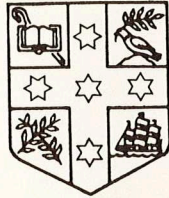


KAMATA



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AYALIV

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1

EVENING was drawing on as Kamala neared the village. She was on her way home from school and her school-books were in a little cloth bag which she held tightly in her right hand. She passed through the village streets just as the lamps were being lit, and bidding her friend Sumitra, who had walked back from school with her, "Goodnight", she quickly walked along the road by the slime covered tank to the Harijan Galli where she lived. Kamala's folk were from the "Depressed Classes": only a few decades ago her grand-father would never have dared to walk through the village as she had done and even on the main road he would have had to stand aside to permit those from a higher plane of society to pass by undefiled. But times had changed for the better and Kamala was the first from her clan to go to school and learn to read and write. She was already, at the tender age of ten years, the one who read and wrote the letters for most of the folk in their street.

Kamala was the eldest of five children. After her came Kallappa (his name means "a stone". His father, Satyappa, called him that to deceive the evil spirits and thus to discourage them from putting the "evil eye" upon his first-born son). Then came Basappa, little Gourawa, and Pushpa, the baby. Their house was not in any way pretentious. It was made of rough stones,

plastered together with mud, with a roof of country tiles placed over bamboo rafters and a mud-floor smeared with cowdung. In one corner stood the chula, where Ratna, Kamala's mother, cooked. It had no chimney and as a result the house was filled with smoke whenever food was being prepared. On one side was a row of brass vessels, in which foodstuffs and water were kept. On the other side was the bedding, shared by the whole family. There was only one room in the house. From the rafters hung baby Pushpa's cradle and in one niche of the wall was the family idol, which Satyappa worshipped every morning and evening. At night a smoky oil lamp provided enough light for them to have their food, but Kamala found it almost impossible to read by it for any length of time. Their house was a good deal better than the stick and mud homes in which some of their neighbours lived. Satyappa was reckoned a great man in the community. His devotion to the gods was well known: almost every year he would go to the great shrine of Yellamma, forty miles away, to worship at the festival. Some wondered that he had not devoted Kamala to the service of the goddess and it was rumoured that he still intended to do it some time. Whenever there was a festival in honour of Doddamma, the village goddess whom all the Harijans worshipped, Satyappa was called upon to officiate and was always suitably rewarded for his services. For that reason, and also because he was the owner of several fields, he was rather more well to do than most of his neighbours.

Kamala found her younger brothers and sister waiting for her. They called to her as soon as they

caught sight of her. Kallappa was just bringing the buffalo in as she reached the house. Her mother was busy preparing the evening meal and Kamala was soon helping her with this. She felt hungry after her day at school: she had had a cold jowar bread and some vegetables for lunch but was looking forward to her curry (rice) and meal that night.

It was not long before Satyappa returned and he was strangely excited.

"Do you know what I heard today?" he began. "There has been an outbreak of Cholera in Bagiwadi. Already several people have died."

Ratna too, looked worried when she heard this news. Bagiwadi was only ten miles away from Shivapur, their own village.

"I don't really wonder at it," Satyappa went on. "Only last week I was speaking to the Pujari from there and he was telling me how the people there have been neglecting their duties to the village-goddess. Even here it has been the same: we have not had a proper festival to Doddamma for ages. But we have been faithful to her: I am sure that she will not allow Maramma, the Cholera-goddess, to strike *our* household."

Ratnamma nodded. She had begun to serve her husband's food, while she herself waited on him. Kamala told the younger children about her day at school: she knew how much Kallappa was looking forward to going to school himself the next year.

The next day Kamala went, as usual, to school. But when she got there she found the school yard full of people. A big motor-van was drawn up inside the yard. At the back of the van a couple of tables had been placed and on one of these was a primus stove. There were two men in white clothes, and their peon was making all the children and adults who gathered get into line to have an injection. The teachers were helping get the people into line.

"What has happened?" enquired Kamala of Mrs. Rao, her teacher.

"There is Cholera in the district" Mrs. Rao replied, "so the Government has sent these men to give everyone injections of a special kind of medicine to stop them getting the disease."

"But my father says that people get Cholera because Maramma is angry with them," replied Kamala.

Mrs. Rao laughed. "Lots of village people think that," she said, "but doctors have proved that it is really caused by little germs, tiny creatures like little worms, which enter the body through dirty food and cause the trouble."

Kamala was bewildered but she thought it well to be doubly safe. She got into line with the others and had a jab in her arm from one of the men. It didn't hurt quite as much as she had thought it might.

"Where do you live, little girl?" the man enquired, as he pulled out the needle.

"In Shivapur, sir," replied Kamala.

"Well, be sure and tell everyone there to come here tomorrow. The road there is not passable in this weather, but we will be here tomorrow. Tell your people that they must come."

"Yes, sir", replied Kamala, salaaming politely.

There was obviously to be no school that day, so Kamala set off home to pass on the message.

When she reached Shivapur she could hear the sound of wailing. That very morning several people had fallen ill, and within a few hours three of them had died. Kamala hurried to the Harijan quarter and learned that two people in their own street were ill. Within a few minutes of her arrival she could hear the wailing from one of the houses that told all and sundry that death had visited the house.

Kamala lost no time in passing on the message about the injections but no-one paid any attention to her. Her own father, Satyappa, laughed at her.

"Any one knows that it is the goddess Maramma who causes Cholera," he said. "When we have placated her, all will be well. What possible good could these injections do? Did you have one yourself?"

"Yes, Father," she added, showing him the red patch on her arm. "The men that gave them seemed very wise and my teacher too told me that Cholera is caused by germs, not by the wrath of Maramma."

“What nonsense they teach in these schools! We shall see,” he commented.

While Kamala was talking to her father, a hubbub was heard in the street outside. The wife of one of the men who had died began to run about, shouting at the top of her voice. “Maramma is angry with us. We have neglected her shrine. Let us satisfy her thirst with blood and she will take her hand away from us.”

Satyappa was delighted. He knew that he would be busy for the next day. Preparations for the worship were soon under way. The next day was an auspicious day and it would be well to appease the goddess as soon as possible. All that night the women prepared the rice for the sacrifice. Satyappa himself hurried to the shrine of Maramma, under a Neem tree on the outskirts of the village. He carefully washed the crude stone image and whitewashed the stone shelter which had been built over it and placed daubs of saffron and turmeric on the stones.

The next day Kamala was kept home from school. She helped her mother to cook the rice for the sacrifice. She was sorry to learn that it was their buffalo calf which was to be sacrificed and felt sad as she saw it being washed in the tank for the last time. Three more people died that day. The whole of the Harijan community became very excited over the prospect of the worship. Towards evening the procession started. Kamala was told to stay inside but her curiosity got the better of her and she crept outside to watch the proceed-

ings. The men, shouting and carrying torches, led the buffalo calf to the open space before the shrine. There was such a crowd that she could not see everything that was going on. Then she noticed that her father, who was directing the proceedings, had a big knife in his hands. She saw the blade gleam in the darkness. He brought it down with all his strength and severed the buffalo calf's neck with one blow, while the crowd looking on cheered. The blood was spinkled over the rice, which was then taken up and sprinkled throughout the village. Kamala felt sick as she watched it all. Were the gods really like that, she wondered? She quietly made her way back to the house.

Satyappa came home feeling happy. “We have done what was wanted”, he stated confidently, “and now Maramma will be satisfied. I don't think there'll be any more Cholera here now.”

Just after midnight Kamala was awakened by the sound of someone being sick. She opened her eyes and realised that her mother had lit the lamp, and that she and her father were bending over Kallappa. But when she looked at Kallappa's face she was shocked. He had been alright when they went to bed: but now one look at his thin face and sunken eyes was enough. Just then he was sick again: she had never seen anyone looking quite so ill. Satyappa and Ratnamma tried to get him to drink but their efforts were in vain.

“What has happened to Kallappa?” she whispered.

“Cholera”, came the whispered reply.

Cholera ! But that very day they had offered the sacrifice. Her own father had officiated. She did what she could to help.

Kallappa died soon after dawn, and, after a short while, was buried. By this time Satyappa and Ratnamma were ready to listen to Kamala's entreaties and went to Bhimapur (the village a mile away where Kamala's school was) with their remaining children to have the injection.

2

AFTER a few weeks the epidemic of Cholera died out. A number had died but Kamala had observed the way in which none of those who had had the injection died. Her faith in the village-gods was beginning to weaken. Her father, too, was less zealous and gave up completely the idea of making his daughter a devotee. He began to consider the questions of taking her away from school and getting her married.

Kamala was unaware of all this and was still going regularly to school in Bhimapur. On market day they had a half holiday and sometimes Kamala's mother would come over with Basappa to do their bazaaring. But on this particular day she was not able to come. Kamala was a little late so ran quickly along the path to Bhimapur. As she ran, she noticed something shining in the path. She stooped down and picked up a two-anna piece. Not many of these had come her way and as she ran the rest of the way to school she was wondering what would be the best way to spend it. Should she get a couple of bananas, some puffed rice, or just what should she get? She tied the money tightly into the end of her sari and ran into the school-yard just as school was about to commence.

As soon as school was over she set out for the bazaar. She looked longingly at the brightly coloured

drinks on the soda-water wala's she cart, looked at the heaps of ladus in front of one of the sweetmeat merchants, and tried to make up her mind as to just what she should get. Suddenly she noticed a new comer to the bazaar, a man with a bag of books who was holding up several books with brightly coloured covers and urging people to buy them. He was a kindly-looking man and when Kamala asked to see the books he put a red-covered book into her hands. It was called "Good News written by Mark" and had a picture of a boat on the outside. Kamala had never seen a boat of that size, though she had seen small boats in which people crossed the river a few miles away from her home.

"How much is this book?" she enquired.

"Two annas, little sister," he replied.

Two annas! Just the amount she had found that morning.

"What is a book about?" she enquired.

"It is a life story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," the book-seller replied. "I am one of His disciples and that is why we are selling these books."

Kamala glanced through the book: it was certainly an interesting-looking book and she knew that it was really a cheap book for two annas. But her inborn desire to bargain soon made its presence felt.

"I cannot afford two annas," she said, "That is too much. I will give you one anna for it."

"I am sorry," the book-seller replied, "but that is the price. You can have one of these smaller ones for an anna if you wish."

Kamala looked at the smaller books: but she still wanted the bigger one. "Alright, I will give you an anna and a half for it," she said.

The book-seller laughed. "Where is your village, little sister?" he asked.

"I am from Shivapur," Kamala replied, "which is a mile away from here, but I come here every day to go to school."

The book-seller was beginning to relent. There were no Christians in Shivapur (or in Bhimapur itself for that matter) and he did want to see the Word spread as widely as possible.

"I cannot give you this book for less than two annas," he said, "but if you pay that I will give you this little one free as well."

Kamala decided to take the book. She paid the two annas, put the books in her bag with her school-books, salaamed the book-seller and set off for home.

That night she read some of the stories in the books to Basappa, and in the days that followed she soon read right through the book. There was something about it that fascinated her. It was all so different from anything that she had heard of before.

The stories of the healing of demon-possessed people in particular fascinated her. She had seen people possessed with demons and was staggered to learn of One Who was

able to cast out demons with just a word of command. She wondered if this teacher Jesus was able to cure Cholera. She was most interested to read of the healing of the leper: she knew that people said that her own grandmother had had the "Great Disease", but Kamala only very dimly remembered her grandmother.

Just a few days later her mother broke the news of her approaching marriage to her.

"Your uncle Rama," said her mother, "desires you as his wife. You remember when your Auntie died, about six months ago. He has been lonely and in a few days your engagement will take place. You are to leave school now."

Rama was her mother's younger brother and Kamala had always disliked him. He was dirty and ugly and Kamala was always glad to be away from him. And now she was to be his wife. She wept bitterly.

"What is wrong, my daughter?" her mother went on. "He is my own brother and will look after you well and be good to you. Do you not want to be married?"

Kamala looked up. "Not to a man like him," she sobbed.

Ratnamma became angry. "You ungrateful child," she screamed, "Your father and I have done our best for you, and this is what you do. You *shall* marry him..."

The next few days passed slowly and the time for the engagement ceremony drew near. Rama had brought Kamala a new sari but she found wearing it a doubtful pleasure. But what must be must be, she thought, and

managed to restrain her tears. When the ceremony was over she could not help overhearing a conversation between her father and her future husband.

"Understand that I want the girl to come to my house **soon**", Ramappa was saying, "I have been lonely since my wife died."

"But, my brother-in-law," Satyappa protested, "She is still but a child. Let her wait at least two or three years."

"Two or three **years**?" came the reply. "Two or three months will be plenty of time. And woe betide you if you don't send her then," he added significantly.

Satyappa protested again, but in vain.

That night Kamala cried herself to sleep. In her dream she thought she could see a sick person, hobbling along on a stick. He came towards a man around whom a crowd of people were standing, and asked him to heal him. As she watched, she saw the man touch the cripple's arm and in just a moment it seemed that the man was healed. He ran off happily throwing his stick away. She puzzled at this and then remembered what she had read in the book. She wondered if it were really true that this Jesus was God's Son, and that He was really alive.

When she awoke the dream still seemed vivid. She decided to put her thoughts to the test and prayed the first real prayer of her life. "O teacher Jesus" she said, "if you are really alive, show me this by saving me from Uncle Rama." That was all. But Kamala had no idea of the way in which her prayers would be answered.

3
A few days later, as she was bathing, Kamala noticed that she had a pale patch of skin on one of her thighs. At the same time she became conscious of a peculiar numb feeling in her legs. However, these did not worry her much and she paid no attention to them. In these days Kamala was kept busy with the cooking, as her mother wanted to be sure that she would please her husband at least as far as preparing his meals was concerned.

One day, while she was working alone at the chula, she burnt her finger on a piece of wood, but, strange to say, it did not hurt. She was unaware of what had happened until she noticed the blister. Her mother came into the house and saw her looking at the finger.

"What has happened, my child?" she enquired.
"I have burned my finger, Mother," Kamala replied.

"Let me see it," she ordered, taking the girl's hand in her own. "That's a nasty burn. Is it hurting much?"

"Not at all, Mother," replied Kamala, "I didn't realise that I had done it until I saw the blister."

"It didn't hurt?"

"No, Mother, I have told you so."

"Have you noticed anything else wrong with yourself?" Ratnamma asked.

"Yes, Mother," the girl replied, "I have a pale patch on my thigh."

"Show me."

"Kamala lifted her sari to show the patch to her mother. She looked at it carefully.

"Let me put some ink and a rag on your finger. Do not tell anyone about this," she warned.

"But what do you think it is?" asked Kamala.

"Don't ask me, child. Try not to worry about it," Ratnamma replied, although Kamala could tell from the way she spoke that she herself was very worried. "Hurry up and get the food ready. Your father will be in before long."

That night Ratnamma showed no desire to go to sleep. Long after the children had retired she waited up. Kamala couldn't sleep but she lay quite still and pretended to be sleeping. After a while her mother came over and looked at her, breathed a sigh of relief, and then began talking in low tones to her father.

"My lord," she began, "there is something that I must talk to you about." Her voice was full of concern.

"What is it?" her husband asked.

"My lord," she said, "I fear that the curse of her grandmother has fallen on our daughter Kamala" As she spoke her eyes were wet with tears.

Satyappa was startled. "What", he replied, "You

surely don't mean to say that you think she has..." He shook his head, unable to say the word.

Ratnamma nodded. "I fear so, my Lord," she sobbed. "This very day it has come to my notice. When she was stoking the chula, she burned her finger but there was no pain. I asked her about herself and she showed me a patch on her right leg and told me that she has a feeling of creatures like ants walking under her skin. It was even so with your mother, you will recall..."

Kamala lay perfectly quiet, drinking in every word. Her grandmother had left the village when Kamala was only three or four and she had only the vaguest memories of her. But her parents rarely spoke of her. From others Kamala had learned that she had had the great disease, Leprosy!

Kamala lay still, straining every nerve to hear her father's reply.

"What are we to do?" he asked. "When people hear of this (and we will not be able to keep it a secret for ever) she will be driven out of the village. Your brother will not want her. Doddamma has been hard to us," he groaned.

"Shall we call the medicine-man?" Ratnamma suggested, "Perhaps his spells may avert the wrath of Doddamma."

"What good did he do my mother?" asked Satyappa bitterly, "No, he would only spread the news throughout the village. But a thought has come to me. At Sholapur,

the Taluka town, there is a Government dispensary. I have heard that the doctor there is a good man, especially kind to us Harijans. It is a good distance from here, the news will not spread so quickly. We will go tomorrow and consult him. Perhaps there is some medicine which can help her."

Kamala heard her parents discussing the arrangements for the trip. Before long they put the lamp out and retired to rest. Kamala fell into a troubled sleep.

The next morning Satyappa told Kamala that he was going to take her to see the doctor at Sholapur that day.

"Your mother and I think it best that we should see a doctor about your finger and he is, we have heard, a good man. Don't you worry", he explained.

Kamala tried to look surprised and felt very apprehensive about the whole thing. Still, she could not help but be a little excited at the thought of a trip all the way to Sholapur.

They walked to Bhimapur and took a bus from there to Sholapur. One of the men from Shivapur saw them get on the bus and asked why they were going there. Satyappa replied vaguely that he had some "court business" and was taking Kamala with him for company. The other fellow looked rather incredulous, but said nothing.

Kamala did not see much of the scenery on the way. Her mind was too worried about the future to see the monkeys that were playing in the trees on the sides

of the road. When they reached Sholapur they went straight to the Government Dispensary. They had to wait quite a while, but eventually their turn came and they went in to see the doctor. He had a pleasant, smiling face and Kamala felt a little less frightened.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

Satyappa explained to him what had happened. A nurse undid the piece of rag around her finger and showed the burn to the doctor. He examined her carefully, looking all over her body and feeling behind her elbows and knees. He looked carefully at her ears and then tested her sense of feeling by pricking her arms and legs with a needle. When he had finished he looked a little solemn, got up, went to the basin and washed his hands for what seemed quite a long time. Then he turned to Satyappa.

"Tell me truly: it won't do any good to try and hide it. Has anyone in your family ever had leprosy?" he asked.

Satyappa paused before replying. "Yes, my own mother."

"Was this child ever in contact with her?" he asked.

"Only when she was a baby. It must be nine years since it was found that my mother had the disease. We turned her out of the house and the village people drove her out of the village." There was a certain amount of shame in the way that Satyappa explained this.

"That, I know, is what the girl has," the doctor went on, "What do you intend to do?"

"What do you suggest, sir?" Satyappa asked.

"I can advise only one thing. I think you should try and take her to Sarpapur, to the Leprosy Hospital there. I know it is a long way for you to go but there is no place nearer. The Hospital is run by a Christian Mission, but I know that they are good people and that, if they think your daughter suitable for admission, they will look after her well. I have sent quite a number of people there and most of them have got better within two or three years. I will give you a letter of introduction if you like," the doctor replied.

"Thank you, sir," replied Satyappa. "Please give me the letter and we will go as soon as I can make arrangements."

The doctor wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper, enclosed it in an envelope, and handed it to Satyappa. They saluted the doctor and left the hospital with heavy hearts.

IT was with some difficulty that Satyappa was able to borrow enough money to cover the cost of the journey in the bus to Sarpapur. He kept up the pretence that his "court business" was the reason for the visit. He said that the case had been referred to the District Court. But this did not deceive many and somehow the secret leaked out.

Ramappa heard very soon and came to the house in a towering rage, accusing Satyappa and Ratnamma of deceiving him and demanding the sari back. In vain did they try and reason with him. He utterly and finally repudiated all the arrangements and cursed the whole household. It was only after he left the house that Kamala realised that her prayer had been answered.

In a few days Satyappa succeeded in borrowing the money that he needed. Kamala said "goodbye" to her mother and the younger children and set out with her father. They walked to Bhimapur, and from there went by bus to Sarpapur. It was the first time that Kamala had been on such a long trip and she thought the bus trip would never end, but eventually the bus stopped at the big city bus stand. Kamala felt scared as she saw all the lorries, tongas and all the other vehicles travelling to and fro at rather frightening speeds.

The people, too, interested her. She had never seen women dressed in such a variety of saris before and the men, somehow, looked different in their trousers and bushcoats. Almost everyone in Shivapur and Bhimapur wore dhotis and shirts.

It did not take Satyappa long to find out where the hospital was but it took them quite a while to reach it. By this time it was about three o'clock. Kamala was fascinated by the big buildings. There was a small building in the middle of the compound and several on each side. They saw a nurse standing on the verandah of the middle place and went up to her. The nurse looked at Kamala and then asked, "What do you want?"

"We have come to see the doctor," Satyappa answered, "The government doctor from Bhimapur has advised us to come here and gave me this letter."

"Give me the letter and I will show it to the doctor. We do not usually see patients in the afternoon but as you have come such a long way he may see you now. He is busy doing tests on some of the inpatients," she replied.

While the nurse was away they glanced around them. On the side of the compound they could see several fields and there were men and women working in them. Nearby they could hear the hum of children's voices, just as if it was coming from a school. A few patients had gathered round to see them. Some had bandages around their hands and feet and one poor

fellow had no nose. Kamala felt frightened and clung to her father. But the patients spoke kindly to them and asked them from where they had come.

In just a few minutes the nurse returned with the doctor. He was a tall young man, dressed in a long white gown. In his hand he held the open letter. When Satyappa saw him he went to fall at his feet, but the doctor held up his arm and stopped him.

"What do you want?" he said. "Is this your daughter?"

"Yes, Sahib, You have read the letter?"

"Yes. Bring your daughter and come into this room so that I can examine her."

Kamala hesitated for a moment.

"Do not be afraid, little sister," the doctor said, "I will not hurt you. We are here to help you."

She looked full in his face for just a moment and decided that this was a good man.

The doctor examined her carefully. He turned to Satyappa.

"Your daughter has the great disease. There is only one more thing that I must do and that is to test her skin and see if she has any germs in it."

"What do you mean, doctor?" Satyappa asked.

"Leprosy is a disease caused by tiny worms that get into the body. It is not caused by the wrath of the lower-gods, as superstitious people believe. The tablets that we give cause these worms to die and so the patient gets better."

He went towards the door. "I will be back in a few minutes. Wait here until I come," he ordered.

After the doctor went Kamala glanced around the room. There were no pictures on the walls but there were several framed sentences. Her father noticed her reading.

"What does it say?" he asked.

Kamala read the text to him.

Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh to the Father but by Me."

"That must be a sentence from the Christian's Holy Book," Satyappa commented. "What does the one on this wall say?"

"For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life," read Kamala.

"These Christians have strange ideas," Satyappa commented, "I dare say that you will hear quite a lot about them while you are here."

Kamala was thoughtful. There was nothing loving about the village gods that her father worshipped. They seemed to think of nothing but revenge and blood! When her brother died she had lost almost all of the faith that she had in them.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of the doctor, along with the nurse whom they had met first. Kamala was a little worried when she was carrying a little white bowl and also a spirit-lamp. The

doctor took a small knife out of the bowl, heated the end of it in the flame and turned to Kamala.

"Don't be frightened," he said to her, "all I am going to do is to take a little bit of blood from a few places in your skin. You are a big girl and it really won't hurt you much."

Kamala did, however, feel frightened when she felt the doctor make a little cut in her ear. She watched him smear the blood from the cut on a piece of glass that the nurse was carrying. In the same way he made little cuts in her other ear, her arms, her back and her legs. Kamala looked rather odd when he had finished, for she had little wisps of cotton-wool stuck on all the places where her skin had been tested.

"I have got some more tests to do, so I will do this one too straight away," the doctor explained. "Go and have some food and come back in an hour's time."

There was a tea-shop opposite the hospital, so Satyappa got some food from there for them, and they sat under one of the trees and ate it. An hour later they were waiting for the doctor. When he came out of the laboratory they saw that his face was sad.

"Satyappa," he began, "I have found many little worms in your child's skin. Have you any other children?"

"There are three others living. Kamala is the eldest," he replied.

"In that case," the doctor replied, "I think that she should stay here in hospital. If she goes home she

may possibly pass on the trouble to the younger children. In any case, it would be difficult for you to come every month for treatment from such a long distance. We will look after her well and you can come and see her whenever you want."

Satyappa willingly agreed. He knew that Ramappa would pass the news on to the village people and that Kamala would only have trouble if he took her back. The few children that he had seen in the hospital looked healthy and well fed.

"Can she stay from today?" he asked.

"Yes, I think that would be best," replied the doctor.

Kamala cried for a little while. Then her father embraced her, said goodbye, and quickly left the compound.

AS she watched her father leave, a wave of loneliness swept over Kamala. She sat down on the ground and wept.

It was the nurse, Krupamma, who came to comfort her.

"Don't cry, Kamala," she said. "Come with me and I will show you where you are to stay". She held her hand and walked with her to one of the houses on the right hand side of the hospital.

"This is the women's side," she explained, "The men all live over on that side. The place where you had your test is the dispensary block, and that building near it is the school and meeting-room. The place behind the dispensary is the community kitchen. You will have your food in the open space near there tonight."

Kamala dried her eyes. Perhaps this was going to be an interesting place, after all.

Krupamma was showing her her room. It was a nice airy place, with whitewashed walls and a pakka Mangalore tile roof.

"You will be in here with five other little girls. They will be here in a minute or two," she explained,

glancing at her watch. She showed Kamala her wooden box and told her to put her things into that. Kamala unpacked her bag and put her extra sari and frock into the box. As she did so her Gospel of Mark dropped out. Krupamma looked surprised as she picked it up.

"Where did you get this?" she asked. "Can you read?"

"Yes" Kamala replied proudly, "I was at school for four years. I bought the book from a man who was selling them in the bazaar at Bhimapur, the village where I used to go to school. I found a two anna piece on the way to school and bought it with that."

"Have you read it?" Krupamma enquired. "It is a good book, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered, "I have read it a couple of times. Have you read it yourself?"

"Many times," Krupamma replied, "It is part of God's Word, the Bible. If you can read you will be given a Bible free if you want it."

At this stage in the conversation they were interrupted by the arrival of the five other girls from school. Krupamma introduced Kamala to them.

"Kamala, here are your five room-mates Grace, Husanbi, Gourawa, Satyamma, and Houshakka. Girls, this is Kamala, who has just been admitted. Look after her well and show her everything that she should know."

She smiled at them all and left the room. Kamala did not feel shy for long. The other girls asked her about her home and village and in return told her of their houses and villages.

"Can you read?" they asked.

"Yes, I studied up to the fourth and then my father took me away from school so that I could get married," she explained.

"Are you married, then?" Grace asked. She had noticed that Kamala was not wearing a *mangala sutra*.

"No. I was engaged but before the marriage took place it was found that I had this trouble. As soon as he heard, my Uncle (whom I was to marry) broke off the engagement. I wasn't sorry. He was a horrible man and I had prayed that I would be saved from him," Kamala replied.

"You prayed? To whom?" Grace asked.

Kamala suddenly felt shy. "I prayed to Jesus," she said. "I lost faith in the village-gods when my younger brother died of Cholera."

The girls looked surprised. "We didn't know you were a Christian," commented Husanbi.

"I'm not," she replied simply, "But once I bought a book about Jesus in the bazaar. That said that he was stronger than demons so I prayed to him. I was just showing the book to the nurse when you came in." She took the red-covered book out of the case and showed it to the girls. "I wish that there was someone to explain it all to me," she said.

"You'll have plenty of opportunity to do that while you're here," Houshakka explained. "We read a piece at prayers every morning and also have a lesson on it in school everyday."

"Who teaches in school?" Kamala enquired.

"There are three lady teachers," Gourawa answered. "They are all patients too. If you passed your fourth you will be in Mrs. Kamble's class. She teaches fifth and sixth. Grace is in her class."

Kamala was soon at ease with the other girls. They showed her all over the women's quarters and introduced her to the other patients. Kamala was surprised to see how cheerful most of them were. A few were in pain because of an acute reaction and some who had recently had operations seemed uncomfortable. Time passed quickly until the bell announcing the evening meal was rung. Someone produced a brass plate and glass for Kamala and she was soon seated with the other girls in the dining space. It was then that she had her next surprise. She was about to start eating as soon as the curry and rice had been put on her plate when she heard Grace whisper, "Wait a minute; no-one has given thanks yet."

She waited, and in just a few minutes one of the men stood up, bowed his head, and very simply thanked God for giving them their food. Kamala had never heard that done before. She was feeling hungry after her long journey and ate the food with obvious relish.

After food was finished came the final surprise of the day.

"We usually have a little 'sing-song' after supper," Grace explained, "but you don't have to come unless you want to."

"I'll come for a while," she said, "but I am tired and will go to sleep soon."

The sing-song was held on the varandah of the women's quarters. One of the women had a tambourine and played this as they sang. Kamala knew some of the tunes but the words were quite unfamiliar to her. There was one that particularly impressed her.

The chorus went like this :

"Come, my friend, o come, o come today,

For King Jesus is calling for you"
and the first verse

"If you haven't got a name upon the earth,

If you haven't any fame upon the earth,

Jesus calls you to give you a kingdom,

Yes, King Jesus is calling for you."

They sang the verse two or three times so that Kamala could learn it. The next two verses were similar.

"If you are feeling the burden of your sin,

If you are fearing God's wrath upon your sin,

Jesus calls you to give you His pardon,

Yes, King Jesus is calling for you.

If your spirit is hungering for God,

If your spirit is thirsting after God,

Jesus calls you to satisfy you,

Yes, King Jesus is calling for you."

They sang several other songs that night but this was the one that impressed itself on Kamala's memory. When she went to rest that night the words came into her mind again and again.

6

KAMALA soon settled into the routine of hospital life. Each morning at half-past six the rising bell would ring and Kamala, along with all the patients, would get up, wash her hands and face and get ready to go to prayers. No one was compelled to attend prayers, but practically everybody did go. Several people took turn about in conducting prayers. They would sing a hymn, read a few verses from the Bible, the leader would comment briefly and then pray that God would bless them that day. When prayers were finished they would be issued with their medicine for the day.

After that the real work of the day began. There was school for the children while most of the able-bodied men worked in the fields around about the hospital buildings. The women took it in turns to help prepare the food in the communal kitchen while those who were not engaged there were busy with weaving and needle work. Those of the men patients who were tradesmen were kept busy with their various jobs: several of the buildings on the compound, she learned later, had been erected by the patients and the potter and shoe-maker were both kept busy.

Kamala was glad to be back at school again and she found Mrs. Kamble a good teacher. The lesson she enjoyed most was the daily Bible lesson. At that time they were having lessons from the Gospel of Luke and Kamala was glad of the opportunity of hearing more about the Lord Jesus. But of course they had other subjects to study as well.]

After morning school came the midday meal (in the same place as they had the evening meal) and then the rest period. In the afternoon there were more lessons, and, after the evening meal, there was usually a sing-song on the verandah.

The one day that was different was Sunday. It was observed as a day of rest and only essential work, like preparing food, was done. There was no school that day, but there were two services held in the building in which the school was held. The morning service was especially for the Christian patients and its main purpose was the observance of a Christian ceremony in which all partook of a single chippati and all sipped out of a glass of grapejuice. The evening meeting was designed for all and took the form of a preaching service. On her first Sunday in the hospital Kamala heard a message that she never forgot.

The preacher was only a young man but he seemed to have a good knowledge of the Bible. He read a passage from the second book in the Old Testament, Exodus, the book of deliverance. He told them of the way that a nation of people called Israelites had been kept as slaves in the land of Egypt. Their God,

Jehovah, had spoken to the leader, who was called Moses, and told him that He intended to free the people from their slavery. He told Moses to command the people to carry out a particular rite. They were to take a young lamb, keep it in their houses for several days to make sure that it was not diseased in any way, and on a particular day they were to kill it, and sprinkle its blood on the two side-posts and the lintel of their doors and then to stay indoors and feast on the flesh of the lamb. In the meantime God had promised to punish their enemies by destroying their first-born sons and then to bring them safely out of the land. Everything had happened as God commanded.

While he was speaking Kamala could not help but think of the night of the buffalo sacrifice, the night that Kallappa died. Her father had said that if they satisfied Maramma's thirst for blood that she would not slay any more people by Cholera. And yet her own brother had been the next victim. But yet the God of the Christians did not seem to be like Maramma..

Kamala realised that she had not been listening to what he was saying. She pulled herself up and began to listen carefully.

"Remember," he said, "that all this actually happened as we read in the Bible. But do not forget one other thing. This passover sacrifice was a picture of something far greater and pointed to the sacrifice of Christ, which took place about fifteen hundred years after Moses' time, that is, nearly two thousand years

ago. That is why John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, referred to Him as the Lamb of God. For He died on the cross to bear the punishment for our sins, so that they might be forgiven and that we might go free. The Lord Jesus Himself was the last Great Sacrifice. Since He died there is no need for any other sacrifice. All that we have to do is to come to Him by faith and accept Him as our Sacrifice and Saviour."

Kamala could not understand it all. But what she could understand fascinated her and she felt herself drawn to the One of Whom she had read and heard.

The weeks passed quickly and happily for Kamala. She knew that she would have to be in hospital for several years and settled in well to the new life. Grace became her special friend and the Christian girl proved a help to Kamala in every way. Krupamma too always had a special greeting for her whenever they met. Once, when Husanbi was sick, Krupamma asked Kamala to look after her at nights and she had thoroughly enjoyed it. She began to dream of becoming a nurse herself when she grew up.

In school she progressed quickly and as she listened carefully, she soon began to learn many more things about the Lord Jesus and His life. In school they had gone through the whole of Luke's Gospel. What particularly impressed her was the story of the crucifixion. The idea that a man who was being cruelly and unjustly put to death could actually forgive his executioners staggered her. She thought too of the kind words and the promise that He had given to the

thief who was crucified with Him. Then too there was His resurrection from the grave, when He rose again in the same body that had been slain and returned to bless and comfort His disciples. It was all so different from the stories of the village-gods that she had heard.

Then came the occasion (it was after one of the Sunday afternoon meetings) when Grace told her that she had been "saved" that day. Her face was radiant as she told Kamala this and she seemed most anxious that she too should be "saved". Kamala was puzzled.

"What do you mean, Grace? I don't understand at all," she asked.

"Today I accepted Jesus Christ as my own Saviour. I *know* now that He has forgiven my sins. At last I have become a real Christian," she answered.

"But I thought you had always been a Christian," said Kamala in amazement.

"That's what I thought until today," she replied. "It was only this afternoon that I realised that I had never accepted the Lord Jesus for myself. I wondered often why I didn't have the peace and joy in my life of which others spoke. But now I *know* that I'm saved. Won't you take Jesus too?" she pleaded.

Kamala was silent for a few minutes.

"I'd like to be like you," she said, "I'm still not sure about some things."

Grace looked her full in the face. "I shall pray for you every day until you do," she promised.

But it was quite a while before Kamala came to that point in her life. With Grace's help she was able to clearly understand some things that had puzzled her before.

Every now and again there would be a "farewell" meeting in the hospital for someone who had become symptom free and who was ready to go home. These were some of the high-lights of hospital life, but Kamala felt sad when the time came for Grace to leave. She had been in hospital four years. Kamala was glad that her friend had got better but she knew that she would feel lonely without her. The day after the farewell meeting there were tears in her eyes as Kamala bade her friend goodbye.

"I'll be back to see you sometime," she promised, and I certainly will not forget to pray for you."

The other highlight in hospital life came when some of the former patients paid the hospital a visit. The Sunday after Grace left a man called Narasimha came for a visit. He had been in the hospital many years before. He was brought there as a child and grew up in the hospital. It was long before the discovery of any of the present-day treatments and he was in the hospital for over ten years. When he left he decided to devote his time and energy to spreading the Christian message that had come to mean so much to him while he was in the hospital. He travelled around on a cycle, selling gospels and medicines to help pay expenses. Occasionally the church in the Leprosy

Hospital sent him a gift to help him in his work. In the afternoon he spoke at the service.

He read from Luke's Gospel the story of how the Lord Jesus had healed the leper.

"Today," he began, "I want to ask each one of you a very important and personal question. It is the most vitally important question in any person's life and one day you must give the answer to God. In all of our lives we have many important decisions to make. We must decide whom we shall marry, what work we shall do, and many other things which greatly affect our lives here in this world. But the question I want to ask you today is far more important than any merely earthly question is—are *you* saved or lost?"

"Think of this man of whom we have read. He was what all of us here are or were: he was a leper. He had to leave his home and family and live away from human habitations because he was unclean. In the days of the Lord Jesus there were no hospitals like this one. Yet he came to the Lord Jesus and was healed.

"In the Bible leprosy is a picture of sin. Leprosy is a disease of the body: sin a disease of the soul. God is the only one who can heal our souls from this terrible disease.

"Let us see what happened to this man.

"First of all, he *heard* about the Lord Jesus. He heard that he was able to cleanse the leper.

"Next, he must have *believed* what he heard. He believed what other people had told him.

"Then he *came* to the Lord Jesus and asked Him to make him clean. We know what happened. In a moment the Lord Jesus cleansed him from his disease.

"That is what it is like with salvation. First, we must hear about the Lord Jesus. We must hear of His life, His death, His resurrection and His invitation to sinners. All of you here are like that. Many of you have heard about the Lord Jesus many, many times. The reason why you are here today is so that you can learn about him. That is why I am here today to speak too. Let us take another simple illustration. If I were to ask any of you why you are here, I think that your answer would be something like "I heard from So-and-so about the hospital here." The first step is *hearing*.

"But simply hearing is not enough. You must *believe* what you have been told. Perhaps some of you here believe what you have heard about the Lord Jesus. You believe He is the Son of God. You believe that He died on the cross. You believe that He rose from the dead. You believe that He is calling for you—and yet you are not saved."

Kamala listened with rapt attention. Narasimha could not have described her thoughts more accurately.

"What then is the next step? After you heard about the hospital here and believed what you had been told, you *came* here to get treated. You put yourself into the doctor's hands. That then is what we must do to be saved. We must come by faith to the Lord Jesus.

We must put ourselves into His hands. We must accept Him as our own personal Saviour and Lord."

As Narasimha spoke these words things seemed to come into focus in Kamala's mind. She had heard and believed, but yet she had never accepted Christ as her own Saviour.

Narasimha was announcing the closing hymn and it happened to be the very first hymn she had heard. As they sung the last verse first something took place deep down in her heart.

"If your spirit is hungering for God,

If your spirit is thirsting after God,

Jesus calls you to satisfy you,

Yes, King Jesus is calling for you.

Come my friend, O come, O come today,

For King Jesus is calling for you."

Kamala heard the call and came.

As soon as the meeting was over she sought out Krupamma and told her what had happened. The nurse rejoiced to hear the news.

"Kamala," she said, "I have prayed for you since the day you came, and ever since Grace was saved I know that she has prayed for you. The Lord has answered our prayers and we thank and praise Him for it.

That day was the beginning of a great change in Kamala's life. A few weeks later, when her father Satyappa came to see her and tell her of her Uncle Rama's sudden death from Cholera, he was astonished at the change in her. She was no longer the terrified girl that she was when he had left her at the hospital.

When he questioned her about it, she told him of how she had come to put her faith in Christ and of the peace and joy she had received. Satyappa himself had lost faith in the "lower-gods". He willingly gave his consent for his daughter to be baptised and when he left took some books for Basappa, who was now going to school, to read to him.

Kamala's interest in nursing grew and, as she had finished at school, spent more and more of her time helping Krupamma. But she was most surprised when, after getting her second negative skin test, she was called to see the doctor.

"Krupamma will be leaving us soon," he said. "She is getting married and will be going away to work in the hospital where her future husband is a compounder. How would you like to have her job?"

"But, Doctor, "she began," I am just not good enough for it."

"You like the work, we know, and you are good with the patients. Krupamma is not getting married for a couple of months and she will teach you everything that you don't know."

"Alright," Kamala answered, "I'll try."

She walked away singing to herself.

"If you haven't got a name upon the earth,

If you haven't any fame upon the earth,

Jesus calls you....."

It was true of her, Kamala thought. God had seen fit to call her to trust and serve Him.

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