting a langur on a hump of rock at the edge of the Balana plain.

'How long have you been here?' he greeted them, squatting.

'Three days,' Poromola said.

'Where then is the flesh?' Tissahamy asked, glancing round.

'The deer are shy and hard to approach.'

'That's because those Sinhalese who ran away from Galmede and settled at Dhikagama always come and shoot here.' It was also Tissahamy's favourite hunting ground. 'Come with me, let's see what we can get,' he said, rising and knotting his bundle round his slim waist.

Within a couple of hours he shot them a deer at long range.

'This is the weapon for these jungles,' Tissahamy remarked, seeing Poromola's look of wonder.

'That I can see,' Poromola agreed.

'And you say that, who are the finest archer I've known.'

'Ah, but you should have seen Gombira shoot.'

'He might have been your equal, not your better.'

Accompanying them past his chena, Tissahamy, only taking a haunch of the venison for himself, fed them, added some plantain and manioc to their loads, and saw them off, saying: 'Whenever you are in want, come to me.'

Some months later, Poromola arrived at the blacksmith's forge at Mullagama, carrying the hind quarter of a sambhur. The man was putting the finishing touches to a muzzle-loader he was mending. Renowned in those parts as a gunsmith, he attracted, from far and near, the villagers who brought him their worn-out

weapons for repair. Given only the barrel, which was beyond his competence, he could recreate a serviceable firearm.

' That's the leg of a great beast,' he commented admiringly. 'Did you slay it with that thing?' glancing at Poromola's bow.

'With what else?' said Poromola.

'I can do with a piece of that meat. It's long since I have tasted sambhur flesh.'

'It's all for you. I want so many arrow-heads.' Poromola spread out four fingers of a hand. 'Not small ones like iron-wood leaves this time. They are of no use for such beasts. I want them long and broad like this,' and he proceeded to draw a design on the smoothed sand.

'You shall have them.'

The smith contemplated the Vedda appraisingly.

'If you can slay a hulk like that with those sticks, what can't you do with such a weapon as this,' he said, patting the muzzle-loader.

'Mother! That sort of thing is not for the likes of me. Will you make me the arrow-heads?'

'That I certainly will. Come in three days. I'll have them ready.'

He looked towards an approaching figure. 'Ah, here comes the headman, the owner of this gun.'

Reluctant to meet one who revived sad memories, Poromola moved off.

'Don't go away, Poromola,' the headman of Bingoda entreated. 'We hardly ever see you now.' Then, observing the leg of venison, he remarked, 'That beast must have been like a buffalo'.

' Yes, and he killed it with his bow,' the blacksmith said.

'I don't wonder, I who have seen him shoot. ... Is my gun ready?'

'Here it is.'

The headman looked the weapon over, cocked it, eased down the trigger, and scrutinized the patch on the barrel.

'I must test it before I take it away,' he said, and proceeded to load.

'What shall I hit?' he asked.

'The knot in that tree yonder,' the smith suggested. 'But stay, I'd like to see what this Vedda can do.'

'What's the good of blunting my last arrow on a mark like that?' Poromola objected.

T i l make you another.'

Poromola, hardly appearing to aim at all, hit the mark, about thirty-five yards away, full in the centre.

'Aay! Better that if you can,' grinned the smith admiringly.

'Not while my arrow's there,' said Poromola hastily; and, climbing quickly up the tree, he wrenched out the missile.

The headman fired at the mark. His half-dozen large pellets patterned well. Indicating this, he explained to Poromola the advantage of the gun over the bow.

'Come, I'll show you how to load,' he said, seeing he had quickened Poromola's interest. 'Very simple ... so much powder . . . ram in the wad so . . . the pellets now . . . another wad . . . cock the trigger ... tap the barrel till the powder shows at the nipple hole ... set the cap, and the thing is ready. Now all you do to shoot is to press it to the shoulder thus, look along the barrel, cover your object, and gently press the trigger. . . Now take it and see what you can do.'

'Not I ! ' objected Poromola, backing away.

' That's silly of you. Here am I wanting to show you how easily you can kill animals, and you refuse. It's more than I'd do for another man.'

A little more persuasion and Poromola accepted the weapon, and looked at it dubiously.

'Now for an object to hit,' suggested Gama enthusiastically.

'That crested hawk-eagle on the milla tree over there,' directed the smith. 'He lives on my chickens.'

'Go quietly up behind that tree, no closer, take careful aim, and do as I told you,' the headman advised.

This time Poromola made no objection.

'Take your time. Keep your eyes open, cover the bird carefully and press the trigger. Don't close your eyes and pull,' the headman advised him.

Poromola's aim seemed interminable. Once he had made up his mind to try the weapon, he was the hunter determined to kill. Just as the suspicious bird poised its crest and stooped to take off, he fired. The great eagle fluttered downwards on a broken wing, and saved itself only just in time by clutching the lowest branch of the tall tree. Recovering, it struggled up from limb to limb, and settled itself securely on the topmost bough.

'Gama, bring my bow,' Poromola called.

To the amazement of the two men, the bird fell like a plummet, transfixed through the heart.

'He shoots better with his sticks than with powder and shot,' the smith exclaimed.

'All he wants is a little practice,' the headman said.

He pondered a while. Then, as if taking a decision, 'Come, let's see you load. Now you know how. Here are three more loads. Take the gun away with you, and shoot some big beast—and don't forget my share.'

That was a proud occasion for Poromola and his two satellites, as they marched off armed with their new toy.

'Today you have done a sad thing,' the blacksmith told the headman, as they watched the Veddas go.

'What's that?'

'All my life I've made arrow-heads for generations of Veddas. I liked the work even more than repairing firearms. Now you've killed the best bowman these jungles ever knew.'

'Why do you say that? He still has his bow which he'll always use.'

'Never! Once the gun comes in, the skill in archery goes. I've seen it happen before. There was a time, in my younger days, while I worked at this same forge with my father, when hardly a month would pass without some Vedda from Galmede, Bingoda, Hennebedde or even Danigala, coming to us for arrow-heads. Latterly the only Vedda who came to me was Poromola, with those two boys he's training so well. You've seen what he can do—that sambhur haunch: how strong must a man's bow arm be to bring down a beast like that; that knot in the tree; that bird. What perfect skill! And now you have killed it.'

'It was bound to come, sooner or later. What does it matter how he kills an animal, as long as he gets him—and brings us some of the flesh?' said the headman, as he left.

But the old smith shook his head, and continued his work in a wistful mood.

Two days later Poromola took the headman the half of a pig he had shot at fifteen yards, stalking it close as for the bow.

'There you are. What did I tell you?[5] exclaimed the man exultantly. 'Carry on. You have two shots left.'

Nor did Poromola forget the blacksmith when next he killed.

'Good for you,' the man remarked. ' But now that you've got that plaything, don't ever neglect your bow that has served you so well.'

' That I won't,' Poromola airily promised.

But the smith knew better.

CHAPTER 21

GAMA AND KAIRA MARRY

FROM now on, for Poromola to secure the loan of a gun from the Sinhalese, whenever he needed one, was not difficult. No one was more agreeable to lend Poromola his gun than Nondia, the Lame One, the *boutique-kctper* of Mullagama. It was not long before the Moor's gun was always in Poromola's hands, greatly to the man's gain, for a proportion of the flesh of every animal killed went to him by agreement. Things would have gone on thus indefinitely, had not Tissahamy put Poromola wise: ' You have paid that blood-sucker twenty times the worth of this piece of junk. It reminds me of my early days. This weapon should be yours by now. There's no necessity for you to give that man any more of what you kill.'

When Poromola took Nondia his quota of flesh, he shyly broached this aspect of the matter.

' All right. Never mind. From today the gun is yours,' Nondia said graciously. 'Anything you bring me after this will be for barter.' The weapon was by then on the verge of uselessness, as even that wonder-worker, the blacksmith of Mullagama, had told Poromola the last time he repaired it.

Once Poromola took to firearms he had, as the blacksmith had predicted, little use for his bow and arrows, which lay idle in his loft. Now and then he would use them for smaller animals. But in the course of a few years the serious use of them became for him a thing of the past.

Synchronizing with this development was another stage in his transition to a more civilized state. Stimulated by the example of the neighbouring Sinhalese, he began trying his hand at chena cultivation. Independent by nature, he never liked having to go to the Sinhalese for grain in times of jungle dearth.

Here he was not so successful. Born of a long line of purely wild men, inherent in him were the instincts of the food-gatherer rather than the food-producer. Helped by Gama and Kaira, he

would fell the trees in a half-acre block and burn them, barricade the clearing perfunctorily, and sow the crops. But there his labours would end. He had not the patience to keep his crops free from weeds or guard them against animals. Yet, once he made a beginning with chenas, he played at the game each succeeding year, very gradually gaining some competence. Always during the dry months of June to August, the Veddas would abandon their chena, and tread the time-honoured trails, returning at the end of the season to their devastated crops.

So the years passed. Poromola was now twenty-four; Kaira and Gama sixteen. Gama, sturdy and strong, easily angered, was at that age a fine figure of a lad. Dark as ebony, he came to be known among the Sinhalese as Kalu Vedda. One day when Gama expressed his need of a wife, Poromola said to him:

' If that's how you feel, we must find someone for you. There's that family from Hinimidurawa settled at Mullagama, we'll visit them tomorrow.'

They found there the man, Saka, and Poromola, taking him aside, broached the subject.

'Is it for yourself you ask?' the man inquired.

'No,' he said, 'it's for that boy yonder. He's a good lad.'

'Perhaps . . . but my girl', glancing towards a comely damsel of thirteen seated by her mother, 'is not for him. There's a widow and her daughter not far from here. It might be arranged. Let's visit them after we've had a meal.'

They had no difficulty in fixing up that match, life being hard for a widow of the Vanni. But when it came to taking the girl away, her mother showed every intention of accompanying her.

'Why is she coming?' Gama grumbled. 'I'm marrying the girl, not her mother as well.'

'There's no need for you to go,' Saka said to the woman. 'They have no other men among them. Why not stay where there are many? You are not so unattractive that you need despair,' giving Poromola a sly wink.

The woman's refusal, obstinate at first, was gradually over-

come by the realization perhaps that her matrimonial chances might be improved by the absence of her daughter. In tears they parted.

Gama built himself and his wife a kennel of a shack, apart from the others.

One day they found Kaira missing. For one or other of the men to wander off on his own with his dog in search of monitor lizards and honey was not unusual. But he always returned by dusk at the latest. And when Kaira failed to return that evening, they remembered that they had not seen him all day.

Next morning Poromola and Gama set out in search of him.

' Where could he have gone?' Gama asked.

'I think I know,' Poromola answered. 'Let's go towards Bakiella. You remember when we were there the other day we saw a Vedda woman with a little girl in a Sinhalese chena. He may be attracted by her. I noticed he has been rather thoughtful since his return.'

As they neared the hamlet about noon they were conscious of approaching voices, and hid behind a tree off the path to watch. Soon there came into view Kaira, the woman and child, sauntering along happily. Poromola and Gama followed at a distance, and when they assured themselves that the trio were taking the path to Bingoda, they doubled back, broke the news to the others and awaited the homecoming.

Gama was the first to greet them, with,'Ha! Kaira has found a wife; and clever fellow that he is, in one night he has produced a daughter as well'. At which they all laughed heartily. Soon they were seated to a feast already prepared.

'What gifts did you take your bride?' Poromola asked Kaira.

'A goa and some gonala yams,' he modestly confessed.

'What, no cloth or bangles?' Gama jibed.

'It's not for you to talk, who gave nothing at all', Kaira retorted; and this time had the laugh on his side.

Unlike Gama, Kaira did not build himself a separate shack, but shared lodgings with his mother and her son Vela's two little children.

The lads, now launched on matrimony, had this difference

between them; while Kaira remained faithful to his cross-eyed love all his life, Gama had many adventures.

Gama's married life was stormy from its outset, Kaira's always calm. Gama's girl wife died at her first childbirth. In the years that followed he had a succession of women. Some ran away from him; others he beat and drove off telling them to go wherever they chose; a few died. He was a man rough with women. His reputation for truculence made it increasingly difficult for him to secure partners. It took him years to learn that however submissive a woman might be there was a limit to her endurance. His brutality only rounded on himself, depriving him of those gratifications so essential to his ardent nature. Eventually he solved his difficulties by having two and even three wives at a time. And there he showed himself the true son of his father, Tissahamy, who alone knew of their relationship.

The contrast between the characters of Kaira and Gama was nowhere better reflected than in the loyal monogamy of the one and the promiscuity of the other.

CHAPTER 22

THE COMING OF THE STRANGER

ON an April day, some seven years after the Veddas had settled at Bingoda, Poromola, Gama and Kaira, accompanied by a Sinhalese boy of twelve as helper, were hunting in the hills of Galmede. They had been four days at it; and now on the fifth morning, shouldering their bulging sacks of dried meat, they started out on their way back to Bingoda, fifteen miles away.

Coming to a stream, Poromola, the leader, drew up suddenly and scrutinized the sand.

'What's this?' he asked in mystified tones.

'Human footprints,' Kaira said with a casual glance.

'Those are, but not these?' said Poromola, indicating certain flat impressions.

'Deer-skin sandals. One of them must have an injured foot,' Gama suggested.

'What are people doing here in ways only known to us?' Poromola asked. He followed the strange tracks that had squelched across the shoal stream on to drier sand, and examined them carefully.

'Not sandals. These are different,' he concluded.

'Shoeprints,' the Sinhalese boy declared.

'Shoeprints? What are they?' Gama asked.

'Things mahathmayas wear.'

'Who are they?'

'People who live on the roadsides in big houses, wear trousers and coats, cut their hair short, put hats on their heads, and shoes on their feet that make marks like these.'

'What queer creatures!' Poromola said, more bewildered than ever. He traced the tracks until they were lost up the bank, and remarked: 'The spoor is quite fresh. Whoever he is, there are three others with him, barefooted like ourselves. They seem to be taking the path we did to Dhik-galge the other day.'

'They may be coming after us,' Gama said. 'Let's get away without lingering here any longer.'

Thoroughly frightened, the Veddas hastily picked up the loads they had laid down, and made off in all haste. Every now and then, however, a shout from the heavily laden Sinhalese boy, left hopelessly behind, caused delays that earned the delinquent a blast of Gama's obscenities.

Another sight of the strange footprints at a lower stream caused some hesitancy, when a faint human 'hoo' hailed them. It served only to quicken their pace. A louder cry fifteen minutes later as they halted for the laggard told them their pursuer was gaining on them.

' Let's throw these loads away and escape,' counselled Gama.

'Cha! What's the good of that?' panted the boy as he caught up. ' They'll take what we have sweated all these days to collect.'

The call now came closer than before, followed by an indistinguishable jumble of words, more clearly heard when they were urgently repeated.

'Don't run away. It is I. Stay where you are,' came the booming voice.

' Sounds like Tissahamy,' said Poromola.

The tall, black-bearded figure bounded through the obscuring scrub like a sambhur. 'Why were you running away? A fine chase you have led me,' he puffed. Rightly had he read their haste in their tracks.

'Are you alone?' Poromola asked anxiously.

' There are others following. They'll soon be here,' Tissahamy answered, then, seeing them pop-eyed, he laughed heartily. 'Don't stare like trapped mouse-deer. No harm will come to you.'

'Those queer marks on the river-bed. What were they?'

' So that's what drove you off,' Tissahamy chuckled. 'Lay your baggage down. Let's rest.'

Being assured by Tissahamy's presence they did as he directed.

'We thought some stranger was after us,' Poromola explained.

'And you weren't wrong,' Tissahamy said. 'But never fear. He'll do you no harm. He wants very much to meet you. He

has travelled a hundred miles to do so. And here you are bounding off as though the devil were at your heels! He spent last night in Peena's compound at Galmede, where people have settled down again. The Moor told him you had come there two days ago with some monitor lizards and honey. Nothing would please him after that but he must see you. None of the Galmede folk would undertake to guide him, in spite of the good reward he offered, saying they couldn't go chasing Veddas on these trackless hills for fear of losing their way. I happened to visit there that night, hearing a stranger was in these parts, and seeing how angry and disappointed he was at what he considered their discourtesy, I undertook to do what I could, which pleased him greatly.'

* Why does this stranger want to meet us?'

'God only knows. For weeks he has been sweating blood through the wilderness, chasing the ghosts of Veddas.'

Presently they heard a far-off shout, and Tissahamy answered. This was repeated a few times as the approaching party sought their direction through the dense jungle. With nervous expectancy the Veddas awaited the meeting. Soon the stranger was before them, and for the first time I saw these aboriginal inhabitants of Ceylon. I was as excited by the sight of these Veddas as they were because of me. After many a disillusioning expedition through Ceylon's wildest jungles, that punctuated a half-dozen years of a busy surgeon's life, I had my reward. Here for me was the realization of a dream beyond my imagining—Poromola, Gama, Kaira, as fine a group of savage hunters as survived from a bygone age, trapped with their laden spoils of flesh and honey and swiftlets' nests, that they alone knew where to find. One of them, Gama, had the inflated bladder of a sambhur at his waist string.

Seated together in the spangled shade of the noonday jungle, in as remote a spot as it is possible to be anywhere in Ceylon, I distributed among them tobacco and betel and sweets, and accepted from them a golden hunk of bambara honey on a broad leaf.

'So you ran away from me?' I observed.

'How could we know it was you?[5] Poromola naively replied.

They were interested in me and my gear, especially the guns—and the shoes! I told them something of the wonders of the city.

'Then why do you leave all that and come to a place like this?' Poromola asked, very puzzled.

' To see how you wild people live among the animals and the trees,' I said.

' You must show him how you get bambara combs,' Tissahamy suggested.

' I f he comes in the dry season.'

'Three months from now,' Tissahamy explained. 'Poromola is the man to show you how it's done.'

On that note we parted—the Veddas to Bingoda; Tissahamy to Embillene; and I to Maha Oya on the high road.

Thus it was that the Vedda remnant whose fortunes we have followed from the outset of this story came to me, the man they ever afterwards called Hura or Brother, who was to befriend them in future years, and bequeath their chronicle to generations to whom the word Vedda will be but a name.

CHAPTER 23

THE BEAR OF BINGODA

SELLI, mother of the clan, lay very ill and near to death. All that the Veddas could do for her, with the help of the Bingoda Sinhalese, proved unavailing. So Poromola decided to obtain the services of a famous katadiya of Damanegama of whom he had been told. Taking a load of venison and honey he set out alone on the six-mile journey. He crossed the Rambukkan river and was making his way past the scattered homes of Idambowa, when he thought he heard his name called and paused to listen. He now saw a female figure obscured by a castor-oil plant fence that encircled a garden in which stood a small hut.

'Did you speak to me?' he asked diffidently, being as shy of strange women as a squirrel of a snake.

'I did,' she said.

'Who are you?'

'Poromola, don't you know me? I'm Menika.'

He started as if at the voice of the dead. He moved towards her.

'Had you forgotten me?'

'Can I ever forget? Though it's long since you left us.'

'Where are you going?' she asked.

'To seek a medicine-man at Damanegama. My mother is very ill.'

'Why didn't you come for me when they carried me away?'

'I didn't know where they had taken you, or what to do. I thought it best for your sake to leave things as they were.'

'I wanted you to take me back.'

'Whom do you live with?'

'My husband.'

'Is he unkind to you?'

'No, but he is nothing to me.'

'I thought you must have forgotten us long ago.'

'Never, as long as I live.'

Just then there was the sound of approaching voices.

'You must go now and come again, Poromola', she said hurriedly, laying a soft beseeching hand on his arm. 'Take me away from here. My life is nothing without you. Now go away quickly without being seen', and she turned to her winnowing.

Poromola slipped into the jungle and hastened on his journey. His mother was his main concern at the moment; but his heart was filled with emotions he had thought long dead.

For three days the physician of the jungle tried every art he knew from herbal decoctions to exorcisms of demons and all to no avail, for Selli died.

That chance meeting between the lovers had its effect on both of them. Poromola's preoccupations rendered him less alert when hunting, and he let many a chance go by he would otherwise not have missed, though this was unperceived by Gama and Kaira. But Menika's abstractions were not unnoticed by her husband.

'I don't know what has come over you of late', he said when he surprised her one day seated in a corner of the veranda, gazing towards the jungle. 'You always seem to be brooding. Aren't you well?' He was as fond as ever of his beautiful wife, though he knew he never had the full measure of her love.

'Nothing is the matter with me', she said, hastily rising and busying herself.

In the weeks that followed, Poromola frequently absented himself an entire day in the hope of meeting Menika alone. Twice he got a glimpse of her among other people, but he had no opportunity of speaking to her. And all through one dark night he kept vigil at her garden fence in the hope that she would come out, but he saw nothing of her.

'Uncle,' said Gama to him one day, 'why is it that you now always go to Damanegama for powder and shot, instead of to Mullagama, which is so much closer?'

'I get better value there,' he answered.

'Next time you go, may I come too?'

'All right,' Poromola promised. 'We'll go tomorrow.'

This time they kept to the footpath. Near Idambowa, they

met a man who, recognizing them as Veddas, inquired where they were going.

'To the Damanegama *boutique,'* Poromola replied.

' Where are you from?' the man asked.

'What's that to you?' Gama retorted in his truculent way. 'Come, Poromola, let's get along instead of standing here answering this fellow's unnecessary questions.'

Hitching up their sacks of dried meat on their shoulders they proceeded.

The Sinhalese was Menika's husband, though Gama who had as a little boy smarted under his blows when Menika was abducted, failed to recognize him.

'Poromola!' mused the man. Could he ever forget that name. So that was he to whom Menika's heart belonged. There came to his mind those impassioned shrieks he had smothered; those tender murmurings in sleep he had often heard, though he never upbraided her with them, being content to possess her even with the memory of her old love lingering. So that was Poromola!

As standing there he pondered thus, he gradually became aware of Menika's recent behaviour and concluded they must have met. This he confirmed later when he learnt of the Vedda's frequent appearances at Damanegama.

He took no one into his confidence. This was a matter that concerned him alone. Nor did he bring Menika to task. Some days later he said to her: 'Let's go away from here and settle somewhere else.'

'Whatever for?' she asked, astonished.

' I am tired of this place. Our chena hasn't done well. We'll go to Nilobe, where my uncle is and cultivate a plot of paddy. There are more people there, and it is much closer to the high road.'

'Let's stay on here,' she pleaded, 'where we've been so long and wanted for nothing. The trees round the house will soon bear fruit, as you yourself said the other day. See the flowers on that lime tree, and those tender jack-fruit. Why leave all this and begin over again?'

'I have made up my mind to go away,' he said decisively.

The more she pressed him, the more adamant was he. As soon as he had made arrangements for their housing, he declared with finality, they would leave. These were days of anxious expectancy for Menika. Would Poromola come before it was too late? But Poromola, hunting on the hills, did not appear until two days after they had gone—where, he could not think, and of whom was he to inquire? He wandered about the hamlets on one pretext or another, searching assiduously, but never a sign of Menika did he see; until eventually he gave up the quest, and once again she faded out of his life, leaving in his heart a wound that would not heal for the knowledge of her unhappiness.

Poromola, hunting alone, was returning home one evening when he saw a leopard on the path. He walked towards it, but it would not move away. He shouted, making a threatening gesture, the only effect of which was to cause the animal to approach him with a quiet deliberation. They were within fifteen yards of each other when the beast flattened its body to the ground and tensely swung its tail. Knowing that to be a signal of attack, and thinking to himself, * Hunger has made this creature bold', Poromola slipped the mouse-deer he carried off his shoulder and gripped his gun, but not soon enough. A tawny streak shot past his head as he ducked only just in time. Having overshot its mark the leopard faced round for a second spring when Poromola fired.

Leaving the carcass there, he continued his way home without troubling to reload. Night was fast approaching, but he did not hasten his steps. He was within half a mile of their chena when suddenly, from behind a tree flanking the path, the bear of Bmgoda was upon him.

Gama, seated outside his hut in the late evening, heard in the distance the fierce barks of a bear and the shouts of a man. Picking up his weapons, he rushed into the jungle in the direction of the sounds, which soon died away.

He found Poromola huddled up on the ground, his face a gory pulp. A gouged eye-ball hung out of its socket, the lower jaw was broken and sagging, the skull dented, the body covered with cruel gashes. The man seemed conscious but couldn't speak.

Seeing that terrible sight a thrill of horror ran through Gama. If such a thing could happen to a man like Poromola, who was safe in that land? For once the real fear of the jungle overwhelmed him.

But why had Poromola not fired? There had been no sound of a shot. Glancing round he saw the gun snapped in two by the bear's bite. Then he knew that Poromola must have been caught unawares, cast down and crippled by the first crunch, or he would not have allowed himself to be chewed and clawed like that. He knew the one animal that must have done it, and his mind seethed with anger and revenge.

Gama lifted Poromola in his arms and carried him home. Then, leaving him in charge of Kaira, he took his gun and sought the aid of the Sinhalese. Whatever happened Poromola must not die among them, for then his spirit would haunt the place, making it impossible for them to continue existence there. Sorry as he was for Poromola, he was even more frightened for himself.

Not until he had sold his gun for five rupees and divided the money between two men was he able to enlist their services, to help him in carrying the injured man to Maha Oya, on the high-road twenty miles away. It was dark when the three of them reached the Vedda chena. Gama was relieved to find Poromola still alive. He was for starting off to Maha Oya at once, but the men dissuaded him against that. Before ever a bird stirred on the bough they were on their way, with Poromola hunched up on a sambhur skin slung between two poles, a cloth thrown lightly over his sagging head.

They passed the hamlets of Kuruntuwinne and Idambowa, evoking the pity and horror of everyone they encountered. Often they had seen men mauled by bears before, but never one who was still alive with such wounds as these. Tired as they were, Gama hurried them on, bearing most of the burden himself. His one fear was that Poromola would die on his hands. At Nilobe, within four miles of their goal, they rested awhile in the shade of a tree for the first time. It was now afternoon. The kindly Sinhalese gathered round, proffering refreshment and help. There were women too, but they held back.

The word went round that the victim was a Vedda. A woman jostled her way through the encircling group. Regardless of admonishing murmurs and thrusting aside detaining hands, she bent over the wounded man and gently lifted with trembling hands the cloth over his head. One sight of that face and a heart-rending moan escaped her. Poromola, who seemed utterly oblivious to his surroundings, now opened his uninjured eye and looked at her, a long moment—then wearily his lid drooped. With a groan of agony, Menika sagged down senseless. The women picked her up and bore her away.

'Why did she behave so?' asked one.

[c] She seemed to know him,' said another.

At Gama's bidding, they hurriedly shouldered the stretcher and continued the last stage of their journey, not stopping until they had handed their burden to the care of the apothecary at the hospital. Gama did not stay there. Once his mission was completed, his sole thought was to put as many miles as possible between him and the dying man.

Back in Bingoda, he lost no time in borrowing a gun and going after that bear. For three days he hunted the jungles with all the craft he knew, but no bear did he find. Then, just as he was about to leave for Maha Oya, to inquire after Poromola, he met a man who told him Poromola had died.

Menika too had heard that. Recovering from her first shock she had gone about her household duties as usual, hoping that by some miracle Poromola might live. But now that he was dead life held nothing for her.

While her husband was at work in the chena she went out into the scrubby jungle to collect amarantus for their meal. There, emblazoning a bush, were vivid splotches of scarlet and yellow—the blossoms of a twiner. She traced the stem's entanglement to where it entered the ground and with a pointed stake dug out a fleshy yam. Returning home she prepared their evening meal of boiled rice and curried tampala and manioc which she cooked in two vessels, putting into one sections of the tuber she had dug.

She shared out her husband's portion and hers, with this difference that hers contained the wild yam. Having thoroughly

scoured out the vessel in which this was cooked, she ate her meal without awaiting her husband's return, and lay down on her mat. Soon she was seized with agonizing pains, but she smothered her moans lest those in the house nearby should hear her.

Her husband came home to find Menika dead.

They only knew the manner of the passing when a boy said he had seen her digging under a bush. There they discovered the hole from which she had extracted the deadly root that nourished the fairest flower in all the jungle—the niyangala.

CHAPTER 24

THE TRAILS AGAIN

AFTER I had seen Poromola's exploits with the bambara bees on the heights of Nuwaragula, ten years passed before I had an opportunity of visiting the Veddas again. For that second occasion, the car was piled with all the paraphernalia requisite for a fortnight's sojourn in the wilds; the passengers were four, including a chauffeur and cook. We reached our destination, Maha Oya, that evening. There fourteen villagers awaited us to convey on head and shoulder, in the days to follow, all that the car had brought.

Much difficulty had been experienced by the chief headman in collecting those porters, owing to sinister happenings in the area it was proposed to visit. That certain brutal murders had been committed by a Vedda, still at large with a price on his head, somewhere in those jungles, I was aware. But that the murderer was none other than my friend Tissahamy I did not suspect until my arrival there. It was all the headman could do to convince the bearers that they were bound on a peaceful expedition and not one which, under the guise of interest in Veddas, was designed to track to his lair a desperado who had threatened death to anyone he suspected of coming after him.

Just as the party was about to start the following morning, the chief headman, who was not accompanying us owing to convenient pressure of business, called me aside and asked me in a whisper to gather as much information of Tissahamy as I could, a fine mission with which to saddle friendly travellers. But this, instead of damping my enthusiasm, only lent a spice of adventure to a woodland jaunt.

Here was the land of the Veddas. Maha Oya itself, though on the main road, lies in the very heart of the old Vedda country; and it is safe to assume that the Sinhalese, born and bred here through generations, have Vedda blood in their veins. The wattle and bark huts seen here and there by the roadside as one

approaches Maha Oya are no different from the Vedda shacks of the remote interior, and the discerning eye may sometimes see the soul of a Vedda in a Sinhalese face.

Near Nilobe, three miles from Maha Oya within the jungle, are two old Vedda rock-shelters—Meenadhama-galge and Borapola-galge—containing crude drawings done by both Sinhalese and Veddas, the difference being that the medium favoured by the former is edible lime, and by the latter a mixture of ash and saliva. As Pollebedda is approached, there loom up the shimmering contours of four Vedda hills—Gorakana, so called because it is covered with goraka trees, Dalibara, a name which describes its sooty hue, and Sitala Wanniya and Raula-hela, redolent of legend.

There was once a Vedda called Sita whose wife went one day with a gourd to fetch water from the hole called Kakuranpola-wala, where she saw some bambara bees drinking. She followed their flight for hours until they led her to their combs on the Sitala Wanniya hill. Returning to the water-hole, she filled her gourd and went home. Her husband scolded her for her long absence, suspecting she had been with a man; but she protested her innocence, saying she had followed the bees. 'AH right,' said Sita, 'then you'll show me those combs tomorrow.'

They went together, and she showed him the combs plastering the hill face. Deciding to take them they climbed to the top of the rock. The man went one way and the woman another in search of the creepers with which to construct a ladder for the descent. When Sita got back with his collection of these, he found to his surprise that his wife had already made a ladder and taken the combs. So ashamed was he at being outdone by a woman that he leapt off the cliff and was dashed to death. Hence is the hill named Sitala Wanniya or The Spirit of Sita.

Raula-hela or Raula-watuna-hela (the hill where Raula fell) commemorates a similar tragedy. The bee colonies on this rock, owing to their position under a prominent brow, were impossible of access except by descending a vine to a long horizontal crevice into which a series of sticks could be thrust, providing a foothold that brought one just beneath the combs. These had

been put in position one year. Raula, descending the following year, found the pathway of sticks seemingly intact and venturing upon them they snapped and sent him to his doom.

It was April, the ground was sodden with recent rains, and the paths were streamlets awriggle with little fish. Here and there great trees fallen across the paths necessitated those detours that render jungle trails so tortuous. And all the way the sun-shot colonnades were alive with a medley of song. Coppersmiths trolled from tree-tops; bulbuls and thrushes chattered in the brakes; white-eyes whimpered mournfully; golden orioles jerked out snatches which for all their rich melody were Sinhalese obscenities; while racket-tailed drongoes, sweetest singers of all, throated their merriest carillons in pursuit of each other—they say these birds can speak nineteen languages, imitating the cries of deer, monkeys and other animals.

All the claim Pollebedda had to its name was a couple of huts. Entering the fenced compound for our noonday rest, we were greeted by the raucous protestations of half a dozen mongrels. Here, in contrast to the annually shifting chenas, was some attempt at permanent agriculture; a few young coconut trees, four kitul palms sprouting out of a common conglomeration of roots, a jack tree, a kapok tree, lime, and orange trees—a brave effort, but not destined to survive long. Tethered to a tree was a buffalo bull that, to the clacking of his wooden bell, kept throwing up his magnificent head, listening resignedly to the calls of his cows enclosed in a byre outside the grounds. The necessity for the separation was the inability of the tame bull to protect his harem from the amorous attentions of a wild rival ever watchful for a fight.

We came the following morning to a small paddy field where half a dozen jungle fowl were taking heavy toll of the grain, quite unconcerned by the activities of an old man and his two sons, who were hurriedly clearing a threshing floor to save what was left of their meagre crop. Their greatest enemies, the ancient bewailed, were not pigs and deer, but those cursed fowls that poured in on every side once the paddy ripened. I clicked open my camera to photograph their picturesque watch-hut on a tree,

when out wriggled a centipede. 'There are three varieties of those, *rathaya, pathwaya* and *gomawaya,'* the old man complacently remarked, as the vicious creature and flustered photographer played hide-and-seek.

As we neared Bingoda on the third day I wondered how many of my former friends I would meet. Ten years was a long time for the Vanni. That Poromola had died only two months before my arrival I learnt with deep regret. With his passing who had assumed leadership—Kaira, his brother, or Gama? To that question there was but one answer—the swarthy statuesque figure now standing there before his hut, scratching his tousled head, and contemplating the approaching intruder with a scowl of puzzled disapproval.

'Gama, don't you remember me?'

The frown of ill grace yielded to a smile of welcome.

' You've come after a long time,' he said.

Soon the men were around me, but the women and children huddled indoors, their bright eyes glinting between the bark slats. Under Gama's harsh inducement the skulkers were routed out, some of the younger children clinging to their mothers, howling, so shy of strangers were these people of the jungle.

I looked around, having won their confidence by distributing betel leaf and tobacco among the adults, male and female, and sweets among the children. In striking contrast to the virile Gama was the pot-bellied, curly-mopped Kaira, who sat by his squint-eyed spouse Handi.

'Is that not Handuna?' I asked, indicating a youth of seventeen.

Now, how did he know that, wondered Gama, looking open-mouthed at the others.

' And who is she?' I indicated a sloe-eyed wench seated coyly apart.

'Punchi, Handuna's sister.'

'Who was their father?'

' Gombira. He was killed by a fall from a tree when these two were very young. After that Poromola, our chief whom the bear killed, took care of them.'

'And now?'

'Handuna is with me,' Kaira said.

'And Punchi?' There was a strained silence.

'In my hut, looking after my children,' Gama said impatiently.

As this open probing into family affairs seemed to cause embarrassment I turned the talk to Poromola and the manner of his death; and the tears glistened in every eye, even Gama's.

'Well,' I told them, 'I have come this time to go with you and your families on the trails, as I promised I would.'

After a thoughtful pause, Gama said: 'We shall be glad to do that, but how about those Sinhalese you have brought? We cannot allow them near our women.'

'You and I will travel together, the bearers can follow some distance behind with one of you to guide them.'

'And when we camp?'

'Your people will be on one side of me, and the bearers some distance away on the other.'

'We cannot have them in our caves,' objected Gama.

'I'll see to that,' I assured him.

Not all the Veddas set out the next morning, a couple of women being left behind in charge of children too old to carry but too young to walk. The route was northwards, following the course of the Magalavatavan river, the dried-out tributaries of which, where water was obtainable by digging, served for camping grounds when habitable caves were not handy. The going was leisurely, the Vedda males and their dogs always a little ahead of the women and children straggling behind. Their loads were light, for the jungle was their larder; a few earthen pots and the last gleanings of their chena were all they carried. A couple of men bore sacks tied in the middle and slung on the shoulder; the women, some with suckling infants, balanced small bundles on their heads.

About five miles a day was their average. Even so it was a wonder those children, some no older than six, and the frailer women, like Kaira's wife Handi, were able to keep on the trail over those hilly jungles infested with ticks, snakes and wild beasts, the most feared of which was the sloth-bear whose caves

they shared, and which they always approached with shouts of 'cho-ho-ho' to warn off a possible occupant.

The length of stay at each camp was determined by the sustenance available in its precincts—yams, fish, honey or fruit, apart from the flesh they always hunted. When food was in plenty the Veddas ate their fill with no thought of the morrow, when scarce they would appease their hunger with bark chews. What little kurakkan they brought was exhausted within a couple of days. The women ground it to flour on the floor of the first cave they came to with small worn stones, the presence of which testified to previous human occupation. To the flour they would add a little water and stir it over a fire into a mess called talape. A ball of this, about the size of one's fist, was more satisfying, they declared, than a great pile of rice which merely melted away inside, while even a pinch of talape provided something for the stomach to busy itself with for hours, and gave greater strength and endurance to the body. Whenever a large animal, such as a deer or pig, was killed, Gama, their lokka or chief, impartially apportioned it to the families according to their number.

Cleanliness was a quality utterly alien to the Bingoda Veddas. They never cleaned their bark-stained teeth which, singularly enough, were remarkably free from decay. Of water they were afraid, and no stream or pool, however limpid, tempted them to bathe. Even wading was avoided whenever possible. That happy-go-lucky scapegrace, Handuna, gravely declared that if he got wet above the knees he contracted rheumatism. When asked why they never washed their grimy rags, the reply was that for one thing they had no ' frothy substance' as they called soap, and for another the fabric would fall to pieces if the bond of dirt that stiffened it were dissolved! The garments of the women just sufficed to impart a hint of modesty to their hips; while the loin-clouts of the men gradually dwindled to ridiculous proportions from being continually depleted for gun wadding or for dressing ulcers.

Every one of the Veddas, including the children, had the enlarged spleens of victims of chronic malaria. Body ringworm

and verminous heads caused a diversion in the day's routine by the scratching they evoked. When I, a surgeon, had first contacted those Veddas a dozen years previously, there was not one but showed the crippling stigmata of parangi. This disease, endemic in the Vanni for centuries, was soon to disappear owing to the miraculous effect of the recently discovered neosalvarsan, first introduced there by me and followed up on my suggestion by itinerant medical officers. The saying went that with my coming the disease had disappeared from those jungles.

The infant and maternal mortality among the Veddas was appalling, and only the strongest survived. It was rare to find an individual over fifty among them. Watching the Veddas at their activities was always a delight to me even though it was often tempered with disgust. Meat, smoked or fresh, they curried with salt, chillies, lime juice, and the aromatic leaf, karapincha, that grew wild; or they stewed the meat with wild yams: and sometimes they ate it merely dipped in honey. They preserved in honey both smoked venison and dried fish, the former after pounding it with an axe-head to loosen out the fibres and allow permeation.

Wanderoo was the flesh they preferred to all others. It, like monitor lizard and gonala yams, was deemed the best food for children and pregnant women. The men favoured sambhur and pig. The red monkey was roasted whole over a fire, but the langur was always skinned—and this is an art in itself. The tail is partially severed by a semicircular incision under its base and continued as two parallel slits along the entire length of the spine. The strip thus demarcated is torn away together with the tail up to its connexion at the neck. This wound round a branch suspends the carcass which is then flayed, eviscerated and quartered in less time than it takes to tell.

One evening Kaira and Thutha with their families were seated hungry and disconsolate under their tree on the border of the river-bed when Gama, returning from a hunt, tossed them a wanderoo and two hornbills, which instantly cheered them. Kaira singed the feathers off the birds, severed their heads, tore off the mandibles, split open the bodies and put them on the fire.

The intestines, browned on the cinders, he distributed to the children standing around with slobbering mouths. The roasted birds were hacked on a log with an axe sticky with jack-fruit milk and then shared by all.

Meanwhile Thutha, having skinned the langur, gave Kaira the fore half and entrails for his portion. Without so much as stripping the intestines of their contents, Kaira chopped them up and put them in a coconut-shell. Then merely sprinkling the messy fragments over with a little water, he fingered them a moment or two, and transferred them to a pot containing the rest of the langur meat, which he handed to his wife to cook. She added water and the juice of two limes, immersed a glowing fire-brand in the pot' to take away the sourness', and a dozen crushed fiery little chillies and salt completed the flavouring. The pot was placed directly on the burning logs. The Veddas heartily relished that meal, but I, the interested spectator, went to bed dinnerless that night.

Even more repulsive and very cruel was their treatment of a tortoise they caught at their next camp as it feasted trustingly on fallen nebedda berries. They placed it alive on the embers, holding it down with a forked stick. As its shell warmed, the poor creature thrust out its head and limbs in an effort to escape, only to withdraw them scorched within the useless shelter of its burning shell. Mercifully its death was not long delayed. When the under surface was roasted, the creature was turned over on its back, and finally rolled out of the blaze charred like a giant chestnut.

Plump Ranee, all asweat with the heat of the fire and the noon-day sun on the hump of rock, hacked off the carapace with an axe, exposing a disgusting conglomeration, mainly of entrails, which both theVeddas and their dogs rejected. She then severed what fragments of flesh remained, and these, with the limbs to which clung scales and nails, she re-roasted, and doled out to the half-dozen eagerly watching women and children, while the dogs gnawed at the shell.

The odour from the offal of that foul feeder drove them out of camp by evening. What wonder that even some of the Veddas,

Gama tells a tale

like Gama, drew the line at the tortoise, though others, like Kaira and his wife, considered it a palatable dainty. Strange that folk partial to such revolting fare should turn up their noses at the porcupine, which the Sinhalese consider good eating. There is no accounting for the origin of that taboo.

The Veddas like their meat high, claiming that it is then both tasty and tender, or as they put it 'not tight'. They commemorate in one of their songs a man cheerily carrying home a blown monitor lizard. The reason they give for not washing flesh is that the removal of blood renders it both less tasty and nutritious—an opinion with which few would disagree.

Vedda cookery then is, by sophisticated standards, both crude and repulsive. Even smoked venison preserved in honey is not as savoury as it sounds. But *chacun a son gout*—that is clean or filthy which one has been bred to regard so; and that is a delicacy to which the palate has been schooled. The Veddas were quite indifferent to the pickle and jam I offered them; and curries made by my cook had not enough chillies for their liking. As for bread, Gama just spluttered it out, saying it was as insipid as mushrooms on dead tree-trunks. When, one foodless day, he was given some cold roast venison he rejected it with a grimace declaring it tasteless; but his hunger getting the better of him he asked for sugar, mixed it up with the meat and swallowed it greedily.

There are, however, certain Vedda dishes which even the fastidious would not scorn, always provided a Vedda was not the cook. Browned bee-grubs mixed with honey are delicious, if one can bring oneself to eat them. This is how it is done: the brood-comb, packed with milky larvae, is placed on the flat of a Y-stick and heated over embers, first on one side and then on the other. The baked grubs are then shaken out on to a kenda leaf (the plate of the jungle), mixed with honey and eaten like rice in handfuls, or picked off singly.

Roasted gonala yams taste rather like artichokes and are not to be despised; nor is a stew of venison or pork in manioc gruel. Tender jack pulp dipped in honey fresh from the comb is delicious. And who could cavil at *gona-peruma,* a sausage composed of alternative layers of sambhur flesh and fat; or *le-peruma,* the

same with an additional stratum of blood-clot; or *goa-thel-peruma,* in which a monitor's fleshy tail is partially skinned through an incision down the back, the muscle masses on either side of the tail vertebrae are then eased off, and between them are put strips of subcutaneous and abdominal fat; finally the skin flaps are over-sewn, by a running stitch, with a strip of bast and a wooden pin, and the stuffed tail is roasted on a slow fire.

CHAPTER 25

MAINLY ABOUT SPIRITS

A COUPLE of miles from one of their camps was Malgaha-usa-kande, the site of an ancient Buddhist temple. Accompanied by Gama, Kaira, his nephew Thutha and a Sinhalese bearer, I visited it. All that now remained of the old temple was a mound of tumbled bricks, a few altar stones and a group of monoliths standing all awry. The frangipane that gave the hill its name was a living link with the priests of old. Perennially it shed its scented blossoms on the sacred site where human hands had in years gone by offered the flowers on the altars. The jungle embraced the ruin as though to hug to its heart those symbols of man's reverence to God.

The Sinhalese, scratching himself on a tangle of thorn that surrounded the frangipane, retrieved a few of the flowers and placed them reverently on an altar-stone, but not before courteously dislodging Gama, who was seated on it with a gun across his thighs, commenting that it would make a fine grindstone for kurakkan. Meanwhile Thutha, always with an eye to the main chance, was quietly denuding a guava tree of its luscious fruit and gulping them down with the ravenousness of a horn-bill, putting away the excess in a fold of his loin-cloth.

'Those are for your wife and child, I suppose', I remarked, remembering their famished faces at dawn.

'Perhaps', Thutha said, smashing a half-ripe fruit on a stone with his axe-head so as not to overwork his teeth.

On their return to camp Thutha's little son came towards him eagerly, hoping something edible might have been brought. But Thutha ignored him.

'Why don't you give him a guava?' I asked.

'Where from?' was the nonchalant reply. 'They were all eaten long ago.'

'All eaten, were they, you gluttonous wretch? Here, give the

children these', and I handed him the half-dozen fruit I had collected.

'My mother,' Thutha exclaimed,' I'd like to eat them myself—but he saw a look on my face that made him change his mind quickly.

Life in those bivouacs by pool or stream was always a delight. Rare warblers sang incessantly in the trees. From adjoining hills came the calls of jungle-fowl and spur-fowl. Under an opulu tree the marble-like seeds would lie thick, providing the children with playthings. The blue-black nebedde berries, tempting in appearance but unsavoury to taste, would stay the hunger of young and old alike. A hole in a dry stream-bed, kicked out by an elephant's fore-foot, would be deepened to provide water. That ever-industrious girl Punchi would discover some pool nearby, and poisoning it with crushed timbiri fruit, collect a coconut shell full of small fry, while her brother, Handuna, foraged on his own; and Gama and Kaira hunted over some rock towering above, where 'the wanderoo when shot at didn't run away, but just sat on and looked'.

Always after dinner Gama would be seated by my camp chair talking. With him alone of all the Veddas was anything like a sustained conversation possible. Kaira was a monosyllabic simpleton. Thutha and Handuna were young and shy. Gama's wives would be utterly dumb if he were anywhere about, but in his absence they were demurely communicative.

'Well, Gama,' I opened, as the Vedda, replete with rice, sat before me and undid his betel-pouch for a chew. 'How has it been with you all since Poromola died?'

'Ah, that he were alive,' grieved Gama wistfully. 'What a man we lost in him.'

'And yet you were afraid he would die on your hands and abandoned him at his hour of death. Why did you do that, instead of staying with him in hospital?'

'Because then his ghost would have haunted me. At death, one's spirit is lonely and wants others to die that it might have company.'

'But is Poromola not now with Gombira and Neela and those others he loved so well?'

'Not yet. That takes time. They have gone into the distance. His thoughts would be of those nearest him when he died.[5]

'How long does the spirit of a man haunt his place of death?'

'A long time. That's why, when a man dies in a cave, we abandon it until all traces of him are gone. There are caves in the jungles where bones lie that our fathers have warned us against; we never go near them.'

'And when such traces have disappeared?'

'It means that the ghost has become a spirit without name or place, and has mingled with our great ones of old time. Then we no longer fear him.'

'What have you kept of Poromola's possessions?'

'Nothing. His axe, knife, and betel-bag were all he had. I left those with him at the hospital.'

'Why did you not preserve something in his memory?'

'Because the ghost would not have liked to see the things he was fond of in the handsof another. It would then have become an evil spirit and thrown sand and stones on him who kept his belongings, hoping he might sicken and die.'

'What would you do if that happened to you?'

'I'd go to a Sinhalese devil-dancer, for unlike our old ones we have not the wisdom to avert strong spirits, and he would charm a handful of stones and bury them in the pathway to my hut, so that the spirit could not pass them; and he would sprinkle charmed sand round the hut, that the ghost might not enter, and apply charmed ashes on the bodies of those living there to protect them from harm.'

'But did you not tell me you have Poromola's gun?'

'Yes. I picked it up broken and rusted in the jungle when I got back after leaving him in hospital, and had it repaired because I wanted to shoot the bear that killed him. I had no other, having sold mine to hire the Sinhalese who helped me to carry Poromola to Maha Oya.'

'Did you get that bear?'

' I killed one about the same place after searching many days' but I'm not sure whether it's the same animal.'

A long pause followed—after which I pursued my probing of the Vedda's mind. Finally, rummaging in my dressing-case, I extracted a mirror, and held it up before Gama saying: 'Look at this.'

One glance and the Vedda shuddered, covering his face in his hands. 'Put it away,' he said, thrusting it aside.

'Why do you do that?' I inquired.

'There's a devil looking out of it.'

'That's yourself, shaggy hair, bearded face, fiery eyes, and all.' Gama certainly was no beauty.

'I don't like it.'

' Don't you drink at clear pools with your lips to the water, as you people always do?' I asked.

' I do.'

'Don't you see anything there?'

'No. I always close my eyes when I drink.'

'Why?'

'Because another is there always staring at me, and I feel afraid.'

'But the Sinhalese aren't. Don't they become ghosts?'

'They don't, because they do kindly acts. Iyo, that'll do now. I feel like a chewed quid'—and Gama spat, rose, and walked away to sleep off the repletion of his stomach and the fatigue of his mind.

CHAPTER 26

'THERE WON'T BE A VEDDA LEFT'

AFTER many pleasant days spent on the trails through the hilly wilderness, the party had returned to Bingoda. Gama and Handuna were now to accompany me to the homes of the Hennebedde Veddas, about fifteen miles south. But on the morning of their departure only Gama was in evidence.

'Where's Handuna?' I asked, having taken a great fancy to the lad.

'He's staying behind to guard the women and children against elephants. You saw what they did to the chena while we were away,' Gama replied.

Considering that Kaira and Thutha would be there, the excuse seemed flimsy. There was more behind it.

'Why then hasn't he come to see us off?' I enquired.

' That's the way with that fellow,' Gama sneered.

We were about to start when Handuna arrived armed with an axe and accompanied by four dogs. He seated himself sullenly on the river bank without uttering a word.

'What's the matter with him, Gama?' I asked. 'He doesn't seem happy?'

'He says that he's the only one who didn't get any presents.'

'Why do you say that?' I asked, turning to the lad. 'You've had a cloth and food and the cook tells me he gave you a fine shirt.'

'What am I to do with a thing like that?' he muttered scornfully.

'He gave it back to me and also the cloth Master gave him,' chuckled the cook.

'What's wrong with the cloth, Handuna?'

'It isn't large enough to cover myself with at night,' he said. 'I prefer a fire. Why should only I get a small piece of cloth when the others got so much bigger ones?'

The complaint was justified; his was a remnant, the stock

having run short. But one hardly expected Handuna to be so particular.

'What are you going to do now?' I asked.

'Hunt lizards and eat them. I'm hungry.'

'Come with us, we'll give you lots of food.'

'I won't,' Handuna snapped.

'Will you bring some lizards for the women and children?'

'I'll burn and eat whatever I catch until my stomach fills. If any are left after that, I'll bring them, not otherwise.'

'All the lizards he'll bring will be inside his stomach,' Gama scoffed. 'There was food for him at home, but he was angry and wouldn't touch it.'

The last we saw of Handuna was on all fours climbing, every inch a monkey, up a slanting tree-trunk after a kanava comb.

The initial stage of the journey to Hennebedde lay along a stream. Now on this bank, now on that, now floundering knee-deep in water, leaping boulders, or tearing through thorny scrub, we proceeded—such being the going when a Vedda guides: no clear pathways for him, but merely a bee line to his destination regardless of obstacles, till he thinks it time to squat for a chew: that is his stage.

Illuk glades, those graveyards of once magnificent forests felled for chenas, and patches of scrub jungle representing more recent clearings destined to a similar fate, indicated that we were nearing the ancient village of Mullagama. Breached castor-oil plant fences surrounded such evidences of human occupancy as kapok, drum-stick, and jack trees that struggled for life against the encroaching jungle. Ridged lawns showed where plots of paddy throve or died, every year or two, according to the whims of the rains. An old Buddhist priest, in charge of the historic temple and its stupa, centuries old, gave kindly welcome to the visitors in the sacred bo-tree's shade, and craved medical relief for his fever-stricken community.

Thence to the *boutique* nearby, the only one for miles around, where we bought provisions for the first time in two weeks. The keeper was Nondia, the lame Moor, of a waxen pallor that betrayed the ganja-addict. His obvious perturbation at the

sudden invasion of his premises by an armed company suggested a guilty conscience. That a scrutiny of the dark interior of his hut would reveal a good store of contraband ganja, I had not the least doubt, but that was no concern of mine.

Whatever the Moor's preliminary reactions, he soon recovered sufficiently to drive the harsh bargains of one who knows himself to be without competitors, and his customers without provisions. From him I purchased gifts for the Veddas, including gilt necklaces which, though they made a glittering display in his shop, were deemed trumpery, as I was soon to learn, even by Vedda women.

'How long have you been here?' I asked.

' Over a score of years, on and off,' Nondia replied. [c] My home is in Kattankudi on the coast, where I frequently go to get my stores.'

'And trade your ganja?' I suggested.

Nondia gave me a startled glance, as if sensing a trap, then reassured, said: 'Che, I've nothing to do with that sort of thing.'

'May I look inside your shop?' I asked.

'What's the good of that?' he countered hurriedly; the bearers exchanged knowing winks.

'Do Tissahamy and his two sons ever come this way?'

'They used to, but not since they committed those murders.'

'Then whom do they take their ganja to now?'

'How do I know?' the trader retorted irritably. 'You can only be joking.'

'Are you afraid of Tissahamy?'

'Why should I be? I've done him no harm.' The question, however, seemed to cause Nondia uneasiness.

As we resumed our journey, the Moor called Gama aside and whispered earnestly to him. When Gama rejoined us I asked him what the man had said.

'He wanted to know who you are, and where you are going. He thinks you have come to spy on him.'

'Was that all?'

' He also told me some story about Tissahamy.'

'What was it?' I asked. So far, though we had travelled in the outlaw's country, we had heard nothing of him.

'This Nondia and another Moor,' said Gama, 'were passing by Galmede some days ago on their way to the coast, when they met Sudhu Banda, Tissahamy's eldest son, who asked them to bring him some powder and shot on their return for ganja money they owed him. They promised they would, but tried to avoid him on the way back, by taking another route. At Perapitiya-ela Tissahamy and Sudhu Banda overtook them. When they found that the Moors had not kept their word and had tried to evade them, they got very angry and pulled the sacks off their pack bull and took whatever they wanted and smashed up the rest.

'As Tissahamy and his son were going away, Nondia, unable to bear his loss, called out that though they might get away with what they did to him then, they would both soon be hanging from the gallows. Sudhu Banda rushed back and was about to strike him with his axe, when Tissahamy seized the boy's arm. Just then approaching voices were heard, and the two walked off threatening to kill him if they ever met him again.'

'And what did you say?' I asked Gama.

'If he valued his life never to get caught by either of them. Their feud with that Moor has been going on for years. You've just seen the sort of bargains he drives.'

The ten miles between Mullagama and Hennebedde embraces some of the finest jungle in Ceylon. About noon we came to a spot so entrancing that we agreed to rest where a banyan tree of enormous spread hung over a brook; its sweeping boughs pillared by aerial roots enclosed a cathedral of Nature choired by singing birds, with its aisles shot with golden beams. There we met a Buddhist priest. The carriers, one by one, put down their loads and bowed reverently before him with clasped hands.

'See what those fellows are doing,' observed Gama to me. 'We Veddas bow to no man.'

At the approaches to Hennebedde were glades of aralu and nelli. Before we were aware of it we came suddenly upon the Vedda chenas tucked in a pocket of the foothills. The Veddas

were quite taken aback, finding their privacy thus rudely invaded by a whole company. That was a breach of jungle etiquette; only by consent, and with one of them for guide, are privileged strangers admitted to Vedda homes. Had one of their sullen old chiefs, like the one-eyed Walaha, been alive, he would have had much to say.

The Veddas clustered together, eyeing us nervously. The only answer one bewildered individual gave, whatever the question asked, was 'Ehenang' (Quite so). The reason for their uneasiness was soon supplied by a glance around, for the harmless-looking plants luxuriating there up to their very huts were ganja.

I found that the ten years since my last visit had wrought a striking change in the Veddas of Hennebedde. Then there had been a few families of true Veddas. Now, from Sinhalese intrusion, the community was both more numerous and sophisticated. Among the three dozen of them there was not one true to type, though a few displayed this or that Vedda trait—low stature, sparse hair, dark skin, wild alert eyes. They were mostly light-skinned and tall, and to all appearance Sinhalese. Some of them reared cattle. Sita Wanniya, their chief, would not eat monkey or pig, and talked fluent Sinhalese. I had met him at my previous visit, and only one other of them, showing how heavy is death's toll in those grim outlands. Those two grand Veddas Walaha and Handuna were dead, and not one of their children survived. With their going it seemed that the day of the Hennebedde Veddas had ended. Among their possessions were still to be found a few articles that testified to Vedda lineage; a single bow and arrow to the whole community; a ceremonial arrow-head; a monkey-skin pouch containing bark chews and snail shells.

Once the Veddas realized the visit was friendly, and that the camp site would be away from their homes, they unbent. But Gama's demeanour was interesting. Though he was among his own people, to all appearances he might have been a stranger; he stood apart observant and critical. What he thought of them he afterwards made no secret of: 'They are not Veddas. They are Sinhalese,' he said disgustedly.

That night at Hennebedde, there came and lay beside Gama

a Vedda of the place, a bearded young singer whose attitude towards his wilder counterpart was obviously one of hero-worship. His croonings were interrupted by snatches of conversation that I could just overhear, as ingratiating on the part of the one as it was brusque on that of the other. *A propos* of some remark made by his self-invited bedfellow, Gama said: ' I never allow a man, whoever he be, to enter my chena beyond the shack at the boundary. He comes on his own business, not on mine. If he wishes to see me let him stay there and call out, and I'll go and speak to him. Why should he want to come to my hut where my women are?'

' If I visit you, you won't treat me like that,' essayed the other.

'Why not? What should you want to come to my house for?' Gama was never a dissembler.

The topic having turned on women, the voices dropped to a lower key.

' If you'll come with me now, I can take you to a fine house,' tempted the local Lothario.

' Che, I don't want that sort of thing, even for nothing.'

A range of hills divides the classic Vedda habitats of Hennebedde and Danigala. The distance across that precipitous barrier is nine wearisome miles by a path only known to the Veddas, two of whom now served the party as guides. Strong and beautiful was the jungle that clothed the range—writhing with massive lianas, filled with the sound of streams and waterfalls, one of which was called Hanthapana-ela or Moonlight Stream, and abounding in caves in which wild animals lurked. Traces were plentiful of elephants, bears, boars, and porcupine. Everything the Veddas wanted was there—fruit trees, *bin kohomba,* edible nests, bambara combs, langurs, and pangolin. Half-way up the ascent was the resting place of the Veddas, but it was not the only one used that arduous day.

At Danigala, too, civilization had laid its stranglehold on ancient ways, for a broad cart-road bit into its very frontier. Some of the girls there were fair and lovely as Kandyans, and wore jackets. The headman's son, like many another Sinhalese, had taken one of them for wife and settled in the Vedda chena.

Silver waist-chains were in evidence among the men. There were cattle about, and grass-cutting implements—in fact every token that the settled husbandman had replaced the primitive food-gatherer. Some of the bark huts had stoppings of mud between the slats. There was, however, a wild unkemptness about a few that proclaimed a clinging allegiance to the jungle. And one family from a further chena arrested attention—Randu Vanniya, the morose, bearded patriarch of the Danigala Veddas: Kairi, his skinny, sour-faced wife; and Badini, their lusty handsome daughter. Even the fastidious Gama agreed they were good, saying: 'When these and we have gone there won't be a Vedda left.[5]

CHAPTER 27

PUNCHI AND SUDHU BANDA

PUNCHI and Handuna, children of Gombira, orphans most of their lives, were as fine a pair of Veddas as existed. They could fend for themselves in any jungle. In the direct tradition of their forebears, their chena life at Bingoda and their nearness to the Sinhalese had in no way detracted from their wild leanings. Like jungle chicks hatched out by a domestic hen their longing was for the jungle.

Punchi was a handsome girl, slightly built, with the large lustrous eyes of a mouse-deer. Her expression of childish wistfulness made her ripe loveliness all the more alluring. That a girl of the jungle should have reached her age, nineteen, without knowledge of a man, was a tribute to the respect in which Poromola, her guardian, was held. She would have been mated long before had there been a suitable husband. But Thutha, the only male of about her age, and she were the children of brother and sister, and by Vedda law such a union would be incest. Gama's team of two wives ruled him out. It was his attempt to seduce Punchi at a tender age that had earned him the thrashing of his life from Poromola. After that, as long as Poromola lived, Gama restrained his yearning for that maiden blossoming into womanhood.

Once Poromola was dead, Gama, assuming the guardianship of Punchi and Handuna, took them into his household, and everyone knew, and no one better than Punchi, that the period to her virginity was only a matter of days. Gama's pretended indifference to her did not deceive her. Often had she seen a hungry look on his face, and been conscious of his seemingly casual approaches when she was alone in some part of the chena. Such situations she did her best to avoid. At home she always kept close to one or other of his women, and never went into the jungle unaccompanied. Her gentle nature revolted

against Gama's attitude towards women. She dreamed of a more stable love.

Barely a week after Poromola's death, Punchi went with Kaira's little daughter, Heen Thuthi, to the stream to bathe. Seated in the shallows they were splashing themselves when, like something evil, Gama, who had been furtively watching them, emerged from the jungle and walking straight up to Punchi carried her away, leaving her young companion frightened and weeping.

Punchi cried for weeks after that cruel revelation. She was less shocked by the act than the callousness of its performance. Having had his satisfaction of her, he had left her there like a wounded animal and gone away without a kind word, elated at the thought that, after all those years, it was he who had first relish of her. Thenceforth she was his, a situation which his wives could not but tacitly accept.

A year had passed and Punchi, filling a calabash at the stream one morning, saw a youth with a gun approaching her. She clambered up the bank hastily with the gourd on her hip, when it struck a tree and fell from her hands and rolled down. Glancing disconcertedly towards it she saw the youth standing there chuckling to himself.

'You go your way,' she called to him.

As he showed no intention of doing so, she was walking off when he said: ' Wait, I'll fill it for you.' Dipping the gourd in the stream he carried it up to her. As their hands touched he imprisoned one.

'Punchi!' shrilled a woman's voice from the chena.

' Coming,' she shouted, and in an urgent undertone, ' There, you see!' Wrenching her hand away, she clutched the gourd and was gone.

The robust youth stood there for a long while. Then, instead of going to the Vedda chena as he intended, he wandered off hunting, and returned to his home at Embillene, twelve miles away. He was Tissahamy's eldest son, Sudhu Banda.

The day following his return to Embillene, Sudhu Banda confided to his brother Tikkiri that he desired Handuna's sister,

Punchi, for wife, and asked Tikkiri to speak to their father about it, as relations between Sudhu Banda and Tissahamy were always strained. When Tissahamy learnt of his son's intention he was glad. What better remedy, he thought to himself, for the lad's increasing restlessness and ill humours.

Tissahamy's circumstances as an efficient chena cultivator and ganja-grower warranted more than the mere flesh and honey expected of a Vedda soliciting a bride. His transactions, however, being mainly by barter, he had no store of money. He owed the Damanegama *boutique-keeper* seventeen rupees for powder and shot. As for Sudhu Banda, he never owned a cent to call his own. But Tikkiri, always prudent, had a little money put by. So when wedding gifts were being thought of, it was to Tikkiri Tissahamy appealed, and Tikkiri willingly surrendered the nine rupees he had carefully hoarded, although he knew it would never be returned.

With this money they purchased at Damanegama a flowered cloth, a handkerchief, bangles and necklaces. Three rupees being left over, Tissahamy instructed Tikkiri to go to Sivanadia, a journeying silversmith then at Kaluwinne, and get him to convert the silver into a hairpin and two pairs of rings for ear ornaments.

Equipped with these gifts Sudhu Banda left home, taking conventional leave of his father by saying, 'I'm going'.

'Go,' Tissahamy said. 'I'll follow in six days and bring the two of you back. Until then stay with Gama and do as he says.'

Sudhu Banda arrived at Bingoda to find Gama hard at work felling a tree in his new clearing.

'Hot work', Gama said self-commiseratingly, pausing to wipe the murky sweat off his face.

'Let me help you.' Sudhu laid his gun aside, hitched up his cloth, and wielded the axe. Gama, who never objected to anyone doing his work, sat in the shade and chewed complacently. Within a couple of hours the great tree crashed down, and Sudhu Banda joined Gama, wondering how to broach the subject of his visit.

'Have you any tobacco?' Gama asked. Sudhu Banda ostentatiously undid his bundle.

They came upon the fugitives happily roasting a monkey

'What are all those fine things you have there?' Gama asked, rising to the bait.

'That's what I've come to speak to you about, uncle,' **Sudhu** Banda stammered. 'Father sent me to ask you for the **girl** Punchi. These presents are for her.'

'Is it for you or your father that you ask?'

' For me,' Sudhu Banda replied.

Gama had not expected this request so he pondered a long while before replying. There had been trouble in his household, his wives being jealous of Punchi. But what decided him was that it was Tissahamy who asked. He wanted no trouble from that quarter.

' All right,' he said,' I am agreeable, since it is your father who wishes it. Let's go to the hut and eat something. You must be as hungry as I am.'

Arriving there, Gama wasted no time in coming to the point. He called Punchi and the women out of the room in which they had secreted themselves at the sight of the visitor, and said to Punchi, very much to the relief of his wives:' This boy has come with presents and asks you to be his wife. Both his father and I are willing. It is a good match. Go now and bring him some food.'

Not by any sign did Punchi show the misgivings that surged within her. There was an attractive daredevilry about the lad, but who could blame her for shrinking from an alliance with a family whose name was the terror of the country. However, she did as she was told, bringing out a meal of talape and herbs, and setting it before Sudhu Banda, while one of Gama's women did the same for him. Sudhu Banda gave Punchi the presents he had brought her. If she had had any doubts about the desirability of the union, she had none now. Such gifts were beyond her fondest hopes.

'Now, you two,' Gama said, belching with repletion, 'go and stay in the guest-house at the bottom of the chena. Stay there until your father comes to fetch you. You said, didn't you, Sudhu Banda, that he would be here in a few days? Yes. Now heed my words well—don't go away till he comes. I have to give you two over to him.'

The sultry afternoon wore out, and the moonlit night flooded the jungle exercising its strange fascination over the lovers.

'This is no place for us,[5] grumbled the ever-restless Sudhu Banda. 'Let's get away from here.'

'We mustn't do that,' said Punchi hastily. 'Uncle told us to stay here until your father comes. It's not good to disobey him.'

'Father won't be here for another six days. We can't stay cooped up here all that time,' persisted Sudhu Banda.

'They will both be very angry. Do let us stay; it is not long to wait.'

'I'm not afraid of them. This is our business.'

'It's too dark. Where can we go?'

'I'll see to that. Come along.'

Punchi had no choice but to obey—and this was their undoing.

They wandered through the shadowy jungle, Sudhu Banda's eyes, accustomed to the dark, were ever alert for danger. Coming to a stream, he stepped into it, saying to Punchi, 'Follow me closely. Keep to the water, so that our footprints won't show.'

About a mile further on he climbed the bank and took a game trail. 'This is where we'll sleep,' he said, coming to a grassy knoll about midnight.

At dawn they resumed their journey, anxious to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Gama.

Gama awoke, happy with the prospect of a few easy days before him. Sudhu Banda should be grateful to him, and would help him with his work as he had done the previous day. A strong, capable lad that. It did not occur to Gama that a honeymoon was no time for drudgery.

Imagine then his discomfiture at finding the love-birds flown! He was as much incensed by their defiance of him as perturbed by their having set him wrong with Tissahamy. Raving like a maniac, he shouted for Kaira and Thutha, and hastened immediately on the tracks of the fugitives.

The stream confused them. Search as they might, they could not pick up the trail on the other bank.

Darkness found them twelve miles from home. Gama spent sleepless hours trying to guess at the fugitives' whereabouts.

In the morning he said to his dispirited companions: 'We'll search today too, and if we fail we'll go to Embillene and tell Tissahamy the fine thing his son has done.'

Towards evening they found their first clue—a branch hacked for a honey-comb. Gama stood there with cocked head orientating his position. 'Wanithibu rock is not far from here,' he ruminated. 'Punchi knows the place. She's been there once; she never forgets. They might have gone there to eat pine-apples. Come, let's go.'

'At least we'll have something to put into our stomachs,' Thutha consoled himself.

They came upon the fugitives at last, happily roasting a monkey. Scattered about were the rinds of jack-fruit and pine-apple. The scene was idyllic—but not to Gama. Tense with fury he sprang upon them, and plucking a stick out of the fire, belaboured them mercilessly. Even the truculent Sudhu Banda accepted his punishment without retaliation, though only a few months previously he had dared his father ever to lay hands on him again.

'That's enough, now,' protested Kaira mildly, as, having done with Sudhu Banda, Gama set upon the frail Punchi.

'She's the bitch that's responsible for this,' he snarled as he left her squirming on the rock. 'She should have known better than to disobey me.'

He moved off and sat down sullenly, while Kaira and Thutha, relived that the worst was over, addressed themselves to the interrupted cooking of the monkey, munching green pine-apples while they waited.

'So this is the way you repaid my kindness,' chided Gama more soberly after a half-hour. 'Now get up the lot of you and let's go.'

They spent the night in the jungle and reached Bingoda about noon the following day. This time Gama took no risks; he kept the young couple in his own hut.

'Don't dare move away from here until your father comes,' he warned Sudhu Banda. 'I can't get into trouble because of you.'

Gama's greeting of Tissahamy, when he arrived with Tikkiri three days later, lacked its usual vivacity.

'Is anything amiss, nephew?' Tissahamy asked Gama (whom he alone knew to be his son) glancing at the young couple seated guiltily apart.

'These two have done wrong,' Gama answered. 'My mind is no longer kind towards them. Take them with you to Embillene. I cannot keep them here any longer.'

And he told Tissahamy all that had happened.

When Tissahamy replied it was with the quiet deliberation of a judge delivering sentence.

' Since such a capable man as Gama here has no use for this girl, neither have we. Give us back the presents we gave her. My son is returning with me.' So poor Punchi was stripped of the trifles that had given her such joy, even to the cloth she wore. Thus was ruined at the outset a romance which, had it been allowed to take its course, might perhaps have prevented Sudhu Banda from doing that which was, in the very near future, to bring calamity to Tissahamy's household.

The jungle inures its dwellers to hard knocks. Marital alliances are much at the mercy of moods. So there crept into Punchi's heart the stoicism the jungle breeds, and soon she went about her work as if nothing had happened.

As the weeks went by Gama's attitude towards her underwent a gradual change. He ceased upbraiding her at the flimsiest provocation. Gama had really fallen in love at last. Nor was Punchi long in noticing the softening of his attitude towards her. Though she never looked him in the face, she was instinctively conscious of being in his thoughts, and this imbued her behaviour with an artless coquetry. What puzzled her was that he, whose way was to take whatever he wished, had not resumed his relations with her.

Then one day it happened in a quiet corner of the chena. But this time, there was a tenderness in his wooing, and instead of abandoning her after his gratification, he spoke soft words to her. On many subsequent occasions he contrived to take her witn him for the day into the jungle. And once, on the pretence

of sending her to work on a neighbouring chena, they were away together for many days.

All went well for about a year, until one day Gama surprised Punchi in a casual conversation with a Sinhalese at the stream. This was strictly taboo in Gama's menage. Nothing incensed him more than that any of his women should speak or even look at a Sinhalese.

'What are you doing here?' he said to her. 'Go home at once.' And to the man, 'You have no business to be talking to our women. Get out of this.'

The Sinhalese withdrew hastily, knowing better than to risk words with Gama.

On his way to the hut, Gama broke himself a stick and beat Punchi until she bled.

' You are a vile strumpet,' he ended. ' This is no place for such as you. Get out of my house. Go anywhere you like. And don't any of you take her in,' he said to the other Veddas. ' I don't want her in my chena.'

Punchi wandered off, not knowing where to go. She was seated weeping in the jungle, when her brother, Handuna, came to her and said: 'Sister, don't cry. I'll take you to our uncle at Kaluwinne.'

In a ramshackle hut, on a Sinhalese chena there, Kaira and his family had taken up their abode some weeks previously, unable to endure the persecutions of Gama any longer. With them Punchi lived, and by her work on the chena helped the family to earn a sufficiency of grain to keep themselves from starvation.

The chena was a communal one shared by three inter-related Sinhalese whose huts stood apart on their separate plots amidst their crops of manioc, maize, and kurakkan. Two of the huts were occupied by brothers with their families; the third by a lonely old headman, now retired. He had been specially kind to the Veddas, and it was in a shack on his plot they now lived.

One day he said to Punchi: 'Come and live with me. I'm all alone, there's no one to cook for me. I'll look after you well.' And he gave her a cloth, saying, 'Wear this. Yours is full of holes.'

How could Punchi refuse so good an offer? She lived as the

headman's mistress for a year, when suddenly a series of events occurred which caused a great upheaval in the placid lives of the jungle folk.

Tissahamy had given his daughter, Kapuru, in marriage to a Sinhalese of Damanegama. Three months later she died mysteriously. Tissahamy suspected foul play. His eldest son, Sudhu Banda, anticipated the revenge his father planned by shooting one night the man they thought responsible for the girl's death. This brought the police to Embillene with warrants to arrest Tissahamy and Sudhu Banda. In the clash that occurred a headman was killed and a constable severely wounded, both by Tissahamy. The police returned some weeks later in great force, by which time Tissahamy and Sudhu Banda were proclaimed outlaws with a price on their heads.

They lived in caves known only to themselves. For six months they made no contact whatever with human beings, subsisting entirely on what the jungle provided. Then the exhaustion of their ammunition and a craving for salt drove them to seek the help of a man they knew at Kaluwinne, the closest settlement to their haunts. By that time the police, disheartened by repeated failures, had despaired of ever catching them; and as far as the outer world was aware the whole family of them might have been dead.

Tissahamy and his second son, Tikkiri, a lad of fifteen, visited Kaluwinne only when driven by sheer necessity, and then with the greatest caution. Not so Tissahamy's elder son, Sudhu Banda. He, the prime author of all the mischief, swaggered about the villages, gun on shoulder, defiant of all, regardless of his father's warnings. He frequently visited Kaira, of whom he was very fond, in spite of the gentle Vedda's dread of Tissahamy and his brood. Always a man of peace, Kaira wanted no entanglements with the law, and Sudhu Banda's way of flaunting his presence so brazenly was particularly distressing to him. But what could he do? Sudhu Banda came in and went out of his hut just as he pleased.

Passing the headman's hut one day, he saw Punchi grinding kurakkan in the garden.

[1] So you are here now,' he remarked.

Punchi did not reply.

'Why did you leave Bingoda?'

'Gama drove me out.'

'So you are now the mistress of this old stick.' She cast down her eyes demurely.

'Is he in?' he asked.

She shook her head, and looked straight up at him.

Thus was renewed their love so rudely shattered a year and a half previously. Sudhu Banda's visits to Kaluwinne became increasingly frequent, but so cleverly did Punchi contrive their assignations that no one suspected them.

There was a tall handsome Sinhalese youth of the settlement, Sarnelis, who was Sudhu Banda's frequent hunting companion. Sarnelis had two sisters kept by Appuhamy, a short, powerful man, the bully of the district, popularly known as Kossa for his hairiness. A trafficker in ganja, he came into frequent contact with the pedlar Moors, whom he treated with blustering arrogance. He had been known to sell his ganja crop to a Moor, then waylay the man on his return to the coast with his heavily laden pack-bulls, and, on some trumped-up pretext, threaten the Moor with his gun and plunder him of all he had.

Peena, formerly of Galmede, was a man he had treated thus. The next time Peena visited Kaluwinne he took with him Nondia of Mullagama and two others, determined to teach their mutual enemy a lesson.

Kossa and Sarnelis were busy on a new clearing when the Moors approached them. Kossa went up to Meera Mohideen of Eravur, seized him by the belt, plucked out the long knife at the man's waist and said:'Today you will not budge from here until you have paid me the five rupees you owe me.'

Instantly two of the Moors sprang on Kossa and pinned down his arms, while Peena and Nondia beat him mercilessly, and left him there more dead than alive. His brother-in-law, Sarnelis, could do no more than look on. Thus was born the grudge Kossa and Sarnelis bore against Peena and Nondia, the Moors.

It was Sudhu Banda's way to leave Patharana cave, the refuge

of the outlaws, whenever he pleased. But this condition they all observed—whenever one or other of them was likely to be delayed more than a day, he was to let the others know.

Sudhu Banda left one morning, saying: 'I'm going hunting and won't be back for a day or two.'

'Be careful where you go,' warned his father. 'You are out very often nowadays by yourself, which is not good. We have many enemies, and there's a price on your head and mine.'

' I can look after myself,' Sudhu Banda threw back.

At Kaluwinne he met his friend Sarnelis who said to him: ' Let's go to the Tota Oya and poison fish in the water-holes still left by the drought.'

On their way there they met Thutha, the Vedda, hunting monitors, and induced him to join them.

They spent two days drying the fish they caught on trestles, and in the afternoon of the second day they heard the faint sound of approaching voices. Being in the dangerous company of Sudhu Banda, the other two had to be careful. So they all hid behind a rock on the bank and watched, wondering whether it might be a party coming in search of the outlaws.

Two men appeared round a bend of the broad, sandy river-bed, laden with sacks.

'Peena and Nondia!' Sarnelis whispered tensely; the men who had given his brother-in-law so severe a beating. It was Nondia too who had taunted Sudhu Banda and his father with the threat of the gallows when they robbed him of his goods.

Sarnelis did some quick thinking. Their trestle stood openly on the high river-bank. That the men would discover them seemed inevitable and if they did they would be lost.

'Let's kill them both,' Sarnelis suggested.

That was a word Sudhu Banda did not need to hear twice. The Moors were now almost abreast of their rock. Suddenly they saw the two armed men with murder in their eyes, and they fell on their knees and begged for mercy, offering all they had.

Sarnelis fired full into Peena's chest, wounding him fatally. Nondia pitched his bundle aside and took to his heels just as Sudhu Banda's shot rang out. The pellets shattered his elbow,

and served only to quicken his speed. Sudhu Banda quickly reloaded, picked up his axe, and followed in pursuit, not doubting that he would easily outrun the lame one.

Meanwhile Sarnelis killed Peena with a point-blank shot through the back of the ear. Then he slashed him savagely with his axe, to indicate revenge such as Tissahamy might have been responsible for.

'Did he take all that killing?' Sudhu Banda asked, surveying the mutilated corpse when he arrived an hour later.

'He was very strong,' Sarnelis replied. 'Did you get the other?'

'No, he ran like a hare. I tracked him till I lost his blood trail.'

'Cha, that's a pity. You should not have let him escape,' Sarnelis said irritably. 'He'll carry word to the police at Batticoloa'—which was exactly what Nondia did, falling exhausted after a fifteen-mile run.

'Let's see what's in their bundles,' Sudhu Banda said, leaning his gun against the bank.

'Don't touch those!' Sarnelis exclaimed, thrusting him aside. 'A single thing belonging to these Moors found on us will put the noose round our necks. Let's get away from here as fast as we can.'

A couple of miles farther Sarnelis said: 'You, Sudhu Banda, go your way, alone. We must not be seen together. Come, Thutha, you and I must go back quietly.'

The dumbfounded Vedda, still all atremble, followed like an automaton. As they approached Kaluwinne Sarnelis said to him: 'You've seen today's work. Don't breathe a word of it to anyone. If you do, what happened to Peena will happen to you.' So effectively did that warning seal Thutha's lips that he might never have witnessed the deed.

If the shrewd Sarnelis had scruples regarding the Moor's baggage, the devil-may-care Sudhu Banda had none. No sooner was he left alone than he doubled back to the scene of the tragedy, and leisurely ransacked the bundles which, to his delight, contained a wonderful assortment of cheap merchandise, besides

some ganja, all of which he secreted in a cave some distance away.

When Sudhu Banda eventually returned to Patharana cave, it was after twenty days of absence. Never had he been away so long as that before, and his father and Tikkiri had been very concerned for him. Some days later Tissahamy and Tikkiri went on one of their occasional visits to their friend Banda at Kaluwinne to barter flesh for ammunition. The old headman, Punchi's master, seated outside his hut, saw them, and greeted Tissahamy quietly with: 'So yet another victim has fallen to you.[5]

'Why do you say that?' Tissahamy asked, surprised.

'At the "Hole where the Areca-nut-cutter fell", in the Tota Oya, two Moors were shot. One was killed, the other escaped. The chief headman and the police have gone there to hold an inquest.'

'As for us,' said Tissahamy, 'we had nothing to do with it. However, anything of that sort would, of course, fall on our head.'

It was a very preoccupied father and son that journeyed back to their cave. But while Tissahamy's thoughts dwelt on vague possibilities, Tikkiri's mind kept analysing his brother's behaviour since his return. Tikkiri was always very observant and suspicious of Sudhu Banda. He had noticed that his brother's ammunition pouch seemed considerably full on his arrival after his long absence, and also that he had always kept it closely guarded under the crook of his knee whenever it was not secured round his waist. He wondered why. And now he determined to find out.

That evening as the two of them were seated on the fleshing rock outside their cave, Sudhu Banda grinding kurakkan, Tikkiri said to him:

'Give that work over to Bala Vanniah, our younger brother, and let's go out and see whether we can get a wanderoo.'

Sudhu Banda agreed. At Ketapendik-gala, they deviated, one on each side of the rock in search of game. Soon afterwards Tikkiri heard Sudhu Banda's shot. A pig, startled by the report

bounded over a boulder close to Tikkiri who, taking a hasty shot broke its forelegs. The animal floundered, squeahng horribly.

'It's making too much noise,' said Sudhu Banda, coming up, ' let's kill it quickly. Someone may hear it.'

Both their guns being now discharged, Tikkiri said to his brother: 'Go and finish off that animal with your axe, while I load our guns. Give me your ammunition bag. I've left mine behind.'

Sudhu Banda tossed his pouch thoughtlessly to Tikkiri, and hastened towards the squealing pig. Scrutinizing the contents of the bag, Tikkiri found two empty spectacle cases, two boxes of soap, two large jack-knives with chains attached, three rings, a few white bead necklaces, and six rupees. He was contemplating the amazing assortment, when Sundu Banda shouted to him to load quickly and come as the boar was showing fight. Tikkiri hastily did as he was bid and went up and killed the beast.

' Here's your bag,' he said drily, handing it over. Dragging the carcass on to the rock they proceeded to cut it up. But the help Sudhu Banda gave was half-hearted, he seemed distrait. Too late he realized his mistake. Tikkiri's grim silence was eloquent of his discovery.

As Tikkiri completed his job he said to his brother: 'It's no use being sad. What's happened has happened, and we must all share the blame of it. Let's shoulder this meat and go.'

'Don't tell father what you have found out,' Sudhu Banda said.

But the matter concerned them too closely to justify silence, and at the first opportunity Tikkiri told his father of his discovery, ending with, 'This is the fellow who killed that Moor'.

After remaining in hiding for a week, Sudhu Banda resumed his visits to Kaluwinne, only to lay up more trouble for himself by foolishly distributing among his friends the murdered trader's goods. He gave Heen Thuthi, daughter of Kaira, a ring and a necklace, and the same to Punchi, who asked him where he had got them, but receiving no reply grew suspicious and hid them away carefully. To the Veddas, Kaira and Thutha and their families, he gave the cakes of soap. With these they were

washing their cloths and lathering their bodies amidst great merriment at a pool, when Kossa and Sarnelis happened to pass by. 'My mother, where did these Veddas get such things?' The words had scarcely left Kossa's lips when he shot an apprehensive glance at Sarnelis his brother-in-law, and saw his fear reflected there. Sarnelis had told him of the happenings at the Tota Oya.

And now the police, repeatedly flouted by the outlaw and determined to have him, arrived at Kaluwinne, following up their village-to-village investigations into the murder of Peena.

'Why ask us?' said Kossa to the sergeant opening inquiries. 'Everyone knows who did it.'

'Who?'

'Tissahamy and his sons, of course. Who but they would savage a murdered man as is said to have been done?'

'So the Moor who escaped them says,' agreed the sergeant. 'But we have information that someone from this village was there too.'

'We have no truck with that brood. They never come here,' lied Kossa virtuously.

He said to Sarnelis that night: 'The way that fool, Sudhu Banda, goes about distributing that murdered man's things will put the noose round your neck if you are not careful, and implicate us all too. Did you see how those men examined everything we had? A single article belonging to Peena has only to be identified by Nondia and our trouble will begin. We must do something about it.'

'There's only one thing to be done,' said Sarnelis, and no one who saw that slight, curly-haired youth would have credited him with so evil a thought.

There was another person in the hamlet much perturbed by recent happenings, and that was Punchi, who loved Sudhu Banda in spite of all his failings. Watching anxiously for his return she saw him two days later about to emerge from the forest border and hurried towards him. 'Come away from here, I want to speak to you,' she said urgently, leading him deeper into cover. 'Sudhu Banda, do you think you are wise in coming here as often

as you do?' she asked. 'The police have been here questioning everyone and threatening them for helping your father and you.'

' They tried to catch us before,' he remarked airily.

'Where did you get those presents you gave me?' Punchi asked.

'What does that matter? Why don't you wear them?'

'I've hidden them away. Don't come here again,' she pleaded. 'They'll do you harm. I'll go away with you if you wish. Then there'll be no need for you to come here any more.'

'You'll do that?' he asked incredulously.

' I will,' she said.

He promised to call for her in three days. Dawn found him sleeping peacefully in the recess of a giant tree-trunk about a mile from the hamlet. He had just awakened when a slight sound attracted his attention. It proved to be his friend Sarnelis, moving cautiously as on an animal's spoor. Sudhu Banda watched him as he approached. 'What creatures are you tracking?' he said quietly.

'Ah, Sudhu Banda, is it you?' Sarnelis greeted suavely. He considered a moment, and then said: 'I'm going to take a honeycomb from a tree I have marked. Come along.'

They walked quietly side by side, not saying a word to each other. About an hour later, Sarnelis, who had all the while kept his ears alert for the hum of a bee, said: 'Here it is,' looking up at a withered bough. 'You climb and cut it while I remove a thorn that has been worrying my foot.'

Sudhu Banda, standing his gun against a sapling, hitched up his cloth and climbed into the tree. In a few moments he was hacking away at the branch. Pausing awhile to shift his stance, he happened to glance down and saw Sarnelis pointing his own gun at him.

'Hi! Look out, it's loaded,' shouted Sudhu Banda.

'This is a fine gun. I am only examining it,' Sarnelis calmly remarked, lowering the weapon. With a sudden realization of the warnings he had received, Sudhu Banda was down that tree in a trice. He plucked the gun out of Sarnelis's hands and with a foul

oath jabbed its butt against his face and drove him away, wiping his bleeding nose and protesting his innocence.

Even that was not warning enough for Sudhu Banda. He continued to loiter around Kaluwinne in order to meet Punchi the following day.

Luckily for her, her ancient consort had gone to a neighbouring hamlet. Bundling up some manioc and maize for the journey, she slipped out of the hut at dawn and made for the appointed spot. There she waited, watchful for the coming of her lover. As the darkness enveloped the grim forest, a cold fear settled in her heart and drowned her hopes. She spent the night weeping in the jungle. Not a morsel had she tasted all day. At dawn she crept back to her home. And when the next day too had passed she knew she would never see Sudhu Banda again. The old headman returned in great perturbation and said to her: 'Collect everything you can. We must get away from here at once, as all the others are doing. Even Kossa and his family. It is not safe to stay here any longer.'

'Why is that?' Punchi asked.

'Tissahamy and Tikkiri were here last night, looking for Sudhu Banda. They think someone here has killed him. They frightened the Veddas so much that they ran away at midnight. Tissahamy said he would soon come here again to settle with his son's murderers.'

Thus, for the fear of a single man, was Kaluwinne deserted like so many other hamlets round the outlaws' haunts. Punchi and the headman settled down at Kuruntuwinne, where he died, a year later. Then, after months of wandering from chena to chena, Punchi at last returned to Bingoda, where she lapsed once more into her former relations with Gama. He was glad of her return, as one of his three wives had recently died in childbirth.

Then the outside world was suddenly stirred by the news that Tikkiri, Tissahamy's son, had been captured. A lad of seventeen, he had shared his father's outlawry for two years, when he was caught by Gama and handed over to the police, who saw in his capture an opportunity of tracking his father. How, with Tikkiri for guide, they launched a final raid on Tissahamy's strongholds,

how they failed, and how Tikkiri stood his trial for murders committed by his father and brother, to be discharged as guiltless, has been told elsewhere.

After his discharge, he lived happily for two years with his mother in Kiri Banda's chena, until she fell ill with a throat infection which she had contracted when nursing Kiri Banda's wife. Skilled in charms, Kiri Banda exercised all his arts to save them both, and Tikkiri sold his precious gun and fetched a medicine man from miles away, all to no avail. The two women grew steadily worse and died within a week. They were buried side by side in the jungle nearby.

Tikkiri, with nobody left to care for, felt a sense of great lonehness. He took leave of Kiri Banda, his benefactor, and went to Gama at Bingoda. Gama welcomed him as he and his family were the sole occupants of their chena. Kaira and Thutha, having found life with Gama impossible, had left with their families and settled on a Sinhalese chena. Tikkiri helped Gama with his chena and greatly impressed him with his competence and industry. The day came when Tikkiri reminded Gama of his promise to give him his daughter. Gama made no demur, realizing what an asset such a son-in-law would be.

'I promised our Hura that I would give you my daughter,' said Gama suavely. 'You can have her. I am a man of my word.'

So Tikkiri and Kalu, just fourteen, occupied a little hut Tikkiri built close to Gama's.

CHAPTER 28

TISSAHAMY TALKS OF SUPERSTITIONS

ONE evening, after a hard day's work, chiefly on the part of Tikkiri, Gama and he were seated under a great banyan tree in the new clearing, enjoying a chew.

'Between you and me what can't we do,' observed Gama complacently surveying their work. 'This year our chena will be one of the best in Bingoda.'

They were about to rise and go, when a sound from the jungle arrested their attention—the long, low whistle as of a bird.

' Father!' said Tikkiri, 'I haven't met father since I left him two and a half years ago. I don't know what his feelings are towards me.'

'Neither do I,' said Gama. 'I wonder whether he bears us any ill will for having led the police against him.'

'Who can say?'

Their indecision was settled by Tissahamy himself walking towards them. He had watched them for an hour, hidden within the forest border. An outlaw now for four years, he had relaxed none of his vigilance. That he might be living somewhere round Friar's Hood with his son Bala Vanniah of seventeen and his daughter Kombi, about eleven, v/as the general surmise. But no man knew for certain whether they were dead or alive, for all shunned the environs of that lonely hill.

Gama rose to receive the one man he feared, but Tikkiri remained seated as if unconscious of his presence.

' So you have come,' Gama lamely greeted him.

'Yes, it is I,' said Tissahamy, squatting down with his gun and axe beside him. 'Have you any tobacco? I've tasted none for months.'

Tikkiri rummaged in his pouch, and handed Gama a half leaf, all he had. Gama passed it to Tissahamy, who accepted it, much to Tikirri's relief.

' It's long since we have seen you,' essayed Gama.

'Is everything quiet here now?' Tissahamy asked.

'Yes, they all think you and your children are dead.'

'That's as well. Tell no one you have seen me.'

'We won't. . . . You must be hungry. Tikkiri, go and get some food from my hut. It must be ready by now. Say it's for ourselves.'

Tikkiri was soon back with a potful of boiled manioc. He shared it out on three large kenda leaves, most for his father, least for himself.

Restored to placidity by a full stomach, Tissahamy asked Gama whether he still grew ganja.

'Anay, since the police were here three years ago and harassed us, I haven't grown a plant,' said Gama. 'I've had enough of those devils; I never want to see them again.'

Tissahamy's smile was grim. 'Ganja is the one thing that brings money in these parts,' he said.

' Aiyo, don't I know that! Since I gave up ganja growing sorrow has been my lot. Why aren't we Veddas allowed to grow it when all the Sinhalese, including the headmen, do? I have been warned only to grow just enough for my needs.'

'I shouldn't worry about police warnings, if I were you.'

'That Kaluwinne gang are the ones for ganja.'

' I have a score to settle with them if they ever come my way,' growled Tissahamy—convinced that his son, Sudhu Banda, had met his death at their hands.

'They'll never do that until your bones are found,' said Gama. 'Why else is Galmede still deserted, but because folk think you might still be alive? The only Sinhalese I like is the Bingoda headman. A Sinhalese raised his hand the other day to strike my dog that growled at him. I said, " Don't, the dog is my life." The man slunk away, not liking the look in my eye.'

Tissahamy laughed. 'I can well believe that. Your face is not a pleasant sight at any time. I'll tell you a story about a Vedda and his dog my grandmother used to tell us boys. Her father was once in a cave with his son, when three Sinhalese entered carrying bundles of coconuts, areca-nuts and jaggery.

"Why have you come to our cave?" the old Vedda asked. "To see if you can give us any meat," said one of the Sinhalese. "Come with me", the Vedda said, and calling his son and dog, they all went out hunting together. Soon afterwards he shot a pig with his bow and arrow, and sat aside with his son, while the three Sinhalese singed the carcass, and cut up the flesh. One of the men placed the pig's ears beside him. The Vedda's dog sniffed at these. The man struck the animal with his hand making it yelp. The Vedda leapt up and shot the man dead.

' He then split open the body with his arrow head, cut out the liver, and divided it into four pieces which he roasted at the fire, while the other two Sinhalese looked on, trembling. He ate one of the pieces and gave another to his son; the other bits he put into his betel-bag, saying to the Sinhalese: " Finish roasting your pig quickly and let us go from here." They spent the night in another cave. The Vedda said, "What I did to your friend, I shall do to you also." By morning the men had vanished leaving all their goods behind.'

'We can't do that kind of thing nowadays,' sighed Gama. 'There are too many headmen about.'

'My sorrows are due to them,' Tissahamy said. 'These last four years have not I and my children lived like hunted beasts?'

To create a diversion Gama said: 'Anay, how did Sudhu Banda's head become like a gourd?' The allusion was to the lad's bald forehead fringed with a few hairs.

'That's because when he was young he had influenza fever. In spite of all my charms and decoctions he got rapidly worse until, in desperation, I applied a strong poultice to his forehead. That cured him, but left him bald.'

' Aiyo, what did you put into that poultice?'

'Asafoetida, drumstick bark, ginger, pepper, garlic and the juice of an acid orange.'

'My mother!' exclaimed Gama. 'It's enough to boil his brain.'

'Better a bald son than a dead one. It took me three months to cure with oils the raw wound that was left.'

'I wish I were as skilled as you in charms and medicines,' said

Gama. 'When my children get ill I have to go to a Sinhalese kapurale. That's why I am afraid to live too far away from the Sinhalese. But for that I would leave this place and settle down near Galmede as Tikkiri suggests.'

Gama had put out another feeler. Galmede was close to Tissahamy's haunts. The grim silence of the outlaw who trusted no man was eloquent of his disapproval.

'Once father drove a devil out of my big brother,' Tikkiri hastened to say.

'When was that?' asked Gama turning to Tissahamy.

Tissahamy did not reply. Tikkiri took on the tale: 'My brother was lying asleep on a trestle in our chena one night, when he saw a red man come up to him and ask fiercely, " Why did you shoot my bull?"—the sort of thing Sudhu Banda was always doing. He answered, "I did not shoot your bull." The red man ground his teeth, glared with eyes like balls of fire, and clenched his fists as though to strike my brother, who then lost consciousness. He remained so until morning, when he descended the trestle and tottered home with a high fever and a bleeding nose, raving about what he had seen.' Tikkiri broke off tentatively.

'When I heard that,' said Tissahamy continuing the story, 'I knew at once that my son was under the influence of Bahiriya-veya, the guardian demon of buried treasures. Not until I had spent two weeks on incantations and decoctions did I rescue my son from that spirit's power.'

'They say there's a lot of buried treasure in these jungles,' Gama remarked. 'That's the sort of thing I'll never meddle with.'

'In Perapitiya glade,' Tissahamy recounted, 'I once saw the top of a golden pot showing in a crevice at the foot of a charred milla tree. I cut down the tree and found, not a golden pot, but a great mass of black ants the thickness of my thigh. Then I knew that I could never take that treasure.'

'How could you say that?' Gama asked.

'If, when you dig for treasure, you find a heap of black ants, or a stone obstructing the entrance, then it is a hoard guarded by Bahiriya-veya, than whom is no more powerful demon. Had

I persisted in my attempts to get that treasure, the whole of my family would have been wiped out. Now see what happened afterwards. Three men who had studied ancient *olas* came to these parts treasure hunting. The Damanegama headman, to whom I told what I had seen, mentioned it to the men; and they all went together, armed with hoes, to get the treasure. They dug at the foot of the tree I had felled. One of them was a very clever devil priest and through his exorcisms they unearthed a large bar of gold and carried it away. They were washing in a stream that evening, when they heard three "hoo" cries. One of the men "hooed" in reply, but the cry was not repeated. Having bathed they continued their journey until they came to a house, where they ate and slept. On waking in the morning they found the man who had answered those "hoos" dead. The other three buried him and returned to their homes. That evening the headman's big bull died. The next day his carpenter's wife died. And the day after that his own wife died. Four lives was the price of that treasure. That was many years ago. That's how the headman is so rich.'

'I thought it was by growing ganja,' Gama observed. 'At the foot of Thambalana-godde he now has a five-acre plot hidden away, I am told.'

Tissahamy made a mental note of it. Ganja is fair game in the Vanni.

'I too have heard of a similar happening,' Gama said. 'A man of Katuhampola was driving his cattle through a glade one day when he saw a shining object kicked up by their hooves. Picking it up he found it to be a golden pot full of coins. The next day he lost his wife, three children, and two bulls—six in all.'

Tikkiri, not to be outdone, chimed in: 'While I was burning a chena at Embillene one day, I saw something gleaming like gold and dug there with a hoe and stake. Suddenly out flew myriads of winged black ants. I fell down senseless. For one month afterwards I suffered from vomiting, purging and fever.'

'Chak!' said Gama. 'Treasures are things I have never meddled with and never shall. I don't mind pitting my wits against wild beasts, but never against spirits. They haunt the

jungle like leaves. How often have I shot at sambhur and pig that suddenly vanished; and when I looked for their footprints could find none. Then I knew them for the ghosts they were.'

And so they gave rein, in the spectral darkness that now enveloped them, to their credulous fancies, when suddenly there came, from the sombre heights of the great tree that canopied them, a demoniac chuckle ending in a forlorn wail terrible to hear.

'Come, let's get away from here,' said Gama, springing to his feet. 'Let's go and sleep in my hut,' he invited Tissahamy.

'Not I,' chuckled the outlaw. 'You two may go. This is where I sleep.'

A macabre goodnight, chortled from above, hastened Gama's footsteps.

'Father, I am going,' said Tikkiri, taking dutiful leave of him.

'All right', returned Tissahamy; and those were the first words he had spoken to his son for years.

Gama's dreams that night were filled with a legend of his race, making him very afraid. A Vedda and his son, Koa, were out hunting three days and had got nothing. They were both very hungry. The father bade his son kindle a large fire. 'What for, father?' asked the son. 'Never mind, do as I say,' was the reply. When the blaze was at its height, the father crept up behind his son and pushed him into the fire. With a burning log he pinned him down until he was roasted. He ate his fill of his son's flesh and took part of a leg home to his wife. 'Where is our son?' she asked, as he entered. 'He's following behind,' answered the man. 'Here's some meat for you.' She cooked it and was sharing it out with a spoon when suddenly she realized it was her son's flesh. Thrusting the handle of the spoon deep into her brain, she moaned 'Koa—a' and died. And ever since, in the guise of the crested devil bird, she wails her sorrow to eternity.

CHAPTER 29

DROUGHT

FOR many months of the year 1939 no rain had fallen in Ceylon. Never had there been such a drought in the memory of living man. Even in Colombo, water was rationed and bore-wells were sunk in bungalow gardens. A river was feverishly dammed by the[1] Government to supplement the exhausted reservoir that supplied the city.

In the low-lying jungles the tragedy was complete. As the crops ripened, anxious eyes were turned to the heavens for rains that never came. The chenas wilted. The great rivers ran dry. Elephants and other wild creatures, driven by distress, pressed on human precincts, and took heavy toll of what crops survived. Bears, their tongues lolling out, lumbered into hamlets in the broad light of day in search of water. Dangerous reptiles came down to the wells and water-holes.

Government relief measures failed to filter down to the sprinkling of peoples in those backwoods. Strong men weakened, women and children fell an easy prey to disease. In lonely households an entire family would be found dead for lack of strength to glean what even the parched forest could provide.

Pollebedda, which had been a flourishing village of about fifty inhabitants, some fifteen years previously, had gradually dwindled to half a dozen families when the drought caught them. All that now remained was one tattered hut set in a menace of encroaching undergrowth. Its mud walls were crumbling away exposing its wattled ribs; its floor was pot-holed through great breaches in the rotting illuk roof, the lair of scorpions and centipedes. Single-handed its owner, Kiri Banda, was unable to effect repairs—or so he professed—but truth to tell his spirit had ebbed away with his hut as it fell to pieces; and yet he was loath to abandon the home of his fathers and the few jack and coconut trees his own hands had tended. So there he clung with his small family, nursing a forlorn hope.

DROUGHT

His paddy had utterly failed. Of four bushels of kurakkan he had sown, the harvest of which should have been sixty, he barely gleaned three. One by one his fine buffalo herd was sold for no more than eight rupees a head, to keep him in kurakkan, the price of which had soared from the usual one rupee a measure to five rupees. Only two scrawny animals now remained to him, one his hunting buffalo. Crouching at its withers, in better times, he would approach game upwind on moonlit nights or rainy days, when deer's eyes are blurred with rain, and leaves do not rustle underfoot. The intelligent animal, knowing what was expected of it, would lead its master, grazing leisurely, to within a few yards of the quarry, and at a signal, come to a dead halt, letting him use its back as a gun rest. But now for lack of powder and shot for hunting the precious animal was useless. If such was the plight of a Sinhalese hamlet—and Pollebedda was only one of scores—how did it fare with the Veddas?

Driven by privation, the groups, scattered by Gama's truculence, had once more gathered under his protection—just five small families, the last remnants of their immemorial race. Gama was by temperament quite unsuited for chieftainship. He and Tikkiri were the only two among them capable of cultivating a chena. Kaira was always listless. Thutha was timid: a brutal word from Gama, and he sulked idly. Handuna was a born vagrant. However, they and their women and children helped Gama, to the best of their capacity, to clear up and plant his plot—while Tikkiri cultivated his own single-handed.

As the drought laid its stranglehold on their crops, Gama's intolerance of his helpers increased—till one day, driven to desperation by his rapidly dwindling food supply, he ordered them all out of his chena, saying they were eating him out of house and home.

' That's ever the way with him', grumbled Thutha as, bearing their pathetic little bundles, they departed, hardly knowing where to go. ' He takes all the work he can out of us, and when there's no more to be done, drives us away, saying there's not food enough for his family.'

They wandered through many a settlement where they were

not welcome until they came to the abandoned plantation of Sirimalhamy, a ganja grower. In a trestled watch-hut there they were permitted to stay on condition that they watered his wilting ganja crop nearby.

Searching assiduously in every nook of the rank chena they gleaned from day to day the edible herbs that thrive in the wake of cultivation. But such precarious fare being neither inexhaustible nor sustaining, they soon had to go elsewhere for food. Thutha and his wife with their three little children scrounged about in forsaken plantations eking out a bare existence. But Kaira and Handi were too enfeebled to leave their hut; and it was their frail young daughter, Heen Thuthi, who slaved in Sinhalese households to keep them alive with the pittance of grain she brought home as her daily wage. Handuna was with them, but not his sister, Punchi, who was of Gama's household. Handuna's contributions to the menage were haphazard. More often than not he roamed the jungles foraging for himself. Only occasionally would he bring in a monitor, a fragment of honeycomb or a few yams. He was therefore not very popular either with his mother-in-law, Handi, whose scowls were his bane, or his wife, Heen Thuthi, whose indifference exasperated him.

One evening, to the delight of them all, he appeared with a great bundle of small fish. The smiles that greeted him from famished faces made him glow with virtuous satisfaction. 'If Handuna will only do this kind of thing more often, instead of running about the jungle like a mad man, how good it will be', remarked Thutha, as they sat around to their first fleshy meal in months.

'That's what I say,' grinned Kaira.

Even Handi's wry face registered approval, and Heen Thuthi's glances were bewitching.

'Would I not bring food every day if I could,' said Handuna, warming to their benevolence.

'Where did you get these?' asked Thutha.

'At the "Hole where Tortoises cannot be Caught".'

'So far away as that?'

'Yes. I walked all day. The farther I went the less there seemed to be. Not even a mouthful of water could I get though I dug in many stream beds. As I approached that hole, I heard peculiar sounds.

' I crept up quietly and saw a bear scooping up pawfuls of mud —that's all there was—on to the rock, and gobbling it up greedily. How hungry that animal must be, I thought, to eat mud, when suddenly I saw something gleam at its snout. "That's what I want," I said to myself. I climbed a tree and made the most horrible noises I could. The bear growled and went away. I got down and went to the hole, shouting all the while and throwing stones.

'My mother! the mud just wriggled with these fish, like bees on a comb. I was so hungry that I ate some raw, but swallowed more mud than fish. Ugh!'

'Good thing for us,' bantered Thutha. 'Are there more fish there?'

'Not one. That bear must be very angry.'

That stroke of luck was but a flash in the pan. The relentless days rolled on.

Handuna's wanderings and Heen Thuthi's close association with the Sinhalese increased the rift between them. He was soon aware that his wife, abetted by her mother, seriously encouraged the attention of the son of Sirimalhamy, whose chena they occupied. His jealousy smouldered, but what could he say, knowing what the reply would be?

Returning home one evening he found the detested Sinhalese amiably seated amidst the family within the watch-hut, a thing Veddas never tolerate. He sulked apart until the youth had gone. Then, unable to contain himself any longer, he blurted out: 'What is that fellow always doing here? Has he no home? You are my wife, aren't you? Why do you always smile at him?'

Heen Thuthi's only answer was a smile. But it was Handi who shrilled: 'Yes, she's your wife. What do you do to keep her alive? Who are you to talk?'

'Why doesn't she come with me? I'll find her food.'

'Yes. And leave us to die.'

'That's it,' fumed Handuna. 'You don't care what dirty thing your daughter does, as long as your stomachs are filled/

'But for the Sinhalese, where would we be?'

There being no answer to that, Handuna went out and slept under the stars.

Next morning he was at Bingoda complaining to Gama of his wife's disgraceful behaviour, and he had the satisfaction of hearing that worthy give play to his favourite topic—the worthlessness of Veddas who lived on the Sinhalese. ' Let the bitches go to any dogs they want,' he concluded, spitting contemptuously. But as that gave no consolation to Handuna, he was soon back at their watch-hut.

As the drought dragged on, Heen Thuthi brought less and less food for her invalid parents. Thutha and his family too, who now occupied the same cramped hut, were in as bad a plight, as the Sinhalese on whom they depended had now little enough for themselves. The Vedda's dogs died one by one. In the jungles there was not even a tortoise to be found. Every implement they had was bartered for food. Nothing was left them but the rags that hung loose on their emaciated frames.

One afternoon, Tikkiri, himself driven far afield from want, looked in at the hut. The sight of that starved bunch of humanity with the whimpering children lying naked on the bare ground, made him forget his own afflictions. 'Come, Thutha, Handuna,' he invited, 'let's see if we can catch a lizard for these children.' Kaira was too weak to move.

The termite mounds of Marina glade, usually abounding in monitors, proved desolate, though they deployed and scoured every yard of it for a couple of hours.

'We have eaten all that the drought didn't kill,' said Thutha disconsolately as he joined Tikkiri.

Just then a shout from Handuna sent them racing towards him. They found him kneeling by an ant-hill with his hand inside a hole.

'Can't you pull him out?' Tikkiri asked.

'He has a tight hold,' Handuna said, straining hard.

They took it in turn, carefully exchanging grips, as the strength

of each was exhausted; but not by the fraction of an inch could they shift those grapnel claws. So vigorous was Tikkiri's heave that twice the skin of the reptile's tail peeled off in his hands, exposing the glistening tendon.

Had they an axe between them they might have chopped open the orifice; but even Tikkiri's had been pawned. They battered the baked earth with stones; it was the stones that broke.

Handuna forced his lean arm deep down and secured a grip nearer the base of the tail. He sprawled over the mound, burying his arms to the very shoulder, wriggling and spluttering, biting the dust with which he was now besmeared from head to foot, and at last succeeded in touching a hind claw with a finger tip; but strive as he might, he failed to tickle it free or to get a firm hold on it.

At last with a grunt of disgust he handed over to Tikkiri. "What strength this devil has,' he said, straightening himself up, and rubbing his aching shoulder.

'And to think that he too must be as starved as we,' commented Tikkiri.

Handuna peered into adjacent openings, hopeful of another avenue of attack. In the depth of one, he could just discern the snout and a fore claw. If only the head could be seized the reptile's fate would be sealed. For though it is proverbially difficult to pull out a clutching monitor by the tail (except by a sudden and unexpected pull) it is quite easy to draw it out head foremost, the grip of the hooked claws being lost.

To judge by the relative positions of snout and tail, through the separate openings, the advantage of the lizard lay in its angled position, which gave it the added benefit of leverage.

But the tunnel in which the head showed was much too narrow to put a hand into. All the battering they gave it failed to enlarge it. So Handuna poked mercilessly at the snout with a stick, while Tikkiri went on pulling the tail. The gallant creature hung on without moving an inch.

Handuna's resourcefulness was not yet spent. To him the contest had become an affair of honour. Plucking out handfuls of dry grass, he stuffed a bundle into the hole and set it alight,

then blew in the fumes with such vigour that they swirled out through five other openings. Some of these he and Thutha packed with grass and lit, others they plugged with stones. But the prisoner evidently preferred suffocation to the certain death which it knew would be its lot if it made a dash for liberty.

With the onset of darkness they had to own themselves defeated. Handuna, however, had his revenge. He bunged every vent of that ant-hill tight with stones.

'Cha!' discouraged Tikkiri.

'Why then wouldn't he come out,' snorted Handuna, ramming in a final stone.

Theirs was a sad homecoming. No word was necessary to tell the eagerly expectant children that the hunt had been futile. Their feeble moans were all their comment.

Providing themselves with improvised implements, they set out next morning to renew their attack on the ant-hill. There had been method in Handuna's wanton action after all. But they were soon to discover that the monitor had escaped through the one hole Handuna had overlooked.

CHAPTER 30

THE DROUGHT CONTINUES

Now Kaira had an antique muzzle-loader by which hung a tale. He had first acquired it from one Pitchapodia, a pedlar Moor, for a sackful of swiftlets' edible nests and *bin kohomba* herbs, and the promise of more of these from time to time until the value of the weapon was realized.

From that day Kaira had most scrupulously avoided Pitchapodia, who looked for him and his gun in vain. There came a time when Thutha, Kaira's nephew, secretly pawned the gun to a Sinhalese for a cloth and two measures of kurakkan. On one of my visits to the Vedda country,, two years previously, I had redeemed the gun for seven rupees and returned it to Kaira with the injunction that he must never part with it on any plea whatsoever. This promise Kaira had faithfully kept, and treasured the weapon despite all hardships.

The gun was old and had been patched up from time to time by jungle blacksmiths. Its lock and stock were held together with a binding of bast, and its worn hammer was supplemented by a small pebble stuck on with dammar wax to make contact with the nipple. Such was the precarious nursling Kaira proudly called his gun, which now quite useless for the lack of ammunition, stood against the wall of the watch-hut.

One morning shortly after the affair with the monitor, Kaira and Thutha and their families sat dolefully, not knowing what to do for food. Except for boiled leaves and bark-chews they had eaten nothing for days. Their lustreless eyes were framed in sunken sockets; every bone of their bodies showed; the women's breasts were mere tags of skin. Heen Thuthi and Thutha's wife, Badini, staggered out to gather wild herbs.

After a while,Thutha quietly reached out for Kaira's gun and was creeping away with it when Kaira asked him where he was going,

'To see if I can get some powder and shot and kill a wanderoo,' he said, hastening his departure.

He made straight for Damanegama, three miles away, and begged the *boutique-kteptr* there for a charge of ammunition.

'What payment have you brought?' asked Appuhamy.

'Nothing,' said Thutha.

'Then get out of this.'

'Won't you give us something to eat? We are starving.'

'We have little enough for ourselves. Go away,' said the man.

'Then keep this gun and give me some money.'

'What use is that wretched thing to me when I have two cartridge guns of my own?' scoffed the trader.

'Anay, take it, and give me a little food, or we and our children will soon be dead,' Thutha pleaded, laying down the gun.

Reluctantly the man handed him a rupee to get rid of him and retained the gun.

Thutha clutched the note eagerly and started out on the six-mile journey to Mullagama, where Agamilawa battened on the unfortunate. When that worthy saw a rupee in the hands of an ignorant Vedda, his eyes gleamed. Here was easy prey. Trade had been very bad.

'What is it you want?' the *boutique-kt^tv* asked, taking the note.

'Some rice and those plantains.' The luscious yellow fruit fascinated Thutha.

The man severed a comb and handed it to Thutha, saying 'That's fifty cents'—three times its value. For the other fifty cents he gave him a short measure of his worst rice and threw in, at Thutha's pleading, two tobacco leaves and twenty-five arecanuts, the smallest he had.

Stuffing a plantain into his mouth, skin and all, Thutha bundled up the commodities in the slack of his loin-cloth. The sweet mealiness of the fruit soothed his stomach. He gulped another and another, even as he sat there, to the trader's amusement, until in a few minutes there were but three left.

'Aren't you taking any home to your wife and children?' asked the man.

'I will, these,' Thutha said.

'How many children have you?'

' Three.'

' Then those aren't enough. Here are two more and some more rice,' adding a handful.

By the time Thutha reached home, there wasn't a plantain left. It was well for his family that the rice needed cooking. He handed all of it to his wife, and a tobacco leaf and half a dozen areca-nuts to Kaira.

Thutha and his family devoured the rice at a sitting, without inviting the expectant Kaira's family to the feast.

As Thutha, filled to repletion, snuggled down to sleep, Kaira ventured to ask, * Where's my gun?'

'I left it at Damanegama,' was all the reply.

What that meant they knew, but Kaira was too spiritless to recriminate. Not so his wife, who gave Thutha the most miserable hour of his existence, which he bore silently with an injured air, consoled by the comfort of his stomach. Some days later Thutha coaxed out another twenty-five cents from the Damanegama trader, but not another cent did he get after that. The gun was irretrievably gone.

The plight of Gama and Tikkiri at Bingoda was hardly better than that of Kaira and Thutha at Idanbowa. Privation had only tended to increase Gama's natural irritability. And if open rupture between him and Tikkiri was avoided, it was due to the latter's good sense. When Tikkiri's patience with Gama was strained to breaking point, he merely withdrew, knowing it would never do for both to lose their tempers at the same time.

It happened more than once that Gama, angered with his son-in-law, would lead his daughter away, saying, ' She's mine. I am taking her back'. Tikkiri would not obstruct him then, but would bide his time. Later he would walk quietly to Gama's hut, and say to his wife, 'Come home and cook my food'. If fear of her father made her hesitate he would pick up a stick and approach her saying, 'Are you coming, or shall I have to thrash you?' And Gama would know better than to interfere.

Gama's stocks of kurakkan and maize were rapidly dwindling,

and he was moodily contemplating the number of mouths he had to feed. One of his two wives had died, and the one left had three children. Punchi and her little girl were seated idly staring into vacancy.

'What are you doing, seated there like owls, instead of going into the chena and finding food?'

'What is there to find?' said Punchi. 'I plucked the last batu yesterday. There's not enough there to feed a hare.'

This angered Gama.

'Get out of my house,' he said. 'Take the girl and go wherever you like.'

'Where can I go?'

'You have a brother, go to him—or to a Sinhalese house; you are always welcome with them.'

'Why should I do that, the child is yours.'

'Mine indeed!' scoffed Gama. 'Who can say whose it is? You are free enough with your love. Get away. Not another morsel of food will I give you.' But Punchi was a good girl and had spoken the truth and Gama knew it.

So, like Hagar and Ishmael, tearfully they left Bingoda. Three days later, having failed to find a home they came once more to the house of the headman of Kuruntuwinne who mercifully took them in.

The food stocks of Gama and Tikkiri were soon exhausted, and they were driven to the jungle for sustenance. Sturdy though they were they found it very hard for lack of ammunition to support themselves. Were it not for their two dogs, Boriya and Shimmy, whom they valued as their lives, all their jungle craft would have availed them little.

Hunting separately they gradually exhausted all the smaller animals in the neighbourhood and were driven farther and farther abroad for food. Then they had recourse to yams—even Gama, who despised the collecting of yams as woman's work. So baked was the ground that they had to water it to permit digging and water was very scarce. Their hands became calloused and gnarled, and their nails worn to the quick. One by one their precious axes and choppers were pawned for food, until only

their two guns were left—these, though now useless, they would never part with except in the direst straits.

Tikkiri's wife, Heen Kalu, was nearing her confinement. She was so weak that she could hardly move. Tikkiri went to Damanagama and wheedled out of the *boutique-keeper* two rupees' worth of ammunition on the promise of a portion of any animal shot.

Watching from a trestle on a tree the next night, Tikkiri shot a pig. He had singed the carcass and was cutting it up at dawn when four Sinhalese, attracted by the sound of the shot at night, gathered round.

Tikkiri said: T i l give each of you a portion and the headman his usual cut of the hind quarter, but not another piece will anyone get who comes after this.'

Soon five other men arrived whom Tikkiri ignored. But even so all that remained to him of that emaciated pig was only a rupee's worth of flesh, as he learnt when giving Gama his share and keeping only the bones for himself, he took the rest of it to the Damanegama trader in reduction of his debt.

' We'll see how many animals he will shoot after this,' Tikkiri had heard one of the disgruntled men mutter as he left them. ' We must teach those two a lesson,' said another. ' Since Tikkiri came to live with Gama they are not afraid of us.'

That night they went to Padadeniya Appuhamy, a famous devil priest. Asking them to get him a fragment of the flesh of the pig Tikkiri had killed, he bound it round tightly with two kinds of bast, and inserted it into a section of bamboo, bunging up the ends with wads of rag. Then for hours he uttered dreadful incantations over the contraption and hung it to smoke over a fire. This was the *hira distiya,* and as long as it lasted Tikkiri would not be able to hit a thing; his gun might even burst and wound or kill him.

After that Tikkiri fired off seven pounds of powder and shot, increasing his debt to the trader to six rupees, without killing a single creature. Then the gun's nipple snapped and he knew that it was under a curse and unsafe to use.

He paid a devil priest fifty cents to cut lemons and avert the

spell, to no avail. Driven to desperation, he told Gama he would complain to the Government Agent, when he next came to Bibile, of the way the Sinhalese were harassing the poor Veddas. This reached the ears of the evil-doers. The old fear of the vindictiveness of Tikkiri and his family returned and they asked Gama to tell Tikkiri not to bear them a grudge, as the *distiya* had been destroyed; and would he shoot again and see what happened?

The very next day Tikkiri with his last shot bagged a sambhur doe. That flesh used with care lasted a week and restored a little strength to his ailing wife. But not another load of ammunition could he obtain from the trader to whom he was now heavily in debt. Tikkiri was at his wits' end to provide his wife with the nourishment she needed.

Seeking far and wide, he dug her gonala yams till his fingers bled. If ever he caught a monitor or came by a honeycomb, he gave it all to her. He had kept one implement he treasured, a hoe that I had given him. This he now pawned for fifty cents and bought his wife two measures of rice which lasted her five days. Then by great good fortune Gama killed a pig with a last load of ammunition he had put by. That might have tided them over the crisis, but the animal was lean and Gama was too afraid of the Sinhalese to keep it all for themselves, despite Tikkiri's dissuasions. But even Gama, as he grudgingly distributed the precious flesh among those who had gathered there like hawks, said to one who twitted him on his niggardliness: 'The Moors eat our brains. You Sinhalese are no better. You always take what we have. What do you give us?'

' Won't we give you, if we have enough for ourselves,' whined one.

'So you say,' retorted Gama. 'Look at your condition and look at ours,' pinching up a fold of skin from his abdomen. * You may put your charm on me and kill me. Then I can do nothing. But if a child of mine should die, I'll know what to do to you.'

'Don't be afraid, Gama, brother,' conciliated the man. 'Will we do a thing like that to you?'

Eleven short lengths of dried flesh was Tikkiri's share of that

pig. This, as it was harsh fare for a girl with child, he hurried off with to Maha Oya, twenty miles away. Sixty cents was all its barter value, with which he bought three measures of rice and a single tobacco leaf to blunt his hunger. He reached home at dusk the following day. Gama, who was anxiously watching the path along which Tikkiri would come, rose eagerly at sight of him.

'I've been waiting for you all day,' he said excitedly. 'The child was born alive, but died soon after. Its spirit will haunt us. A small human being or a big one is the same. How can we stay here? You must take it away and bury it now,'

' It's too late to do that,' said Tikkiri huskily. He entered the hut where his girl-wife lay with her dead infant beside her. He sat down and stroked her tenderly, his heart too full for words, while Gama's wife prepared her some gruel with the rice he had brought. They lay that night, side by side, with their little one—the boy they had hoped for—between them. But Gama, frightened of the infant's wraith, spent sleepless hours outside his hut with his family round him.

While Tikkiri buried his first-born at dawn, far away from the chena boundary as Gama directed, the first raindrops fell.

CHAPTER 31

'THE VEDDAS ARE STARVING'

THERE is that about a second-class resthouse that appeals to the heart of a jungle lover. True, it lacks amenities. Where the second-class resthouse scores over the first is that it is set in quiet, natural surroundings in jungle places. The folk you meet have not the sophistication of town dwellers. Their talk is of the simple essentials of life; when they comment on the weather it is no polite convention but a serious concern on which their lives depend.

Apart from all this the great advantage of a house in the jungle is that you have it to yourself. Your modest lodging is beneath the notice of most motorists. Therefore you may spread yourself out and make yourself abundantly at home.

And spread ourselves my daughter Christine and I did, that New Year weekend of 1939 at the Maha Oya resthouse with all the Veddas around us. As the car approached the Vedda country, meagre plantations devastated first by drought, then by floods, gave some idea of the terrible hardships the jungle folk must be suffering. But it was not until we had seen the pitiful remnant of Veddas, who had travelled twenty-five miles through swollen rivers and marshy jungles to see us and get a little relief, that we realized their truly desperate condition.

Passing Maha Oya a few days previously, I had sent a message to the Veddas that I would be returning there on New Year's Eve and would like to see them. I had speculated that two or three of the men would probably respond if the torrents permitted, but what was my surprise to find eagerly awaiting me almost the entire Vedda population of Bingoda—and that was barely a dozen in all. In tired little groups they had straggled in, clad in filthy rags, looking as if they hadn't had a square meal for months. Well they knew that he who had summoned them would send them back repleted, and every man, woman, and child who could walk had turned up: haggard women with ailing babes,

under-sized children of seven and eight with spleen-bulged abdomens and fever-bright eyes, accompanied by miserable dogs whose bones jutted under their mangy skins.

I greeted them one by one and found it difficult to realize that these folk, so friendly now, had been shy as forest deer when I first met them. Children too weak to cry lay inert on their mother's laps, fumbling at milkless breasts. One wizened mite, seemingly a few months old, was said to be three years old. His mother sat rocking him tirelessly, a look of fateful resignation on her face; his death was spoken of casually as inevitable.

A woman and two children had died recently. Malaria, bronchitis, and starvation were playing sad havoc with them. Their chena had been destroyed by the long drought; there was no grain to barter for powder and shot, and therefore little flesh to eat.

'Tikkiri, where's your wife, Selli?' I asked.

'I left her at Pollebedda where we now live. She is swollen all over and unable to walk. Five months ago I lost my firstborn —such a boy. Next time the mother too may die.'

'Why did you leave Bingoda?'

'Because of Gama's ways.[5]

'What did he do?'

'It's a long story. For the last two years he had been looking after a small herd of cattle for the Bingoda headman, receiving for his services an occasional calf, until in time he had six animals of his own. One of these he gave me for assisting him in the work. When the drought came and he had nothing to eat, Gama exchanged his animals, one by one, for food, until he had none left. Then he took away my beast, saying he had only lent it to me. When a man does a thing like that what can one do but leave him? I put up with a lot from Gama because he gave me his daughter. But this was too much, so I left him and came to Pollebedda.'

'Handuna, where are you now?'

'With us at Nilobe,' said a villager. 'He came to us starving. He's all right now.'

'Is Heen Thuthi with you?'

Handuna shamefacedly shook his head.

'Where are Kaira and his wife?'

'They are too weak to come,' Tikkiri answered. 'Even if they have the food they haven't the strength to eat it.'

'And Gama, where is he?' I asked. 'He has never failed to meet me yet. Didn't he know I was coming?'

' I tried to take him word,' said Tikkiri, ' but the rivers were flooded and I failed.'

'That's a lie.' The voice came from behind the low wall of the living-room they occupied, which Gama had quietly approached unnoticed. ' I f that was so, how then am I here? There was water only up to my waist in both rivers. The truth is they didn't want me to come; but I heard from others.'

He slouched in sulkily and sat down, tired out with the great haste he had made.

The sobering effect of Gama's presence was remarkable. After a long interval of silence, Tikkiri rose and deferentially offered him the betel and tobacco that I had given them. Thutha and Handuna dutifully did likewise. Gama was still their chief. He accepted their gifts with a dignified coldness.

'Pity you didn't come earlier, Gama, before I gave away the presents I brought,' I said.

'I know you won't send me away empty-handed,' he complacently remarked. ' There must be something for me in the box.'

'They tell me you are alone in Bingoda now.'

'What's to be done? There's no food for all there; not enough even for ourselves. But for my bitch we would be dead.'

'Boriya?'

'Yes.'

'Tikkiri, where's your dog, Shimmy?'

'Also with me,' Gama said, and then chuckled; 'Aiyo, now look at that! Our Hura remembers even the names of our dogs. Anay, but for him where would we be?'

'Then you have no dog now, Tikkiri?'

' I have a pup, a beautiful one, speckled black and white in the body, with all four legs white.'

'Since you have no ammunition don't you set deadfalls?'

' We do, but the animals have become cunning,' replied Tikkiri. 'There are no lizards left; we have eaten them all. Monkeys are too clever to fall into those traps.'

He showed his nails and those of the others, broken and worn, from digging yams.

'Is there no food at all in your chena?'

'None whatever. The drought killed all our maize and kurakkan.'

'Did you stockade your chena?'

'We Veddas never do,' said Gama.

'Was no rice distributed to you by Government, as to the other villagers during the time of drought?'

'We saw none of it,' Gama said.

'When I heard that rice was being given free at Bibile,' Tikkiri remarked, 'I went the thirty-five miles to get it. They gave me twelve measures for Gama and me, and the headman took one measure from each of our shares. What was left of my share by the time I got back after eating a little to allay my hunger was barely three measures, which didn't last my wife and me two days. What's the good of going all that way for such a little?'

'How do you get food, Handuna?'

'I get plenty of flesh at Nilobe.'

'What flesh?'

'Very often they kill sambhur.'

'Why can't you get meat if you have two or three men with guns and dogs?' said Gama wistfully.

'As food is so difficult to come by where you now are, Gama, why don't you go closer to a village like the others?'

'When I leave Bingoda that will be the end of me.[5]

They ate ravenously whatever was given them, from rice to figs. Handuna crunched green papaw with gusto and gulped great handfuls of coconut scrapings from which the milk had been squeezed for curry.

Little Gomba of seven had now shrunk to the size of a child of four. Asked who his father was, he replied,' I have no father'.

'Your mother, which one is she?'

He pointed to the woman with the desperately sick child. And there sat his wizened six-year-old brother, whom his mother had given to sonless Gama for a piece of cloth. But both those children had done that terrible journey in a day and a half. Next morning their spindly little legs would take them back to the jungle. How could they survive the ordeal?

Gomba shadowed Christine wherever she went.

He crossed his skinny arms over his shoulders and shivered. ' I am cold,' he said.

He snuggled into the scrap of cloth she wrapped him in.

Their stomachs filled to repletion, laden with food, the Veddas returned to their homes, but what they were given did not last them long. Handuna spent fifty cents on fifty areca-nuts. Thutha, labouring under his load of rice, was waylaid by a trader to whom he owed twenty-five cents and was relieved of the lot. The half bushel of kurakkan sent to Kaira was finished in a couple of days. Morning, noon, and night that small family of three ate pittu, talape, roti, as they had never eaten before.

Back in town, Christine wrote an article to the press entitled, 'The Veddas are Starving', describing what she had seen. It ended with:

I understand that the Government undertook to relieve the hard lot of these Veddas with kurakkan, rice, and salt, at the beginning of the dry months; but no such relief has reached them. And now they have no grain to sow for the coming year. God help them.

Villagers have had relief from Government in those famished months. But what provision against want have these forgotten Veddas had, who suffered illness without medicine, famine as a condition of existence, and cold with a few inches of rag? To us dwellers of the towns who do not know the meaning of the word want, to look at those gaunt faces of young and old, is to realize how utterly failing we are in our duty towards that remnant of mankind struggling so bravely against insuperable odds. We, whose consciences have been stirred in the interests of our dwindling fauna and provided them with sanctuaries, should surely do something for the Veddas.

But not a ripple stirred in the official conscience.

CHAPTER 32

BINGODA—THE LAST PHASE

BINGODA as the home of the Veddas had been fast declining. In previous years, however often Gama's harshness scattered his community, they tended to return to him, if only for a season But latterly they had kept altogether away.

Tikkiri, after his estrangement over the cattle episode, had returned once more to Gama's chena, Pollebedda proving too civilized for him. But he was not happy. For one thing, his sinister reputation embittered his relations with the Sinhalese; and for another Gama was increasingly hard to get on with, owing to his confirmed addiction to ganja.

For a couple of years following the police raids on Tissahamy's strongholds, Gama had been scared out of his ganja-growing habit. But when official incursions into those jungles had petered out after repeated failures, Gama, encouraged by the example of the Sinhalese, resumed his illicit practice. A plot of a hundred to a hundred and fifty ganja plants was quite enough to keep a family in comfort. A single luxuriant plant would yield, in three crops, up to twelve pounds of saleable ganja. Gama followed the usual practice of sowing his seed with the first rains of September, and collecting in the sixth month the lower branches of the plant with some of the flowers and seeds: in the eighth or ninth month (about April) cuttings with less flowers and more seed; and lastly in the tenth or twelfth month the best portion of all, the unfertilized crown of the female plant, resembling a ball of matted hair.

The local Sinhalese traders, themselves ganja-growers, lent money or goods on a man's prospective crop and thus secured a lien on it, purchasing it at fifty or seventy-five cents a pound. Moors from Kattankudi and Eravur would camp on the Rambukkan when the ganja harvests were due and the growers of Damanegama, Kuruntuwinne and other hamlets would sell their crops for from five to even twelve rupees a pound according to

the harvests. If the commodity was dried, bundled in sacks and cached in a cave for about a year, awaiting a good market, it might secure as much as twenty rupees a pound. This is vast wealth in the Vanni, and well worth the small risk attached to the contraband. Gama, being but a simple Vedda, was quite content with the smaller gains, and not knowing the value of money was cheated even of this. His main concern with ganja growing, however, was to provide for his own use. An average ganja addict was satisfied with about three smokes a day. Gama had now reached a stage when he required ten or twelve and his demoralization was progressing rapidly.

Moistening an admixture of dried ganja and chopped tobacco on his palm, he would roll up the bolus between thumb and fingers and squeeze out the juice to expel the bitterness. He would then wrap this up in a piece of tobacco leaf like a cigarette, slice it with an areca-nut cutter and pack the fragments into the wider end of a funnel fashioned of a plantain or opulu leaf. On this he would place a live ember; gripping the funnel in the cleft between thumb and index finger, he would dip its narrow end in a small vessel of water, the mouth of which he sealed with the rest of his palm; then, applying his lips to a narrow space between the edge of the vessel and border of his thumb, he would suck up the bubbling fumes. A few deep inhalations, and he would lie back, his eyes glowing, his chest dry, his brain bemused with airy visions. Hardly did the effects of one smoke wear away than he craved for another.

Sharing a common chena with Tikkiri, it can well be imagined that Gama's part in cultivating it was small, his slothfulness being counterbalanced by Tikkiri's untiring diligence. Tikkiri's dream had always been to settle down one day in his old home at Embillene, with its isolation and good hunting. For the present the nearer he got to it the better. So when the time came in May for them to look about for a new chena, Tikkiri prevailed on Gama to join him in clearing a plot within a couple of miles of Embillene.

For ten days they worked hard, assisted by Handuna, felling the trees of the virginal jungle. Towards the end of June they

fired the clearing and watched the great blaze hiss and crackle in the blinding sun. Early in September the real work of the chena began: the building of the bark and wattle shacks, the stockading around with charred logs, the clearing up of the land leaving only the skeletons of vast trees that had withstood the ravages of the fire, scattered about like ghosts to renew their life with the coming rains.They had now only to sow their crops of manioc, kurakkan, maize, green gram, beans, chillies and melons—and wait and dream of what the year would bring.

But as the time for abandoning Bingoda drew near, Gama's heart was heavy: not only because of his long association with the place, but also owing to the isolation of his new home.

For him, as for all jungle dwellers, accident and illness implied the ill-will of malignant spirits necessitating exorcisms. All Gama knew of those arts were the simple Vedda ceremonies—the *adaku* and *kirikoraha*—which, while they served for the spirits of the newly dead and a few other wood gods, availed but little against the formidable hierarchy of demons which only the most skilled of the Sinhalese devil priests could bind and subdue, by rites far more spectacular and fearsome than the Veddas could ever aspire to.

What worried Gama was that he would not know whom to go to in case of illness if he cut himself off from the Sinhalese. He did think of asking Kaluwinne Banda, a clever exorcizer, to settle down with them in their new chena. But being a Sinhalese this man had no right to land allocated to Veddas, and his presence there would invite trouble with the headman.

A prey to such misgivings, Gama accompanied Tikkiri to Damanegama to collect seeds for sowing. The trader-headman there called Gama aside and said to him: ' We've heard of your new clearing. If you go there you'll have trouble with Tissahamy and so will we. We'll have to petition against you and Tikkiri, saying you are going there to help that murderer.'

That was all that was needed to make Gama abandon their project, and Tikkiri had no alternative but to do likewise. Gama upbraided Tikkiri for having brought him to that pass, frittering away their time uselessly, leaving them with the

prospect of starvation in the coming year. They nearly came to blows.

The long drought was nearly at an end and there was little time before the imminent rains to fell trees and burn a new plot. The work would have to be done quickly by many hands if it was to be done at all.

So following his usual technique Gama sought out Kaira, Thutha, and Handuna, scattered about the Sinhalese holdings and invited them to go hunting with him. Hurrying through this in a couple of days he inveigled them into helping him and Tikkiri to clear a new chena, promising them full participation. They knew only too well what this meant; but Gama was their chief and they responded to his soft words as usual.

Working hard against time, they had in eight days made a good job of felling, when the Bingoda Headman walked up and contemplated them quizzically.

'What do you think you are doing here?' he asked Gama.

'Clearing a chena, can't you see?' retorted Gama.

'With whose permission?'

'No one's.'

'You have already cleared one chena this year, you can't have another.'

'All my life I have been in Bingoda,' declared Gama. 'If I have no right to a chena in Bingoda, where then am I to have one?' and he carried on with his work.

The headman left in anger. It was not like Gama to set him at defiance and answer him in that manner.

The next day Tikkiri met the headman on his way to Mullagama and asked him where he was going. 'Gama said Bingoda belongs to him,' the man replied. 'I am going to the Moorman's *boutique* to buy paper to write a petition to the Government Agent, asking him whether I or Gama is headman of Bingoda. We'll see whether I don't get him out of Bingoda in three days. You can tell Gama that.'

'You do what you like,' said Tikkiri. And he went back and told Gama what the headman had said. Gama became very angry and blamed Tikkiri for causing this quarrel with the head-

man, who had always been his friend before Tikkiri settled in Bingoda.

A couple of days later the headman asked Tikkiri to help him repair his hut. While Tikkiri was busy thatching the roof with illuk grass, he heard someone come there and say, 'I am going away'. The headman afterwards told him that it was Gama who had left him that message.

Tikkiri returned home that evening to find that Gama had gone away with his family, leaving Tikkiri's wife and infarct only a few weeks old alone in the chena.

Tikkiri stayed on and continued to clear his portion of the new chena. He said to the headman who found him at it: 'Gama may have been frightened away by your threats, but I am going on with this chena. You may beat me if you like, or petition against me. I have got to keep my wife and child alive.'

'I am not angry with you', conciliated the headman, who knew Tikkiri's nature better than to rouse it. Besides, were not Tikkiri's father and brother still alive not very far away?

Tikkiri was seated after his midday meal a few days later when he saw a man and a woman enter Gama's hut close by. Going up he found them to be Gama's wife, Thandi, and the Sinhalese Sarnelis whom Tikkiri knew to be his brother's slayer. They had come to remove what was left of Gama's belongings, and were bundling up stocks of kurakkan and maize that Tikkiri had helped Gama to grow. It was not so much the wholesale removal of these, as the emissary Gama had chosen to accompany his wife, that made Tikkiri's heart seethe with a cold anger. How great, he thought, must be Gama's resentment against him to do a thing like that. He said not a word as he watched them strip the hut bare. Three times he looked at the rice-pounder and then at Sarnelis, but reined himself in and let them get on with their work.

A week afterwards Handuna and a Sinhalese boy came to Bingoda for green gram. Tikkiri gave them a good meal, and having learnt from them that Gama and his family had now settled down at Kaluwinne with the other Veddas, he said to Handuna:' I'll come to see you all as soon as I have finished work

on my chena. Should there be any sickness or sadness among you, do not fail to come and tell me.'

Within the month, Tikkiri, working against time, fired his new clearing, and even as the flames rose, dark clouds and the rumblings of thunder presaged the monsoon. He nursed his fires till late that evening, when the first rain fell. With a talipot leaf over his head he was approaching his hut in the dark, when as he passed through his plaintain grove, he heard unsteady footsteps behind him, as if a blind man were groping his way and stumbling against obstacles. They ceased of a sudden when he was clear of the grove. He thought no more about it until he received a message two days later, saying that Gama had died and that I was coming to Maha Oya the following day.

Taking his wife and child with him, Tikkiri left them at Pollebedda and made all haste to get to Maha Oya to meet me, whom the Veddas had not seen for two years.

CHAPTER 33

PITIYA-HELA

EVER since he left Bingoda Gama had been most unhappy, and the unhappier he became the greater was his resentment against Tikkiri, who, he felt, was the subtle author of his misfortunes. It angered him to think that the man responsible for turning him out of Bingoda was he to whom he had given his daughter.

Life had now become a heavy burden to Gama and ceased to interest him. He sought solace in ganja. Hardly was he out of the stupor of one smoke than he was in the throes of another. He ate less and less. He became more morose and unreasonable than ever. His powerful body slowly weakened. Then he caught a chill which affected his lungs.

Seeing that he was rapidly getting worse, Handuna fetched a medicine man from Damanegama, whose fee for the visit was fifty cents, and for the charmed thread with seven knots he tied round Gama's neck, another twenty-five cents. Having exhausted Gama's money, and with Gama getting worse, Handuna pawned Gama's gun for a rupee, and once more enlisted the man's services. But his mantrams, decoctions, and oils proved unavailing. Gama's fever rose; his lungs, rasped by the fumes of ganja, became congested and he coughed bloody sputum.

In a state of semi-delirium, supported by Handuna and Thutha, Gama was walked the fifteen miles to the Maha Oya Hospital. There he lingered for two weeks, and when Handuna next visited him he would not let him go. Two days later—within two months of leaving Bingoda—he died with his arms on Handuna's shoulders, gasping for breath. Of all this Tikkiri had been left in ignorance.

Distraught by the loss of their Chief, the Veddas, begged that a message be sent to me, and I arrived the next day.

The pitiful little group of Veddas stood before me—Kaira, Thutha and Handuna—and placing their hands on my shoulders

sobbed their distress. This was no time for nursing past grievances; however badly he had treated them, Gama their Chief was dead and they felt like lost children. Echoes of the outer world had reached them but faintly. They knew vaguely that there was a war on. But how far away and what its nature, they could not comprehend, even when the miracles of submarines, the speed of aeroplanes, the guns that spat devastating death, were laboriously explained to them.

'Aiyo,' blurted out Handuna. 'When I heard there was fighting, I wept and wept, thinking our Hudu Hura would be killed and we should never see him again. Then one dawn we were waked by a frightening sound in the sky—br-br-br-br, and looking up I saw a thing like a great bird with fire cages in front and behind, high up in the sky, and I thought our Hudu Hura was coming to see us, because he had told us of those things before, and I shouted and waved to show him where I was—but the great bird passed on and I was sad.'

He paused and then resumed: 'Anay, if it were not for you where would we be? Everything we have is what you have given us: these cloths, these axes, these necklaces and bangles our women and children wear. The very thought of you keeps us alive.'

'That's so, that's so,' said Kaira and Thutha, and the women whose feelings seldom found expression in words.

'Sometimes I dream of you,' quietly interposed Tikkiri.

'Shortly before he got very ill, Gama saw you in his sleep,' Handuna said.

'What did he say we were doing?' I asked.

'Going on the old trails as we used to—all of us together.'

Gama's widow, Thandi, came up carrying her child and handing me a bow and arrow, said: 'He made this for you.'

She wished me to go with her to the hospital to collect his belongings, as in his delirium he had given his name as Thutha, and the apothecary would not give them to her without confirmation of his identity. This I did and saw Gama's betel-bag, his sole possession, change hands. All it contained was a tin chunam

In tired little groups they had straggled in

box, an areca-nut cutter I had given him, a crushed betel leaf, a small phial of medicinal powder, and two cents.

And that was the end of the Black Vedda as he was called.

That the death of their Chief was calamitous to the community there could be no doubt. Whatever his shortcomings, he was a figurehead who had held them together. Gama and Bingoda had always been their anchorage, however often his caprice might scatter them. Gama's death caused me great concern for the Veddas. It was therefore not long before I was on the way once more into the Vedda country. With my carriers, headed by Tikkiri, I arrived about noon at Pollebedda, whose sole inhabitants now were Kiri Banda and his small family. Highly honoured by the call, the man treated his visitors as usual to ripe jack-fruit and young coconuts.

His hut had collapsed at one end and I asked him why he did not repair it.

'An elephant did that last night,' he casually remarked.

'Why didn't you shout and drive the animal away?'

'I shouted all right when I saw him in the garden, but that only brought him towards us,' he said ruefully.

'Where were you and your family meanwhile?'

'Crouching in a corner of the hut.'

'Why didn't you use your gun?' I glanced at the ancient muzzle-loader on its sambhur horn rest embedded in the mud wall.

'What's the good of that without ammunition, which is the price of gold nowadays?'

Resting for lunch in the greenery of the Rambukkan bank a mile or so beyond Pollebedda, we found the Veddas on the farther side in a small cave, Muthakade-galge. They were indeed a sad sight. Many had fever, all seemed starved. Thutha limped on an ulcerated foot profusely besprinkled with the dust of a dried yam, bandaged with a dirty rag.

To see those men, women, and children shovel great gobbets of food into their mouths was to know the measure of their hunger. To watch them warm to kindliness was to realize their need for sympathy.

It was not my intention to take the women and children on this trip. So with only Kaira and Handuna as guides, the party proceeded towards Nuwaragala seven miles away, on the summit of which I meant to spend the night. As we neared the boulder-covered base of that bastion, the jungle assumed a grandeur of its own. Massive lianas, the girth of a man's thigh, sagged ponderously from dizzy pinnacles, widely spiralled where they had strangled and killed the trees by which they climbed. Nowhere were boles mightier than here—the very colossus of them a upas tree whose buttressed roots twisted amidst the boulders binding them into a secure foundation for that majesty of girth and branchless height that rose above us.

Descending to the foot of the hill the following morning, I was surprised to find awaiting me the entire band of women and children we had left behind in the cave, including babies in arms. Somehow they had crawled those seven miles through the bear-infested jungle with no one to protect them. Not a scrap of food did they carry. They knew that the journey from there on would be through boundless jungle, but they were confident that I would not let them starve—which was more than I was, for I had only brought sufficient provisions for myself, the bearers bringing their own. However, there was now no help for it.

Around Nuwaragala there was no dearth of food, the Veddas knowing where to find jack and pineapples. From there we went on to the 'Hole where the Sambhur was Killed' and the Long Cave, and along the elephant track to Wapuran-penela, midway through the gorge, where day and night are full of fear.

At the pass of Meda-moraate-kade, where began the steep descent to the lowland jungles, they interrupted their journey to collect bambara honey. Accompanied only by Tikkiri, Kaira and Handuna, I scaled the escarpment of Pitiya-hela and came abruptly to a small cave on the very brow of the precipice, past which was the hazardous path to the combs. The Veddas were hurrying through, when I stopped them, saying,'Let's rest here for a while'.

' It's not good to do that,' solemnly protested Kaira.

'Why?'

There was no answer. Looking about I glimpsed a globular shape wedged into a crevice where the vault and floor of the cave met. I went down on my knees and dislodged a small human skull; I also found a slender thigh bone and a few ribs, all sheared in places as if by a chisel. I was puzzling over these marks when Tikkiri remarked ' That's a porcupine's work'.

' Was this why you didn't want us to stop here?' I asked Kaira, presenting the skull.

'Yes,' he said. 'We only come this way because there's no other way to the combs, and then we hurry through.'

'What are you afraid of?'

'The spirit.'

'Of this woman?'

'Now how do you know that?' was Kaira's awestruck question.

' So it was a woman, and you knew her. Who was she?'

Kaira hesitated, and then solemnly said: 'A terrible thing happened here when we were young, very long ago. Now that Gama is dead, only I know about it.'

With endless patience, I drew out of Kaira's sluggish mind the halting, disjointed stcry of the death of Kalu, Poromola's wife, and of his fall down the precipice when looking for her. And how, when they had all thought he was lost also, he had returned like a ghost, bearing in his arms the shattered body of his beloved and laid her there. Ever since then, as long as a bone of her remained, they only came to that cave because there was no other way to the honey-combs, and then always hurried through with averted faces.

And now, leaving the hills, we descended to the lowland jungles. We camped at Hungana-ela, a stream-bed within three miles of Embillene, Tikkiri's former home. Here, as at every bivouac in that time of drought, we used the drinking places of wild creatures. In the evenings thirsting bronze-wings would flash down in singles and couples, only to veer off in sudden surprise, and melt into the greenery, waiting to drink. From the surrounding treetops would come the mournful protestations of imperial and green pigeons.

At night the sole precaution against wild animals was a hurri-

cane lantern slung on a pole. And yet the dark was restless and the creatures calling. Faint rustlings would tell of the timid approach of a pangolin; bold shufflings and sniffs that of a bear. Once the sudden crack of a branch revealed that an elephant had stalked up close—the sudden realization of which jerked the cook out of his sleep into the arms of a bearer whose head he tremblingly clutched.

A couple of miles from camp, along the rocky bed of the Hungana-ela, was a pool which Tikkiri said was a haunt of bears. Armed with cine-camera and tripod, I proceeded there that afternoon with Tikkiri. Hastily preparing a hide, we settled down to watch.

Sitting there, alone with the loneliness, silent with the silence, I sensed the fascination and fear of the jungle. To that secluded waterhole anything might come at any time. It was this closeness that filled the place with its sense of awe. To Tikkiri, always the lonely wanderer familiar with such scenes, there was nothing in it. He lay down and dozed. I watched.

Faint twitterings were the first indications that the life around, hushed at our coming, was regaining confidence. Nearer and nearer came the sounds, increasing in volume and variety. Soon all that shy melody of the jungle was to materialize on the naked boughs of a dead tree fallen on the farther side of the pool. Elusive birds that piped tantalizingly from green coverts, where they could not be seen, came out at last and were revealed in their gaudy splendour.

Suddenly there was a lull, a momentary hesitancy; and then a swish of wings, and the pool lay silent and desolate.

The watchers had not heard a sound. What could it be? Only a couple of mongoose and their young. Having quenched their thirst, they disappeared as silently as they had come.

The birds gradually reassembled, and resumed their frolicking. So they went on for a long while, when something which we could not hear drove them into seclusion with even greater precipitancy than before, not to return again.

There was deep stillness. The longer it lasted the tenser it became. About five in the afternoon, with the sun behind the

topmost trees, the tawny, rosetted form of a panther stalked to the pool, sank on its belly and lapped. Tikirri reached for the gun. I restrained him with a look. Not for anything must the sanctity of that pool be broken.

It was twilight when we reached camp to find the Veddas in bad plight. They were seated in disconsolate groups, having had nothing whatever to eat all day. They had now been two weeks in the jungle, having come unprovided with any food whatsoever. I had shared my provisions with them, leaving little enough for the end of the trip.

Hunting had been very difficult on those mountain slopes with the dry leaves rustling underfoot. On previous journeys we had always shot a deer or two; but on this, as so often happens when the need is greatest, we had no luck at all with large animals. And on this day Tikkiri the hunter had been enticed by me to dawdle watching birds when he would much rather have been hunting. Had a deer come to that pool there would have been no question of its sanctity.

My dinner, which was a roasted jungle cock, a pigeon and potatoes, I gave to the Veddas, and was rewarded with the sound of a child's laugh. All night the silence was broken by the heart-rending 'Ah-ahs' of an infant sucking vainly at its fevered mother's milkless breasts. A cigarette tin of diluted Nestle's milk and sugar soothed it at last.

The morning found most of the Veddas seated listlessly on the river-bed bereft of all energy. Tikkiri had left at dawn with the gun. On him their hopes were centred. Handuna had gone in quest of honey. His sister, Punchi, taking her little girl, scrounged as usual on her own. She would be back perhaps with a kanava comb or at least with some edible leaves. They were a grand pair that brother and sister. But most of the women and children just sat and waited—and among them Kaira.

The carriers too had gone out in search of honey, for their provisions were going fast. One of them, a boy of fifteen, who had accompanied Tikkiri from Bingoda, came in later with a gourdful of delicious mee honey.

' Where did you find that?' I asked.

' From a tree near by,' he said, passing on.

Kaira eyed him gloatingly, then turned a grinning face to me and bewailed: 'Cha, that's the comb in the rana tree where we always find honey. We hadn't the time to go and look at it yesterday; and now the Sinhalese have taken what is ours.'

That annoyed me—a Vedda beaten in his own jungles by a Sinhalese. 'You lazy rascal,' I said, 'if you knew that a tree within a few yards of you might have honey, why didn't you go and look? And now you speak as if the honey were taken from you, while that boy had to find it for himself. Even the women do what they can. But there you sit from morning to night expecting food to fall into your lap.'

Kaira wilted like a frightened child, staring forlornly into vacancy. Alas that the last surviving son of Neela, the brother of Poromola, who should have been chief of the clan, should come to such a pass! Kaira embodied a despair that foreboded the doom of his people.

And now behold Tikkiri with two langurs sagging from his carrying-stick. He meant to give one to the Veddas, and the other to the bearers with whom he shared his meals. But seeing the hungry Veddas, especially their children, cluster round him, he gave both animals to the Veddas, and went hungry himself. Fires were lit, and within the hour not a particle of that flesh was left.

That was a fitting finale to their privations; on the morrow they would be at Kaluwinne where manioc and kurakkan could be had in plenty.

Next morning Handuna discovered a bambara comb on a timbiri tree close to camp. To watch him take it was to see a master at work. He clambered up the stout trunk with a smoking torch looped to his elbow and a long vine tied to his waist for drawing up the honey gourd. Halfway up he lost his torch, but that did not worry him in the ieast; with a merry jest he continued his climb. And now he was asprawl on the branch from which hung the massive comb. Fondling it, as it were, he scooped away the clustering masses with smooth unhurried strokes. The Sinhalese, fine jungle men themselves, gasped with wonder at

his coolness in tackling Ceylon's fiercest bees, whose concerted attack might easily have driven him headlong from his perch. Slowly and carefully Handuna collected a full gourd of that honey. With a stick whittled flat like a paper-knife Handuna made a clean job of that comb, escaping with but a single sting on the scalp.

'Handuna's way with bambaras is the way of a man with a woman,' remarked a bearer.

CHAPTER 34

A CHILDHOOD HOME

IN the early morning, sending on the Veddas and carriers to await us at the next camp, and taking only Tikkiri and Kaira with me, I made for the Sitala Wanniya hill. The jungle surrounding the rock was a fastness in which lay up during the day all the marauding creatures of the night. Traces of elephants were plentiful. Growing thickly in the gorges were cane brakes on which the animals had recently fed; there were opulu trees stripped of bark which had been chewed up; the bare roots across the paths were chipped by the animals' tails. Sinister as was that jungle it seemed to become more so as we skirted the long base of the Sitala Wanniya range, atumble with boulders, gashed with gulches and packed with caves, all enshrouded in heavy growth.

The fear that lurked there found sudden expression in the shrill infuriated challenge of an elephant that had scented man. It brought us to an abrupt halt. We were puzzling as to its direction when it came again, fiercer and more impatient than before.

'Aiyo, our children!' moaned Kaira. 'They were going that way. They will all be killed.'

There being no repetition of the sound, we proceeded cautiously. We had gone about a couple of hundred yards when the snap of a branch petrified us and there thundered forth the concerted trumpetings of elephants that had scented man very close. Kaira, trembling all over, was for running madly away. A hand steadied him. We kept deadly still as the herd of half a dozen, including two mothers with young, charged down within a few feet of us, ears fanned out and tails stiff. As the animals swept past trumpeting, Tikkiri hastened their going with two shots and derisive maledictions.

Coming to a plot of level ground we saw, attached to a tender sapling, a great cone-shaped wasps' nest, white and whorled.

We stood watching the wasps enter and leave its single orifice when Kaira remarked, 'This was the old dancing ground'.

'Then the Pihilegoda cave cannot be far,' I said.

'It's a "hoo" sound away.'

Kaira led us up the steep ascent. But finding the long-abandoned cave amidst that enforested labyrinth of tumbled rocks was no easy business. For a good hour we clambered from boulder to boulder and scrambled up rocky faces, hither and thither, up and down, until at last Kaira came to a standstill and owned himself defeated.

'It is a long time since I was here last,[5] he apologized.

'A fine guide you,[5] sneered Tikkiri. 'Had I come this way even once, no matter how long ago, I'd have found the cave.[5]

'It's somewhere here, but it's not to be seen,' said Kaira lamely.

'We know that,' I said. 'But find that cave you must after making us walk from dawn till noon. Here we sit until you discover it and shout to us.[5]

Kaira left disconsolately. He was gone so long we began to fear for him, for his only weapon was an axe and there were many bears about. Repeated shouts evoking no reply, I suggested looking for him.

'Who can say where he has gone?' dissuaded Tikkiri. 'We may miss him and he us. If we stay here he knows where to find us. He undertook to show you the cave, let him do so.[5]

A half-hour later, hearing a' hoo' a little above us, we ascended.

'Have you found it?' we called.

'It's here,[5] came the answer.

'Where are you?[5]

'Here.'

'The fellow is afraid to leave the cave lest it vanish,' remarked Tikkiri.

A struggle over a hump, a squeeze through a crevice and on to a ledge and there we found Kaira before a spacious cave.

'Didn't I say it was somewhere here?' he grinned.

'You certainly did,' agreed Tikkiri. 'But why circle about to find something under your nose?[5]

'The jungle here is very different now from what it used to be.'

The cave was a long commodious one without a drip-ledge. On top of the massive rock that domed it grew an enormous banyan tree whose aerial roots covered the face of the boulder. Clutching one of these with both hands, Kaira braced his feet against the rock and walked up, moving hand over hand.

'This was how we climbed to the top when we were boys,' he said. ' It was here we lived when I was young—I and my brothers, Poromola, who was killed by a bear, and Vela, Thutha's father; and those others now dead, our father Neela, and Gombira, whose children are Punchi and Handuna. That flat ground at the foot of the rock where we saw the wasps' nest was our dancing place, as I told you. This was the rock on which we children stuck lumps of mud and played at taking bambara combs.'

All of which was a long speech for the usually monosyllabic Kaira, and deeply interesting to me who now learnt for the first time that the Veddas of Bingoda and Sitala Wanniya were one. I settled down to a patient questionnaire, ruffling Kaira's dull wits, and coaxing to light the life story of the Veddas of all that terrain. In this I was helped by Tikkiri who, having heard much from his father regarding the older Veddas was able to assist in piecing together Kaira's disjointed fragments into a coherent whole.

The Pihilegoda cave, it appeared, was not occupied by the Veddas throughout the year, there being no source of water nearby, but only during the rainy season—September to January. They collected into a gourd, always placed there for the purpose, the trickle of water that came into the cave through a rift in the dome.

When the rains were over, three or four of the families would climb to the wind-swept Galapita cave on top of the hill, where there was a small water-hole. When this was exhausted they would go to the Gorakana cave near Pollebedda, and thence from cave to cave, as we have followed them, to Nuwaragala—to return once more with the onset of the monsoon to their Pihilegoda refuge. That was the Vedda cycle in those days.

'How old were you, Kaira, when you left this cave for the last time?'

'So high,' he said, indicating the stature of a child of six.

'No wonder then you had such difficulty in finding it today.'

'That's so. The jungle has become strange, but we don't forget.'

'I don't know so much about that', Tikkiri wryly remarked, idly flicking out an ant-lion larva from its pit.

'Those were the creatures we played with as children,' smiled Kaira.

'What did you do?'

He bent down, and gently blew into a hollow cone on the smooth sand and made circles round it with his finger, crooning: 'Little creature nicely dance. Nicely dance, little creature.' And so it did in quaint backward jerks. We had awakened those memories of childhood, but we soon had to go down again leaving that old home of the Veddas to the panther and the bear.

That evening we came to Kaluwinne where we found the old cripple, Gamandi, brother of Tissahamy, Tikkiri's uncle. Surrounding his shack was a two-acre block of manioc utterly devastated by elephants.

'When did that happen?' I asked.

'They were here the last two nights,' Gamandi replied.

'Why don't you shout and drive them away when they come?'

He smiled disdainfully. 'They are not afraid of men.'

'What then do you do? You are only a cripple, and have only your wife and child.'

'What is there to do but crouch inside the hut and keep still.'

'And let them eat your manioc?'

'Won't you stay here the night and shoot one of those elephants?' Gamandi asked.

'We had two shots at them this morning. They won't worry you tonight at least.'

'Won't they? You don't know those elephants. Those shots will only make them angrier.'

'Well, we must be going now.'

'Whereto?'

'The Rambukkan river/

'Then you should hurry. It's getting dark. Be careful. The elephants are everywhere.'

The truth of these words was evident when we reached the dry river-bed where the Veddas and carriers awaited us. The place seemed a veritable elephant promenade; the sand had been stamped flat, the islets of havan grass plentifully chewed up and drinking-holes kicked out by the animals' forefeet were in evidence every few hundred yards. To judge by the spoor, these water-holes had served for the deer too, who cannot dig for themselves. But bear and porcupine had scratched out pits of their own. That being the only source of water we had no choice but to camp there on the open river-bed. All that night we could hear the pitiful whimperings of the sick child with us and its mother's untiring lullaby:

Ro-ro-ro-ro little one,
Go to sleep, my little one,
Sleep is falling now.

Towards dawn the tired voice ceased. The mother awoke later to find herself hugging a corpse. It was evident that if something were not done for these Veddas, and quickly, they would all soon die.

'How about Tikkiri for your chief?' I suggested. 'He is young, it is true; but he is very capable. And now he's one of you, being married to Gama's daughter. He could teach you to cultivate chenas.'

' There's no one else,' they agreed.

'What do you say, Tikkiri? Can you hold them together?'

Tikkiri spat out his quid, looked at them unenthusiastically, and commented: 'You can see the sort of people these are. Can one depend on any of them to do a job? Kaira is always sick. Thutha can only sulk or grin, Handuna can never stay in one place.'

'If you don't help them, no one else will. Can't you take them on your chena?'

'If they are willing I shall try, because you ask me.'

'Well spoken, Tikkiri.'

'But they mustn't come to me now,' he hastily added. 'There isn't enough food for the twelve of them on my chena. They must fend for themselves for another month until my crops ripen, and it's time to start a new clearing. I'll call for them then.'

Reaching Maha Oya, I took Tikkiri and Thutha in the car to Padiyatalawa, where I purchased "them a good stock of provisions, and for each of the four men, an axe, a chopper, and a knife. Tikkiri lingered over the business of selection like a connoisseur; he flicked the steel with his finger, discarding those that did not ring true. When everything had been purchased, including ammunition for Tikkiri's gun, he still loitered.

'What more do you want?' I asked.

His answer was to inquire diffidently of the vendor the price of a cheap tin trunk and an umbrella.

'What do you want things like that for?'

' I like them.'

' He never comes here but he asks me the price of those two things,' interposed the Moor.

Much against my inclination I let Tikkiri have them. From the way he carried them it was evident that he prized them more for the status they imparted than for their utility. Now he could hold his head as high as any headman.

CHAPTER 35

A SETTLEMENT

SEVEN months after I had parted from the Veddas at the Rambukkan river, I returned to see how they fared. I had failed to secure Government support for a scheme I had put forward[1] and felt that I had saddled Tikkiri with an impossible task. Without regular supplies of food while chenas were in the making, it would be impossible to carry on the work. Just that little help that was so necessary, Government had denied them.

Arriving at Maha Oya, hoping against hope, I was not surprised to learn that most of the Veddas had settled in a Sinhalese chena close to the high road. The only folk now left at Bingoda were Tikkiri and his wife and Gama's widow, Thandi, with her infant, all in a single hut.

'How did this happen?' I asked my Sinhalese informant.

' The Veddas will tell you themselves, if you will come with me to my chena where they now are,' said the man. 'They all came to Maha Oya starving, we couldn't let them die. Someone had to look after them.'

Turning off the road we took the jungle path that led to the chena two miles away. A boy with a parrot perched on a stick, which he shouldered like a gun, joined us. He offered the bird for a rupee.

'I would buy it if it were a grackle,' I said. 'The one I had has just died.'

' That's owing to the evil eye,' sagely declared the boy. ' When those birds are taken from the nest they should be fed on a piece of pork to make them unclean and keep off the evil eye. Otherwise they die of fits.'

He beguiled the journey with more ornithological wisdom which only ceased with our arrival at the chena. Comfortably settled in the owner's hut among his family were Kaira and Handi

[1] **Sec Appendix.**

with their daughter, Heen Thuthi. Punchi was there, but there was no sign of her brother Handuna, Heen Thuthi's husband.

' Where's Handuna, Heen Thuthi, has he left you as usual?' I asked.

The frail girl, who was obviously pregnant, looked up at me and her eyes filled with tears more eloquent than words. Then she bowed before me with clasped hands, saying nothing. An inquiring look at Kaira evoked the cryptic reply,' He's elsewhere'.

' Never mind, we'll go into that another time,' I said.

I had never seen the Veddas so well fed and contented as now. The extensive chena shared by half a dozen Sinhalese families, living in huts on their separate contiguous allotments, was luxuriant with manioc and maize. In a shack of his own, close to another family, was Thutha, his loft well stocked with maize cobs he had earned.

Accompanied by Thutha and the owner of that plot, a thick-set, dour-faced Sinhalese, I returned to where the other Veddas were.

The arrival of this man at his neighbour's chena loosened the tongue of the latter's wife. Something seemed very amiss.

'What's all this about?' I inquired of the woman.

' Ask him,' she snapped, darting a vicious glance at the man.

He made a gesture of mystified indifference.

'Yes, he knows nothing about it,' was the sarcastic retort. ' Who then came here and shot that dog not an hour ago?'

There, a few yards away among the manioc, lay a fine brown dog peppered with a charge of shot in the chest.

'Why can't I shoot my dog if I want to?' sulked the man.

' Why don't you take it away then and bury it, instead of leaving it to rot near our hut?'

'I'll do it in my own time, not at that creature's bidding.'

' Yes, I can see you doing it,' she scoffed.

'Cha, why did you shoot so fine an animal?' I asked.

'Because it was always going to other people's houses and breaking their pots and pans and causing mischief.'

'The only place that poor animal used to come was here to play with our bitches,' said the woman. 'It did no harm to any-

one and no one complained. It was his evil nature that made him shoot it.'

' Why should my dog be more in other people's houses than mine? The only time it used to come home was at night for food.' The man's anger, that had been smouldering, now flared up, and he shouted gloweringly: ' Woman, that vile tongue of yours will land you in a serious mess one of these days.'

Realizing that it was my interference that had set these two at each other, and fearing worse to come, I created a diversion by showing an interest in a beautiful litter of pied pups, kennelled with their mother, in a hollow tree stump, roofed with slats.

' They are mine,' Kaira said proudly. ' She was the last bitch left to us.'

Taking a seat among the Veddas, I asked:' What happened to you after I left you last time? I thought you would all be nicely settled down by now with Tikkiri at Bingoda in a chena of your own.'

'Nothing came of that.' It was Thutha who took up the story. 'When you left us at the end of our last trip, Tikkiri and I, loaded with the presents you gave us, returned to the river where the others waited. Tikkiri told us all to go and stay somewhere else until he came to fetch us, because, as he told you, there wasn't food enough for us on his chena. He took with him only Gama's wife and child. We agreed to wait for him at the Balana cave. So there we went and stayed many days, living on yams and lizards and honey. But food was very hard to find and we were always hungry. We became weaker and weaker; and still Tikkiri didn't come. One by one all our dogs died, except that bitch. Fearing our turn would come next, we left the cave and cut across the jungle to Pullumailai, and then along the high road to Maha Oya.'

'How long did that take?'

Thutha thought a while and held up three fingers.

' So many days. We were too weak to walk fast, especially the children.'

'Did you not find any food on the way?'

' Nothing at all, until I saw a mee comb on a tree by the road-

They had all gone, leaving Kaira and Handi alone

side. We ate only the flowers and the grubs, and chewed the wax. The honey we gave to a man and got some manioc yams which we ate raw, only a mouthful or two for each. Then we met the hospital man [apothecary] going past in a bullock cart. Seeing our state, he felt sorry for us and gave Kaira twenty-five cents, and me ten cents, and told us to buy some food and go on and wait at his house until he returned in the evening. We did that, and he kept us there some days and fed us well until our strength returned. Then Heen Banda, who brought you here, saw us and invited us to his chena, where we have been ever since.'

'That was good of you, Heen Banda,' I said, turning to the little man.

'What else could one do?' said he. 'We couldn't let them starve and die. You should have seen their state when they came, just skin and bone.'

'I have never known them look so well as now.'

'We thought you would be pleased,' he smiled.

That afternoon I took the Veddas over to the resthouse. While the women cooked in the stables, the men sat round me in the garden. Among them was Poromola Saka, an ebon-black, unpleasant-looking fellow. Originally from Hinimidurawa, he had lived for some years at Bingoda where I had met him, but always apart from the other Veddas. Recently he had settled down at Maha Oya with his wife and five children, the eldest a girl of twelve whom he intended marrying to a Sinhalese as soon as she came of age.

I turned to Kaira: 'Now tell me what has happened to Handuna.'

Kaira was silent and wistful. But a wry smile twisted Poromola Saka's ugly countenance.

' You tell me,' I invited.

'He is at Modagolla, in the house of the headman, Heen Appu, two miles off the sixty-sixth mile post,' Poromola Saka replied.

'But why hasn't he come to see me, as he always does?'

'Because they won't let him,' he maliciously sniggered.

This headman, Heen Appu, was a tall man of fifty-five years, with a massive head and domed forehead. Though to all appear-

ances a Sinhalese, that he was of Vedda blood was manifest in his sparse beard, his knowledge of the Vedda patois (a distorted Sinhalese now rarely used by the Veddas except when on show), the bow and arrows he always kept but seldom used, and his proficiency in Vedda rites.

In a small clearing close to his hut was his sylvan temple, with its implanted stake supporting bundles of leafy twigs. Round this he would dance to the NewSpirits, a sheaf in each hand which he waved about him, tossing his head and swaying his body in rhythmic contortions until he worked himself to a frenzied climax and fell in a swoon. Well versed was he in these and other occult arts, and was respected and feared by both Sinhalese and Veddas. Even more remarkable was his wife, a spare, wiry woman, jacketed like a Sinhalese. She was a fearless huntress, a veritable Diana of the jungle; many were the deer, bear, and leopard, bayed by her dogs, that had fallen to her muzzle-loader or only her axe. Often she hunted alone. Such was the couple who seemed to have bewitched poor Handuna.

'But why won't they let Handuna see me?' I puzzled.

'Because they fear to lose him,' Poromola Saka sniggered.

'Are they as bad as all that?'

* How bad, I'll tell you. . . . When I first came to these parts with my wife and five children some months ago, seeking a new home, that woman said to me: "I'll give you a coconut tree and brand a calf with your name, if you will stay here and work for us." She spoke so kindly, as also did her husband who is a good man, that I built a hut on their chena for ourselves, and tended their cattle and worked for them in many ways. All I got in return was barely enough kurakkan and maize to keep me and my family alive. Though I worked nine months for them, I got neither coconut tree nor branded calf.'

'What do you a Vedda know of nine months?'

With an artful smile Poromola Saka unstrung his betel pouch and withdrew from it a length of bast with nine well-spaced knots and held it up, saying: 'That's the number of months I worked for them.'

'Well, how did you come to leave them?'

With his hideous countenance keyed to his lugubrious tale, he proceeded: 'Modagolla gave a white cow to the Kallodai temple, the priest of which was his brother. Some time later that cow strayed back to the chena and I tied it. The priest searched for her and discovered what I had done. He scolded me for stealing his cow and left saying that he would place a curse on me, and that for every coconut he broke in the temple an animal under my care would die. Many days did not pass before three of the cattle I tended for Modagolla died. Then another was lost, and I looked everywhere for it and found it at last one evening lying with its back broken far away in the jungle. Though the place teemed with elephants and bears, I watched beside the animal all night. In the morning I got help and brought the cow back. Then Modagolla's wife scolded me in filthy language, as she always did, and drove us all out of their land, saying that owing to my neglect all their cattle were dying.' His face assumed an air of abysmal injury.

'Where are you living now?'

'Not far from here, in a small hut I built close to a Sinhalese chena on which I work.'

'Why don't you cultivate a chena of your own instead of always working for others?'

'Where have I the implements for that? Even this axe I carry isn't mine.'

'Don't you earn any money for the work you do?'

'That's a thing we never see.'

'Well now, what about Handuna?'

'Kaira can tell you more about him than I can.'

Kaira, for whom silence was happiness, assumed an embarrassed solemnity. However, by dint of much persuasion his mind started to work.

Handuna and he had gone one day to Modagolla's chena. The man and his wife welcomed and fed them. They suggested that Kaira should bring over his family, including his son-in-law, Handuna, and occupy the vacant half of their hut. This they did the following day. Soon it became apparent that they all had to work hard for their living; and however much they toiled they

were incessantly scolded by Modagolla's wife—which was not surprising where the sluggish Kaira and Handi were concerned, but quite undeserved in the case of Heen Thuthi, who, though pregnant, was made to drudge unmercifully. Indeed she seemed to be marked out for special persecution by the woman. The poor thing wilted under the strain, and after a few weeks collapsed, with the result that she and her parents were turned out of the house, but not Handuna, to whom the woman had taken a fancy. She and he would often go out hunting together while her husband worked on the chena.

' Didn't the man object?' I asked.

'He didn't seem to mind.'

'Then there could not have been anything wrong in it.'

' She's not a good woman,' Kaira declared.

'How do you know?'

Kaira's expression assumed gravity and he sidled up to me and confided. ' She used to go out hunting with us men. When we got benighted she and her husband would lie apart from the rest of us. As soon as he was asleep she would creep away and come and lie beside each of us in turn, and afterwards go quietly back to her husband. She's a bad woman.'

Kaira lowered his voice to an awesome whisper: * She funnels leaves.'

'What's that?'

'When she kills any animal, the sight of its blood sends her mad, and she dances round it until she falls in a swoon. Then she cuts open the animal's chest, plucks out the heart, and pours the blood into a funnelled kenda or mora leaf. She drinks some of the blood, the remainder she places on a spread of leaves as an offering to the spirits.'

'One day her husband will catch them together, and beat Handuna and drive him out,' Poromola Saka chuckled maliciously.

'Perhaps that's what happened to you?'

Poromola's silence was non-committal.

That evening I had all the Veddas, men, women, afod children, around me.

'Now what about your future?' I asked. 'Are you content to remain where you are?'

' We have plenty of food now. We cannot say how it will be in the lean months/ Thutha observed.

'You can cultivate your own chena. Heen Banda here will teach you how to do it.'

' Our home is in the jungles, not here/ Punchi said wistfully.

' Our caves and river-beds for us,' and Kaira's eyes glinted.

'If we stay here much longer by the high road what sort of Veddas will we be?' sniffed Punchi.

'We must have flesh and honey. Kurakkan and maize and leaves, day after day, are not enough/ Thutha added.

'Are there no monitor lizards here?' I asked.

'We ate them all.'

'Honey?'

'What honey can there be with all these people about? Our jungles for that.'

' But there you starved,' I reminded them.

Their silence signified there was no denying it.

' Why don't you all band together and cultivate a chena of your own instead of always working for others?' I turned to Poromola Saka, who seemed the most competent of the lot.

' I am all right where I am,' he declared.

'Why do you always live apart from the other Veddas?'

'Veddas can never be together without quarrelling. See how it always was with these,' he said. ' They only came together to scatter again.'

'Is that so, Thutha?'

'Sinhalese eat Veddas' guts. Veddas eat Sinhalese' guts. Veddas eat Veddas' guts', was the philosophy of that worthy.

'What are we to do with you all, then?' I asked. 'I hoped Tikkiri would be able to help you; but see what happened.'

' He can't by himself. We must have food given us while we work our chenas and guard our crops to begin with, any way,' Thutha said.

'That's why I can never have a chena of my own,' Poromola Saka said.

'What then would you like me to try and do for you?'

A thoughtful silence followed.

'There's Kiri Banda of Pollebedda. He has always been good to us. If you will speak to him he will do as you say', Thutha suggested and the others agreed.

The more I thought about the idea, the more I liked it. What spot more suited as the last resting place for these Veddas than Pollebedda, only seven miles from Maha Oya and traditionally associated with the Veddas? What man more fit to guide them than Kiri Banda, now the sole occupant of that once considerable hamlet, and himself of Vedda descent? He knew all the older Veddas, now dead. How often had his jack grove saved these very Veddas from starvation. It was he alone who had dared to give sanctuary to Valli, Tikkiri's mother, when her bestial husband finally drove her away from home. He was a good hunter and chena cultivator. Who better than he to teach these children of the jungle the art of the chena, side by side with his own?

Besides, Pollebedda had another great advantage. It stood not in the Uva Province, whose Government Agent, residing in far-away Badulla, had shown no interest in the Veddas, but just within the eastern province border whose Government Agent had his seat at much nearer Batticoloa, and whose chief headman resided at Maha Oya itself, only seven miles from Pollebedda.

My experience of trying to get anything done through official channels had proved disastrous, but the Government Agent of the eastern province was my friend. This time I would appeal to the man and not the official. I would link my cause directly to human sympathy and short-circuit the red tape. Of one thing I was convinced: any project for the betterment of the Veddas was bound to fail without official assistance. Implements could be supplied by anybody, but not the regular supplies of food and medicine required to sustain them through the seasons.

So I motored the thirty-five miles to Batticoloa, and was soon in conversation with my friend. I had only to put the case of the Veddas to him to secure his full co-operation. The very next day the Government Agent and his headmen met me, the Veddas,

and Kiri Banda at Maha Oya, and settled within a couple of hours what I had previously failed to do in six months.

Kiri Banda was appointed Vedda headman, and given charge of the Veddas. They were to be provided with the few implements they required by Government and regular supplies of food until their chena came into production. The chief headman at Maha Oya was to exercise supervision of the settlement. At last Government gave its aborigines its protection.

' Don't worry now, Heen Thuthi,' I assured her, as I took leave of them. ' Handuna will come back to you when you go to Pollebedda.' And she smiled through her tears.

CHAPTER 36

TISSAHAMY MOVES AGAIN

KIRI BANDA admirably fulfilled his trust. The Veddas gathered round him; even Handuna, as I had predicted, thereby saving himself the thrashing and ejection by Modagolla that Poromola Saka feared. But Saka himself, true to his lonely nature remained in the neighbourhood of Maha Oya, on the pretext that the plot allotted to him at Pollebedda was the very worst.

The coming of the Veddas to their new home was in the timely month of June when jungles are felled and burnt for chenas. At such destructive work the Veddas were second to none, but not so with the more plodding activities to follow. Two acres of jungle were assigned to Kiri Banda, and an acre each to Kaira, Thutha, and Handuna—the whole forming a composite block, demarcated by imaginary lines between trees. Surrounding the common acreage was the stout stockade to which each contributed that part forming his boundary. To see that this was efficiently done was Kiri Banda's greatest concern, for a fence, like a chain, is only as secure as its weakest section. Thutha was fairly industrious, Kaira was sluggish, Handuna energetic only in gusts. Their fence-work was characteristic of them: Thutha's was a passable imitation of Kiri Banda's, Kaira's never seemed to progress, Handuna's leaned all awry, at which no one was more amused than himself. Their little shacks of wattle and bark were the crudest imaginable.

With the rains of September, maize, manioc, beans, and yams were planted; in November, kurakkan, chillies, and green gram. Their bane was rats, which devoured the sprouting seeds.

The plants growing well in virgin soil delighted the Veddas. Hitherto content to forage in the abandoned chenas of others, they now savoured the joys of husbandry. The crops would be harvested from February to April. Until then Government would feed them with a weekly ration.

TISSAHAMY MOVES AGAIN

One day, within two months of the Veddas having settled at Pollebedda, there came by post a hastily scribbled note to me from Kiri Banda, informing me that a woman, threatened by Tissahamy, had sought refuge there. This was the first token in five years that the notorious outlaw still lived—and his come-back was characteristic. The very next day I was bound for Pollebedda.

I found the Vedda families comfortably settled in little huts in Kiri Banda's jack grove, Thutha's family sharing his own house. The man's mergence with his wards seemed complete. Across a belt of jungle was their chena, full of promise. Seeing a large number of uprooted young maize plants strewn about, I asked:

'What animal did this?'

'There's the animal,' Kiri Banda said, indicating Handuna. 'Yesterday Kaira and he quarrelled with Thutha, and Handuna rushed at Thutha with his axe. If I hadn't separated them, there would have been murder. He was so angry at being thwarted that he ran about like a madman knocking down his own plants with his axe.'

'Why did you do that, Handuna?' I asked.

'I was so furious, I had to do something', he said, laughing unrepentantly, while Thutha, still smarting under his wrongs, sulked apart.

The woman who had sought refuge at Pollebedda was Gama's widow, Thandi, who had been living with Tikkiri at Bingoda. Her story was that Tissahamy and his son, Bala Vanniah, had now taken to visiting Tikkiri about once a month. They always came armed with guns and brought flesh and honey which Tikkiri bartered for them. One day Tikkiri gave Thandi a new cloth, saying his father had asked him to give it to her. She refused to take it at first, knowing what it signified, but succumbed to the temptation later. She was a comely woman of about thirty, Poromola's daughter. Tissahamy's choice of women was always good.

So far Thandi had not seen her admirer, but knew of his comings from the long, low whistle at the jungle edge which was his signal to Tikkiri. One evening she was collecting batu

in a corner of the chena when Tissahamy, now quite grey-headed and bearded, suddenly appeared before her. He spoke to her kindly and suggested that she should go and live with him.

'I cannot take my two children to that jungle,' she objected.

' Leave the children with my son and come with me,' he urged.

'I cannot do that,' she said. 'Iama picture Vedda. The Hudu Hura will come to look for me.'

'Tikkiri will tell him you are dead.'

That frightened her, and she retired as best she could. The very next day she left Bingoda with her children, realizing only too well that whatever Tissahamy coveted he always took.

'You must not go towards Embillene Kumbura again,[5] she warned me in an awed whisper. 'Tikkiri told me to tell the Veddas not to bring you there, as harm will befall you.' Then I knew that Tissahamy had returned to his home once more and that Tikkiri avoided me because he had renewed contact with his father.

'What did you do with the cloth Tissahamy gave you?' I asked.

' I brought it away with me,' said Thandi.

'Was that a wise thing to do?'

'He gave it to me, didn't he?' was the naive reply.

When Thandi had gone, Kiri Banda came up and sat before me.

' She has told me what happened,' I said.

'Did she tell you that Tissahamy has threatened to shoot her for having stolen his cloth?'

'No.'

'He has done that,' Kiri Banda said. 'And what's more he came here two nights ago looking for her. That was when I wrote to you. Thutha's wife, Badini, and Handuna's sister, Punchi, were seated in the garden over there about nine at night eating fish and manioc, when they heard a twig crack. Looking in the direction of the sound they saw a man standing behind that jack tree bordering the jungle, pointing a gun at them. They rushed into the house. He did that purposely to frighten them in order to discover from their reactions if Thandi was here; he knew that this was where she would come.'

' Where was she at the time?'

' In my father-in-law's house. I sent her there knowing what would happen.'

'What would he have done if he had found her here?'

'Tried to carry her away, as he did so many other women before.'

'What did you do when the women crowded into your house?'

'I rushed out with my gun to see who it was; but there was no one about. Next morning I saw his large footprint by that tree.'

'Aren't you afraid of Tissahamy?'

' Not I , ' Kiri Banda said, quietly stroking his black beard. ' I am the one man in these parts who has stood up to him.'

'When was that?'

'We were both young in those days, Tissahamy a little older than I. One afternoon I was walking up the bed of the Rambukkan Oya with my gun, when a tall, bearded man stepped down the bank from the Kaluwinne path, and proceeded a few yards in front of me. He carried a sack of dried meat on one shoulder and an axe on the other; he had a knife at his waist and a gun in each hand. Seeing that I continued to follow him, he stopped and asked me where I was going.

' "To the teacher's," I said.

' "Why are you going there?"

'"Just for a talk."

'"Whose gun is that?"

'"Mine."

' "How much did it cost?"

' "What's that to you?" I replied.

'" Let me see it. The gun looks good."

' "That's why I bought it," I said, keeping my distance. I knew that when Tissahamy was angry with a man he always snatched away his gun.

' "You talk like a brave fellow," he said.

' "The deeds of a brave fellow are done by men like us," I replied.

' "Do you know who I am?" he asked.

'" I haven't seen you before, but I know you live in Embillene Kumbura and are called Murderer."

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

' "Why should I be afraid of you?" I asked. "You were born in your mother's womb, I was born in mine. You are a male. I am a male. Why should I be afraid?"

' " If I hit you what will you do?"

' " Should you take one step towards me, before you lay down that sack on your shoulder, my shot will be inside you," I said.

'There was a moment's hesitation, then Tissahamy said: " I f we talk much more, we will quarrel. There's no use in talking. I'll go away."

'Whenever Tissahamy met me after that, he talked politely to me. About a year must have passed when Tissahamy came to my house one day with a bunch of plantains, and said: "Eat these. There's no evil spell on them; see, I eat two," and he did so. I took the plaintains and gave him a bundle of betel leaves and fifty areca-nuts. After that he used to come here from time to time with one gift or another; and whenever we met he always had a civil word for me. But he trusted no man. Whatever I gave him, he politely bundled up and took away, but never ate, fearing an evil spell. He never looked a man in the face for fear his evil nature would be revealed.

'In later years, when quarrels became frequent between Tissahamy and his wife, Valli, he said to her: " I f matters should ever come to such a pass that you decide to leave me, go and stay with Kiri Banda at Pollebedda; he will look after you. But to no one else." And it was here she came and died.'

When Tissahamy was the theme the talk did not falter. Listening far into the night, I learnt much about the man, and also of the older Veddas, from Kiri Banda's eloquent lips. He knew the Veddas—Neela, Gombira, Madana-rala, and the others—from boyhood. Often had they come there, from Galmede, Embillene, Sitala Wanniya, and Bingoda, to barter their goods.

Next morning I found Basnaike, Kiri Banda's brother, muttering incantations over a coconut shell. He did it for half an hour, and then rubbed the charmed oil and saffron it contained on

the ears, nose, chest and body of Thutha's child shivering with fever.

Even more intriguing was a man with a stomach-ache, who squatted, mumbling a spell, with a rice-pounder thrust between his thighs and abdomen. Every now and then, mentioning a different demon's name, he would attempt to lift up the implement by its protruding ends. At first it came away easily; then it stuck, revealing the miscreant demon whom he proceeded to exorcize.

By evening both patients had recovered!

Punchi of the sloe-black eyes, long husbandless, was now obviously pregnant. Discreet inquiry revealed that she had taken to accompanying Kiri Banda frequently on his jungle excursions; his wife, being a cripple, was left at home. The Vedda women had warned Punchi that she was courting trouble, but their words had gone unheeded, and now her condition was accepted as a matter of course.

The family that gave me most concern was Kaira's. Heen Thuthi was nearing her first confinement. They were all very afraid for her, she seemed so small and frail. Though twenty-three years old, she looked no more than thirteen. In their crazy little shack she would sit all day long beside her sad-eyed parents, wondering what was in store for her. Handuna too, that incorrigible vagabond, was now always at his wife's side. A more forlorn group there never was. And sprawling about them were the half-dozen pups Kaira's bitch had borne, now spiky-tailed and starved to lankiness, with all the grace of their puppyhood gone.

My experienced eyes told me that Heen Thuthi would never survive her ordeal; never would those small hips give passage to the life that filled her womb; never would those slender muscles stand the strain. Her only hope was a Caesarean section.

'Tomorrow at dawn I leave you,' I said, seated amidst the family. 'What shall we do about your girl? She is too delicate to give birth to her child.'

'That's what troubles us', said her parents, voicing their fears for the first time.

'Let me take her away with me to a hospital and attend to her.

I shall see her safely through this, and bring her and her child back to you.'

'We cannot let her go.'

' Do as I advise. It's her only chance,' I pleaded with Kaira in an undertone.

' Whatever happens, let it be here', he murmured sorrowfully, and Handi agreed.

'Heen Thuthi, will you come with me? I'll look after you.'

Sadly she shook her head. My last vision of Heen Thuthi, was her frightened face, like that of some trapped animal resigned to its doom.

Only two days had passed when moans at night told them that Heen Thuthi was in travail. The women gathered round her; Thandi, Gama's widow, Badini, Thutha's wife, and Punchi. They made her as comfortable as they could on a sambhur skin, while Punchi supported her back. All night she moaned and shrieked, and Kiri Banda charmed oils which the women applied to her abdomen. He also powdered the noxious niyangala yam and rubbed it on the soles of her feet to ease delivery. His wife prepared a decoction of ginger, garlic and pepper which Handuna had fetched from beyond Friar's Hood. She was to drink this three times a day after childbirth, so that the raw womb might heal. And all through the dark, while Heen Thuthi's moans grew feebler and feebler, Kiri Banda invoked the gods with all the mantrams he knew.

At dawn the girl died from exhaustion, with the child still within her.

CHAPTER 37

THE COVEY SCATTERS

HEEN THUTHI'S death was but the prelude to a series of calamities that soon befell the ill-fated hamlet of Pollebedda. Six months had passed, and it was February, when chenas are at their best. Kiri Banda had seen to it that there was no slacking in the night watches against the inroads of elephants and pigs that incessantly threatened their boundaries. The first crops of kurakkan and maize were being harvested.

Kiri Banda was well pleased. He had justified the trust placed in him. It had been difficult work to discipline those wayward children of the jungle to a settled life, but he had not done badly, as their chenas testified. If only their Hura could visit them then how pleased he would be! Kiri Banda wrote to me saying all was well—but even as he did so Nemesis was at his very door. Suddenly, without warning, he was stricken with a throat affection, even as his wife and Valli had been, and in two days was dead.

That was Fate's most cruel blow to those Veddas. He whom they had come to look upon as their prop and stay was snatched away from them. It was difficult for them to realize that one so skilled in medicines and charms could have succumbed so easily. Now, once more, they were as sheep without a shepherd. True they were under the surveillance of the headman of . Nilobe, four miles away; but what they needed was someone in their very midst to guide and help them. There was Kiri Banda's brother, Basnaike, who was as one of them; but he had not the other's personality.

Thutha had not been in good shape for some time—ever since he had slung up and skinned a wanderoo after five one evening, which was a thing he should never have done; for a demon, watchful to do men evil, covered him, and the next day he was down with an influenzal fever that nearly killed him. He recovered, but remained more or less of an invalid with a hacking cough. Basnaike's spells were not potent enough against so powerful a

spirit. It was so symbolic of their belief that demons were the cause of disease that it did not occur to them to seek relief at the Government hospital at Maha Oya. What good were medicines against spirits?

One day, the headman of Nilobe met Handuna arrayed in a cloth knotted obliquely across his chest, remarkable for one who usually affected only a skimpy loin cloth.

' What have you here?' the man said, fingering something hard within the folds.

Handuna abashedly confessed that it was the blade of his hoe which he was taking to Mudagola, his former employer, to exchange for a rupee with which to purchase a phial of charmed oil from Kossa of Kaluwinne. For Thutha was seriously ill.

'You know very well you were told never to barter away any implement given you for cultivation,' the man chided.

'What's to be done?' said Handuna. 'My uncle is so ill that when his wife lying next to him had a miscarriage, and we removed and buried the child, he knew nothing at all about it.'

'You don't look too well either,' the man said. He gave Handuna the rupee he needed.

Kossa's oil, rubbed on Thutha's chest, seemed to tide him over his trouble.

That all was not well with Handuna too was soon apparent. He, the playboy of the jungles, was playboy no more. He, whose feet could never keep from roaming, would now spend all day listlessly stretched on the ground. His sinewy frame was growing fat unhealthily. And Punchi his sister—Fate had not dealt kindly with her. She, always so gentle and unselfish, had had a hard life. Ravished in her girlhood by Gama, her romance with Tissahamy's son, Sudhu Banda, rudely shattered, she had become a drudge in Gama's household. When his moods sent her wandering she was forced of necessity to other liaisons; finally at Pollebedda, still in her late twenties, she had fallen to Kiri Banda with whose child she was now big, and he being dead, she must bear her shame alone.

Most of the day would she and Handuna be seated listlessly dreaming of bygone times. No more for them the trails that led

to the pineapples and jack of Nuwaragala, the honeycombs of Pitiya-hela, the deer of Balana talawa, the catfish and the bitterlings of Bodagaha-wala; no more for them the Ash Cave and the Long Cave. At Pollebedda they were as exiles, tied to their chenas, which fed their bodies but starved their nomadic souls; a prey to alien demons more powerful and malevolent than their protective Ancestral Spirits.

To Punchi, Kiri Banda's death was a great blow; they had come to love each other well. Now, as she neared her term, she felt the need of him. She grew weaker and weaker. Fearing that Heen Thuthi's fate would be hers, they hurried her off to Maha Oya. There, soon afterwards, she gave birth to a dead infant, whom she survived only two days.

Handuna too had been steadily growing worse. His whole body was bloated and he could hardly rise. His sister's death seemed to rob him of the will to live. With the greatest difficulty, the folk of Nilobe induced him to go to the Maya Oya hospital. There, with careful dieting and treatment, his condition improved. In two weeks he was well on the way to recovery, when suddenly he decided to leave, and nothing they could do would induce him to change his mind. He said that if he stayed there any longer, he too, like the other Veddas who had been there before, would die; they were starving him on milk and gruel while what he required was rice and flesh which they would not give him. Efforts to restrain him only rendered him boisterous and violent, and in the interests of the other patients they let him have his way. What drove him out of the hospital was that Gama had come to him in a dream and called him to go hunting.

Back at Pollebedda, Handuna ate to his heart's content whatever he fancied, even raw maize and manioc. The Vedda stomach craves for bulk, and Handuna ate till he could hold no more. The result was that in a few days he relapsed into a state very much worse than before. He became so swollen that he could barely move. Again they persuaded him to go to hospital. Thutha was too ill to be of any use, and so it was left to Kaira to accompany Handuna, who refused to be carried. His indomitable spirit kept him tottering on, without even the aid of a stick, the four miles to

Nilobe, which he reached more dead than alive. There the people took charge of him and placed him on a stretcher.

Handuna's farewell to Kaira was: 'I am going, uncle. After this you will see me no more. Be careful of yourselves. Don't go into the jungle alone. You keep my axe and chopper.'

Arrived at Maha Oya, ill as he was, nothing would induce him to re-enter the hospital there. So they conveyed him by bus to Batticoloa. Within a month of each other, Punchi and Handuna, devoted sister and brother, children of Gombira, had found alien graves. Handuna's premonition that he would one day be discovered dead at the foot of a milla tree, as his father was, had not come true. Strange that those deemed fittest should have gone, while Kaira and Handi, the weaklings, still survived. It was well that those who were left, chiefly women and children, were amidst the plenty of the chena Kiri Banda had fostered for them.

Commenting on the depletion of that community, the chief headman of Maha Oya wrote to me: 'I cannot understand why these Veddas should be dying out like this. Perhaps it is because chena food doesn't agree with them, and they lack the flesh and honey of the jungle.'

And the Government Agent of Batticoloa wrote: 'There are three stages in the progress of primitive people: the hunting stage, the chena stage, and the tank stage. It seems to me impossible for either Sinhalese or Veddas to be really civilized or secure from famine until they reach stage three—not in this dry zone. It is a raging furnace from May till November, and water is the only remedy. In the meantime village after village is deserted, merely a name on a map, its inhabitants wandering about doing chena cultivation—no schools, no wells. Even Tissahamy could be civilized if you were to give him a tank.'

I received yet another letter, five months later, from the chief headman; it ran: 'The Veddas who were settled at Pollebedda left the village for Kaluwinne in the Badulla district with all their bag and baggage. Their chena was doing well and they were about to open a new one. Their suddenly leaving Pollebedda is beyond all expectation. Some time back they revealed their dis-

content with living on Indian corn, kurakkan, and vegetables without flesh and honey, their staple food. But they never mentioned anything about leaving the place. To think that they have been so ungrateful as to behave in this manner after all that has been done for them! The Veddas are like that, they say; there is no knowing what they would do. They act just as the whim seizes them.'

Later revelations, however, disclosed that there was more to it than that. A newcomer to Pollebedda was one Banda from Payila, hence known as Payila Banda to distinguish him from the innumerable other Bandas. As long as Kiri Banda, the protector of the Veddas, was alive, this man was a nonentity. But with his passing the newcomer's true nature revealed itself. In these outlands a masterful man can prove very nasty, especially towards a helpless people. Kiri Banda's brother did his best to keep the colony going, but Payila proved too much for him.

He liked Pollebedda and meant to settle there. What he did not like was the presence of the Veddas. He had been heard to say that if they were allowed to remain there, they would soon deplete the jungle of honey and monitors and wanderoo, and leave nothing for others. So he began a campaign of persecution designed to get rid of them, and conducted himself in such a way as to inspire a fear of him in the hearts of the Veddas. He boasted of his skill in malignant charms, and constantly quarrelled with one or another of them. He threatened Kaira and the ailing Thutha with bodily harm. He stole Thutha's hoe. As Thutha was quietly sleeping one evening he knocked a hole in the hut wall at his head, nearly braining him.

He said to them one day: 'I will set charms on the lot of you, and finish you off one by one, even as I did Kiri Banda and Handuna.' And those credulous children believed him, but for the sake of their chena they clung on. Things came to a head when he contaminated their only drinking pool. They dug another. He fouled that too. On being accused of it he only laughed. When they complained to the Nilobe headman about it, he airily retorted that what they imputed to him was the deed of a civet cat.

'Can't we tell the difference between human excrement and a wild cat's?' Thandi, the widow of Gama, sneered.

But the headman took no action, preferring to believe the word of the oppressor rather than that of the oppressed. That night the Veddas spoke together saying: 'If we stay on here any longer, we too shall die. Let's go away.' And without more ado they disappeared at dawn, abandoning their food crops that might have sustained them for months to come.

They found shelter in an abandoned chena at Kaluwinne belonging to Kossa, the hairy one. Two months of this and food became increasingly scarce. Thutha killed a langur one day and shared it with Kaira and his wife, but not with the others—how far could a monkey go? Thandi complained of this to Kossa, and so created ill-feeling which led to a scattering of the four families, Thandi alone remaining behind for a time in Kossa's household.

Kaira and Thutha, whose families were always inseparable (for not only were they uncle and nephew, but Thutha's wife Badini was Handi's daughter by a previous marriage) returned for the last time to Bingoda—not, as they had hoped, to Tikkiri's chena, which year by year had been getting closer to his home Embillene, where, it was rumoured, Tissahamy now lived with his son Bala Vanniah, and his daughter Kombi—but to the Sinhalese settlement. There in an abandoned chena, belonging to the friendly headman, the two families settled down, more food being available in the deserted chenas here with its eight families than at Kaluwinne with only two.

CHAPTER 38

THE DEATH OF KAIRA

THE leaderless Veddas had for many years now, even while Gama was still alive, gradually drifted into subsisting merely on abandoned chenas.

The cycle of the chena—or axe-cultivation, as it is paradoxically called—was singularly suited to their purpose. By the end of a year, most of the crops being taken, the chena is wastefully abandoned for a new one. In its second year it is known as kanatte, of which there are two kinds according to the nature of the land originally opened up—mukulana kanattes when the clearing is in virgin forest, and landu kanattes when in scrub jungle that has replaced the virgin jungle hewn down for chenas ten to fourteen years previously—if cultivated again within that period the scrub is replaced by grassy plains which never revert to jungle.

In these deserted kanattes, especially of the virgin forest with its rich loamy soil, there still survived a variety of vegetables, such as a small remnant of kurakkan, maize, and manioc; brinjals, ash, pumpkins, bitter gourds, watermelons, cucumbers, chillies, and amaranthus and other edible herbs. On these the Veddas would live for the better part of a year; but towards the end of that time, everything being exhausted, they moved into newer kanattes abandoned by the Sinhalese—but for which system the Veddas would long have ceased to exist.

It was in the crumbling huts of such an abandoned plantation, with its breached stockade, two miles from the nearest Sinhalese chena, that the Veddas now eked out their miserable existence. It required great courage to live like that.

Here was a little community composed of but one sickly man, Kaira, three women, and half a dozen children, varying in age from twelve to two, isolated in the midst of the wilderness. Their only defence against the elephants that nightly ravaged the jungle around was a shrill concerto of voices to which even

the yoimgest contributed—and the great beasts would pass them by.

They had already been there a year, and the appearance of caterpillars in great clusters, voracious of every edible leaf, was the usual warning signal that the time for their departure had arrived.

The women and children, including Puncha, Gomba, and Gombira, had all gone in quest of a newer kanatte to settle in—leaving Kaira and his wife Handi, too feeble to move, temporarily alone. Two days had passed and the others had not yet been able to return for them. On the following morning, Handi, making a wry face at the mush of leaves Kaira offered her, said to him: 'If only I could have some monitor lizard broth, I might get strong enough to leave this place.'

'Our dogs are dead,' Kaira said. 'I have not the strength to hunt one without them?'

They lapsed into a long silence, he seated there beside her.

'A tender jack and a little honey—how I long for these.'

'I cannot leave you here alone and go in search of them,' Kaira objected.

'Perapitiya hill is not so far away', she murmured, and fell into a sleep of exhaustion.

Watching her shrivelled and shrunken form crouched by the fire for warmth, and her scarcely perceptible breathing, Kaira reahzed that if he did not find her nourishment quickly she would never rise again.

'I will go and see,' he said, rising languidly.

He replenished the fire and left some faggots handy.

'Don't let this go out. I may be late getting back,' he said.

'All right,' she mumbled. 'Return soon.'

Picking up his small hatchet, the only weapon he had, he left on his five-mile journey with what alacrity his thin legs and swollen stomach permitted.

He looked with longing at many a monkey, rock squirrel, and jungle fowl he passed. He gave feeble chase to a monitor lizard unsuccessfully. So exhausted did the effort make him that he had to rest a while and chew some bark before he could proceed.

It was evening when he came to the rock. To his great relief there were two tender fruit on the single jack tree there. He climbed up, picked these, and was about to descend when he discovered a kanava honeycomb on a dead branch of the tree.

By the time he had secured this, night was closing fast. Being too tired and afraid to start on his journey back, he decided to spend the night in a small den they occasionally used higher up the rock. He collected a few sticks and made a small fire. The sight of it, ever the Vedda's friend, gave him comforting reassurance in that grim and lonely spot. Being ravenously hungry he split open one of the jack-fruit with his axe, and ate the fleshy pulp dipped in honey, the seeds he roasted. It was the grandest meal he had had for months.

A faint sound froze him apprehensively in a listening attitude. Yes, there it was again, a feeble moan, as of the wind a long way off. A chill ran through him, for he thought he heard his name. Closer and closer it came. There was no mistaking it now—'Kairaa,' as if a lost soul were seeking him. It was approaching the cave!

Thoroughly scared, Kaira stumbled out into the darkness, climbed a tree near by and clung to it quivering.

He could now hear the tap of a staff on the rocky floor of the cave as if a blinded thing were tottering.

'Everything here has been broken,' crooned the eerie voice. 'Where are you, son? . . . Child, child, child! Where is he? He has roasted and eaten jack seeds. He has gone away . . .' and so it carried on.

Unable to bear any longer the yearning urgency of that frail voice, Kaira stole down from his tree and climbed out of the spectral closeness of the jungle on to the open summit of the star-lit rock.

There he remained seated all night, fearful of being discovered by the owner of that voice. So strung were his senses to that obsession that when the first faint flush of dawn came with the boom of a langur, it took him by surprise. Soon the twittering of birds restored his composure. But it was not until the sun was well risen that he ventured into the cave to retrieve the fruit and honey that would give new life to Handi.

What was his joy to find, at the foot of the rock, a monkey that had fallen on a boulder and broken its spine. He despatched it with his axe, slit its cheek, rove its tail, securing it in a loop with a twist of bast, and slung the carcass on his shoulder.

'How pleased Handi will be,' he thought to himself, as with renewed vigour he hurried on his way home.

He had accomplished about half his journey, when suddenly the sky darkened, a strong gust flailed the trees, and a heavy shower of rain poured down—though it was the height of the drought. Being very near the cave Eryminiangpane-galge, to which Poromola had brought his remnant of Veddas when they first came to Bingoda over a score of years before, Kaira entered it.

As the rain showed no sign of abating, Kaira repaired a trestle there, kindled a fire, and singed the fur off the monkey. He then chopped it up and spread the pieces to smoke on the frame, laying aside carefully the liver and brain, the daintiest morsels, for his wife.

'When I have put some strength into her, I will carry her to the headman who will help me to look after her,' he mused.

Seated there, snuggling close to the fire for warmth, he gazed into it as in a trance. Gradually he became aware of a red dog with glowing eyes that lapped up the blood dripping from the trestle. He watched it a while, and then, realizing that it was a phantom, he left everything there and rushed out into the rain in an agony of fear. Nor did he stop until he came to their hut, to find Handi lying stark and stiff on the sodden ground.

Utterly exhausted, he lay down beside her in a burning fever, and soon lost consciousness.

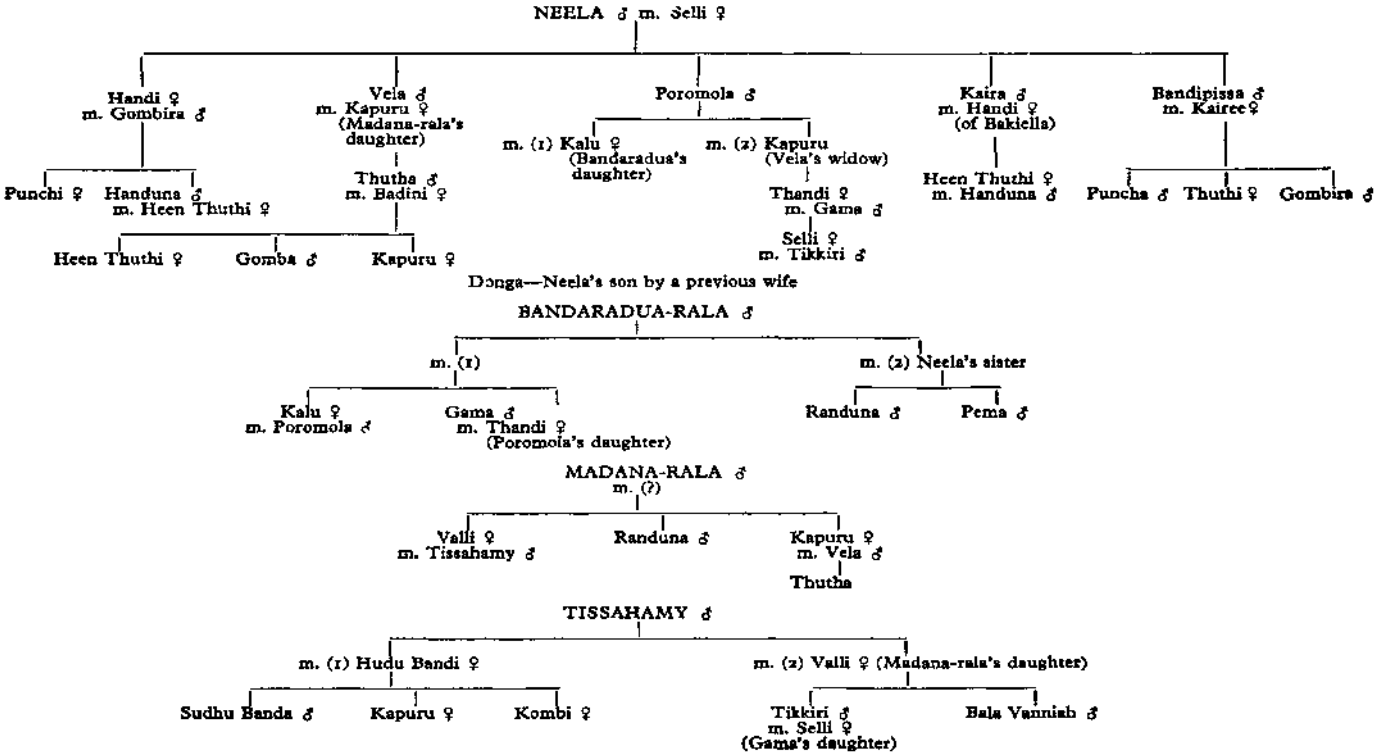
The next day the headman of Bingoda and another, having been informed of the plight of these two by the Vedda women, came to the small hut.

' Cha, pity we didn't know of this earlier,' he said.

They dug a shallow grave and laid them side by side, and covered them over with dead branches as the Veddas do.

' There lie the last of their fine,' said the old man as they left the place.

GENEALOGY OF FOUR VEDDA FAMILIES



GLOSSARY

ADAKU. Vedda ceremony.

ANIMALS. The Vedda names, with the Sinhalese names given in brackets, are as follows:

Bear, Karia (Walaha).
Buffalo, Tomba (Mee-haraka).
Deer, Gombaraya (Mua).
Elephant, Botakabala (Aliya).
Hare, Lemba (Hava).
Jackal, Hevalpakka (Nariya).
Leopard or *Panther,* Dheea, Dheebotta, or Mitta (Kotiya).
Mongoose, Mookatiya (Mookatiya).
Monkey, Red or *Macaque,* Katapaiya (pouch-mouthed), (Rilawa).
Langur, or *Leaf-monkey,* or *Wanderoo,* Udakelina, or Botakuna (Vandhura).
Monitor Lizard, Mundha or Halaya (Goa).
Mouse-deer, Asgedja, Asgediya (Big-eye), or Ataya (Meeminna).
Pangolin or *Scaly Anteater,* Kabalaya (Kabalaya).
Pig, Hossa-dikka (long snout), (Ura).
Rock Squirrel, Rukaya (Dhandu lena).
Sambhur, Hala-katta (Gona).

ARECA-NUT, or BETEL-NUT PALM *(Areca catechu).* A tall slender palm, extensively cultivated in village gardens. Its two-inch-long fruits grow in clusters and contain an ovoid nut which forms an ingredient of the common masticatory with betel leaves *(piper betel).* The nut which yields catechu and tannin is often reduced to a fine powder and used as a dentifrice.

ARROWS. The feathered, iron-bladed arrows used ordinarily in archery are made of *zvelang (Pterospermum suberifolium)* or *ee-gaha* (arrow-tree); they are feathered with the plumes of jungle fowl, owls, or hawk-eagles. The arrows used with miniature bows for spiking drugged fish consist merely of the pointed and notched sticks of *ulkandhe otgatawela,* of which latter the bow-staves are also made.

AUDE. Ceremonial arrow blade.

AYIBOWA! Long life!

BALIYA. A colony *of bambara* bee honeycombs on rock faces. *Yakkini baliya* means 'she-demon's combs'.

BAMBARA. *See* Bees.

BARIGULA. Barred hole. A charm word shouted at animals to prevent their escape.

BATU, i.e. egg-plant or aubergine *(Solarium jaquinii).* A small, marble-like brinjal.

BEES. There are five kinds of honey bee in Ceylon—the *bantbara (Apis dorsata),* the largest and fiercest, which usually builds its great combs on hillsides; the *mee massa (Apis indica)* which makes the sweetest honey; the *kanava massa* or rosin or dammar bee; the *dandual massa (Apis florea),* reputed to be the smallest honey bee in the world, and the *kotha massa,* an even smaller species. The honey of the two latter is hardly worth the taking.

BIN KOHOMBA or CHIRETTA *(Munronia pumila),* a medicinal plant growing on afforested hills.

BLOODSUCKER. An agamoid lizard of India—so called from the red colour its throat is capable of assuming.

BOUTIQUE. A small shop.

Bows. The staves of the *ath-dhuna* (hand-bow) which shoots arrows, as well as of the *gal-dhuna* (pellet-bow) are made of the *gatawela* tree *(dhunu-gaha* or bow tree) *ulkandhe, kobewela* or *maha-kekela-gaha.* The pellet-bow is usually strung with *niyande* or bowstring hemp, the other bow with *araluwel,* the inner sheath of the bark of the *aralu* tree.

CHENA. A stockaded clearing in the dry zone jungles for the cultivation of *kurakkan,* maize, manioc or cassava, and vegetables. It represents a primitive and wasteful form of agriculture, fresh plots of jungle being felled annually, and a plot once cleared not being recultivated for from ten to twelve years. A recendy abandoned overgrown chena is known as a *kanatte.*

CHEWS. In the jungle, chews are the barks of certain trees—*Demata (Gmelina asiatica),* a spinescent bush, *bolvilla* and *thambola* are substitutes for betel-leaf. *Davata (Carallia intergerrima),* which takes the place of areca-nut, is a huge tree with aerial roots often formed in masses in the angles of the larger branches. *Demata* and *davata* are the favourites. Other barks used as chews are *opulu (Cynometra bijuga) galsiyambala* or rock-tamarind *(Dialium ovoi-deum\ mora (Nephelium Iongana), habatha, nuga (Ficus benghalensis) kalawa, galkara.*

CHIEFS. *See* Ratemahat-maya.

CHILLIES. *Ni-miris,* a species of pepper plant.

CHUNAM. An edible lime, the concomitant of betel or bark chews. The Veddas prepare it by moistening the burnt shells of the following varieties of snails—*wantako* or *godang hello*—large white land snails; *along hello* or *gadu hello*—small black river snails found on dry stream beds; the bivalved *ethal hello*; and the convoluted *kankuro* or *lanu hello.*

COMPOUND. A clearing round a hut, usually enclosed by a fence.

DAGABA or STUPA. A dome of masonry containing a relic chamber found in association with Buddhist temples, as also is the bo or peepul tree.

DAMMAR. *See* Bees.

DAVATA. *See* Chews.

DEMATA. *See* Chews.

DEVIL BIRD or ULAMA or ULALENA. The precise identity of this bird is one of the mysteries of the Ceylon jungles. Its eerie cries have been attributed to a variety of birds. The most likely candidates, however, are: the forest eagle-owl *(Huhua nipalensis)* for the up-country area, and the crested honey-buzzard *(Pernis ptilorhynchus ruficollts)* in the lowland jungles.

DHUNA-HENA. A bow-mark cut into the bark of a boundary tree that demarcates Vedda territories or *panguas.*

DHUNU-PENA-BALANAWA. Soothsaying by the bow.

EE-GAHA, or WELANG. *See* Arrows.

ENDARU. Castor-oil plant, favoured as a live fence for village compounds.

FISH (river):

Andho, eels.

Anguluwa, a species of river or sea catfish with scaleless body, whiskers, and stings.

Hunga, stinging fresh-water catfish.

Kanaoy lesser snake-heads.

Katu-kaneOy labeo.

Kaviya, climbing perch.

Kokassa, a catfish.

Lula, murrel.

Pethiya, olive carp.

Theliy eel.

Thithayo, bitterlings.

Walapotha, large fresh-water catfish.

Walihondoy fresh-water goby.

FISH POISONS. *Pus-wel* or *Pusal-wel (Entada scandens),* a large powerful

climber of extraordinary length, twisted spirally. The seeds contain saponin and are used as an emetic. The juice of the stem is a fish poison; it is whipped into a foam in pools, stupefying fish and making them easy to catch. *Kukurumun (Randia dumetorum):* a thorny shrub. The active principle of the fruit is saponin, an emetic. *Dhaluk-kiri,* cactus milk, is a still more potent fish poison.

GALGE. Rock-house or cave.

GAMARALA. A minor headman.

GANJA or KANSA, Indian hemp *{Cannabis sativa)*,* a plant with serrated tapering leaves. The flowers form clustered spikes. It is widely used as an intoxicant in India, being either smoked or swallowed. It is found in four forms in Indian bazaars: *bang* or *sidhi {hashish* of Arabia), the dried leaves and small stalks; *ganja,* the flowering tops; *char as,* the resin which exudes from the leaves and branches, and *mayung,* a sweetmeat.

Even minute doses produce in the novice symptoms of floating in the air. There is a stage of excitement with hallucinations, usually, but not invariably, pleasurable, and often of sexual character. The individual may laugh, sing, or talk or become furiously delirious. This is succeeded by a stage of narcotism, with dilated pupils, tingling and numbness of the body, or in severe cases general anaesthesia.

Persons intoxicated with *ganja* are liable to commit acts of homicidal violence, as in 'running amok'. In the old days hemp was sometimes served out to soldiers entrusted with desperate enterprises. It is also given to criminals just before execution.

GATAWELA. *See* Trees.

GECKO. SO called from the sound it utters, is a small more or less nocturnal lizard that lives on insects. *See* Kotaka.

GINIKUDUWAS. Fire cages.

GOA. *See* Animals: Monitor Lizards.

GONALA VINE, slender stem *oigonala* yam.

GUEST HUT. Idang-ge.

HEADMAN. *See* Ratemahat-maya.

HETHA. *See* Spirits.

HONEY-CUTTER or KAPUNKARAYA. The name given to the adventurous takers of bambara honeycombs from the sheer sides of precipices. Equipment for the task consists of the *yothala* or cane ladder; *kullas* or smokers looped to the forearms as also is the *matha* or *masliya,* a six-foot *welang* stake, pointed at one end and pronged

at the other, for cutting and detaching the great honeycombs; and the *maludema* or *hangotuwa,* a deerskin honey receptacle, also called the *yaka-kate* (devil's mouth).

HUNIYAM. A charm.

IIXUK, or LALANG, of Malaya *{Imperata arundinacea).* A gregarious, quick-growing pest very difficult to kill out. The leaves make excellent thatch.

IRATIYA. Double-barrelled muzzle-loader.

KADIAS. Black ants.

KANATTE. *See* Chena.

KANAVA. *See* Bees.

KAPURALE. A devil-priest.

KARAPINCHA. Curry leaf *(Murraya koenigii).*

KATADIYA. Devil-priest.

KENDA *{Macaranga peltata).* A plant with large leaves, used by jungle folk to do service as plates.

KIRIKORAHA. Vedda ceremony.

KOBEWELA. *See* Bows.

KOTAKA, a large-eyed gecko or lizard, frequendy found in caves.

KUDUKARAYAS, edible-nest swiftlets. *See* Nests.

KUKURUMUN *{Randia dumetorum).* *See* Fish Poisons.

KURAKKAN. *Ragi* of S. India and Malaya *{Eleusine coracand).* An erect sedge commonly cultivated in *chenas,* producing a terminal cluster of spikelets with small round reddish grain, considerably used as a food by the poorer classes.

LANGUR or WANDEROO. *See* Monkeys.

LOKKA. Chief.

LORIS, akin to the lemurs. A small slender tailless nocturnal creature. It is omnivorous and purely arboreal.

MACAQUE. *See* Monkeys.

MAHATHMAYAS. Gentlemen.

MANIOC, TAPIOCA, or CASSAVA *{Euphorbiaceae).* A shrubby perennial with fleshy tuberous roots largely grown in *chenas.* It is said to have been introduced to the East by the Portuguese from tropical America in the seventeenth century. There are two distinct kinds, the 'bitter' and the , sweet', and of these there are many varieties, all more or less characterized by the presence of hydrocyanic or prussic acid in the juice of the roots. When grated and washed, boiled or roasted, or made into a coarse meal and bread, the poison is dissipated; but poisoning and death sometimes occurs.

MANTRAMS. Charms.

MASLIYA. *See* Honey-cutters.

MEENEMARUWA. Murderer.

MONKEYS. Ceylon, being essentially a forest country, is well favoured by the monkey tribe. There are two main species:

(1) *Macaque* or *Red Monkey* (Sinhalese—*Rilawa).*

(2) *Langur* or *Wanderoo* (Sinhalese—*Vandhura*\ a grey leaf-monkey.

MOOR. The term commonly used in Ceylon for Arabs long settled in the Island. They owe their name to the Portuguese, who found them similar in appearance to the Moors of Morocco.

MOUSE-DEER or CHEVROTAIN. Smallest of the deer tribe in existence.

NAE YAKU. *See* Spirits.

NELLI (*Phyllanthus emblica).* A small tree with acid, astringent fruits generally found in patana lands (savannahs).

NESTS, EDIBLE BIRDS'. These are built by a species of swifts (*Sollocalia)* inhabiting caves. Their chief nutritive value is derived from the dried salivary secretion with which the mossy nests are lined.

NIYANDA or BOWSTRING HEMP (*Sansevieria zeylanica).* Grows on rocky ground in tufts of banded or mottled greenish leaves which afford a tough, pliable fibre used by Veddas for bowstrings and waist-cords.

NIYANGALA. *See* Yams.

NUGA TREE. *See* Trees.

OLAS. Palm-leaf manuscripts inscribed with a style.

OPULU TREE. *See* Chews.

PANGUA. Territory. *See* Dhunu-hena.

PANULA. Water spring.

PARANGI. The native name for yaws or *Frarriboesia tropica,* a highly contagious disease akin to syphilis, but distinct from it. Before the advent of neosalvarsan it was an endemic scourge of the vanni, as the arid lowland jungles are called. It owes its name to its probable introduction to the Island by the Portuguese invaders (ferengi or foreigners) in the fifteenth century, through their African slaves.

PLACE NAMES:

Alu-galge. Ash Cave.

Dhik-galge. Long Cave.

Eth-bahinde-kade. Pass the Elephants Descend.

Eth-bedde-gala. Elephant Forest Rock.

Gona-maru-wala. The Hole where Sambhur were killed.

Ibbang-bari-wala. The Hole where Tortoises cannot be Caught.

Maigaha-usa-kande. Rower-tree Hill.

Meenadhama-galge. Cave where the Corpse was Left.

POKUNA. Cistern.

RATEMAHAT-MAYA. The chief headman of a district, whose residence is known as a *walauwa.* Below him are *korales* or minor headmen of smaller districts; and below them *gamaralas* or village headmen.

SAMBHUR. A large brown Asiatic deer (Indian elk). Its antlers are heavy, the brow tine is directed upwards, and the beam is simply forked.

SHAMAN, KATADIYA or KAPURALE. Devil-priest.

SPIRITS. The Veddas make little distinction between devil and spirit, the term *Yaka* (plural *Yaku)* being used for either. *Hetha* means ghost or spirit. *Vanniya* is synonymous with *Yaka* and *Hetha. Nae Yaku,* ancestral spirits, are held to be benevolent, unless angered, tutelary over their homes and are supplicated in all ceremonies. *Gal Yaka* (female *Yakkini),* rock-demon, is a more malevolent being.

Bahiriya-veya, guardian demon of buried treasure; *Dadayan Yaku,* hunting spirits; *Dadayan talawa alut deyo,* the new god of the hunting plain; *Etha artnay alut deyo,* the new god pierced by an elephant; *Gaheyng watuna deyo,* the god who fell from a hill; *Kande mulpola vanniya,* the phantom of the foothills; *Indigola yaka kiriappa* (male); *kiriamma* (female); *Paranakarya,* spirit of the deceased; *Parathaya,* evil spirit; *Yakinibaliya,* she-demon's combs.

TALAPE. Boiled doughy mass of kurakkan flour.

TANKS. Ancient artificial lakes formed by bunding watersheds.

TALAWA. An extensive glade, usually overgrown with *illuk* or *lalang* grass. Talawas are often the result of *chena* cultivation of forest lands which have failed to revert to jungle.

TOTA OYA. The name by which the *Magalavatavan atu* of the maps is known to the jungle dwellers.

TREES:

Aralu (Terminalia chebula). A moderate-sized tree with slender crooked stem. It supplies gall-nuts used for tanning or staining, and as a medicinal purgative. It is one of the three myrobalans of Ayurveda. Bowstrings are made of the twisted bast.

Bo (Ficus religiosa), the peepul tree of India, held sacred by the Buddhists and planted close by every temple.

Cadju or *Cashew-nut (Anacardium).* The fruit consists of two parts,

a fleshy, pear-shaped edible stalk, with a kidney-shaped grey or brown nut at its extremity containing an edible kernel—the seed outside the fruit as it were.

Darriba {Eugenia gardneri).

Ee-gaha, Arrow Tree. *See* Arrows.

Etamba or *Wal-amba,* wild mango (*Magnifera zeylanica),* a tall, erect, handsome tree with a compact crown bearing small ovoid fruit which, though harshly acid, is eaten by monkeys and birds.

Gatawela, Dhunu-gaha or Bow tree.

Goraka (Garcinia cambogia), the fruits afford an acid used to pickle fish and flavour curries.

Jack tree or *Kos (Artocarpus integrifolia),* an introduction of great antiquity into Ceylon. The fruits attain an immense size, up to 70 lb., are very numerous, and are borne on the trunk and older branches. They have green knobby rinds enclosing achenes surrounded by fleshy perianths, and form an important article of food in the tropics. The yellowish flaky pulp, with a strong, scented odour, is eaten boiled, or curried, or raw when ripe. The seeds are eaten boiled or roasted. No part of the tree is useless. The timber is used for buildings and furniture. The wood chips boiled afford a yellow dye used by Buddhist monks for staining their robes. The sticky latex makes a good birdlime, and the leaves serve as fodder for cattle and goats.

Kalu tree (Diospyros melanoxylori), a large erect tree with thick bark exfoliating in scales.

Kukurumun (Randia dumetorurri). See Fish Poisons.

Kumbuk (Terminalia glabra), a large water-loving tree usually found on the banks of rivers and tanks.

Lime (Citrus acida).

Makulu (hydrocarpus venanata), a large tree that grows by the water. The velvety berries are nibbled by fish, crabs, and crayfish, which are then poisonous to man. Porcupines too eat the fruit with impunity, but their flesh then causes blood-vomiting when eaten by human beings.

Milla (Vitex altissima), a large tree supplying a durable timber used for house building, railway sleepers, etc.

Na or *Ironwood (Messua jerrea),* a beautiful tree often found as a sacred plant round temples and shrines. It was probably introduced to the Island at a very early date. Vedda arrows are made in imitation of the lanceolate leaves.

Nuga or *Banyan (Ficus benghalensis),* an immense tree with long, wide-spreading branches that drop aerial or adventitious roots. The dull, coral-red fruits are much eaten by such birds as barbets and hornbills, and by flying-foxes, a large species of bat.

Opulu. See Chews.

Timbiri (Diosphyros embryopteris), the large globular fruits yield a strong gummy juice very rich in tannin; it is used for preserving fishing nets and lines.

Ulkandhe. See Arrows.

Upas or *Riti tree (Antiaris toxicaria),* the celebrated ordeal poison tree of Java supposed to give off poisonous fumes fatal to animal life. The sap contains a virulent poison known as *ipoh* used for poisoning darts and arrows, but not in Ceylon. The dense inner bark, after retting and beating, furnishes a thick fibrous material, formerly worn by Veddas as a short skirt, and even now used for bags.

Weera tree (Hemicyclia sepiaria). A moderately large tree with very much grooved stem and small bright red sweet fruit, much eaten by birds and bears.

Welang or *Velang (Pterospermum suberifolium),* a small tree with yellowish scented flowers, a favourite food of elephants. The shoots—being light, straight, cylindrical, and easily smoothed—are used by Veddas for arrows and fire-sticks; while the larger poles are used for *masliyas* for removing bambara honeycombs from rocks.

ULAMA. *See* Devil Bird.

ULKANDHE. *See* Arrows.

VANNI. Arid low-country jungle.

VEDDI-RATTE. Vedde realm.

VEDARALA. Medicine-man.

WADIA. Settlement.

WADIPOLA. Bartering-ground and dancing-place of Veddas.

WALIMBE. The native name for the rock known as *Friar's hood.*

WAL WANDURU. Jungle pepper.

WANDEROO. *See* Monkeys.

WARUGE. A Vedda clan of which there are the following: Morana, Unapana, Rugam, Uru, Tala, Nabudena, Kiribo, Embille. (For the origins of these, see the author's *Wild Ceylon.)*

WHITE ANTS. A popular misnomer for *termites.*

YAKA. *See* Spirits.

YAMS. **Edible jungle yams (tubers of climbing plants) are: *gonala, katuala, hirathala,* and a/a//a—the first of which is the most favoured.**

Niyangala *(Gloriosa superba)* is a creeper which, it is said, has two very poisonous yams, one to the east and one to the west—the one causes death in the morning, the other in the evening.