



NEHRU
BAL PUSTAK ALAYA

ONCE UPON A TIME...

(Part-I)

M. CHOKSI and P. M. JOSHI





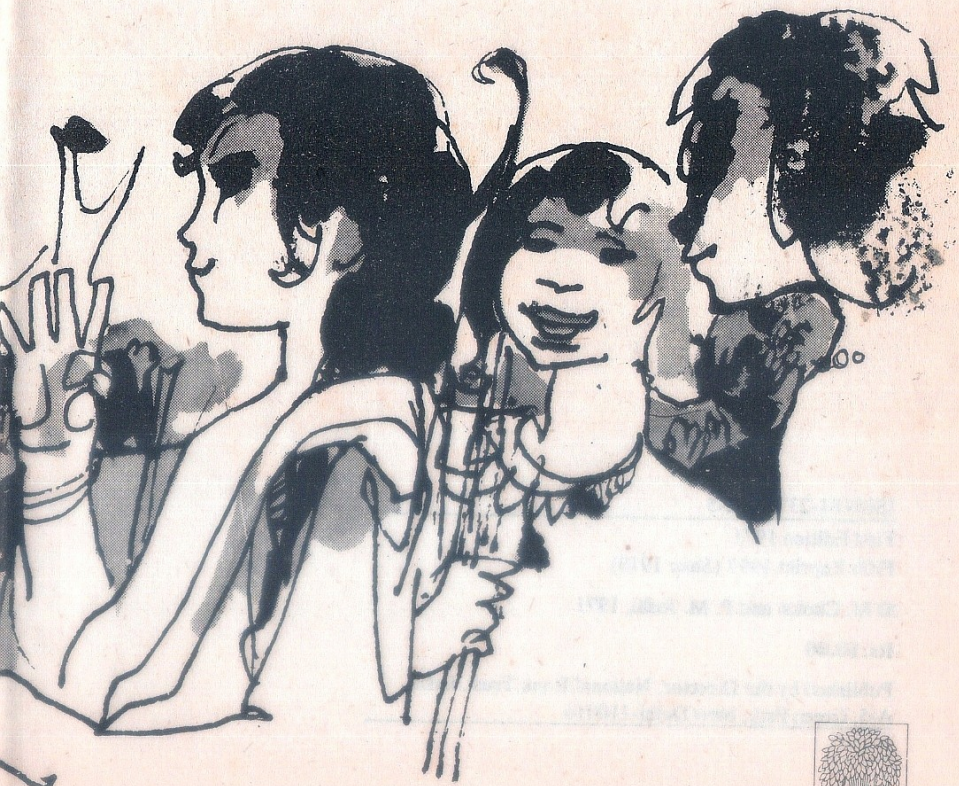
Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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(Part-1)

M. CHOKSI and P. M. JOSHI

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IN THE ANCIENT CITY OF MOHENJODARO

It was early afternoon in the city of Mohenjodaro. The hot sun of May beat down on the neat rows of flat-roofed brick-houses. The houses had no windows, and the doors all opened on to a central courtyard. Here the women cut vegetables, ground spices, boiled rice, washed dishes; and after their household work was done, gossiped and spun cotton, while children played around them. In one corner of the courtyard squares had been roughly scratched on the floor, on which the boys played all kinds of games.

The sun burned more fiercely and now there was not much shade even in the courtyard. Virochan, the seal-cutter, had dropped off to sleep on a mat in his workshop. His wife too was taking a nap, for she was tired after cooking the mid-day meal of curry, rice and barley bread. As usual, the whole family had bathed before sitting down to eat. There was no shortage of water even during the summer months, for the city was built on the banks of the great river that we now call the Indus.

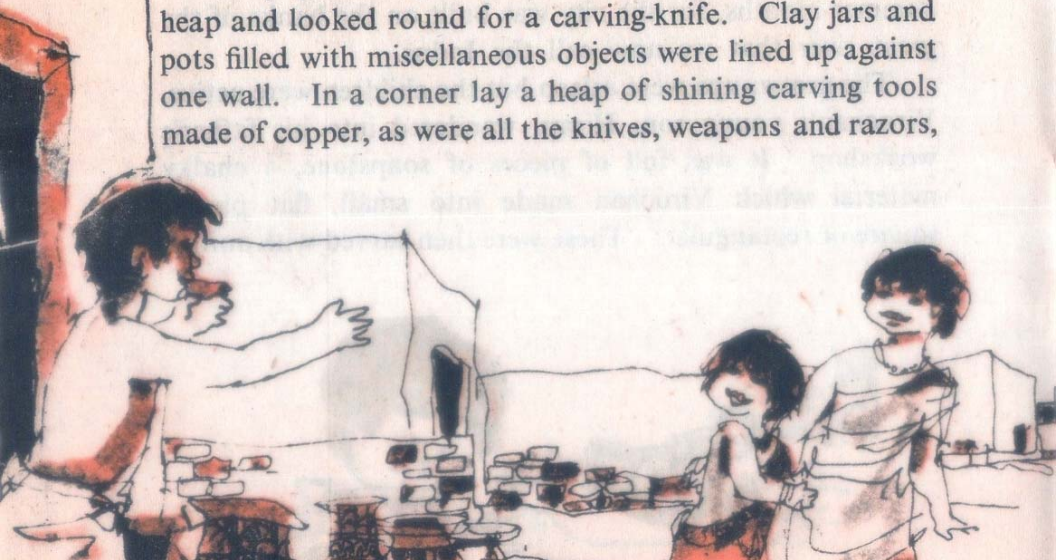
The grown-ups were asleep but the children were active. Virochan's young son, Hirap, wandered into his father's workshop. It was full of pieces of soapstone, a chalky material which Virochan made into small, flat pieces, square or rectangular. These were then carved with animal



designs, under which there was a little picture-writing. These were seals used by merchants and others as their special mark of identity. Of all the craftsmen of the city—potters, brick-makers, weavers, goldsmiths, copper-smiths, boat-builders and stone-carvers—the seal-cutter was perhaps the most important, as almost every man had his own seal.

Virochan's shop was very popular. Many merchants, who could afford to pay for skilful craftsmanship, patronized it. They all liked animal designs, and the heap of carved seals was like a miniature zoo. There was the wise elephant with his broad forehead, the stately bull with long horns, the tiger with his stripes and even some animals that are found only in wet, tropical climates, such as the one-horned rhinoceros that lives in marshes and the alligator that resides in the river.

Hirap picked up a piece of soapstone from a waste heap and looked round for a carving-knife. Clay jars and pots filled with miscellaneous objects were lined up against one wall. In a corner lay a heap of shining carving tools made of copper, as were all the knives, weapons and razors,



for these people of five thousand years ago did not know the use of iron.

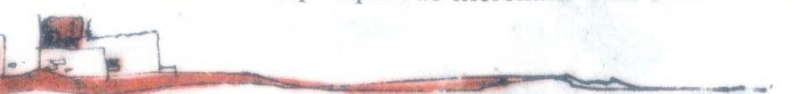
Hirap was just about to start carving when his little sister cried out. Her toy bird had slipped down the drain in the bathroom.

"Don't cry," said Hirap. "I will get you another bird soon. Zanzar, the potter's son, is my friend and I am going along to his house now. Come with me and we'll look at the toys his father makes."

Sandipan slipped her hand into her brother's and they walked down the street. Though narrow, it was straight and very clean. A breeze blew from the river right through the main street and all the little lanes which ran at right angles to it. The two children turned down another lane, the Potters' Street, where the city's potters lived and worked. They too were prosperous craftsmen, for clay pots and jars were in great demand as they were the chief means of storage.

Just then Zanzar came out of his father's workshop and Sandipan cried out, "My bird—look, he's got my bird in his mouth." As she was speaking, there was a shrill whistle. Hirap and Sandipan ran up and Zanzar proudly showed them his special whistle. Though it was made of a tube of baked clay like that of the other boys, it was in the shape of a bird.

There was a voice at the door. It was Zebar, the nephew of a prosperous merchant who traded with distant



lands. "You should see the fine necklaces my uncle gets from the goldsmith," he boasted. "He takes them far away to another river valley (Egypt) where the people

build great stone monuments in the desert. The ladies there love his gold necklaces and their great Queen, the wife of their ruler or Pharaoh, wears them too. Those are *real* necklaces."

"Beads of stone and wood are just as pretty as those of gold," retorted Hiras and Zanzar angrily.

Zanzar's mother heard the raised voices and came out. She was wearing a simple cotton skirt, and had copper



bangles on her arms and wrists. Her coiled hair was held in place by a beautiful hair-pin and comb. A brooch secured the girdle at her waist and round her neck was a necklace of carved stone beads, some round, others barrel-shaped.

"Aren't our craftsmen clever?" she said quietly. "They make expensive necklaces of gold and precious stones to sell to the rich people of many lands, and they make necklaces of beads of carved stone and wood, which are very pretty too and which all of us can wear."

"Uncle also sells cloth," Zebbar continued. "He takes it by sea; and as soon as our ships arrive at the port of Punt, the merchants gather round eagerly to buy our ornaments and soft cotton cloth. The important people of the city dress in our fine cloth. Not only do they wear it when they are alive but even when they are dead!"

"You do tell tall stories, Zebbar!" exclaimed Zanzar.

Hirap intervened, "What he says is true. The people of that land have a strange custom. My uncle told me that when a great man dies, they preserve the body. They wrap it in soft cloth and put it in a big grave in the sand or in rock."

Sandipan suddenly interrupted loudly, "I want to see a gold necklace."

"Well, you can't," said Zebbar, "you will find them only in the goldsmith's shop. Gold necklaces are for rich people. Uncle sells them, but he doesn't have any at present."

"Where does the gold come from?" asked Zanzar. "We have none near our city."

"Run out to the boat-builder's yard and ask Kapardi," replied his mother. "His boat has just returned. He will

tell you where things come from and where they go to.”

“I must take Sandipan home first,” said Hirap.

“Leave her with me,” said Zanzar’s mother. “She can play with some of the new toys Zanzar’s father has made, and then I will take her home. There’s a bird-cage with a tiny bird in it that I am sure she will like, and a donkey that moves its head when you pull a string.”

“Oh yes, please,” Sandipan cried, jumping excitedly up and down.

Hirap agreed gladly. “If you take her to the head of the lane, she can run home alone.”

“I’ll do that,” the lady promised, “and I’ll stand and watch till she gets home. Our streets are so straight that we can see from one end to the other.”

The boys wandered off. As they were passing the weavers’ quarters, they called out to the weaver’s son. He was in a big shed full of looms, watching his father weave cotton. He ran out and joined them.

Beyond the town, the boys passed fields of barley and wheat cultivated by villagers, who lived in mud huts. Among these were brick kilns, where bricks were



being baked in open furnaces.

As they were going on, a fat boy shouted to them from a street near by. It was Brihadrath, the priest's son. He could not always join in their games, for he had to bathe several times a day and spend many hours learning hymns by heart. Besides, his father often sent him on errands to tell people of coming festivals.

"Where are you going?" he panted. "I'll come with you. But don't walk so fast. It's bad to walk fast after a meal."

"What? Have you been eating again?" the other boys teased him.

"Of course, I've been eating," Brihadrath retorted. "Since I have to have a bath and chant hymns before I eat, I had lunch later than you."

"I expect you ate a mountain of food," said Zanzar.

"I ate twelve pieces of barley bread with date pickle," replied Brihadrath, smacking his lips. Then turning to Hirap, he said, "Of all the dates I have had, by far the best are the ones your uncle gets from the land of the Twin Rivers (the Euphrates-Tigris)." He paused, then added anxiously, "Your uncle is due back soon, isn't he?"

"Yes," Hirap replied with a laugh. "And I won't forget to send you some of the dates he brings. The boats must all return before the rainy season, so he should be



back soon."

The boys then proceeded to the yard by the river where boats were being built. As the city had extensive trade connections, there was a great deal of traffic by sea and land. Boats went and returned all the time except during the rainy season. The boats were large; their prows rose high above the waves and some had sails. The sailors were guided by the sun during the day and by the pole-star during the night. They hugged the coast; for if there was a succession of cloudy nights and days, they might lose their way completely once they lost sight of the land.

In the boat-yard, the boys found their friend, Kapardi, a kindly shipmaster. He had travelled far and was very knowledgeable. He told them of distant places from where came beautiful things. He said that gold came from the south-east (present-day Mysore) and a lovely green stone from the south. For a brilliant blue stone, caravans made dangerous journeys to the far north



(Afghanistan), beyond mountains inhabited by great bears and other wild animals.

But he himself went in his boat on long voyages to the brick-built cities of another river-valley (Euphrates-Tigris), from where the best dates came. And still farther, he said, was a third river-valley civilization (Egyptian) with great stone buildings. The city and villages were by the river Nilus, but the stone monuments, for which the river-valley was famous, were in the desert beyond.

"Are those cities finer than ours?" Zebar asked anxiously.

Kapardi smiled. "They have some things and we have others," he replied. "But I'll tell you one thing. As soon as I return from a voyage, I go to one of our public baths, and have a good long bath in the warm water, such as I never get elsewhere."

"Don't they bathe in other countries?" asked Zanzar.

"They don't have a bathroom in every home and they certainly don't have such fine public baths," said Hirap with pride.

Kapardi explained further, "They don't have the underground pipes and channels of baked bricks to carry away the waste water and keep the city streets clean. In the cities of the Twin Rivers, they build high towers of brick and watch the stars from on top. In the land of the Nile, great stone monuments rise high above the desert sand and look as if they will last forever. But nowhere are cities as well planned as ours. Ours is the cleanest and best-planned city in the world."

BHIMAK AND HIS FRIENDS

We are now in the Epic Age the events of which are related in the great epic poem, the *Mahabharata*. The Aryans, a nomadic people, have displaced the traders and town-dwellers of Mohenjodaro and the earlier Indus Valley Civilization. The Aryans were a pastoral people, cattle-keepers, moving about with their herds and also growing corn.

Varnavat, on the banks of the Yamuna, was a fertile area with plenty of water, shady forests and good pasture-land. On the outskirts of the forest was a village with huts of mud and bamboo, set in rows and encircled by a thorn fence. Bhimak, the charioteer's son, lived here with his



mother and his little sister, Devi. His father had been killed in the great battle of Kurukshetra.

Like everyone else, Bhimak woke at dawn. He was learning archery and was considered a better shot than most of his companions. In a few years, he would learn to drive a chariot and even to build one. He wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and be one of the King's best charioteers.

By the time the sun was overhead, the morning's work was done. Bhimak bathed in the river and came home for a meal. Then he left for the forest to play with his friends, the herdboys and the sons of the potter, the weaver and the goldsmith. They played many battle-games, and Bhimak was always the leader because his father had been killed in battle. He arranged his armies in square, rectangular and spider's-web formations. Sometimes they had sieges too with rope-ladders, slings and battle-axes.

Bhimak loved to make his own weapons for these games. He polished and sharpened long sticks and used them as spears, and made axes by tying pointed stones to the ends of short, thick sticks. The battle-axe was his favourite weapon and he took great care to tie the heads firmly with strips of leather, that gripped tighter and tighter as they shrank.

Sometimes these mock-battles took a serious turn when the short dark-skinned Dasyu boys arrived on the scene. The Dasyus lived away from the taller, fairer Aryans who had conquered them. They had little settlements of their own, farther in the heart of the forest. Although the two groups fought sometimes, on other occasions they played together.



Bhimak gobbled his barley *luddoos* and drank up his milk. "Why are you in such a hurry today?" asked his mother.

"Devadatta has come back and it's a long time since we saw him last," replied Bhimak.

"Devadatta went to the ashram to be the *chela* of Guru Devmitra Shakalya, didn't he?" asked his mother. "He has been away for nearly four years. He must be very learned now."

"It's a great pity he went to the ashram," said Bhimak regretfully. "He was one of our best fighters."

His mother laughed. "Off you go but don't be late," she said and began to wash the *thalis*.

But his little sister, Devi, was inquisitive: "Why are you taking all these spears and sticks?" she asked.

"We are going to have a great battle," replied Bhimak. "It will be like the famous battle of Kurukshetra, in which Maharaja Yudhishtira and his brothers defeated their jealous Kaurava cousins. And we'll have a big elephant corps. Dhenuk's herd of cows will be our elephants, the Dasyu boys will act as the Kauravas, and I'll show them how chariots and horsemen can cut through elephants."

"But where will this battle take place?" asked Devi, whose curiosity had now been fully aroused.



"We are meeting at the ruins at Varnavat, where the false Kauravas had built a palace for their princely cousins. The walls were of coloured stone outside, but inside they were coated with inflammable lac. The Pandavas, however, suspected some treachery, and as soon as it was dark, they escaped from the palace. That very night, a terrible fire broke out and the whole structure was burnt down. Now there are only a few ruins overgrown with grass and bushes and the place is flat enough for a big battleground. We'll go there after we have collected weapons from my armoury in the hollow tree-trunk."

"I want to come too," Devi cried out.

"Big battles are not for little girls," replied Bhimak and rushed off.

Devi cried a little, then drying her tears, she took her pot and went down to the stream to fill it with water. She stopped to watch a tall, white heron standing by the water, and returned home very late.

Her mother spoke with irritation. "You are back at last. I must go to see your aunt, who is ill. Play with Hariti next door and I'll call you when I return."

Devi agreed without a murmur but she thought to herself, "I won't go next door, I will go to the ruins at Varnavat."

So Devi set off through the forest, for Aryan children were not afraid of wild animals. She arrived before her brother, for Bhimak had first gone to the banyan grove where he had his armoury.

In the meanwhile Bhimak had joined his friends: Kaladhan, the weaver's son, Alik, the potter, and Jayant, who belonged to a family of goldsmiths. Dhenuk, the cowherd, was to meet them later in the grounds of the ruined palace with as large a herd of cows as he could get together.

Then Devadatta arrived. He was greeted with cries of delight and plied with questions.

"What do you learn?" "Are you Master of the Shastras now?" "Who are your friends?" "You haven't forgotten your old friends, have you?" the questions tumbled out.

Devadatta was very friendly but more thoughtful and serious than before. "Just now I am learning the four Vedas," he said. "I have another eight years with my guru and a great deal to learn before I become Master of the Shastras."

"How clever you are!" exclaimed Alik. "My poor head could never hold so much knowledge."

"You are very strong too!" exclaimed Bhimak. "Your arms are even more powerful than mine." Then feeling the muscles of his friend's arm, he said regretfully, "What a fine hunter and charioteer you would have made!"

"I have had a lot of practice in wrestling," said Devadatta smiling. "As for being a hunter, the ashram is deep

in the forest and wild animals abound there.”

“Oh, Devadatta, you do not know the wonderful city that our great King has built, now that the Kauravas are dead,” said Jayant, who loved to talk of the glories of Indraprastha. “There are strong walls and deep moats round the city, and high towers inside from which soldiers keep watch. My uncle, who lives in a village near by, often goes there. He sells ornaments—heavy necklaces and bangles and large ear-rings for both men and women. There are fine sights to see: the King’s palace, a great arena for wild beasts, the Hall of Justice and the Hall for Gambling.”

“Gambling !” exclaimed Devadatta. “One would have thought that gambling had caused enough suffering.”

“It seems that kings, princes and nobles must fight or hunt or gamble,” said Kaladhan. “Now the fighting is over and the royal hunts have made life safer for the forest villages. At one time, panthers and hyenas had become so bold that they even carried away village children! Now there is sometimes loss of cattle, but not of human life.”

Bhimak looked up at the sun, which was their clock, and said, “We must leave for the big battle. Dhenuk must have brought the cattle to the grounds of the ruined



palace.”

“Now that Devadatta is a student, he cannot be a soldier,” said Jayant.

“The priest accompanies the King in battle,” replied Bhimak. “Lord Krishna was Arjuna’s charioteer. Won’t you be mine, Devadatta ?”

“Yes, I will,” said Devadatta with a quiet smile.

“You shall have the first choice of weapons,” said Alik. “Bhimak has made some fine spears, battle-axes and bows.” And he drew them all out from a deep hollow in a banyan trunk.

“They look very impressive,” said Devadatta. “But I do not need a battle-axe, sling or bow. A priest does not fight, and besides my staff will do well enough.”

The boys examined his staff. It was strong and heavy and the point was sharp and hard.

When they arrived at the ruined palace, the cattle had already been arranged by Dhenuk in a solid formation. They looked quite formidable, for these were the half-wild big cattle of the early Indian forests. On the back of each was a “mahout”, a small dark Dasyu boy whom Dhenuk had asked to join in the mock-battle.

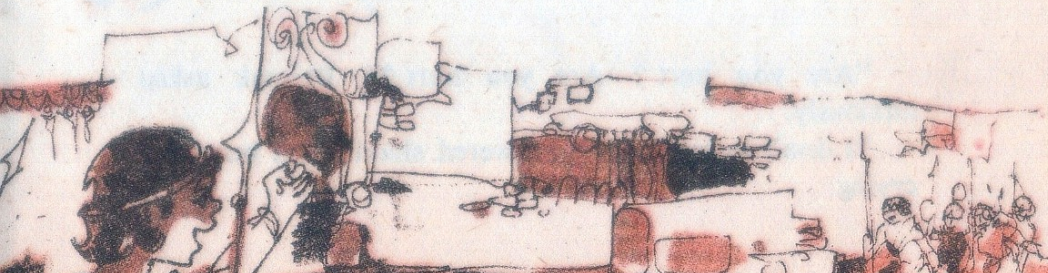
As soon as they caught sight of Bhimak’s party, they gave a wild yell and prodded their “elephants” and urged



them forward. The "Pandavās" charged, for they were supposed to be charioteers. They raised their spears above their heads and shouted as they ran. The herd stood firm till they were quite close and then suddenly parted in the middle. The "Pandavas" raced down this opening, the herd swerved, and the cattle ran helter-skelter. The "charioteers" had beaten the "elephant corps", who were in complete disorder and confusion.

Suddenly through the lowing and stamping of cattle was heard a loud bellow of pain. A panther lurking near by had jumped on a cow that had strayed too far. But the boys were forest-dwellers, accustomed to constant threats from wild beasts and bold in the defence of their precious cattle. They rushed up yelling loudly, and Dhenuk struck the panther again and again. Meanwhile the great bull, who was the herd leader, had rushed back to charge the panther. The boys and the cows parted hastily to make way for him. Dhenuk had just skipped out of the way of the charging bull when the panther took fright, bounded sideways and slunk away among the bushes.

There was a cry of triumph from the boys. But suddenly a scream, feeble but shrill, chilled the boys' blood, especially Bhimak's. It was the cry of a little girl and he recognized his sister's voice.



SAVED FROM THE PANTHER'S JAWS

Devi had been hiding in the undergrowth, watching all that happened. As she was coming out, the panther saw her and was about to pounce. Bhimak and Dhenuk rushed up, followed by the other boys, but it seemed as if nothing could save the child. If they struck from behind, the panther's jaws would immediately close on Devi.

But Devadatta rushed ahead of them, his stout staff raised high. Just as the panther's jaws were about to close on Devi's shoulder, Devadatta drove the staff into the panther's throat.

Red blood gushed out on Devi's shoulder; the panther's tail sank, his body quivered, and then fell lifeless. Devi screamed but with fear, not with pain.



"Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" Bhimak asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Devi answered shakily and burst out crying.

Devadatta took charge of the situation. "Well, I know that you are not hurt. The panther's blood is spattered over you because you are his conqueror. Look down proudly on your defeated enemy. Wave your spear at him." And he put a little stick in her hand.

Devi's tears dried, she smiled and waved the stick shakily. "Is it my blood or the panther's?" she asked rather doubtfully.

"Let's go to the pool and wash it off and you'll see for yourself," replied Devadatta.

So they went to the pool and Devi washed off all the blood. Now that Bhimak was sure that his little sister was not hurt, he began to scold her angrily, and she burst into tears again.

Devadatta intervened, "I don't think we need scold her any more. She has been in the panther's jaws and that is lesson enough. You won't run away alone again, will you, Devi?"

"No, no, I promise," replied Devi and clung to Devadatta's hand as they walked back to the dead panther.

Meanwhile the Dasyu boys, whose homes were near by, had run to get knives to skin the panther, a task at which they were especially skilled.



The other boys gathered round the beast and looked admiringly at Devadatta. "What a stroke !" they said. "Is that what they teach you at the ashram ? Let's all go and study there !"

Devadatta smiled his quiet smile. "I have seen our guru save a *chela* from a bear with iust such a thrust," he said.

"We'll skin the beast and you can wear the skin as a trophy," said Dhenuk.

"You had better come and look after your cow first, Dhenuk," said Devadatta. He held out his hand to Devi, who was trembling again at the sight of the dead panther. "Come, little one," he said, "we'll go and tend the poor cow, who has suffered more than you from the panther's teeth and claws."

The cow was still lowing piteously, as much from fear as from pain. Devadatta patted and soothed her. He took her down to the water and washed her wound gently. Her skin was torn and bleeding but the cuts were not deep.

"Let us put some milkweed on her back to ease the pain," said Devadatta. So Devi found a milkweed



bush and they cut its big leaves and bound them to the cow's back with a strip of grass. Then they led her to a big patch of fresh green grass and soon she was munching away happily.

"Devadatta, you are a good herdsman as well as a skilled hunter," Dhenuk said admiringly. "You look after the cows as well as I do."

"We have a large herd of cattle in the ashram," Devadatta said. "And we have to guard them well, for the pasture grounds are farther away and the forest denser and wilder than it is here."

"What do you eat at the ashram?" asked Jayant, who was a fat boy, interested in his own food and everyone else's.

"We eat the same food as everybody else," replied Devadatta, "rice, wheat, barley, milk and meat. But we eat less meat than the other things."

"It must be the milk that makes you so strong," said Alik.

"We do have a lot of milk, butter, *ghee* and curds, but we have many more fast days than you have," said Devadatta. "It's the hard life we lead that makes us strong."

Suddenly Devi started to shiver and be sick. "We must take the little one home to her mother," said Devadatta.

"The cow has already forgotten the panther tearing her back," said Alik, "but Devi still remembers the panther's jaws that were about to close on her shoulder."

"Human memories are longer than those of animals," said Devadatta.

Dhenuk gave the Dasyu boys the big parcel of *luddoos* wrapped in banana leaf that Jayant had brought. They



promised Dhenuk that they would remove the panther's skin and keep it safe, before the hyenas and jackals came to feed on the dead beast.

Then everyone went home and Bhimak, Alik and Devadatta took turns to carry Devi, who was dropping off to sleep after the long walk and the excitement. They got Devi back to the hut just before Bhimak's mother returned.

Devi settled down on her mat and dozed off. Bhimak's mother entered, greeted her son's friend, and asked him about life in the ashram. Presently Devadatta quietly told her of Devi's adventure with the panther. "Devi will never go off by herself again," he ended.

Devi had woken up and was listening intently. She looked at her mother with big frightened eyes. Her mother picked her up and pressed her to her heart and Devi knew that she was forgiven.

Now that Devi had got over all her fears, both of the panther and of being punished, she joined in the conversation. "Dhenuk will bring the panther's skin tomorrow.

He and the Dasyu boys are skinning it," she said drowsily.

"Would you like to keep the skin?" Devadatta asked Bhimak's mother. "It will keep you warm at night."

"No, thank you, it would give me 'bad dreams,' she replied. Then she asked, "How long will you be here, Devadatta?"

"I shall be here till my guru, Devmitra Shakalya, returns to the ashram. He has been summoned to Indraprastha where Maharaja Yudhishtira will soon hold the horse sacrifice.

"As you know, this famous sacrifice can only be performed by a king whose power is universally recognized. If anyone wants to challenge the authority of the King, he has to capture this special horse, which is set free to roam at will for a year. Now that the year is drawing to a close and the rulers of all the realms have acknowledged Dharmaraj (Maharaja Yudhishtira) as their overlord, there will be a grand *Ashvamedha Yagna* (horse sacrifice). All the gurus of the principal ashrams have been called to the capital and also the holy rishis who live on the banks of the great rivers—the Ganga, the Yamuna, the Shone and the Gandak..."

Devi interrupted sleepily, "Before I fall asleep I must tell you how kind Devadatta was both to the cow and to me."

Bhimak laughed. "We knew that Devadatta would learn the Vedas at the ashram and become a scholar. But we didn't think that he would also become a very good hunter and herdsman, and even a good children's nurse!"

"It is wisdom that he is learning at the ashram," said Bhimak's mother softly.

AT THE REST-HOUSE ON THE ROAD TO PATALIPUTRA

There was a great deal of activity at the rest-house on the road to Pataliputra, for a large caravan had just arrived from the east. This rest-house was one of many built by Asoka, the third and greatest of the Mauryas.

Under the influence of Buddhism, Emperor Asoka had made many changes in his vast dominion. A net-work of roads linked the extensive empire and the Emperor and his officials frequently toured around to supervise the people's welfare. Traders and travellers now moved over long distances conveniently and safely. Forests had been cleared and new settlements established, in which customs were less rigid than in the towns and villages.

The caretaker's family seemed to consist of people from different areas. The caretaker himself appeared to be a Northerner in late middle age, of tall upright bearing, like a soldier. His mother, though old and wrinkled, had the same complexion and features, but his wife was smaller and darker. The strongest dissimilarity, however, was among the children. The two younger ones, a little

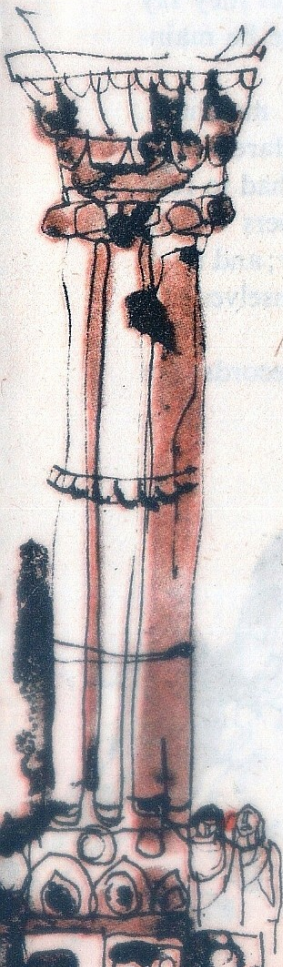


boy and a baby, resembled each other; but the eldest, a girl, was dark with black, frizzy hair and large full lips.

It was early afternoon but the rest-house was full. Travellers sought shelter long before darkness fell, for there were many wild animals in the forests around. A merchant from Tamralipti was on his way to the bazaars of the capital with bullock-carts laden with jars of spices and perfumes and bales of cloth. There was also one of the King's officials, an inspector and record-keeper, accompanied by several assistants. There were two other travellers: an ascetic wearing a leopard-skin over his shoulder who was visiting all the shrines in the land, and a young student from Gauda (Bengal) who was on his way to the university in far-off Taxila.

After the guests had washed by the well near the caravanserai and had had a good meal, they sat and talked in the courtyard. The caretaker and his aged mother joined them, listening eagerly to their tales. The merchant was describing the bazaars of Pataliputra and the goods displayed there. As the caretaker's wife hurried past, her husband called out, "Come and join your mother-in-law. This good trader is telling us about skins, carpets, rugs, brightly-coloured cottons, rich silks, cutlery and armour from the North..."

At this point the merchant broke in,



"And ivory work, gold necklaces, spices for the kitchen, perfumes and cosmetics for the toilet."

"I will come soon," the woman said to her husband. "Another guest has just arrived, a stone-cutter from the North. He has travelled far and is hungry."

An old man sitting in a corner suddenly spoke, "The Emperor is a warrior and the son of warriors, yet they say that he has given up war. How then can peace be maintained?"

"But peace is maintained," asserted the merchant. "We are safe from foreign enemies, for none dare attack us; from soldiers at home, whom in the past we had to feed as they marched through the land; from robbers on the roads, for the Emperor's officials maintain order; and from the officials, for now they observe the law themselves and enforce it."

The record-keeper smiled and added, "Records are



kept so carefully and supervision is so thorough that there is no possibility of extortion. The Emperor repeatedly instructs his officers to rule by love and law and not by terror."

"Enemies may attack from within or without and destroy the security that his grandfather and father established," grumbled the old man.

The ascetic now spoke, "It is the dharma (law) by which the King rules, not by fear."

"The army has not been reduced," said the record-keeper. "The borders are well guarded and the law is enforced."

The ascetic continued, "Our good Emperor has declared, 'the teaching of the law shall replace the roll of the war-drums,' and 'the only true victory is victory over the hearts of men'."

"Therefore," said the merchant, "the Emperor has



had the law recorded on rocks and pillars so that all may know their duties and the law may endure. Everywhere in the land we have seen the Emperor's messages inscribed."

"In these writings," said the ascetic, "the Emperor instructs everyone—the governors, the subordinate officers and the people—in their dharma or duty."

Here the merchant interrupted, addressing the ascetic: "The Emperor is a follower of the monks of the yellow robe and you are not a member of that order. How is it that you praise him?"

The record-keeper intervened, "His Majesty respects men of all religions. Since His Majesty was converted by the famous scholar Upagupta of Gauda, he has become a follower of the Wise One, the compassionate Buddha. But His Majesty feels that there is good in all creeds. He wants religion to unite men and not divide them."

"The Emperor has inscribed on a pillar a warning that none should praise his own religious belief by criticizing those of others," added the ascetic. "It is gentle words and good deeds that he preaches."

"The Emperor practises what he preaches!" exclaimed the caretaker. "It is for his gentle words and good works that all know and love him: the gentle words of his sermons on stone and the good works all around us. There are roads for the trader and the traveller, irrigation facilities for the farmer, hospitals for men and animals. At every eighth *cos*, rest-houses have been provided with wells and store-houses. Banyan and tamarind trees have been planted so that men can travel in the shade. There are mango groves outside every town and village where men, animals and birds can find shelter and refreshment."

THE STONE-CUTTER FROM IRAN

Just then the caretaker's wife ushered in the latest arrival, a big, broad-faced man, who appeared good-humoured and friendly. Then sitting down by the old woman in the corner, she said to her husband, "Bimbi is seeing to the animals and will join us presently."

"I usually see to my animals myself," said the newcomer, "but I came to join you when I saw how confidently the little girl fed and watered them."

"My daughter loves animals," said the caretaker.

"Is that dark-haired child your daughter?" asked the merchant in astonishment.

"Yes, she is our daughter, sir," replied the caretaker with emphasis.

The guests glanced at each other in surprise, for the dark-skinned child looked like a jungle-dweller.

At this point the last visitor tactfully diverted the conversation. "It is a long time since I saw my own family.



When I go North again my little daughter, who must be the same age as yours, will not recognize me !”

The caretaker's wife, though she hardly ever joined in the men's conversation, now spoke softly, “I thought you were a foreigner, sir, though you speak our language so well. Where does your family live ?”

“I am an Iranian,” the man answered, “a stone-cutter from Taxila. When your great King came to Taxila many years ago, he knew of the Iranian stone-cutters' colony there. Later he sent for some of us to cut and carve in stone.”

“We have been talking of our great Emperor's sermons on stone, by which he conveys his edicts to the people,” said the merchant. “You will be able to tell us how these pillars of piety are cut and inscribed. No other ruler before him has spoken to his people by means of writings on stone.”

“Writing on stone is not unknown in the land from where I come,” said the Iranian. “Our great King Darius has left an inscription on a high rock.”

“And what has he written ?” asked the ascetic.

“The inscription tells of his glory and his conquests,” answered the stone-cutter.

“Our great Emperor's writings are concerned not with his own greatness but with the welfare of his subjects,” said the ascetic. “He tells his people that he wants them to be happy. He says that happiness is obtained by following the Dharma: through the practice of gentleness, generosity, truthfulness, respect for the aged, proper treatment of Brahmins and *bhikshus*, of the poor and the wretched.”



"He instructs his officers to look after the welfare and happiness of his subjects as a good nurse is expected to look after the children entrusted to her care," added the record-keeper. "His compassion extends even to the jungle tribes who live on the borders of civilization and whom all persecute and despise."

At these words, the younger woman's eyes filled with tears and her mother-in-law pressed her hand in sympathy. Then the grandmother spoke from her corner, "But how do the people understand these words, sir? We cannot all read, particularly not the border folk."

"The inscriptions are not in the language of the learned scholars, but in the language of the people," said the merchant.

"And the King's officers often collect the local people together and read the message to them," added the record-keeper. "But let us learn from our friend here about the

cutting and carving of the great pillars."

"The stone comes from two places," began the carver. "There is spotted red and white sandstone from near Mathura and hard, buff-coloured sandstone from Chunar near Varanasi. A huge block of stone, all in one piece, is cut for the shaft of the pillar. Then it is shaped, carved and polished; a large number of stone-cutters, both Indian and Iranian, toil at that. Afterwards, instead of decorating the shaft with flowers and leaves as in the many-pillared hall of the King's palace at Pataliputra, we use all our skill to sculpture the great capitals or tops, and to give the pillar a brilliant polish that makes it shine like metal."

"Can't our Indian craftsmen polish like that?" asked the merchant.

"This brilliant polish is one of the special skills of Iranian craftsmen and so is the carving of the animal capitals," the record-keeper explained. "Our Indian stone-cutters have, however, constructed works of utility like the great dam at Lake Sudarsana near far-off Girnar."

Then the stone-cutter continued. "A great block of stone is also required for the capital. Here a new style has been worked out by your Indian craftsmen, who are





most inventive. The base of the capital is often like a large bowl and when it is decorated with foliage it looks like your beautiful lotus flower. Finally come the big animals that crown the top. On these we use all our skill."

"What animals?" eagerly asked the little girl, who had just sat down by the stone-cutter.

"Lions, little one," he answered smiling, "the most kingly animal of the forest, both in your land and mine. The bull, too, looks fine on a capital and so does the horse. The finest pillar of all, the one at Sarnath, has four great lions sitting back to back, looking out on the four quarters of the world."

"When both shaft and capital are ready at the site," the stone-cutter continued, "we have the task of fixing the shaft firmly in the ground and raising the capital on it."

"How is the top fastened?" the caretaker asked.

"The capital is fitted into the shaft and secured with a great copper bolt," answered the Iranian.

"The animal that Indian craftsmen



love to carve is the wise elephant," interposed the ascetic. "I have seen an elephant at Dhauli which emerges from the rock, just like a live animal coming out of the jungle. He stands there to draw attention to the Emperor's edict, inscribed on the rock near by."

"How do the King's messages come to you?" the student asked, "and how do you carve the writing on these grand pillars that you make?"

"The Emperor's edicts, written on fine cotton cloth, are all issued from Pataliputra," the record-keeper explained.

"Then we carvers cut the writing on rock or pillar with a chisel," resumed the stone-cutter, "and patient, laborious work it is, for both the writing and the rock must last through the ages. And the carver cannot always read the letters that he carves so diligently."

"I know that your writing reads from left to right, though in my country we write from right to left. You are a scholar travelling far to seek knowledge, so you must know the language of the edicts well."

"The language that our friend wants to study is the language of the Vedas, Sanskrit, the language of scholars," said

the merchant. "These inscriptions are in the language of the people (Prakrit), for our benevolent Emperor wants them to be understood by all his subjects."

"I too know the language of the people that is used on the inscriptions," said the student. "The script (Brahmi) is the one script known both to scholars and scribes."

"I have heard that another script is used in a few of the inscriptions, those on the north-western border," said the record-keeper. "The people there must be using this other script (Kharoshthi) that reads from right to left."

"Can you all read and write?" the little girl asked eagerly.

"Merchants can usually write and officials too, for they must keep accounts and records," the record-keeper answered. "Scholars learn the Vedas and religious books by heart, but knowledge of writing is useful to carry on daily business."





"What do you write with ? I wish I could write !" exclaimed the little girl.

The young student smiled and unwrapped a cloth package to show her the strips of birch bark and palm leaf and the stylus and brush that he had with him.

"I have a hard day's work ahead of me tomorrow," said the record-keeper. "His Majesty himself sets us a good example. He has given us strict instructions that we must report to him about the affairs of his subjects at any time or place, whether he is eating, sleeping or in the palace gardens."

"The King's only joy is to work for the welfare of the land," said the ascetic. "He has stopped animal combats and the royal hunt. He wants no unnecessary bloodshed

either of men or of beasts."

"Ah, the animal combats !" exclaimed the Iranian. "I must admit I miss them. I saw them in Taxila when I was a boy. What fights they were—bull against bull, elephant against elephant ! But most of all I enjoyed the fights between two of those strange one-horned animals, with their horn in the middle of their long, broad snouts."

"An animal with one horn !" cried the little girl. "I have never seen one. And now that there are no more fights, I will never see one."

A quiet dark man, who was travelling with the record-keeper, now spoke, "I have seen the rhinoceros, little one, and can tell you about it. Elephants are in great demand, both for transport and for the elephant corps in the army, and I am in charge of elephant capture in the forests of the North. In these jungles there also lives this one-horned monster with skin as thick as armour. The wise elephant, who does not fear even the tiger,



avoids this animal."

"I would love to see a rhinoceros. I would not be frightened of it !" exclaimed the girl.

"There speaks a forest-dweller !" muttered the merchant under his breath.

The caretaker and his wife overheard him, and looked protectively at the child.

But the little girl was quite undisturbed. "I love the forest creatures," she said, smiling happily.

"No hunts ! No war !" The old servant grumbled from his corner. "How then can our great ruler be respected by other kings ? War and conquest are the business of kings and hunting is the most royal of sports !"

"His Majesty seeks conquest but it is through the spread of the law of piety," declared the record-keeper. "He communicates with great kings in distant lands and tells his friends, the kings of the West and the King of Lanka (Ceylon), that the only worth-while conquest is conquest by means of the law.

"Last year, the Emperor sent his own son, Prince Mahindra, to Sinhala (Lanka or Ceylon). The King of Lanka was converted along with all his people. That is the first conquest of the Law of Piety."

THE DAUGHTER FROM THE JUNGLE

The travellers dispersed to go to their sleeping-quarters. The stone-carver went off to see if his beasts were comfortable.

"Shall I take our friend to his horse and then see if little brother needs anything?" Bimbi asked. Her mother smiled in agreement and Bimbi ran off with the Iranian.

The caretaker's family moved into its own quarters where the children slept in a niche with their grandmother. "That merchant was looking at Bimbi with a great deal of curiosity," said the caretaker's wife. "I fear we shall have to tell her the truth concerning herself and she will be very unhappy."

"She must hear it some day—it may be tonight, it may be a year hence," the old woman replied. "Do not be so anxious, my daughter. Bimbi will recover from the shock, with our love to help her."

As the women were settling down for the night, Bimbi came in with tears in her eyes. "Mother, the trader was talking behind the stable and he said that I could not be your daughter."

"Come and sit by me, my daughter, and tell me what happened," said the



woman. Bimbi sat down but resisted her mother's attempt to put an arm round her. Then she began:

"The stone-cutter, the elephant-catcher and I went to see the Iranian's horse." Tears filled her eyes but she brushed them away. "As we came out of the stable, we heard the merchant saying to the King's official, 'That girl cannot possibly be their daughter. She must be an orphan, some jungle brat that they have kept out of pity. But it is strange that they should call her daughter and not servant or slave!'

"I had never thought about it before, but what he says is true—I do not look at all like you or Father. Why?" asked Bimbi directly.

The caretaker had heard the conversation as he entered. "We must recall the past in order to explain to you how our daughter came to us," he said. Then he continued in a quiet tone, "Many, many years ago, before we came to live at this caravanserai, your mother and I had never met and hundreds of miles separated our different homes and families.

"My father was in the service of the Emperor when he was Viceroy in Ujjain. My mother, your grandmother here, was then an attendant of the beautiful Didi, the rich



merchant's daughter, whom our Emperor loved as a young prince but whom he had to leave behind when he came to Pataliputra and became Emperor. I was married and had a family and home of my own.

"Then I was summoned to fight in the King's service. I returned safely but my wife and children had all died in an epidemic, and only my mother survived to break the news to me.

"I was desolate, and was glad when I was called to fight in the war far away—the last war that our Emperor fought—in the forested land of Kalinga.

"It was a long and bitter struggle. The soldiers on both sides robbed and plundered, burnt homes and butchered families. The peasants suffered greatly and so did the forest people. It was then that your mother lost her home and family and you too, barely eight months old, must have lost yours."

At this point, his wife took up the tale:

"I too had another home and family then. My husband was a cultivator and I had three children, one a new-born babe. Our fields and huts were near the forest and for a time we were left in peace. Then one day, a group of soldiers came, killed my husband and children, and burnt down our house. Before they could harm me, they were called away and rushed off.

"As I lay forlorn and miserable, a baby girl crawled up, crying piteously. She settled herself in my lap and fell asleep. When I tried to put her aside, she clung to me and would not let me go.

"So the days passed and the tiny dark-haired girl became very dear to me. We subsisted on wild berries, and



fruit and roots. One day, when I had gone to the edge of the forest in search of food, I tripped over a stone and fell. I must have fainted. When I regained consciousness, a man was bending over me, sprinkling water on my face.

“‘Do not be afraid,’ he said as I looked up at him in terror. ‘I would never harm a woman or a child. I came because I heard a child crying.’ Then looking at the girl who was now smiling and laughing, he asked with surprise, ‘Is she your child?’

“‘She clung to me after the soldiers had killed my own children,’ I explained. ‘But I have no means of supporting her. Take her and look after her!’”

Now the caretaker took up the tale:

“‘I cannot look after the child alone,’ I told her. ‘But if you come with me, I will take care of both of you for a while. After you have regained your strength, you can leave.’

“So we stayed together and when the war was over, I took you both home to my mother. When she heard of your misfortunes, she welcomed you with open arms, accepting your mother as her own daughter and you as her grandchild.

"Soon afterwards the Emperor was converted to the teachings of the Lord Buddha. He now greatly regretted the slaughter and suffering caused by his conquest and resolved to give up war. He has recorded on one of his inscriptions: 'If a hundredth or even a thousandth part of the people who were then killed or enslaved were now to suffer a similar fate, the King would be most deeply grieved.' He decided to govern by the Dharma, and a new life began for the whole of his empire. When I heard that the King's officers were looking for a caretaker with a family to take charge of a large rest-house, I applied for the job and was accepted. Here we began a new life, your grandmother, mother and I, and soon a little brother and then another baby boy were born to join the family."

Bimbi had listened to this long tale in silence. When it ended she said gravely, "So what the man said was true. I am not your child and I do not know who my father and mother were."

Then the grandmother spoke, "Don't you?" she asked. "Parents look after and protect their child. You would have died alone in the forest if your new mother had not fed you and looked after you. Nor would either of you have survived long, if my son had not undertaken to shelter and protect you. When little Aniket wakes, he calls for you. Aren't they your father, mother and brother?"

"Yes, they are," said Bimbi. She smiled and cuddled up to her grandmother. Then she got up, yawning, "Please wake me very early so that I can help Father and Mother, for there will be a lot of work with all these visitors. Besides, the elephant-catcher has promised to tell me more about the one-horned beast."

TRADE AT KAVERIPATTINAM

There was great excitement in the flourishing city of Kaveripattinam, the capital of the Chola kings. A large ship had just arrived and unloaded its rich merchandise and would soon be reloaded with the products of the land. People poured out of old Puhar, the fortified city with the King's palace and fine residences of the rich, through the central market-place, out on to the beach town on the foreshore. Here, amid the warehouses, wharfs and custom-house was the foreign quarter, filled with sailors and traders of many countries. The **harbour** at the river-mouth was crowded with ships, **barges** and **boats**, and in the distance rose a tall **light-house** tower.

In the early afternoon, **seven** young friends met. Perched



on a brick platform overlooking the beach, they watched the bustle below. They were Sattan, Paranan and Saduvan, sons of prosperous merchants, Pekan, son of a customs official, Appar, whose father was a scholar in the hall of learning, Rahul, a ship-captain's lad and Valluvar, whose parents were poets.

Just then Ilam, the potter's son, came into view, his shoulders bent by the weight of his baskets. "Ilam, Ilam, put down your pots and have some sweets with us," Valluvar called out.

Ilam gave a sigh of relief as he lifted the pole off his shoulders and sat down. "This morning I sold ten pots. Then I went to the bazaar to buy rice, salt, dried fish and honey for my mother. I even managed to save some of the payment in cowrie shells that I received," he said proudly.

"Pots, pots," Valluvar chanted, "glossy black and red or dusky black and grey; with patterned lids, wide-mouthed or beak-shaped. Pots to cook food to nourish the living and pots to hold the ashes of the dead!"



"Will you shut up!" said Saduvan, putting some sweets on a leaf and passing them to Ilam. "Must you sing about burial-urns on a festive day? Anyway, Ilam's father does not make those."

"Funeral-urns are made by another potter," said Ilam. "What delicious sweets! Are they from the shop in the bazaar?"

"No," replied Saduvan. "Mother made them specially for Father, who returned yesterday from a long voyage. He had gone to get goods from the North to sell to the *Yavana* (Greek and Roman) ships."

"Did your father travel by sea or land?" asked Rahul.

"This time he went by a coastal ship," replied Saduvan.

"Do men really travel across those dark forested hills?" asked Ilam.

"There has always been communication between Dakshinapatha and Uttarpatha," replied Appar.

Then turning to Saduvan he asked, "Your father has been by land in the past, hasn't he?"

"Yes, when he had to bring back horses," replied Saduvan. "He takes cotton cloth, spices, pearls, conch-shells and mother-of-pearl from our land, and returns with horses, gems, drugs and perfumes from different areas in the North. Horses are always in demand for the King and his army, while the gems, perfumes and drugs are used by our rich folk but also resold to the *Yavana* merchants."

"The exchange of goods and ideas has continued through the centuries," said Appar. "The Mauryans of Magadha knew of the pearls of the South. Asoka, the great Mauryan ruler, sent to us and even to Lanka teachers to teach the dharma as well as medicinal herb for both



men and animals.”

Suddenly Valluvar began signalling vigorously to a tall boy on the beach. “Kari, the parrot-catcher, is looking desperately unhappy,” he said, “I’ll fetch him. Give him my share of the sweets, Saduvan, please.”

Kari was a dark, tall, thin lad, poorly clad, usually with a cheerful grin on his face and a rose-ringed green parakeet perched on his shoulder and other parakeets in wicker cages, that he was going to sell. He turned away as Valluvar approached, but Valluvar seized his hand and pulled him along, talking eagerly all the time.

Valluvar made his friend sit down near him. Knowing that Kari would not talk easily, he returned tactfully to the original conversation. “Tell us about the goods, and all that your father has to do at the King’s custom-house, Pekan.”

“In the broad streets of the beach town, the goods lie outside the merchants’ warehouses, waiting to be valued and stamped with the King’s emblem—the terrible tiger with uplifted tail—and the dues on them collected before they are loaded on the ships,” explained Pekan. “Goods unloaded



from the ships too must be valued and stamped before the merchants can take charge of them.”

“I don’t really understand why our merchant princes, like Saduvan’s father, must go by caravan or ship to get products to supply *Yavana* ships, when the *Yavanas* themselves come to get these goods,” the potter’s lad said.

“That is a good point,” said Saduvan. “Father has crossed the bay to the mouths of the Ganga and the Irrawaddy and gone over the ocean to the eastern islands—all for supplies besides our own to resell to the *Yavanas*. They want pepper, pearls...”

"And parrots," interrupted Valluvar in an attempt to draw out the parrot-catcher, but Kari only frowned.

"Yes, parrots, peacocks and monkeys; fine muslin, ivory and tortoise-shell; and *vaidurya* (beryls, aquamarines) that rich *Yavanas* love for seals and cameos. They pay for these mostly in gold."

"They bring things to sell too," said Pekan, "two-handed jars full of cool grape-wine, pottery, glassware and curiously wrought lamps."

"They do," agreed Saduvan, "but they need our products more than we want theirs. So our merchants go far and wide to earn wealth for the King, the city and themselves. They get pepper from inland trading houses as well as from eastern lands rich in spices. Tiger and leopard skins are required as armour both for our soldiers and for export to the *Yavanas*. Our merchants get pelts and ivory from the hunters of our forests and tortoise-shell from our own sea-coast as well as that of the eastern islands (the Malay Archipelago)."

Sattan now took up the tale. "It seems that the *Yavanas* can never have enough of these products and of our fine cotton cloth. They pay well and their gold fills our treasuries. And, of course, rice, fish, sesame oil, bananas and jack-fruit are needed to feed sailors and city- and village-dwellers alike."

Ilam interrupted anxiously. "If the sailors take so much, what about rice and fish for us, poor folk?" Kari frowned and nodded agreement.

"Don't worry," said Pekan, "there is plenty for everyone. No rice-land is as rich as the land of the Kaveri, and our coastal waters swarm with fish."

THE PARROT-CATCHER AND THE YAVANA MERCHANT

Suddenly Kari burst out, "Why can't the *Yavanas* stay in their own land?"

"What is wrong? It's your parrot, isn't it? What has happened? Tell us about it," Appar asked gently.

Kari's words came tumbling out, "Your *Yavana* friend took my parrot away from me!"

The boys looked at one another. "Which *Yavana*?" asked Ilam in amazement. "Did he snatch it from you?"

Kari's eyes blazed with anger. "My father sold my loved one out of greed," he choked.

"Begin at the beginning and tell us the whole story," said Appar firmly.

At last the words poured out, "Yesterday was my last happy day. Father had just returned from a tiger hunt and Mother had fed the crows as a thanksgiving for his safe return. It is the parrot-breeding season and I had reared eight parrots that I was going to sell in the city. That evening the salt merchant stopped at our village. He had been round the hill villages selling salt and dried fish and was returning to the town with a lighter load—honeycombs, jack-fruits, sweet roots and bitter gourds obtained from the forest-folk. He told my father that a *Yavana* ship was approaching the port. 'You haven't seen the great city. Come with me and bring your tiger-skins yourself instead of waiting for the trader to collect them,' he said. So we all set off." At this point Kari's voice broke. After a pause he continued: "When we reached the city, we went to the custom-house and arranged for the sale of the tiger-skins. There were sailors on the wharf,



Yavanas and others, and they were eager to buy the parrots in the wicker cages made by Mother. Then a *Yavana* merchant came along. He was wearing a thick body-bag (jacket) and a cloth round his waist, and he seemed rich ..”

Kari stopped again and Paranar said soothingly, “The *Yavanas* do wear many clothes. It may be that their land is cold. Anyway it is profitable for us, because we can sell them more cloth.”

Kari swallowed hard and continued, “My parrot was sitting on my shoulder, calling greetings. Suddenly this bad *Yavana* came up. ‘I’ll buy this parrot,’ he said. ‘It is not for sale. It has no cage,’ replied my father. ‘That doesn’t matter. Put him in any cage but this is the one I must have. I want him for a boy in my country who is sick and confined to his bed.’ ‘No, no!’ I cried and ran with my Pearl balancing on my shoulder.

“Then the wicked one took out a silver coin such as

I have never seen before. My father—it was as if an elephant-hunger had seized him—released a parrot from its cage, grabbed my Pearl, put him in it, and the merchant walked off with the cage. I ran after him shouting, but my father stopped me. He said he would buy me some sweets but I ran away from him. Since then I have wandered up and down the beach, thinking of my loved one.”

“The *Yavana* will treat him well,” said Pekan in a soothing voice. “I have seen cages of silver wire with fittings of ivory and tortoise-shell that our craftsmen make to sell to rich *Yavanas* for their pets.”

“My Pearl does not want to be in a silver cage, he wants to perch on me,” said Kari.

“When did this happen?” asked Sattan.

“In the early morning. If it hadn’t been for the salt merchant’s cart, we wouldn’t have met the *Yavana*, and my father wouldn’t have had this elephant-hunger for a coin that he can’t





eat.”

“Have you eaten this morning?” Valluvar asked gently.

“How should I eat when I am feeling choked? What do you think my Pearl is eating?”

“Sailors always have seeds and nuts to feed their parrots,” said Saduvan kindly. “Your Pearl must be having a good feed. Do have some of these sweets, Kari.”

“Thank you, Saduvan, but I can’t swallow. Now I’ll go down to the beach by myself and look at the waters over which my Pearl will travel. I can’t bear to think that he won’t be there to greet me when I wake in the mornings. Maybe some seaman wants a sturdy lad to work on his ship and I’ll go off to sea. I’ll climb ships’ masts instead of forest trees and my father can catch parrots for himself.”

“I won’t let you go without me. I shall hold on to you,” Valluvar said affectionately.

A SEA OF COMMERCE : SHIPS AND SEAWAYS

Paranar turned to Rahul, the sea-captain's boy, and said, "Tell us why these foreigners from the West come to Tamil land."

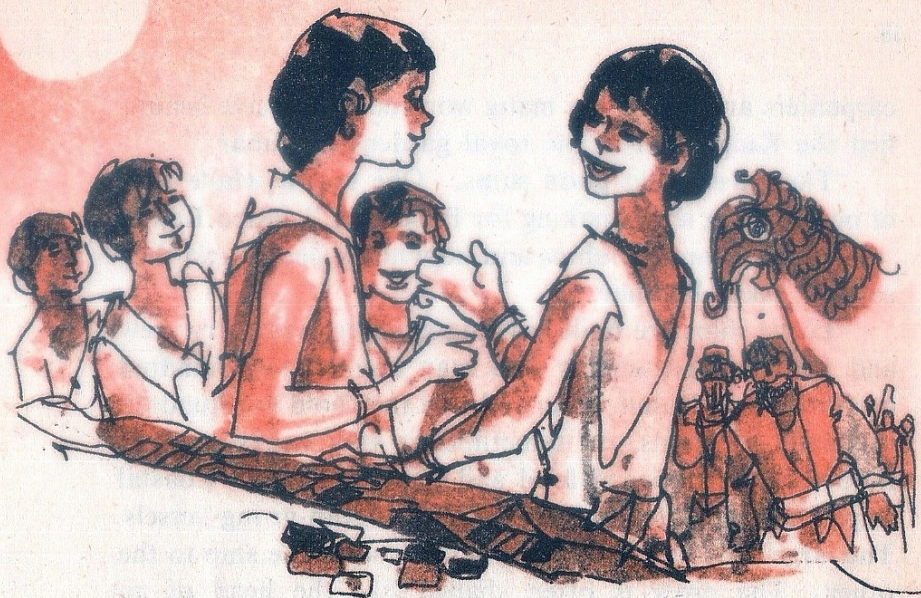
"The *Yavanas* trade with all three realms of the three crowned kings," Rahul began. "Muziris, the Chera port, is directly on their route. The *Yavanas* go there for pepper—more than half their return cargo is pepper. Then for the queen of jewels, the pearl, they go to Korkai (Kolkai), which is a great centre of trade in pearls and conch-shells in the Pandya kingdom."

Saduvan now continued the explanation:

"The *Yavanas* have an elephant-hunger for the fine products of Tamil land; and as our Chola coast is in an excellent midway position between the lands of the east and the west, it is most suited to supply them. Our chief export is fine muslin cloth; for, the cotton plant or 'wool-bearing tree', as the *Yavanas* call it, is unknown in their land. But the trade is so profitable that in addition to all the products from the Chola land itself, our enterprising merchants get pepper, spices and tortoise-shell from the eastern islands as well as gems and ivory from the North, which they resell to the *Yavanas*."

"There are so many *Yavanas* and other foreigners at Kaveripattinam," said Pekan, "and yet my father tells me that the *Yavana* merchants have their own settlement farther north at Poudouke. The *Yavanas* have homes, wharfs and yards, and their ships come in several times a year, for it is a calm harbour."

"Do these monstrous *Yavanas* eat pepper as we eat



rice?" Kari suddenly asked sarcastically.

"Their food must be very tasteless and insipid. Why else would they be so eager to flavour it with pepper?" said Paranar.

"A little pepper gives taste to the poor man's rice gruel," said Ilam anxiously. "If the foreigners take away so much, what will be left for us?"

"There is plenty for all," said Sattan. "The pepper vine grows profusely in Tamil land. The pepper the *Yavanas* desire most is white pepper. That is not much used by our craftsmen's families."

"Do these *Yavanas* make nothing for themselves?" asked Kari scornfully.

"The *Yavanas* are skilful craftsmen," said Pekan. "They have made lamps for the King's city. Moreover, *Yavana*

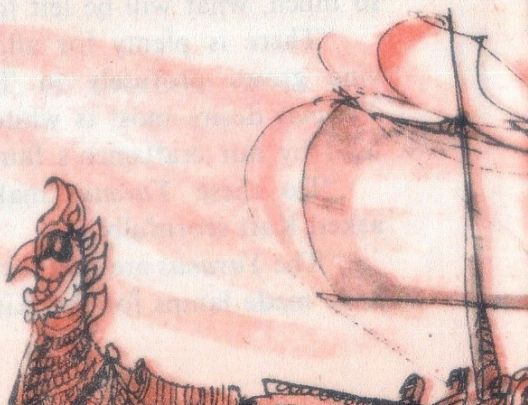
carpenters are among the many workmen who have beautified the King's hall in the royal gardens at Puhar."

"They also build good ships. One sees a whole fleet of ocean-going ships making for Poudouke," added Rahul.

"How big are our ships and how many people can they carry?" asked Parinar.

"Large ships are built for long voyages, and carry crew and merchant passengers who may number two hundred or more," said Rahul. "In addition they hold five hundred cartloads of goods, or sometimes a very heavy load of timber, and supplies of food and drinking water. Coastal ships, however, are lighter than the ocean-going vessels. The large ones have cabins from one end of the ship to the other. The prow is often shaped like the head of an elephant, a buffalo, a parrot or a peahen. Lofty masts with great sails catch the wind, but a tempest may disable them. Worse, however, is a dead calm when the wind drops altogether and the ship is motionless on the waters."

"The King's Sailing Superintendents make excellent arrangements to assist damaged ships," said Pekan. "But we help can reach a ship stranded in the ocean, when mast



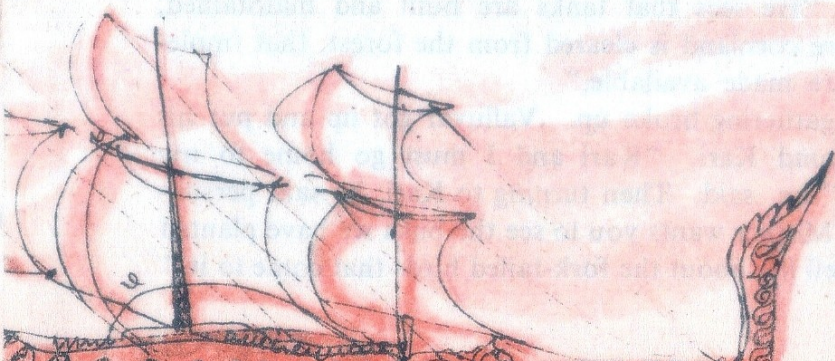
and sail have been crippled by the wind and waves. Yet such voyages are regularly undertaken and usually accomplished safely by our Chola ships as well as by Arab and *Yavana* seamen."

"Do tell us how sailors manage to accomplish this trackless ocean-crossing," said Sattan.

"The winds that blow over the open sea have their own secrets," said Rahul, "and sailors have learnt some of them. There are seasonal winds that blow in a particular direction during one season and in the opposite direction at another time. The sailors use these to sail across the sea."

"I shudder to think of the danger and discomfort that Saduvan's father undergoes on his travels!" burst out Ilam, the city-dweller.

"All life is like that!" said Saduvan. "Think of the village herdsman fighting and sometimes dying to save his cows from cattle-lifters, tigers and leopards. In each hamlet there is a *verakkal* (hero-stone), where women make offerings and pray for the safety of their men. The pearl-diver risks death all day and every day! What about



Kari's father and the danger he faces when he hunts tigers and elephants? Kari himself knows that any time the hooded cobra may lift its head above the parrot-hole in the tree." He turned to Kari, hoping to draw him out, but the parrot-catcher remained grim and silent.

"The city prospers and the *Yavana* gold pours into the treasury of the great King," said Sattan. The others nodded their approval.

Kari's voice interrupted harshly, "What use does the King make of the gold? How does it benefit us?"

A chorus of voices answered him. "The King's first duty is to protect his realm. He defends it from the ambitions of other kings, from attacks from the hill tribes and from cattle-raiders. This means maintaining a strong army." "The King is a great patron of the arts. Dancers, singers and poets flock to him as parrots fly to a fruit-bearing tree." "In garden retreats and halls of learning, the King provides shelter for saints, recluses and scholars." "Then there are also festivals and wrestling and boxing matches for all to watch."

"How about the tillers, shepherds and hunters?" Kari asked gruffly.

"A good king never neglects the food-producer," said Sattan. "He sees that tanks are built and maintained, that more cornland is cleared from the forest, that implements are made available."

The gathering broke up. Valluvar got up and put his arm around Kari. "Kari and I must go home to my mother," he said. Then turning to Kari, he said persuasively, "Mother wants you to see the bush we have planted and to tell her about the fork-tailed birds that come to it."

SONGS AND RECONCILIATION

Kari found himself being hustled along from the beach town to the King's city. They passed through the bazaar and went on to the residential quarter. Valluvar's parents had a small beautiful house near the halls of learning and garden retreats. The latticed windows of the wooden house had holes like the eyes of a deer, and the wooden doorway was intricately carved. Valluvar told Kari to look around and disappeared inside.

It did not take his mother long to understand the situation. She came and stretched out her hand to take Kari's but he said, "Let me wash first, lady." She smiled and Valluvar took him to the back of the house where there was a great clay water jar of a pleasing black and red. Kari washed off the dust and sweat, and it seemed to him also something of the pain.

Valluvar's mother then led the boys to the front garden, to a wooden seat the legs of which were decorated with tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl. She had already put two big bowls of butter milk for them there. Kari drank



it gratefully and ate the soft ripe banana placed beside it.

After they had washed again, they sat on the doorstep and Valluvar's mother put her arm around Kari. "You must not be so sad, Kari," she said. "*Yavana* merchants love their parrots and feed them well. A *Yavana* merchant told me of poems written by poets of his land about pet parrots bought from India."

"But he could have bought half a dozen fine parrots—why did he have to take mine?" asked Kari.

"You had trained your parrot to speak so sweetly, he thought it would comfort his sick child," explained the lady.

"How will it help the *Yavana* boy when my parrot speaks to him in my language?" Kari objected.

"A parrot trained so well to speak men's words will soon pick up another language," the lady replied.

"So my Pearl will learn to speak to the boy and he will be happy, but I will not," said Kari bitterly.

"You must remember that the child is lying in bed and is unable to walk in the forest, climb trees, or see birds as you do," said the lady gently.

Kari thought all this over; then he broke out passionately, "To think that my father sold him for a silver coin! Can one eat silver?"

"You must rid yourself of this burden of anger against your father," said the lady. "Now sit with me while Valluvar runs an errand for me and we will wash away your anger with a song." Valluvar's mother had sent her son to find Kari's father, for Valluvar was sure he had seen him on the beach looking as unhappy as Kari.

The lady brought out her *veena* and plucking the strings

gently, began to sing a song about a parrot. Kari lost his sullen look and, almost unwillingly, began to smile.

Down on the beach, a dark strong man was moving disconsolately, peering here and there, when the boy with the *erukku* garlands pulled his arm. "You are looking for Kari, aren't you?" Valluvar asked. "He is at my house and my mother is singing to him to comfort him for the sale of his parrot."

"I could not help it!" said the hunter, as if in answer to a reproach. "A silver coin for a jungle parrot! I had to take it to save against a year of famine. But it will have brought little good if I cannot take Kari back to his mother. I feel lost in this strange sea-city with ships and shiploads, strange chattering men, and the noise of the water always in my ears."



"My mother will persuade Kari to go home with you," Valluvar said reassuringly. "Now you must come quickly so that both of you can eat some food before setting out for your home in the bamboo grove."

"But that is not possible!" said the horrified hunter. "A lady like your mother cannot let a hunter and tracker of the hills into her house!"

"This lady can," said Valluvar. "We'd better hurry. She is waiting for you."

Valluvar took the hunter to a stream to wash and then guided him into the western city. Talking all the time and pointing out various landmarks, he hustled the bewildered hillman till they came to the entrance of the house. Valluvar's mother came out, holding Kari's hand. "We were expecting you," she said in her soft, musical voice. "Kari has laid out banana leaves in the back garden and I have prepared rice, curds and a good pepper soup. Now you must sit down at once to eat and then start for home, otherwise Kari's mother will be very anxious."

They sat down and Valluvar and his mother served them till they had had their fill. Valluvar chattered away, asking questions about the black fork-tailed drongos in the garden and the antelopes in the hills, to which Kari gave brief replies, for the hunter seemed to be struck dumb.

Before leaving, the hunter touched the lady's feet. "I do hope it does not get too dark before you reach home," she said. At the note of anxiety in her voice, the grateful hunter found his voice. "Do not fear for us, lady," he said. "I have a fire churn and can easily light a brand to keep animals away."

Father and son walked in silence.



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