

The wailing of a helpless soul - a true story -

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Grandmother sat on the veranda, rolling the beads of the rosary. Old age has got a special charm. The grace and the poise that came with the mellowing of years, the light of wisdom on the serene brow, the calm dignity of wrinkles - Grandma had all these. She used to give me valuable information – the fruits of a lifetime.

The pale light of the evening was beginning to fade when, carried on the still air, a loud voice could be heard speaking outside the gate. It was the familiar voice of Emmanuel, kneeling on the road, his arms outstretched and gazing in prayer up at the sky.

‘Heavenly Mother, help!’ ‘Darling boy, please tell Thampuratty to give me an old shirt. The grand festival of the church is nearing.’

Grandmother was walking towards the gate. Hearing this request she told him, ‘Emmanuel, I shall give you a new shirt and dhoti for the coming festival of St Sebastian.’

‘Heavenly Mother, help!’ He knelt down once again on the road and prayed in loud voice. I stood there, watching him till he walked off to the market.

Emmanuel was the best known person in our little town. He had no family to bind him to society. Life held no hope or joy for him, no promise of light-hearted happiness. His moods would fluctuate. When Emmanuel was high, he dressed like a tribal king and performed primitive dances. His way of life reminded me of Christ’s words, ‘Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them’.

On the day before the festival, Grandmother gave him new clothes and on the afternoon of the festival I saw him in the street dressed up in them. Newcomers crowded around him and listened to him - he was in a prophetic delirium. He began to give the Sermon on the Mount. The crowd interrupted him with shouts and laughter. In the end, he shouted, ‘Hypocrites, and blasphemers...’ The crowd encouraged him, ‘you, a generation of vipers’, and then added a four letter obscenity. He continued, ‘He that humbleth himself shall be exalted and the haughty shall be abused.’ He began to speak like a prophet in tones so clear that they seemed to fill the universe, like hard rocks of truth.

He jumped from one topic to another. When buses passed, he gestured like the traffic police. He felt as if the whole burden of managing the festival was entrusted to him. His dramatic charm seemed to have captivated everybody’s heart.

The festival was grander than on previous years. For some days, Emmanuel did not come home. One evening, I was bothering grandmother with a lot of questions. ‘What happens to us after death?’ I asked. Grandmother told me that all human beings have a soul that lives eternally, even after the body has been committed to death, and that rises up through the air to the bright stars above! Then the familiar voice of Emmanuel was

once again heard outside the gate. 'Heavenly Mother, help! Thampuratty, please give me some food.'

'Oh Emmanuel, how was the festival?' Grandmother asked him. He gave us the look of a whipped dog. Tears filled his eyes, draining his heart of all its brooding bitterness. They ran down his withered cheeks. Meanwhile I noticed some ulcerating wounds on his head, neck shoulders and trunk. The new clothes, which Grandmother had given him before the festival were torn and blood stained. He was a living tale of woe.

'Who did this to you? What barbarians!' Grandmother shouted. Tears veiled her eyes and the words died on her lips. On the night of the festival a group of drunkards had assaulted Emmanuel when he cautioned them with the biblical words, 'Dogs return to the vomitus.'

We stood gazing out of the window till our lonely friend disappeared from sight. The stars in the unclouded sky blinked in pain.

The harvest had been gathered and the fields were brown and dry. For a time Emmanuel lived a normal life. Then came frightful days of rain and wind. Emmanuel became gloomy. He sought refuge in isolation. Sometimes he burst into spells of crying. He did not know why he cried - it was like sinking into mental quicksand. The strife and struggle of life was making him a miserable wretch on the face of this beautiful cosmos. He got frightened even by the raucous cry of crows and the croaking of bull frogs.

Summer came to the town again. The sun blazed down on the streets, no breath of wind stirred, not a drop of rain fell. Gradually, Emmanuel came out of his shell. But moods began to change. He began to get excited. Constant shouting and laughing filled the streets. Words poured forth from his mouth, one phrase unrelated to the next. He tore his clothes off. He began to feel that he was all powerful with thoughts whirling whirled through his head. He talked and talked and talked. People began to think of Emmanuel as a nuisance. He became hindrance to the traffic. I began to sense something tragic and my fears proved to be not without foundation.

The long expected festival week arrived once again. The whole town was happy and jubilant. A few days before the festival, I was returning from the school in the evening when I noticed a crowd in the street. A police bus was parked nearby. I looked frantically around. Emmanuel was handcuffed and two policemen stood on either side of him. He was giving the Sermon on the Mount. His voice was hoarse. He looked at me with his solid gaze, like a beast of burden panting under its load. Unceremoniously, the tribal King was pushed into the bus. Nobody said good-bye to him. As the police bus moved off, the last, familiar words I could hear were 'Heavenly Mother, help!' In the distance was heard the beating of drums and the blare of trumpets, and all the church bells began to ring to announce the commencement of the evening festival ceremony.

Grandma told me that Emmanuel had been taken to the state mental hospital and that once he got cured he would come back. Without Emmanuel, there was dead silence in the streets. Nobody spoke about him. All the people soon forgot him. We waited for months and years, but he never returned to the town.