

A NIGHT OF CYCLONE

The Talkative Man said:

It was in Vizagapatam that I finally got a job. A *sowcar* was building a mansion on the Beach Road and he gave me twenty-five rupees a month and a small house to live in. He labelled me supervisor of construction. At first the designation seemed to be vague. But I soon learnt what I was expected to do. A supervisor's job is no joke in the beginning: the contractor thinks that you are an upstart; the stone-mason has a feeling that you are an intruder; and the carpenter thinks that he is your equal in status. It is plain sailing when you have discovered your duty which consists in bullying the contractor, frightening the stone mason, and pretending to be carrying out a general scheme of retrenchment.

Believe me when I tell you that I considered myself the most blessed man in Madras Presidency at that time. Blessing number one: work was easy. I generally conducted my supervision from my bed through a window. Blessing number two: my wife and I were living in a sweet idyll. Her temper was uniformly good in those days. It might have been because she had not brought into the world our first boy; he was due to make his appearance in a couple of months. Blessing number three: our house was situated in the finest locality. The sea was not ten yards from my door.

One November morning I got up at about 9.30 and found it almost dark outside. The workmen were waiting in a body at my door and asked to be let off since it was going

to be a rough day. I sternly replied I would not stand any nonsense and ordered them back to work.

A little later I went through the Bazaar street, where everything was oppressively dull and calm. It was half an hour past ten in the morning and yet there was only a faint twilight. Some shops were already closing. Of all things on earth when I see shops closing in day time I instinctively look forward to something terrible. I could detect something panicky about everybody. Just then a lot of children burst out of a school yelling at the top of their voices. It relieved the monotonous calm a bit. One child however came out bitterly weeping. I asked him what the matter was. He sobbed out, 'Is it true that the world is going to end today? Our teacher said so.'

When I went home my wife told me in a somewhat shaky voice that the world was going to end that day. She took the trouble to assure me at the same time that there was not a word of truth in it, and then gave a hollow laugh, I managed to crack one or two silly jokes about the end of the world, admonishing her to take only her best sarees with her when leaving it.

At about midday I found that the workmen had left the work and gone home without my permission.

I do not remember where exactly the game commenced. At about three, I found the elements in a fiendish glee and about to break their accumulated fury on Man. The coconut trees edging the sand were swaying to and fro almost touching the ground each time. The sea looked sinister in the gloomy light. I wondered if it was the same sea that used to make me poetic and sentimental at times. The water was reddish brown in colour, the colour of dirty blood. Each trembling wave stood half as high as a coconut tree ready to

fall on and devour the earth any minute. From that brown simmering expanse terrible gurgling and hissing noises rose in the air.

My wife sat up for a while in dismal silence, and then went to bed saying that she was not feeling well. She was pale and nervous. Lighting a lamp, I sat by her side and tried to keep her mind engaged by reading to her interesting bits from a newspaper. By this time the sea was raving and shrieking like a devil, the wind was screaming for blood, and the rain beat down on the roof with the noise of a thousand hammers on a zinc sheet. My wife was listening to my most entertaining tit-bits in grim silence. Gradually she began to give low moans. She complained of pain down her sides.

At about eight in the evening she grew worse. I did not know what to do. She blurted out between moans that I was to light the oven and cook the food. I sulked into the kitchen with a groan. Hunger was scalding my stomach. If next to cycling I have failed to learn anything, it is lighting a fire. It has always been a mystery to me how our women do it and all honour to them. I stuffed the oven with firewood till it could hold no more and then looked for the match-box and found it on the sill of an open window.

Then I struck fifty sticks one by one without producing so much as a whiff of smoke. With the fifty-first I lighted a newspaper and tried to light the firewood with it. One newspaper after another kept burning. The firewood would not catch fire. Only my fingers did. And by the way, it was then that I genuinely wondered how houses and shops caught fire in this world. The small kitchen was filled with smoke and my nostrils and eyes had their share.

I left the kitchen and went back to the hall, in a very bad temper. My wife asked me if I had eaten anything, to which I gave a biting reply. There was a chance if surviving even the cyclone, but not that hunger. My wife then reminded me that there was a little milk in the store room, which was only a dignified name for a particular corner in my wretched kitchen. I rushed to the store room. I was about to drain off the milk at one pull, when I thought that my wife might need it any time now. I kept the milk back, determined to fill my stomach with any stuff that was available. I ransacked all the things in the store room, plunging my hand into this stuffy pot and that. I then put my hand into the pot containing tamarind and suddenly withdrew it with a howl and looked in. There was a big black scorpion in the pot.

The sting began to take effect. I jumped and howled with pain. I fell down and rolled on the floor.

Now the storm had gathered full strength. Tiles from the roof were flying off. In the best room in my house calendars and pictures were flying like missiles hither and thither. There was no place to stand in. Water was deep everywhere. The house might collapse any moment. I could have borne anything, but not the scorpion sting at that time. I waded through the water in the front room and reached my wife's room. She was wailing and moaning, writhing like a worm on her bed. I had to stand there and look on not knowing what to do.

She then admitted the fact that it was labour pain. Why were things crowding on me? I was savage enough to curse her for choosing that day.

When her pain gave her respite, she said, 'I do not wish to trouble you, but can you bring some help?' Bringing her

help! Wherefrom? Who would come out in that hellish carnival? Whom did I know?

However, I took an umbrella and a lantern, and throwing at her a word of cheer set out. A part of the road in front of my house had collapsed, and there was sea water in its place. I attempted a short cut to my 'neighbour's' bungalow, which was built on an eminence. Meanwhile, the umbrella was snatched from my hands and went no one knows where. Next, the lantern, the so-called hurricane lantern, went out. I walked in darkness knocking my shins against every stone on the way, stumbling on bushes of cactus, and having the pleasure of cold rain water running down my spine. I felt that I was letting myself into the hands of a demon. It looked as though the wind would fold me up and lift me in the air and dash me down or twist me and tie up my body into a thousand knots. And all this, while trees were crashing down left and right. With bruised and bleeding feet, I panted uphill to the bungalow of my 'neighbour'. Not till I was actually in his porch did I realize how rash I had been. The 'neighbour' was a European; he was a police officer—D.S.P. or something; and he had a ferocious bull dog. A formidable combination of things! I retraced my steps quickly.

Half-way I stood undecided. I was new to the place. I not only did not know anybody, but did not even know where anybody could be found. I suddenly recollected that in the same road a doctor lived in a castle-like house called 'Ocean View'. I started towards it, sucking my scorpion stung finger, in which, it seemed to me, needles, instead of blood, were circulating. Suddenly I found myself weeping loudly like a child.

I ran up the never ending slopes and steps and stood in the veranda of 'Ocean View'. For about twenty minutes I

violently banged on the door. Then I ran round and round the house shouting. A window opened and a lady demanded who I was. What a foolish question! As if she would know all about me the moment I announced my name! All the same I gave her an epitome of my miserable life up to the hour, of which she did not hear a single word. She then asked me my name. I shouted it back. There was so much noise all around that each question and answer had to be repeated a dozen times. It was most exhausting. I must have cut a very homely figure with the rain water dripping from me and my wild wet hair plastered on my face, and my dress swathed in mud. I could clearly see that the lady took me for an apparition or a thug. I asked her in the mildest tone possible if the doctor was in. She summoned her last ounce of courage and replied that he was away at Bombay, and that he wouldn't return for a month. And then she added quite irrelevantly, perhaps to impress the thug, that there were a lot of relatives sleeping in the house and they would be wild if they were disturbed. I assured her that I was not a thug and explained my condition. She was sympathetic enough, no doubt, but what could she do? It was her husband and not she or any of the terrible relatives slumbering in the house that had studied medicine.

I raced back home.

I assured my wife that help would be coming. She brightened up a little at this piece of lie. She then advised me to open the window on the side of the sea since the gale threatened to topple the house down if the closed window resisted it. The house already seemed to be creaking and rocking. But to open the window would be to invite the storm into the room. We were discussing this when all of a sudden there was a crash—the kitchen was down. It was followed by a terrific bang and explosion in our room. The

window under discussion was smashed by the wind. The light went out. I sat stunned for a while. Then, groping about in the dark I tried to fix up the window with my hand (which was still smarting with scorpion venom) against the ferocious gale. And all the time my wife was killing me with her cries pitched in various keys. I became mad with rage, hurt my hand worse, and fell into wild abusing. I dropped the window down and stood agape as the loud, lusty cry of a newborn baby pierced the stormy darkness.

The Talkative Man rose and hallooed, 'Boy! Come here!' A giggling, radiant urchin came in. The Talkative Man patted the urchin on the head and said, 'Well, sir, this is the gentleman who arrived on that fine night.'