

The following 99 folktales were collected from storytellers in Tamil Nadu in the mid-1990s by Stuart Blackburn, and were among those published in his book, Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from the Oral Tradition, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 278, Helsinki, Finland: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2005. The stories were told in Tamil, and were translated into English. Stuart Blackburn's commentaries on the stories appear in the book, but are not included here.

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1. FRATERNAL UNITY

In a certain town, three brothers lived together after their father passed away. Soon it was time to divide the assets, the house and all the land. Now the youngest brother was lame, and his older brothers spoke among themselves, "Why should we give the gimp a full share? We'll give him the worst land and when we partition the house, we'll give him the section with the weak walls. Then we'll give him those mangy, old bullocks for ploughing."

When they gave this to the cripple, his wife said, "What's this! They gave you the scrub land and kept the fertile land for themselves!" She picked a fight with him like this, but he scolded her, "Fool! If it's given by god, it will pour through the roof. Just mind that advice and shut up because my brothers are good fellows." That's what he said: "If it's given by god, it will pour through the roof."

A heavy rain fell. So the brothers hitched their bullocks and ploughed the fields, but the lame fellow with his emaciated bullocks bumped along dragging his bad leg. What they could do in two days he needed four days to complete. When the field was ready, he took some sesame seeds to his wife and said, "Fry these." "What? You think fried seeds will sprout?" "Don't talk back; just do what I say." Thinking there was no point in arguing with him, she fried the seeds and gave them to her husband. He went out and threw them everywhere, all over the field, without knowing what he was doing.

That night - you must understand that ants love fried food and of course a sesame seed doesn't normally smell, but when it's fried, it smells wonderful. So that night all the ants came, not just one kind of ant but all kinds - little ones, big ones, red ones, all of them. They came in huge numbers, like an army, and marched into the lame brother's field and ate his seeds. Not a single seed was left uneaten.

Then one of big ants said to the others, "This isn't right. He's a cripple, and we've eaten all his seeds. We were hungry, but this is wrong. Now what shall we do?" Another ant said, "Over there are the seeds in his brothers' fields; let's put them in the cripple's field." And that's what they did: they went as a huge army and rolled the seeds from the brothers' fields into the cripple's field.

In about a week, the sesame seeds began to sprout up everywhere in the cripple's field, but nothing grew in his brothers' field! How could anything grow? There weren't any seeds! So they called their little brother, "Tambi, your field is growing nicely but ours hasn't grown at all." "That's right. You see, I roasted the seeds first." "Roasted them! But that'd ruin them." "Suit yourself, but that's what I did. Go ask my wife if you don't believe me." So the brothers bought seeds, roasted them and scattered them in their fields, but the ants came again and ate them.

That year, when the youngest brother harvested four bushels of sesame, he gave one to each of his brothers and kept two for himself and his wife. You see, he really loved his brothers and wouldn't listen to anything his wife might say against them. But his brothers, well, they were determined to keep him at a distance.

One night when the moon was very bright and his wife went out to make cow dung cakes, she saw seven pots of gold, just sitting there on the ground! She ran back to her husband out of breath and said, "Quick! Get a bullock ready! I found seven pots of gold! Got to drag it back here and bury it. Hurry!"

"Fool. Why should we go drag anything in the middle of the night? Remember what I said: 'If it's god-given it will come through the roof.'" "He's useless," she thought and went to her brothers-in-law and said, "There's seven pots of gold over there and my husband doesn't want it, so you might as well go get it." The brothers ran off and saw the seven pots, each covered by a plate; lifting one plate, they looked inside - and saw that the pot was crawling with snakes and scorpions. "I see," they thought, "our brother tried to kill us with this little trick. Thought we'd take the pots home, open them and get bitten. Can't let him get away with this."

They put the lid back on the pot, took them all to his house where they climbed a ladder and then threw the seven pots through his roof! The pots crashed into his house, but when they hit the floor, jewels, emeralds, rubies, and gold coins lay scattered everywhere! That's what he had told his wife, hadn't he? "See what god has given us," he said to her. "Right through the roof! Gather up the jewelry and wear it."

The two brothers waited awhile, until they were sure that their brother and his wife would have died from snake and scorpion bites. Then the older brother sent the other one to the Harijan ceri to summon the drummers for a funeral. They came banging their drums, but inside the house the lame brother and his wife were sound asleep. It was four in the morning so he got furious and screamed, "What the hell are you doing at this hour? Can't a man get some sleep?"

"The dead man's talking!" screamed the drummers and brothers and ran off. But the lame brother chased after them, yelling, "No, no! It's me, your brother. Stop, stop!" They stopped and he asked, "Why were you banging those drums at me?" "We... thought the snakes would have killed you. You see... we've done wrong, brother, forgive us." "Come home and see how those snakes have turned into gold," he said.

Back home, he gave two pots to each of his brothers and kept three for himself. That's a story about unity between brothers.

*Storyteller: Ettirajalu (stories 1-4)
Karaiyamputtur, Pondicherry*

2. STRAIGHTENING A DOG'S TAIL

The one thing you can't make straight in this world is a dog's tail. You see, it works on the "lever" system. If you straighten it out, it just snaps back again! Even if you tie it down, it won't stay put. It's just made that way.

Now there was a mantiravati and he had a clever disciple. One day as they were talking, the mantiravati said, "This magic power I've got now isn't really enough. I'm going to do some ferocious tapas, really hard stuff, and get even more powerful magic from god. Then I'll control the whole world. I'm going now; you look after the ashram."

So he left and began to perform exacting tapas. God came and asked, "What do you want?" "Swami, I want the whole world in the palm of my hand!" "The world's bigger than your hand, you know," explained god. "I don't care! I want that kind of power!" "All right," said god. "Five bhutas govern this world, and I'm going to put them under your control. Then you can rule the world as you like."

God called the leader of the bhutas and said to him, "See that fellow over there, that mantiravati. From now on, obey him. Do whatever he says and don't refuse anything." "All right, swami. But there's one condition: he must give me work every day. I'm not the type of person who can just sit around idle, not even for a minute. If he doesn't keep me occupied, I'll eat him." "Hear that, mantiravati?" asked god. "Yes. That's fine. I've got loads of work for him; he can't possibly finish it." So god sent the bhuta to work for the mantiravati.

Accompanied by the bhuta, the mantiravati returned to the ashram, where he said to his disciple, "I wanted a boon, but... well, I guess I made a mistake." "What else is new?" "What happened was that god didn't give me what I asked for. I mean, I told him I wanted to control the world, and he gave me this bhuta. The thing is the bhuta must be kept busy all the time; if not, he'll eat us up!"

Shaking with fear, the mantiravati also said, "You be the one to give him work; I know you can manage it somehow." Then, telling the bhuta to take orders from his disciple, the mantiravati slipped away.

Next day the bhuta went to the disciple and asked, "What work shall I do, swami?" "Look at that ocean; you must empty it completely before nightfall. I don't want to see a single drop of water!" said the disciple. The bhuta went to the ocean, sucked deeply and half the ocean disappeared! He drank again and the whole ocean was gone. "This is too easy," he thought and sat down.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when he went back to the disciple, who asked, "Well, have you drunk up the ocean?" "Nothing left, not a drop, only a dry bed." When the disciple saw that this was true, he began to feel a little worried: "This bhuta might be big trouble. Of course, he is the head bhuta who rules the world." "How about some more work today?" asked the bhuta but the disciple sent him away.

The next day, the bhuta came to the disciple and said, "Swami, that was nothing; give me some real work today." "Nothing, he says!" thought the man. "All right, let's use this bhuta to make us rich; we could do with a nice house, at least." So he said, "See those sixty acres over there. Go and cut down all the trees and bushes, and then build two golden mansions - all before nightfall!"

When the bhuta blew hard, he uprooted huge trees which flew in the air and landed miles away. Then he leveled the ground and blew a whistle. Suddenly thousands of bhutas appeared and began to construct pillars and windows made of the nine gems - diamonds, emeralds, rubies, cats-eye, coral, pearls, in two hours that army of bhutas had built two mansions glittering with jewels.

The bhuta returned to the man, who asked if he had completed the task. "Look at the mansions! C'mon, you're giving me simple tasks," said the bhuta. "We'll see about that; come back tomorrow," said the man, a little more worried.

At home, the man began to think, "Right. We've got our golden mansions; now I've got to get rid of him somehow." As he was wondering what to do, a dog came and lay down outside the ashram. Looking at the dog, he remembered what people said about a dog's tail - you can't straighten it out. In the morning the bhuta appeared and said, "What's up for today?" "Listen," said the man, "today you've got to straighten that dog's tail. It's got to be perfectly straight! And you can't hurt the dog or do anything to its hair. Can't harm it in any way. Not a scratch on its tail, mind you. But the tail must stand up straight, before dark." With these words, the man left.

First the bhuta gave the dog whatever it wanted. He fed it lots of meat because he wanted the dog to fall asleep. When it had eaten a lot and fallen into a deep sleep, the bhuta had his chance. He grabbed the tail, smoothed its hair and slowly unrolled it. "The dog's sleeping and the tail is nice and straight," thought the bhuta. "Now let's see what happens." With these words, he let the tail go. Snap! It snapped back into a tight roll! The dog was asleep, but its tail did what it always does.

The bhuta grabbed the tail again and straightened it out, but again it snapped right back into place. He tried and tried, but only got more and more frustrated. He tried smearing it with butter, thinking that might smooth it out, but that didn't work either. Snap! Right back into a curl.

What to do? He found some silk thread and a stick, then laid the stick along the straightened tail and tied it on with the thread. You know, like a splint for a broken limb. He kept it like that for half an hour, but when he untied it - snap! Back went the tail into a curl. Again and again, he tied it and loosened it, but the tail rolled back up every time. By this time the sun had set.

In the morning the mantiravati came and asked his disciple about the bhuta. "He's gone, swami, gone forever. Couldn't straighten the dog's tail; that's what defeated him. Now you! You went looking for a boon so you could control the whole world. But me, all I did was use my brains!. And look! We have these golden mansions to spend the rest of our lives in! Don't need anything else, no land, no money, nothing." And they lived a rich man's life in those golden mansions.

*Storyteller: Ettirajalu (stories 1-4)
Karaiyamputtur, Pondicherry*

3. TENALI RAMAN

You know the Tenali Raman stories? He was a counselor to a raja. He couldn't give him advice directly, of course, so he had to use his wits. During the Vijayanagar period this Tenali Raman was sort of a court jester - he wasn't the raja's bodyguard, you understand. No, he had the job of keeping him happy because the king should never worry. That was his job: to keep the raja from worrying about anything.

One day, when the queen was very ill and close to death, the raja asked her what she wanted. "A mango," she said. "I want a mango." But it wasn't the season for mangoes then, so the raja ordered his army to get her one -to go wherever it was necessary, but they must come back with a mango for the queen. The horses galloped off at a furious pace, but before they returned, the queen died.

The raja was miserable: "I am a famous king, but I can't even get a mango for my ailing wife. What's the point of all this raja stuff?" He called his guru, head of a thousand Brahmins, and complained that he couldn't get a mango for his queen. "Don't worry about that," said the Brahmin. "Just give the thousand Brahmins a golden mango, a silk cloth, and a cloth with golden thread; give us these gifts as offerings. If you do that, the sin of her death will leave her. She'll be there in heaven, but the sin will stay here."

That's what the raja's guru said, and the raja gave the order - the ceremonies were conducted, the gifts given and the thousand Brahmins walked away happy. Tenali Raman was furious - he was also a Brahmin - but he didn't like what had happened. Throwing caution to the wind, he stood at the threshold of the head Brahmin's room and said, "Swami, my wife has been sick for three days." "I see, well... the raja gave us golden mangoes." "I can't possibly manage that." "Well, you've got to make some offering if you expect all the Brahmins to come and alleviate her suffering." "Fine. Tell them to come directly to my house!" said Tenali Raman with pride.

So the Brahmins went to his house, which was really very small. He told them to finish their rituals and then line up to receive gifts. "Stand there in a line and when I open the door, I want you to enter one at a time. As you can see, this is no palace, so I've got to conduct a separate ceremony for each of you. When I call you, enter and receive your offering one by one."

What he did was hook up two electrical wires to a wide brass serving plate, on which he placed fruits and money. Then he invited one of them in, saying, "Swami, please accept this offering." When the Brahmin picked up the plate, Tenali Raman touched the wires together and gave him a powerful shock! He did this to the thousand Brahmins, who ran off in pain to the raja. "Tenali Raman has burned our hands. You must punish him."

The raja summoned him and said, "You can't burn Brahmins like that! It's a crime, a terrible crime!" "But when the queen died she wanted mangoes, didn't she? To satisfy that hunger you gave away mangoes which were transferred to her in heaven, right? Now my own wife," continued Tenali Raman, "had rheumatism. They told me to keep her warm, and I had the wires all ready for that. But she died suddenly, so I thought if I heated those Brahmins the heat would reach her in heaven; that way her longing would be fulfilled. We both wished our wives to be happy in the afterlife: you gave the Brahmins golden mangoes and I gave them heat."

What could the raja say? Tenali Raman had done the right thing - he had removed the sin of death! Still the raja was furious and ordered him put in prison to await an execution. But the raja knew that somehow he would escape - that prison was just a "test", so he ordered two guards to take him away and execute him. They marched him off, with threatening words, "Move! You have sinned against the raja. Your time has come!"

Tenali Raman said, "Chop off my head, by all means, but instead of having to deal with my bloody body, just throw it in the River Ganga. You see the river is holy to me. If you let me die there, it'll be easier for you and I'll go to heaven. Just take my head back and show the raja." "Right. That's easy," said the guards.

Stepping into the water, Tenali Raman said to them, "Now, please do what I say so that I can go to heaven. I'll stand here and you two stand on either side of me. When I say 'one', raise your swords; when I say 'two', get ready; when I say 'three', lower the swords and chop off my head. Both of you, at the same time. Don't hesitate. Afterward just throw my body into the river and take my head back, to the raja."

He said "one" and they drew their swords. "Two" and they got ready. "Three" and they both swung their swords, but Tenali Raman ducked, so they chopped off each other's heads! They killed each other!

Tenali Raman returned to the court, where the raja was amazed: "What's this? I sentenced you to death yesterday. Where are the guards?" "They're gone, both dead." "You are really something," exclaimed the raja. "I can never defeat you!"

*Storyteller: Ettirajalu (stories 1-4)
Karaiyamputtur, Pondicherry*

4. THE GURU AND HIS DISCIPLE

In a town, there was a raja. Now, today people have ten or twelve children, but back then it was often difficult to get just one child. Even those who lived in luxury suffered from childlessness; even the raja, who was the wealthiest of all, suffered. He enjoyed every other kind of pleasure: his many servants fed him, fanned him, served him water in golden vessels and dressed him in silk clothes.

So this raja's world was filled with pleasure, surrounded by fragrant flowers and continuously fanned with fly whisks. But the raja's pleasure was a false pleasure; his fans couldn't cool him like our electric fans [pointing to his fan] because they were only fly whisks. Besides, he was childless.

One day a muni arrived at his court. The raja said, "I have no heir, no one to carry on my name, our line. What can I do?" And the muni said, "You'll have two sons; that's your destiny. At first you'll lose your kingdom, but then through the children you'll regain it." "The kingdom is not important to me," the raja said. "I only want a son."

Soon the queen was pregnant. Then an enemy army threatened the palace, so the raja and queen escaped through a tunnel to a foreign country and hid in a village. Working in a Chettiyar's house, she pounded rice, got her wages and they were able to eat. Month by month she got bigger and the raja, watching this, grew anxious wondering how they would feed the child. "What did we do to deserve this fate? Why should my wife and child suffer?" he said to himself and cried a flood of tears. His wife cried even more, as she pounded the rice.

When the Chettiyar's wife spoke to the raja about this, he said, "My wife is about to give birth, but I don't have any money, not even for medicine." "Don't worry, I'll take care of her," said the woman, who then bought them medicine and everything. A son was born, and after two more years another son was born. Soon they were old enough to be educated so the raja took them to a gurukkulam, which is a school where the students live together with the guru. He took his sons there, found the guru and said,

"Sir, please give my sons an education." "The fee is 300 rupees a month, for both of them together, including meals and everything. When their studies are completed, just come and collect them," said the guru.

"I am a poor man, struggling to make ends meet, and can't possibly find that much money each month." "Well, this is my school and I can't make exceptions." "Please try to do something." Then the teacher looked closely at the boys' faces and saw something regal in them; plus the father looked like he was once someone important. Since the guru had no sons of his own, he said to the father, "I don't know whether you will like this idea, but here it is. I will teach both your sons, and teach them equally, but in the end you must give one of them to me. One or the other - you can choose."

The raja thought for a minute, "They're both stupid anyway; why not let him take one and I'll keep the other." He agreed to the teacher's plan, left the boys with him and returned home.

At school the older brother proved to be a dolt, but the younger recited the alphabet correctly and learned everything that he was taught, including conjuring, astrology and magic; he knew the past and could predict the future. Meanwhile, the older brother was sent out every day to graze cows, bullocks and goats. After some time,

the younger brother wondered, "What's he up to, this teacher of ours? I better find out." So he recited a mantra and used his magical powers to see into the future. He saw that his father would come to the teacher to take one of them home, according to the agreement. He also saw that the teacher would dress up the stupid older brother and sit him on a chair on top of a table like a class leader; and that he, the younger brother, would be placed in a corner of the classroom, to look like a dunce.

In those days, say forty or fifty years ago, kids who didn't study were chained up; if they didn't go to school, they had chains put on their legs and they had to walk around dragging the chains. Anyway, the younger brother saw himself tied up like that. That's what would happen: the teacher would deceive his father into taking the older brother and leaving the younger one.

"I've got to warn him," he thought and using his powers - he knew everything, remember - he became a hawk, which flies really fast. He flew at once to his father's house and woke him. "What are you doing here at this hour, son?" asked his father "This is an emergency; you're coming to get us in a week and that teacher is going to cheat you. My older brother hasn't learned a thing; he's impossible, only grazes animals, but he's the one the guru will give you. He's going to chain me up like I'm the stupid one. You've got to say that mother insists that you take me. You see, I've learned all the arts and I can feed you, but he can only graze cows. He knows nothing else and won't be able to help you at all."

The father agreed and a week later he appeared at the school. The teacher, knowing nothing about their plan, dressed up the cowherd brother and sat him in a chair. Then he said, "He's learned all the arts and skills, but the other one can't learn a thing; he's no good." "Oh, you see, my wife told me that I must bring back the younger one; she simply lives for him," said the father.

The teacher thought, "You win some and you lose some." Really he had no choice, did he? He had said that the father could choose. So he gave away the younger son, but as he said goodbye, he spoke to the boy in his secret language: "I treated you like my own son yet you've betrayed me!" And the boy replied in the same language, "Get lost, you old goat!"

They went home, and soon the son saw that his family were hungry. "What can we do, son? We lost our kingdom," said his poor mother. "We stay alive by the wages I earn from pounding rice." "Listen," said the son, "I have special powers. There's a raja nearby who loves cock fights, so I'll turn myself into a huge cock, worth three fanams." Today a fanam is equal to about 200 rupees. Anyway he turned into a huge cock and told his father to take him and sell him to the raja for nothing less than five hundred rupees - you see, he has to deduct the cost of feeding the cock.

The father took his cock-son to the raja, who asked "How much?" "Five hundred." "What?" "Well, look at its height, its body. This is a very special cock; no other cock can beat it. I'm selling it at a discount to get some cash for my old age." In the end, the raja bought it, had its legs fitted with blades and a special room built for it; then he ordered a servant to place the cock under a big iron vessel so it couldn't get out. That night the cock-son turned himself into a bandicoot, burrowed his way out and went home. In the morning, the raja invited all his friends to witness his cock in a fight. "Bring out my cock," he ordered but all that was left was the bird's dead body. "A rat must have killed it," said the guard. "Killed it and ate it, without a trace!" "Don't be stupid! Get out of my sight!" screamed the raja.

Before long the 500 rupees were spent and the parents were thrown back into poverty. The younger son didn't have the heart to send his mother out to pound rice again, so he said, "I'm going to become a pure white horse because there's a shopkeeper nearby who's completely crazy about horses. Sell me to him for nothing less than two thousand."

Next day his father took the white horse, a huge animal, to the man and asked for two thousand. "That much?" "I'm only selling him because I've fallen on hard times." In truth, it was a beautiful horse. "It's enough just to have the horse to look at," thought the shopkeeper. "Come here," he said, opened his shop and counted out the money. "Be sure to train the horse," the father said and left with the two thousand.

Now that teacher, the one who ran the school, used to buy his vegetables and things at that very shop. One day, when he came to shop as usual, he saw the horse and asked, "Whose is that?" "Mine. I just bought it for two thousand." "I see," said the teacher to the horse. "So this is how you use those tricks I taught you! You double-crossed me back then, [to the shopkeeper] Let me break in your horse; it's new and it'll give you trouble unless you train it first. If you mount it, you'll fall on your backside!"

The teacher climbed on the horse and, swearing to get revenge, rode it as hard as he could. When he got off, the horse went to drink water from a clear pool. It saw a fish there, a fish whose life-span was expired, so the horse transferred its soul to the fish. The teacher realised what had happened - he taught him all those tricks, remember! He called a bunch of schoolboys and said, "Get in that pool and catch that fish!" In they went, deeper and deeper, trying to get the fish. The fish frantically looked for a way out and saw a dead water buffalo lying on the bank, skinned and cut up into meat. "This is my chance," thought the fish, who sent its life-power into that dead carcass, which then miraculously got up and ran off!

"Hey! Catch that water buffalo," cried the teacher who ran after it. Running like all hell, the water buffalo saw two parrots on a branch of a tree; the male had died and the female was crying. "Oh, that's a good disguise," he thought, entered the dead parrot and flew off. "Flying away as a parrot, are you?" said the teacher, who became a hawk and chased after it. Off the two birds raced.

A hawk can fly really fast because it's a huge bird; it can cover miles and miles in no time, but the parrot can't fly very fast because it's small. Anyway, they both shot through the air, flew over many lands, to a faraway country where, on a seventh floor balcony, a princess stood at dusk. The parrot flew down into that balcony, gasping and out of breath. The hawk came, too, and swore, in its own language, "Don't think you've escaped! I'm going to kill you within seven days." "You'll never catch me in seven days," returned the parrot in parrot language. They could understand each other's languages, see. As they were cursing each other, the princess told her maidservant to put the parrot in a golden cage, where she fed it milk and fruit, and looked after it.

Three days passed; only four remained. Using its clairvoyant powers, the parrot saw that the teacher would perform a magic show outside the palace, the raja would be pleased and the teacher would ask for the parrot and then for a pearl necklace. The parrot thought, "Somehow I have to tell this to the princess, but how can I do that while I'm a parrot?" So in the dead of night, he opened the cage, hopped out and became a man. He ate all the fruit set out for the sleeping princess, chewed her betel nut and spit the juice on the floor. In the morning, the princess was amazed to see

the fruit skins and betel juice on the floor. "Who came in here! It's not possible with my guards!"

This happened a second night, and on the third she thought, "I'll keep an eye open tonight. But how? I know; I'll cut myself a little and put a mixture of asafoetida and lime juice in it; that'll be just enough to keep me awake." She cut herself and then lay down, keeping one eyelid a little open. Again the parrot became a man, ate the fruit, chewed the betel nut and was about to spit, when she grabbed him; drawing her sword she threatened to kill him.

But he spoke, "Good lady, there's another reason for this. You remember a hawk that sat on your window sill? He's my teacher, who taught me this black magic, and he's going to come here in a few days. Today is the sixth day, so he'll come tomorrow. He'll demonstrate all his magic tricks to your father and then ask for your parrot, that is, for me. You must refuse him and then you must break my neck. He'll ask for your pearl necklace, but you must throw it on the floor. Then watch what happens."

Just as predicted, the teacher came and demonstrated his magic, and when the raja offered him a gift, he asked for the parrot. "I possess many things already, but I want to learn more tricks from that parrot; I want to learn many languages from it, too," said the teacher. The raja ordered Ms daughter to give up the parrot, but she refused, broke its neck and threw it on the floor. As it died, the man transferred his soul to a large pearl on the princess' necklace.

When the raja said, "She's killed the parrot; what else would you like?" The teacher said, "I want the necklace on her neck." Again the raja told his daughter to give it as a gift, but she cursed the teacher, tore it off and dashed it on the floor. "You've become a pearl, have you?" thought the teacher, who became a cock and started to search for the big pearl. But the man became a big cat and tore at the cock's throat - you know what a cat can do to a chicken! The teacher screamed in fright, "Leave me alone! I'll make you raja! I'll..." But the man said, "If I learned anything from you, it's not to trust you. Promise that you'll never, never return! Then I'll release you." The teacher promised and they both became human again.

As the raja stood there, marveling at this display of magic powers, all that mantra-tantra, the teacher said, "He learned many tricks from me, and now he has surpassed me. His cat beat my cock. He won and I lost. You should marry your daughter to this clever, young man. Then he will win back the kingdom that his father lost."

So the boy married the princess and then defeated the king who had stolen Ms father's land. He became raja and they all lived happily.

*Storyteller: Ettirajalu (stories 1-4)
Karaiyamputtur, Pondicherry*

5. THE ABDUCTED PRINCESS

A raja and his minister each had a son; both had been childless for a long time and then these sons were born. From an early age the two boys studied together like brothers. Then one day, the raja said, "Son, you're now twelve years old. It's time for you and the minister's son to take over from us, to become raja and minister." When they had been appointed to these positions, the young prince said to his friend, "They've made us raja and minister, but first we must travel around and see our kingdom." So they mounted their horses and rode off in the sky to see the world.

On the way, the prince got very thirsty and told his friend, who said, "We're above Cuddalore, the 'Sea-town', so we can't drink that water. Let's go further, to an inland town and drink there." They rode ahead until the prince saw a pond in a grove of trees; they went down, tethered their horses, secured their weapons and drank some water. Sitting down near the pond, the prince said, "This forest has a lot of mango and other flowering trees, so we can eat and spend the night here. I'm hungry now; go find some food."

The minister put their horses and weapons in order, took a sack and went into the forest to forage for food. While the prince was sleeping by the side of the pool, a snake emerged from the water and went to bite him. When it got close, the prince opened his eyes, drew out his sword and killed it. From the snake's mouth fell a ring, which the prince put on his finger. In the meanwhile, the minister had gone for food, as you'll remember; well, he went as far as Pondicherry. Night fell and he met a celestial woman, whom he asked to feed him. "It's late," she said, "and wild animals roam about here; you better spend the night here and go in the morning." So the minister slept there.

At the same time, the prince with the ring went to clean his sword in the pond, but the water kept receding, going down and down. As he waded further and further into the pond, the water rose above him; deeper and deeper he went into the water, until he came to a tunnel at the bottom. He saw a row of twelve houses, but no one in sight. "What's this?" he thought. "All these big houses, but no one to be seen," until, in the last house, he saw a girl. Entering the house, he found hot water in the first room where he bathed; he went to the second room where he found sumptuous dishes which he ate; he went to the third room where he saw the nine precious jewels and to the fourth room where he found more glittering gems.

Finally, he reached the tenth room where he saw a girl playing the vina all by herself. As he stood there confused, she asked him who he was. "I came from a faraway land, stopped at the pond to drink and then killed a snake that came to bite me. I took its ring, but when I went to clean my sword, I kept going down and down while the water went up and up." "You've killed it?" "Yes, I killed it because it was going to bite me." "But that's not possible because that snake is a raksasa who abducted me and then became a snake. He couldn't carry me any further, so he left me here."

When he said again that he had killed it, she replied, "You're just saying that; no one can kill that snake." "I'll show you," he said and led her to the side of the pond where the snake lay dead. "Although I am a princess," she said, "I became his wife for twelve years, but now you've come and I will live here as your wife." So the prince lived with her inside the underwater tunnel.

When the minister came back with the food, he saw two tethered horses but only one sword. "Where could he be?" he wondered and then called to the birds - he knew the languages of many animals - elephants, herons, sparrows and others; both he and

the prince knew all these languages. He called ten kinds of birds and asked them in their language if they had seen the prince, but they all answered "no". "Somehow I must find my prince," thought his friend, who took off his ordinary veshti, put on the ochre veshti of a sadhu and went to Benares.

After he had left, the prince in the tunnel said to the girl, "We're wasting away in here; let's go outside." You see, the ring which the dead snake had spat out was magic: if he showed it, the waters would part and let them out. So he put on the ring, the waters parted and they went out of the tunnel. As they were playing in the water, a raja from another kingdom came hunting in that forest with his own minister; when that minister saw the prince and girl sporting in the water, he said to his raja, "She's much finer than your wife. She would grace your palace wonderfully" As soon as he spoke, the prince and the girl dove back into the water. The raja and all his armies stared at the water, but the figures had disappeared beneath the surface and into the tunnel. "You dare to slight my queen in favour of that girl! Well, where is she then?" the raja shouted angrily at his minister and then imprisoned him.

In the tunnel, the girl said, "I told you it's dangerous to go outside, but you didn't listen and look what happened." Ten days more they stayed inside and again the prince said, "Let's go out." Again they emerged and again that same raja came. This time he came by himself, to see if what the minister had said about the girl's beauty was true. He saw them bathing, and when they gathered their brass pots and went back into the water, the raja announced to the whole world that whoever could get him that girl would receive half his kingdom, plus 6,000 fanams.

When a Brahmin widow heard this, she said to her son, "I'm going to get that girl and bring her home." She went to the pond and began to weep, "I'm alone, all alone! Who can help me?" The prince, standing on tip-toe to see, said to his wife, "Some woman is crying out there. Let's go see." "Don't go; it's dangerous." "But I'm a prince; nothing can harm me. Come." He went to the old woman, who said, "Help! My child has died and I'm going to die on this pyre."

The prince said he would protect her and took her back to the underwater tunnel; when she saw him use the ring to part the waters, she thought, "I've got to kill him and use that ring to steal the girl." She lived with them for a while, and then on the eighth day, after prince washed his face - you see, his wife always served him rasam soup after he washed - the old woman said she would serve him. But he refused, saying, "Not necessary; I'll wait for my wife." Then the old woman said, "Oh, I see! You'd take food from your mother, wouldn't you? But not from me?" In the end, he drank what she served him, fell into a swoon and died.

Before he died, the prince and his wife had played dice. When the prince won, he said, "When my minister and I played, he always won, But where is he now?" "You both came to the pond?" "Yes. After I sent him into the forest for food, I killed the snake, got the ring and came here; but I haven't seen him since. We both know animal languages, and he has a special mantra - to raise the dead." And so, when her husband died, the girl decided that she must somehow find that minister to revive him.

The old woman then built a box, put the prince's corpse in it and took his ring. With it, she went to the raja and cried: "Give me the money you promised for getting the girl. My only son has gone to Benares, but when he comes back you can write over half the kingdom to him." The raja agreed and gave her the 6,000 fanams, and she went home.

Meanwhile, the prince's wife, who had followed her husband's corpse, went to the raja and said, "I'll become your wife, but first I must live by myself for six months; after that you may marry me. And on each day of those six months you must feed everyone who comes to the palace; you must feed at least a thousand people a day." The raja agreed and appointed ten people to feed all those visitors. The girl also added that the raja must ask each person if he had been separated from a friend. "If anyone says, 'Yes, I've lost my friend,' you must lock him in a room and tell me," she said.

Soon the six months were almost over; when only four days were left, the minister, who had gone to Benares, came back that way. As he approached the town, he asked the cowherds and goatherds for any local news. "Nothing special," they said. "Seems there was a prince and princess, and the raja announced that he wanted to marry her, but no one got her. Then a Brahmin widow came and got her." "Oh, where's her house?" he asked. "Over there." "Does she have any sons?" "One, who went to Benares. And when he returns, the raja is supposed to give him half his kingdom."

Still dressed in his ochre veshti, like a sadhu, the minister walked toward the old woman's house. When people asked him, "Where are you from, friend?" he answered: "What! You don't recognise me? I left my mother when I was a small child and went to Benares. You know that Brahmin widow? She's my mother."

Then the neighbours called out, "He's coming, your son! Your son!" She hugged him and welcomed him home and began to feed him. As he sat down to eat, he said, "Mother. When I left we had no food to eat, barely a few grains of rice, and you pounded rice for a living. How'd you get all this?" She explained how the raja wanted the girl and how she'd gone into the tunnel, killed the prince and stolen the princess. "How did you get into the tunnel?" he asked. "You have to use a ring to part the water." "Give me the ring." "It's here, but you can have it after I die." "If you're going to give it to me then, why not give it to me now? I'm going to live here now anyway." So the old widow gave him the ring and told him to eat. "There's a big feast at the palace, amma, so I'll eat there."

He went by himself and found the feast was over, but the cook asked him, "Are you separated from a friend?" When he answered "yes", they put him in a locked room and informed the princess. She told them to give him an oil bath, feed him and keep him there until she came. It was sunset and tomorrow was her wedding to the raja. "I can't stay here tonight," she thought. "Somehow I must find my husband and revive him before morning." When she spoke with the minister and found out that he was her husband's friend, they left at night for the pond, carrying the ring.

In the morning, back at the palace, the servants searched everywhere but the girl and the sadhu were gone. The raja called the old woman and said, "You took my land, and now your son has stolen my wife. You're done for." And he burned her in a lime-kiln.

At the pond, the minister told the princess to stand to one side while he revived the prince. "When he awakes he might think I had designs on you or you on me, so hide yourself." She hid, while he said the mantra and revived the prince. When they were united, they decided to return to their own kingdom; so they mounted horses and rode away, the prince and princess on one horse, and the minister on the other.

On the way, they sat down under a big banyan tree, in which a male and a female parrot perched on a branch. The female parrot said, "Tell me a raja-story." "I don't know any stories," said the male parrot. "Just tell whatever you know, that's enough." "All right, but it's terrible, about a prince who's going to lose his life!" "How will he die?" "Well, this banyan tree will soon fall and kill him." "If he escapes from underneath the tree, will he face any more danger?" "If he escapes from the tree, he'll come to a three-pillared mandapam, which will collapse and kill him." "And if he escapes from that, will the prince live?" "If he escapes that, he'll sleep on a soft bed and a cobra will strike." "And after that?" "If he escapes that, he will not die. But if anyone repeats this story, that person will turn to stone!"

This is what the parrot said, but only the minister heard it because the prince was asleep on the sleeping princess' lap. Immediately, the minister dragged the prince out from under the tree and the tree fell in a crash! No one was hurt. Then they rode their horses and came to the three-pillared mandapam, but the minister spoke to his horse in its own language and it flew upward as the building collapsed in a heap below! Again they had escaped. Soon they reached their own kingdom, where everyone rejoiced at seeing them.

The minister announced to the people that the prince had returned with his bride, who was called Gnanasuntari, the "Jewel of Wisdom". They were all very happy, but there's still one more danger to escape, isn't there? A snake. You see, the snake that the prince killed at the pond was Karkottan. He had a son who swore that he would kill his father's murderer; in fact, the fallen banyan tree and the collapsed mandapam - all that was his doing. The prince and princess knew nothing about this, but the minister did. He slept under their bed, and when the snake approached at night, he killed it and hid it under the bed. But a little blood fell on the princess' breast, and when he went to remove it with his little finger, the prince awoke.

"That's what I thought. You tried to get rid of me back then. You want her, don't you!" The princess stopped them from arguing and took the matter to the royal assembly. They questioned the minister: "Why did you do that? What were you doing? Explain yourself." But the minister kept silent because if he told the story he would be turned to stone. Meanwhile, the princess gave birth to a child - she got pregnant back in the tunnel with the prince - but everyone thought the child was the minister's. Of course, she didn't know that the minister had heard the parrot's story and couldn't speak.

In the end, the whole town decided that the minister was guilty and should be taken to the cremation ground and burned. As he was being taken there, he thought, "Well, I'm going to die either way, but if I tell the truth, at least I can save the child's reputation." So he spoke: "I revived the prince, and when we sat under a banyan tree I heard a parrot say that he would die when the tree fell, when the mandapam collapsed and when a snake bit him. The parrot said that if anyone repeated this story, he'd turn to stone." "How can the stone become a man again?" they asked. "An only son must be sacrificed, in front of the parents' eyes, and his blood must be poured over the stone." He said this and then turned to stone.

Everyone wailed, "Oh that good man has died! Such a devoted friend to the raja! 'Even if a bad smell blows over a flower, it doesn't lose its scent.'" When the prince heard the truth, he was overcome with grief; sitting down by the princess, he cried, "He saved my life and has now become stone!" The princess said, "Don't worry. Here's my son. Show me the stone." Taking their son to the stone, she held his head while he cut it off and poured the blood over the stone. The stone regained its human form. Of course, the child must be revived, so the minister chanted his mantras and the child came back to life.

Finally, they all returned to the palace, the minister, the prince, the princess and the child. There the people asked her, "Where is your father and mother?" "I'm from a nearby kingdom. We were twelve servant-maids. One day we went to pick flowers and that snake scared us; the others ran away to other kingdoms and I alone remained. Then the snake took the form of a raksasa, captured me and kept me in the tunnel in the pond. For six months I had to endure being his wife; finally the prince found me and we came here."

That's what she said, and the story is finished.

Man in audience: Who did you learn this story from?

Storyteller: This is a story that was read to me from a book. I don't know how to read, sir. Can't read. Someone else would do that, and I'd sit close and listen. That's how I learned it. It's not just any "raja-story"; it's from a book.

Man in audience: And you don't read now either, is that right?

Storyteller: No. They send me to graze goats. [laughter]

*Storyteller: Vanamayilu (stories 5-6)
Pakur, Pondicherry*

6. A BRAHMIN MAKES GOOD

In a town there were two brothers - they were Brahmins. The younger one knew astrology, but the older one didn't. The older one just wandered around idly, while the younger one worked hard telling horoscopes and came back with two or three thousand rupees, which he gave to his wife.

As the older Brahmin's wife set off to the fields one morning, she said to her lazy husband, "Can't you learn even a little astrology? Then you could give me a few coins at least. You do nothing and I work in the fields all day to feed you!" "All right," he said. "Give me that five rupees you got for your daily wages yesterday and give me a little food." His wife cooked a handful of rice and gave it to him, along with the five rupees.

He left the village and soon came to a kallu shop, where you can get toddy. He drank five rupees of kallu and slept. Waking up later he thought, "What am I going to tell her? Tomorrow when she goes to work she'll ask about the five rupees she gave me, and then she'll get angry." Not knowing what to do, he sat down and soon a white rat crossed his path. He watched as the rat scratched and scratched and dug a hole. So he wrote that down: "I saw a white rat dig a hole." He went further, sat down and saw a spotted deer leaping about. He wrote that down, too: "I saw a spotted deer leap."

In another shop, near the kallu shop, they sell candies in the shape of eyes, mouths, tongues, so he bought some, ate them and returned home, where his wife asked, "Right. You went to learn some astrology. What'd you learn?" Proudly he answered, "You'll see. I'm a famous astrologer now." She was so happy she went around the whole town, announcing, "My husband's learned astrology! He's an astrologer!"

That day the washerwoman lost her donkey. While she and her husband were searching for the donkey, the Brahmin's wife said, "No need to search like this. If you ask my husband, he'll find your donkey." So the washerman went to the Brahmin and asked him to use his special powers to help. "Don't worry. By morning your donkey will be tethered. You can go home now," said the Brahmin. All night that Brahmin searched through the fields and gardens - an Aiyar looking for a donkey! [laughter] Finally, he caught it and tied it up before the sun rose. So he was proclaimed a great astrologer.

At the same time, in the royal palace, a necklace went missing. The servants there were named "Mrs Tongue", "Mrs Nose" and "Mrs Eye". The three of them had stolen the necklace, put it in a metal box and buried it, thinking they'd get it out the next day. In the palace, the guards were searching all over for the necklace, and when the washerwoman came to get the dirty clothes, she said, "Oh, our village Aiyar is a great man, a great astrologer. He said our lost donkey would be found by the morning and it was. Go and ask him to do his astrology for you."

The guards brought the Aiyar back to the palace, where he was forced to practice his astrology; first though he ordered them to bring special puja materials: "Bring me coconuts, bring me camphor, bring this and that." But the raja said, "No, sir. No pujas now. You must find the necklace within eight days. If not... well, we'll see about that."

When the eighth day arrived, the guards brought the Aiyar back to the palace. As they marched him along, do you know what he thought of? "Those candies I ate a week before - in the shape of a nose, eye, mouth, [laughter] If I don't find that necklace, I'm done for. The raja said if I find it I'm rich; but if I don't I'll lose my head. Tomorrow I'm going to die for sure! How I will miss those lovely sweets! Oh Nose, Oh

Mouth, Oh Eye! What will happen to you!" When the three women who stole the necklace heard him call their names [laughter], they were shocked: "Amazing! What magical powers! He'll turn us in for sure. Better give him the necklace right now."

They got the necklace, went to the Aiyar and said, "I'm Mrs Nose, she's Mrs Eye and she's Mrs Mouth. Here's the necklace." The Aiyar understood absolutely nothing, but he received the necklace in a box. Then he went to the palace, pointed to a spot on the floor and said, "Tomorrow, in the early morning, you'll find the necklace here." Later that night, the Aiyar put the necklace in that spot and went home. The raja rose in the morning, saw the necklace, gave the Aiyar gifts and made him the royal astrologer.

*Storyteller: Vanamayilu (stories 5-6)
Pakur, Pondicherry*

7. A CRUEL DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

In a town there lived an old man and woman. For many years they had had no children, then in midlife, say about forty or forty-five years old, they had a son. They raised him with great affection in their old age. He was very intelligent, did well in his studies and got a job. At that point, they had every comfort - a big house and everything a family could want. Then the father died, and only the son and his old mother remained. She said, "Son, it's time you married; we've got everything here in this house and it will make me happy in my old age."

She tried to convince her son, but he said, "No. I'll marry only after you die." "Now listen," she said. "I've suffered a lot to raise you and now we're well off, so what's the point of marrying after I die?" "If you find a bride for me and bring her here, what's going to happen? She won't understand how you worked so hard to raise and educate me. She'll have to come from a wealthy family because now we're rich, and so she won't care a thing about you; she'll only look after me." "That won't matter to me. You get married and no matter what she does or says to me, no matter how cruel she is, I'll never complain to you." This was the mother's promise.

"Well," he thought, "if she's that insistent that I should marry, I will." He married a girl from a rich family who gave a huge dowry of cash and household things. In the morning the son told her to look after his mother and he went to work. What did she do? She made a snack for herself, switched on the fan and lay down to rest. Didn't care a hoot about the old woman. The mother went hungry but said nothing to her son. Sometimes the daughter-in-law would toss her a few left-overs, or she might leave a little gruel outside her door. Still she said nothing to her son - remember what she said at the beginning: "No matter what I suffer, I'll not complain." She just kept it all to herself. As the years passed, she grew older and weaker and nearly blind.

One day her daughter-in-law sat down with her tea and called the mother-in-law, "Hey, old woman! Come here. I'm a bit bored; I want to watch you dance and hear you sing for a while." When she was singing in a separate room, her son came home, unusually, in the middle of the day. Hearing a strange sound, as if his old mother were singing, he said, "Sounds like my mother in there."

"Yes. You see, she wants a husband." [Someone in audience sniggered and teller said, "Quiet! This is the way the story is told."] Then he began to think, "She did so much for me all her life; now she wants something she really shouldn't ask for. Still, if that's what she wants, I'll get her married."

He went out to find her a husband. Because he loved his mother so much he didn't realise what he was doing. I mean, how many old men are there? And even if he finds a few still kicking, at their age they're all beggars. Well, finally he found an old man and said, "Grandpa, come with me and I'll see that you're fed and taken care of. My old mother is alone and you can live with her." The son brought the old man home, where he built a small house for his mother and him.

The daughter-in-law did what she always did: poured a little gruel in a tumbler of water and gave it to her mother-in-law and gave a tumbler to the old man, too. The old fellow was happy not having to wander around and beg for his food. The young woman left the gruel outside their door and went back to the main house where she fed herself well. This went on for some time, and the mother didn't know what to do: "I can't tell my son and if I tell anyone else, I would be humiliated. Did I work so hard to raise him just to suffer like this? Can't tell anyone, but let's see what god has to say." And she began to weep loudly.

Siva and Parvati were making their rounds feeding everyone, when Siva heard something and said, "Parvati, some woman is crying down there in the middle of the night. Must be an emergency; let's go and see." The gods changed to their human forms, went down and asked her why she was crying, but she said, "Why ask about my problem? What can you do? You're just a man." "No, really, tell me. I'll help you," said Siva. So she told him the whole story, how she brought up her son, how he refused to marry and what had happened with the daughter-in-law. "I see," said Siva. "As long as I am alive, you have my blessings and shall lack nothing." He gave her this boon and left.

Now she had everything - lots of tables and chairs, pots and pans, clothes and jewels. The next day, when the daughter-in-law came with the gruel and called the old woman to eat, she said, "Go away. I don't need you. You wouldn't even recognise me now that god has taken care of me." When the daughter-in-law looked in and saw all the things she had in her house, she ran to her husband and told him to get an old husband for her own mother and put them together in a separate house so they could get rich, too.

The couple sent for her mother, built her a house and found an old man to live with her. Three times a day they were fed, the best curries and dishes. One day, while they were eating, Siva and Parvati stopped by and asked what this second mother-in-law's troubles were and she said, "I eat fish and meat every day. What problems could I have?" She showed the gods no respect, just kept on eating, hardly looking at the god and goddess, who then left.

Suddenly the old couple turned into donkeys! They went to the daughter-in-law's house and butted against the door. This woke the young woman, who came outside, saw the donkeys and then saw that her mother and her old husband were missing. She understood and said to her husband, "Oh, god. My mother and that old man have become donkeys! We pushed her into living with that man, and now look what's happened!"

At that moment the first mother-in-law came by and spoke to her son and daughter-in-law, "I'll tell you what happened. I have kept silent all these years but now I'll tell you the whole story. You said that you would marry only after I died. Well, I suffered so that you could marry. I've known hunger all these years. She gave me a little gruel at night. I drank that and lay down. But that's all. Look what she cooks for her own mother - curries, fish, everything! Siva gave me a boon because I suffered, but he turned them into donkeys." Finally realising that his mother had been treated cruelly all these years, the son turned on his wife: "You watched all this and said nothing while you did this to my mother! I'm getting rid of you." He tied his wife on the back of the two donkeys and sent them through the streets. Looking after his mother, he found another bride, married, and lived happily. That's the story.

Storyteller: Celvi (story 7)
Pakur, Pondicherry

8. A MOSQUITO'S STORY

A mosquito dressed up in her bangles, her finest silk sari and a long braid, and went around looking for a husband. She searched everywhere, until a young bull asked her, "Hey, sweetie! Where're you going?" "I'm looking for a good husband, that's what." "Why not marry me?" "What can you do?" asked the mosquito. "They plough the fields with me all day. At night they tie me up; then I eat straw, sleep and make dung."

"You won't do at all," said the mosquito and continued her search. Four hoes appeared and asked, "Miss Mosquito! Hey, Beautiful! Where are you going?" "I'm looking for a good man to marry." "Marry me!" said one of the hoes. "What can you do?" "I work hard. I dig up soil, cut grass and everything in sight. In the evening they throw me in a corner; I go to sleep and get up in the morning." [laughter] "You're not what I want either."

Another day passed, and this time a group of rats appeared; among them was a lame rat who asked the mosquito, "Where are you going, lovely mosquito?" "I'm looking for a husband." "Marry me, marry me," said the lame rat. "What can you do?" asked the mosquito. "I can earn a good living. I'll bring you whatever you want - cooking oil, water, clothes - everything. Besides, I've seen the whole world." "Then you're the right man for me. I'll marry you."

They married and lived a happy family life, but soon troubles arose. When they fought with each other, the mosquito cried and got angry with her rat husband. One day he asked for water and she brought it, but when he drank it - you know how rats drink by inhaling quickly - well, she was sucked right up into his nose! She went in there and died!

She was dead, and nothing could be done. The other rats cried for a while and then collected sticks and made a bier and carried the bones to the ocean. Got to follow all the rituals, you know. When the bier was put in the river, the water became dirty, at the very spot where a wild elephant used to drink.

When the elephant came to drink and saw the water, it said, "You're normally clear; what happened, Mr River?" "Haven't you heard?" said the river. "The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones, put them in the water and now I'm all dirty."

When it heard this, the elephant broke off one of its tusks in sympathy and lay under a date palm to sleep. The tree asked, "Oh, brother elephant, why are you coming here with a broken and bloody tusk?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; so I broke off one of my tusks." "Then I'll drop all my leaves," said the tree and it did.

Next a crow came and sat on the tree, as it always did, and said, "You're completely leafless! Where am I going to sit?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; so I dropped all my leaves." "In that case, I'll pluck out my eye." And till this day you can see that the crow has a damaged eye.

The crow always sat on a certain wall and when it did, the wall asked, "Why is your eye dripping with blood?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; the tree dropped its leaves; so I plucked out my eye." "Then, I'll fall down," said the wall and it did.

Now, a farmer's wife used to walk that way, carrying her husband's lunch in a bundle on her head; when she saw the wall in a heap, she said, "You have stood here so long, wall! Why have you collapsed?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; the tree dropped its leaves; the crow plucked out its eye; so I collapsed." "Then I'll throw this food on the ground and run away. So what if he doesn't get his food, after all that has happened!" she said and threw the food away.

Back home, when her husband asked about the food, she replied, "So much has happened," and told him the long story. When he heard all that, the man said, "I'm not going to plough any more," and broke his plough. Then his son asked, "Why have you come home so early today, father?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; the tree dropped its leaves; the crow plucked out its eye; the wall collapsed; your mother threw away the food; so I broke my plough." "In that case, I'm not going to school!" said the boy and broke his slate.

However, he went to school anyway, just for fun. When his teacher saw him and asked why he had come without his slate, the boy told him the whole story about the mosquito. "Then I'm going to burn down this school; I've got no work here," said the teacher. So he burned down the school and ran out of town. That's the end of the story.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

9. LOOSE BOWELS

A man had two sons, named Little Kali and Big Kali. Neither had any idea what "rice" was - they were that stupid. A Brahmin, an Aiyar, hired the older brother, telling Mm, "If you bring ten bundles of firewood and eight bundles of grass, I'll feed you a banyan tree leaf full of rice every day." But how much rice does a banyan leaf hold?

Still, the older brother wanted that "rice" badly, though he didn't know what it was, so he went to the Aiyar's house. He collected the firewood and grass and was given just one handful of rice on a little banyan tree leaf. How could he manage on that tiny amount of food? He couldn't, and eventually, working hard and eating little, he began to waste away. Finally, he went back home in that emaciated condition and told his younger brother to go and work for the Aiyar.

When the younger went to him, the Aiyar again said, "If you bring ten bundles of firewood and eight bundles of grass, I'll feed you a banyan tree leaf full of rice." So the younger brother agreed and went to work. He worked hard, like his brother, but he did things a little differently. He made ten tiny bundles of wood, equal to one normal bundle, tied up each with rope and brought them back to the Aiyar. After all, the man had said "ten bundles", hadn't he? Well, he got ten bundles.

The younger brother did the same with the grass: he split one bundle into eight tiny ones. And for his food, he stitched together fifty banyan tree leaves, so that he had an enormous leaf! After work, he put that leaf down and asked for his food, but even all the rice cooked for the Aiyar's family wasn't enough to fill that huge leaf! As he ate, he teased the family, "C'mon! Fill my leaf! I'm still hungry."

The Aiyar's wife watched all this and later said to her husband, "He's eating us out of house and home! Tomorrow take him along to daughter's house and see that he gets what he deserves!" The next day the Aiyar said to his servant, "Come along with me; I'm going to ride over to my daughter's house for a few days." His plan was to kill him on the way, since he was ruining them little by little!

On the way to the daughter's house, the Aiyar felt tired and told the young man to give the horse a bath while he had a nap. As he lay down under a tree, the young man cut off the horse's ears and tail and shooed the horse off into the forest. You see, the Aiyar might have wanted to harm him, but he had decided to get back at the Aiyar for trying to starve his brother and him. So he took the horse's ears and tails and stuck them in the mud, as if the horse had sunk below, into the mud.

Then he waited for the Aiyar to awake; when he did and asked for the horse, the young man said, "I washed it all over, but it sank deep into the mud! You grab the tail and pull hard and I'll grab the ears. We'll pull it out together."

"Right," said the Aiyar who grabbed the horse's tail, held it firmly and then pulled as hard as he could - and fell backwards right into the muck! "Oh, sir!" said the man, "The horse is lost; it's gone right down into the mud and died!" "Don't worry about the horse; I've got to clean my clothes. You go ahead - see my daughter's house over there, the big house - go and tell her to cook me a nice meal. I'm famished."

At the house, the man spoke to the Brahmin's daughter, "I came with your father but he's taking a bath and said that you should cook him a meal. He wants a soup of old millet." The daughter thought her father had developed some strange food habits in his old age, but she shrugged it off and found old, dirty millet, full of insects. She

cooked it in a hurry, because her father wanted it soon, and didn't worry about the insects or dirt.

When her father arrived, he swallowed the whole bowl to satisfy his hunger. Before long his stomach ached and he went to the toilet all night long. He thought his daughter must be in deep poverty: "I asked her to make me something really nice and she cooks this rotten stuff! Poor thing. Her husband gets a good salary but apparently doesn't give her anything." The Aiyar really suffered that night; he couldn't sleep and could hardly walk, but he had to go back and forth to the bathroom all night.

Then the young man said to him, "Sir, here's an idea. Take this big gourd, go in it and then empty it in the pond early in the morning. After that we'll go back home." The exhausted Aiyar agreed and filled up the gourd with his waste. At dawn he took the gourd and snuck off as if to take a bath, but at that moment, the young man said to the daughter, "Look! Your father has left in a huff! He didn't say anything all night long. Better go and call him back." She ran after him, calling, "Father, come back! Come back!"

She even grabbed his hand, but he tried to get rid of her: "Let me go bathe; I'll come right back." But she wouldn't let him go. What could he do? He couldn't say, "I'm going to empty this gourd full of crap?" could he? "I'll be back in a moment; let me go," he pleaded. "No! Don't leave when you're upset like this, father," she kept on saying. "At least eat something before going back home." "No! I've got to bathe." She pulled this way, he pulled that way and eventually the gourd tipped, spilling the excrement all over him. "You see, my stomach's upset and I've got to go bathe. It's not your fault; that servant of mine has caused all this trouble. After I bathe, I'm going to take care of him!"

That night he talked with his daughter and son-in-law, "Look at the mischief he's created! Unbelievable things!" In the end, they decided to kill him in his sleep. Now, the man, who was sleeping on the verandah, overheard all this; so he quickly wrapped his veshti around a calf, left it on the verandah and climbed up into the rafters. The Aiyar came at the sleeping body with a sharp knife, muttering, "You bastard! You almost ruined me, but I'm going to get rid of you now!" He struck hard, right into the calf. "Better stab him a few more times; then I'll be sure he's gone," he thought and stabbed the calf over and over. He didn't know it was a calf, so when he lifted off the veshti and saw the dead animal, he screamed in horror.

From the rafters, came a voice: "Oh, I see! You Aiyars eat cow meat only at midnight in the agraharam?" [laughter! "What! Are you still alive! And now I've lost something else - this calf. My family is ruined; my horse is dead and this calf is dead!"

While the Aiyar beat his breast in grief, the young man said, "Here's a bit of advice. Tie up its legs, put it around your neck and then walk along that path over there, where no one will see you, and throw it into the pond. If you see anyone, just run back here."

So the Aiyar's son-in-law tied up the calf, hoisted it onto the old man's shoulders and off he went. When they left the house, the young man put on a new veshti and ran ahead of them - you see, he wanted to cause him even more trouble. When the Aiyar saw him - remember the old man was carrying a lot of weight - the Brahmin said, "What'd you come for?" "There's some people coming this way toward the pond. Better go that way." So the Brahmin lugged the calf in the opposite direction, where

the man reappeared and the Aiyar said, "Now what?" "Someone's coming this way."
"Oh, then I can't bury the animal here."

Back and forth went the Aiyar, carrying the calf. Finally, the young man began to pity the Aiyar and said, "Who cares what they think? I'll bury it for you." And so he did and the story ended happily.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District

10. THE BOUQUET

In a kingdom lived a raja and his minister, and each had a son. When it was time to crown his son, the raja told him he should get married. To this the son replied, "Let me first see the world, then I'll be ready for marriage. I'm not ready now." The raja agreed, gave his son and the minister's son a bag of money and a horse each, and bade them farewell, saying, "Go and see the wide world and then return for your coronation. But, you, young minister! You must protect my son carefully; a thorn in his foot should be like a thorn in your eye!"

They traveled widely, visiting many places, and one night they lay down to sleep outside a temple. The minister held the prince's head in his lap as they slept, just as the raja had ordered. Early in the morning, the minister woke, gently lowered the prince's head to the ground, and walked around the temple toward the tank. On his way, he saw a beautiful sculpture on the temple wall, a stone sculpture of a woman holding a bouquet of flowers. She stood there as if she was offering the flowers to you! He was fascinated with the sculpture but thought, "If the prince sees this, he'll never leave this spot. If I find her beautiful, he'll be completely infatuated! I've got to prevent him from seeing her."

When he returned to the temple, the prince asked him where he'd been. "I went to look around the temple. Take a look, but don't go to the north wall." The prince walked around the temple, looking at all the images of the gods, and then said to himself, "Why should I listen to what he says?" and went to the north wall. As soon as he saw the sculpture, he was overwhelmed. He stood in front of the woman and said, "Give me the bouquet! Give me the bouquet!"

After an hour had passed, the minister wondered where the prince was and went to find him. There he was, still dumbstruck in front of the sculpture. "Oh, no! He's lost now!" thought the minister, who said to the prince, "That's only a picture. Forget it. We've got to go, travel back to your father." But the prince wouldn't listen and just stood there repeating, "Give me the bouquet! Give me the bouquet!" He neither ate nor moved; and his only thought was to take the woman with him. He was that much in love, completely fixated.

After two days of this, the minister decided it couldn't go on any longer and called the temple priest. "Watch over the prince; here's some money for you," he said. "Now tell me, where is the woman in the sculpture? And who is the sculptor?" "She lives across the seven seas, in a Chettiyar merchant's family; seeing one of her hairs, a sculptor made this image. If you cross the seven seas, you'll find her," said the priest. "I'm off. You must watch him carefully; that's your duty."

The minister rode for a long time, until he saw a cobra in a tree eating two baby chicks just hatched in a bird's nest; every day the bird laid two eggs and every day the snake broke the eggs and ate the babies. The snake kept on devouring this family, day after day. When the minister saw the snake slither into the nest, he realised what was happening, killed the snake with his sword and turned it into a mountain, a high mountain.

When the two chicks survived, they said to the minister - they are the kind of birds who can speak at birth - "Who are you, great saviour, who has rescued us from this historic destruction of our race! Tell us what you want and our parents will grant it." "I've got to cross the seven seas, you see..." but how could he tell the whole truth to the birds? "Please take me over the waters." "We'll do that. Just hide here so that our

parents don't see you; they are very fierce and might bite. Wait till we call you; don't come out till then."

After he hid, the parent birds came, crying because more of their chicks would have been killed; but when they saw them alive, they were overjoyed and said excitedly, "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen one of my children alive! Wonderful!" "Mother, father. Promise that you won't kill anyone." "We promise," the parent birds said. "Look over there at that mountain; that's what's been devouring our family for so long. A young man has saved us and you must carry him across the seven seas. If you refuse, we will never eat again; you must do it, right now." The parents agreed, "We'll do whatever you wish, children; you are everything to us. Tell us what to do and it's done. Even if you wish us to fast, we will do it for you."

The birds called the minister and asked him what he wanted. When he said he wanted to be taken across the seven seas, they agreed and he climbed on the wings of the parent birds. As they flew over the third or fourth sea, he thought, "How can I present myself to the Chettiyar? Can't just show up without a good reason." Looking down, he saw rubies, emeralds and diamonds, and said to the birds, "I've got to go to the toilet, please put me down for a moment." They did, and he went into the forest like he was going to the toilet, but he filled his pockets with these jewels. Rich as a gem merchant, he climbed back on to the birds and flew off.

They crossed the seventh sea and set him down on the shore. "Here's a little rod," they said. "Whenever you want I'll come and take you back. Just hold this rod in your hands as if you're praying, and we'll return." After the birds left, the minister hawked his wares like a merchant. In that region, only the Chettiyar, whose daughter he was searching for, had the wealth to buy such precious gems. Soon the Chettiyar called him to his house, bought some of his gems and then said, "You may stay here, until you go back home." "I've left home for good," said the minister, as part of his secret plan, "and I have no plans to go anywhere." "In that case," said the Chettiyar, "stay in our house and eat with us."

So he stayed in the Chettiyar's house, but after some time, he said, "May I build a small house for my wife to live in when she comes?" "Of course, why not!" He paid for the land with the remaining jewels and the house was built; without the Chettiyar's knowing, however, the minister had a tunnel dug that connected his house with the room where the Chettiyar's daughter slept. When he went through the tunnel to her room, she fell in love with him. Next day she told her father she was ill and wanted to lie down in her room, but she went through the tunnel; the Chettiyar knew absolutely nothing about this and thought his daughter was lying down in her room whenever she visited the minister's house.

One day the minister said to the Chettiyar, "My wife has arrived from her village. Please come and eat a meal with us." The Chettiyar ate with them, but after he left he had a funny feeling that his friend's wife looked a lot like his own daughter, but he couldn't be sure. "Who can say? There are so many women in this world! Besides, he says she's his wife," he muttered in confusion.

This went on for a while: the daughter would go to the minister's house and then return and lie down in her room, pretending to her father that she had been ill. Soon the minister told her that they must return to his own kingdom. He also asked the Chettiyar to bid them farewell.

On the very last day, when he was eating in the minister's house, the Chettiyar, who was still suspicious, got an idea: "I'll smear a little ghee on her sari as she passes by

and when I get home, I'll check my daughter's sari. That way, I'll know if she is my daughter or not." Putting some ghee in his hand, he smeared some on the woman's sari as she passed by. The minister, however, saw this and later told her to take off her stained sari and wear another just like it when she went home. "Lie down like nothing's happened and your father will believe it's you."

When she returned, her father said, "Daughter, that's a beautiful sari you're wearing; expensive silk, isn't it? Let's take a look." "Yes, father," she said - she wanted to fool him, of course. Looking at the sari, he examined the spot where he had smeared ghee, but the sari was perfectly clean. "That woman really is his wife! And this is my daughter," he said to himself and cleared his suspicions.

The next morning she went very early to the minister's house and got ready to leave with him as his wife. When the Chettiyar knew they were leaving, he gave them a send off. They all stood on the seashore, with the minister holding the rod in his hand; and when he prayed the birds came. The minister and the Chettiyar's daughter each climbed on a bird and flew off, as the Chettiyar wished them well. When he entered his house, however, his daughter was gone! He beat his head and his chest, screaming, "He cheated me!"

Meanwhile, when the minister and the woman reached the temple, he said to the birds, "Thank you for all your help; you have done us a great favour. Without you, the prince would never recover." After the birds flew off, he brought the woman to the temple and gave her a bouquet of flowers. "Hold this," he said, "and when the prince says, 'Give me the bouquet,' give it to him. Next he'll ask about me, and you must say I'm dead."

She held the flowers and when the prince said, "Give me the bouquet," she merged with the sculpture - you couldn't tell them apart - and gave him the bouquet. At that moment, when he received the flowers, the prince came to his senses and asked, "Where is my minister?" "Oh, he died some time ago," she answered. "He died after bringing me such a beautiful woman! He's left me alone in this isolated place," he cried and died on the spot. "The prince, who was to be my husband, is dead! I can't live any more," she said and died, too.

Now there were three corpses outside the temple. And when the pusari, the priest, came for puja and saw the prince, the minister and the woman lying dead, he also committed suicide!

Now, sir, which of those deaths are justified and which are not? Who should have died and who not?

Man no. 1 in audience: When people tell stories they often ask questions like this.

Man no. 2: Well, let's see... I think the prince's death is right; after the person who did so much for him died, he felt that he couldn't live. His death was justified. I don't know about the others.

Woman no. 1: The pusari's death is also right.

Storyteller: Not the pusari! What's he got to do with it? He's supposed to perform the puja, not die with them. The prince died because of the minister, and the princess died because of the prince - that's all as it should be. But the pusari should clear off the bodies and get on with his work. Why should he die?

Woman no. 1: That's right; he just wanted to join the crowd, after seeing the others lying on the ground.

Storyteller: So the prince's death is right, but the pusari's is not.

Man no. 3: What about the minister and the princess?

Storyteller: No, sir, not the minister. The raja told him to look after his son like his own life.

Man no. 2: The minister - he's the one who did the most wrong.

Storyteller: That's right. He told the lie about being dead. If he hadn't told her to say that, no one would have died.

Man no. 2: You tell stories really well. Do you tell this story a lot?

Storyteller: Yes.

Man no. 2: And when you ask the question at the end, do people get the answer right?

Storyteller: Some do and some don't. Mostly they don't understand.

Man no. 2: Then do you tell them?

Storyteller: No. I ask them questions: "How did the raja die? How did the minister?" I tell them to think and then give an answer. Some say the death of pusari is proper, some say the minister, and so on. I tell the kids to think about it and tell me later.

Man no. 2: Oh, I see. That way, when they can't get the answer right, you can get out of telling the next story and do your housework.

Storyteller [laughing]: Exactly. I can trick them and escape to do some housework, and also get out of having to tell another story.

Man no. 3: Do men and women give different answers or the same?

Storyteller: They answer individually. I can't see any difference. The older people get mad if I don't give them the answer. "Hey, you can't keep silent!" they say. "Tell us!" Then I say, "You kept saying 'um' [as respondent] during the whole story but you didn't follow a word, did you?" That's what I say.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

11. KILLING THE MONKEY-HUSBAND

Six brothers lived with their little sister, who was lame. On her way to school one day, she played in the woods with other children and they all climbed a tree. When the school bell rang, the children climbed down and ran off, all except the lame girl, who couldn't get down. Left all alone, she cried, "Help me! Help me down!" but no one would help. They all said, "You're lame; why did you climb up?" and left her there in the tree.

Then a monkey came by and she said, "Monkey, please help me down." "I will, if you will marry me," he said. "I can't do that, but please help me." "Only if you marry me," he repeated and in the end she agreed. He got her down and took her to his house. Meanwhile, her six brothers searched everywhere but couldn't find her and returned home.

The sister got married to the monkey and then said, "I want to go back and see my parents for a day." She went first to her oldest brother's house, but he didn't recognise her at all because she was all dressed up as a bride. He thought he recognised her hair, yet he wasn't sure. When he asked her what she wanted, she sang this sad song:

I went to pluck fruits, anne,
as pretty as a parrot was I;
I married a magic monkey, *anne*,
and now I've come home.

She sang this song, but her brother understood nothing. It was the same with the second brother. But when she went to her mother and she sang the same song, using *amma* for "mother" instead of *anne* for "brother", her mother immediately understood and embraced her daughter.

When the girl described everything that had happened with the monkey, her mother told her to invite her husband to their house. After she left to bring the monkey, her family laid out gifts for the newlyweds: silk veshtis and shirts, and silk saris. They also dug a deep pit and heated boiling water. The daughter said to the monkey, "Come to my house; they want to celebrate our marriage for us."

When they arrived at her house, her family sat the monkey down, rubbed him in oil and told him to get in the pit. "What's the pit for?" asked the monkey. "Oh, that's the way we celebrate weddings in our family," they said. They put him in the pit and poured water all over him, and he died.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi (stories 11, 16, 20, 25-27)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District

12. A DOG'S STORY

Once a woman raised a dog with great affection. Then both she and the dog got pregnant at the same time. But the woman ate all the kohikkattai cakes and gave none to her dog, who got very angry and said, "You've eaten all the cakes and given me none! All right, but I curse you to give birth to four puppies!" Cursing her like this, the dog left.

Sure enough, the woman had four puppies, while the dog herself gave birth to two human daughters. The dog raised her daughters well, taking them to the river to bathe and clothing them by stealing clothes drying on the river bank. Her daughters grew up to be very beautiful.

One day a raja came hunting that way and asked them for water; when the daughters gave him some, he was infatuated with the beauty of these dog-girls and took them away with him. The mother dog was distraught, but the younger girl had torn off pieces of a sari and dropped them along the way to the raja's town so that her mother would know where they were; the younger one loved her mother that much. But the older sister was very proud and the raja didn't marry her. Instead, he let his minister marry her.

During the marriage celebrations, the mother dog went there and began to cry, "Oh, my little daughter! You're gone, but you left these signs for me!" Outside the mother howled, while inside the younger daughter recognised her voice and welcomed her in; she fed her and did everything for her. Then she said to her mother, "Don't go near older sister's house; she's too proud and won't look after you. You should stay here." "How can I not see her? I'll go see her for a little while," the dog said and went to see her other daughter.

Her house was also celebrating a marriage, but when the dog arrived and started to howl, just as she had at the younger daughter's, the older daughter said, "What a nuisance! That flea-bitten bitch is making a racket!" She beat the dog, gave it nothing to eat and said, "Get out of here. If my husband sees you, he'll kill you. Get lost!"

The injured dog dragged itself back to the younger daughter's house and said, "I'm going to die. After I'm dead, put me in a bundle and tie it in the rafters above the swing. I say this for your own good; it'll teach you about what's good and what's bad. And if anyone asks what's in the bundle, just say it's the dowry your mother gave you." The mother soon died and the younger daughter tied her in a bundle hanging from the rafters.

Now her husband was dying with curiosity to know what was in that bundle and kept on asking himself, "What could it be? What's in that bundle?" but he didn't say anything for a long time. Then one day he asked his wife about the bundle and she said, "Oh, my mother gave it to me as dowry." He took it down, opened the bundle and saw it was full of diamonds and gold! "Let's see how much it is," he said. "Go to your sister and get a measuring vessel." When the older sister heard about the treasure, she asked how it had happened and the younger sister explained: "When you beat and killed mother, I kept her in a bundle above our swing. That's how I got this dowry from her."

"I see!" said the older sister. "I'm going to do the same thing." She ran out into the street, killed a dog and hung it up. Of course, the younger sister had treated her mother like a god and had done everything for her. But if you snatch some dog off the street and hang it up, what are you going to get? Gold?

Soon the dead dog began to smell horribly, and her husband asked, "What's that hanging up there? It stinks!" "It's the dowry my mother gave me," she said. "Look inside; it'll be full of diamonds and gold." When he did, he found a rotting dog's corpse, threw it away and scolded his wife.

Later the younger daughter said to her husband, "Mother gave us all this; we should go see her." So she took him and set out, but she lost her nerve: "She's dead. How am I going to find her?" Then to her husband she said, "Wait for a moment. I'll be back soon." Pretending to go to pee, she went behind a bush and thrust her hand into a snake-hole, hoping to kill herself. But at that very moment, the snake was having a baby, a very painful birth, and the baby-snake landed in her hand. She cleaned the mother snake after the birth and held the baby.

Then the mother snake said, "What's the matter?" "I'm an orphan, my mother died; I've left my husband nearby and wanted to die so I stuck my hand in your hole." "Don't think such thoughts," said the snake. "You helped me in my hour of need and now I'll give you something. I'll give you a golden necklace, in the shape of a woman like your mother. Take it home and live with your husband. When she took the necklace and showed it to her husband, they were happy again.

One day, while she was eating at her sister's house, the older sister heard about the necklace. "How'd you get that?" she asked. "I put my hand in a snake-hole and it protected me," said her sister. What did the older sister do? She went to her husband and said, "Come on. We'll go find my mother." Halfway, she told him to wait while she walked a little distance and put her hand in a snake-hole. The cobra bit her and she fell down dead.

Man in audience: Who do you tell this story to?

Storyteller (Vijayalakshmi): To these girls [the other tellers] sitting here.

Girls (Kalaichelvi and Alli): Yes, to us.

Man: Why do you tell this story?

Storyteller: To teach them that we should respect our mothers. [all laugh] Just look how the dog suffered, taking the clothes from the river bank to give to her girls.

Alli, youngest teller: In our house, my sister here is the big one who drives out the mother, but I am the little sister who thinks, "She may be a dog, but she's still our mother."

Man: I see. So you two sisters fight for your mother's attention?

Girls: Of course we do!

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

13. POISON HIM, MARRY HIM

There was a raja, a powerful raja, who battled with all the neighbouring kings. When he died and left behind a five-year-old son, all his enemies plotted to conquer his powerful kingdom. "We'll find his heir wherever he is, kill him and take over the kingdom!" That was their plan. They decided to look for a boy without a silver belt on his waist, entice him with food and then check with the astrologer that he was the raja's son. When they caught him in this way, they would kill him.

When the townspeople heard of this, however, they wanted to save the boy because they respected the raja. They gave the little boy to a gypsy, a Kuratti, who smuggled him out of the town in a basket and then left him in the wild, thinking that he would somehow survive. The other rajas, led by the big raja and his astrologer, were looking for him everywhere.

Meanwhile, another raja was hunting and heard the baby's cries; this poor raja was a tributary of the raja who wanted to kill the boy. After the poor raja took the boy and raised him in his land, his prosperity grew so he could pay his tributary tax on time every year. The big raja was surprised: "He always used to ask for a loan. This is strange." He sent spies to that kingdom, and the people there said truthfully that ever since their king had found a baby in the forest the kingdom had prospered. The big raja understood who the baby was and was determined to kill it. He had been trying for years to kill it but hadn't been able to.

About this time, when the boy was nearly fifteen years old, the big raja paid a visit to the tributary raja, who welcomed him in surprise: "What brings you here? I've paid my tribute." "Nothing like that. I just came to look at your kingdom, to pay a small visit. But I wish you would send your boy to my kingdom for a while." "Yes, of course," said the tributary raja - after all, he was now the rich one and could be magnanimous. "Good. I've got some business elsewhere. Just send him to my palace with this letter," said the big raja. Thinking that the big raja would shower his son with gifts at his palace, the tributary raja got a horse ready for the boy and sent him off with the letter.

When the boy reached the palace after a long journey, he felt tired, tied up his horse at a tree near a pool and fell asleep. The big raja's daughter, named Visai, came to bathe at that pool with her friends. When they saw a man sleeping there, they went over to see what he looked like. Seeing the letter in his bag, they took it out and read: "This is my enemy; poison him immediately." The princess thought, "What's this? He looks like a good man! Why would my father order him to be killed?" So she took a pen and added a small curl to one letter and a half circle to another. Now the letter read: "This is my friend; marry him to Visai immediately." She folded up the letter and put it back in his bag.

When the young man arrived at the palace and delivered the letter, the palace was surprised: "The raja has ordered the marriage at short notice indeed!" But the letter was clear and the groom seemed appropriate, so they quickly made the proper arrangements. Of course, all this was the daughter's work, but no one knew that, especially since the writing was her father's.

All the townspeople were invited to the wedding, the ceremonies were duly celebrated and the couple were very happy together. When the father arrived, he was shocked! "What is this!" he screamed at his daughter. "What did that letter say? And what have you done?" "I did nothing wrong, father. You wrote that he was your

friend and that I should marry him. That's what I did. It's all in your handwriting. The boy had nothing to do with it himself."

"I can't let him get away now," thought the raja, who decided that he would kill him somehow. So he summoned him and said, "Boy, there's a custom in our country that you and your bride should light the temple lamp." Then he sent four men with orders to cut off the head of the first person who entered the temple with coconuts and oil for the lamp.

The young bridegroom went to the temple with the puja things, but the raja had also sent his own son there to give him a message. When the raja's son arrived at the temple, he said to his brother-in-law, "Let me take the coconut and oil. I'll light it and come back." When the raja's son entered, they cut off his head in one blow, just as the raja had ordered. When he didn't return for a while, the raja went to look for him. Seeing him cut in two, he thought, "God! Nothing turns out as I planned. I can't kill that boy; but I have killed my own son!"

He had lost everything - his daughter and his son - and he fell to the ground in anguish. The boy was made raja of his father's kingdom, and the other raja stood empty handed.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

14. THE DISFIGURED EYE

There was a raja and he had just one son. But that son got up to every kind of mischief imaginable - visiting prostitutes, gambling, cards ^ name it and he did it! How to reform him? "Better get him married to a woman from a respectable family; that should help," his family thought.

So the raja sent out his men, with the boy's photo, to search for a bride. As they wandered over the country, another group of men came from the opposite direction, with the photo of a girl whose father had sent them to look for a bridegroom. The two groups met, exchanged photos and, as everything seemed right, each party went back and made arrangements for the marriage.

The initial ceremonies were soon underway, but somehow the wedding announcements weren't sent out! The boy took the girl's photo to the prostitute's house and said, "Look at this! My parents are going to marry me to her." The dasi was eaten up by jealousy - you see, the girl in the photo was so beautiful. "I can't let this happen," she thought. "If he marries her, he'll never give me any more money." Soon they finalised the arrangements without even informing the son - he knew about it but they didn't tell him the date.

"Now, what can we do?" he said to the dasi. "My father's sealed the deal. I can't refuse now." The dasi took a needle, scratched out one eye in the photo, put lime-paste over it and said to him, "Look at this beauty you're married to! You're married to a half-blind wife!"

He didn't know what to do, but she said, "Don't sleep with her. Keep coming to me." He followed her advice and continued to visit her at night.

When his parents saw this, they thought things might improve if he and his wife lived by themselves, so they built a separate palace and set them up in it. Even then he paid no attention to his wife and gave her no pleasure; he was at home during the day and ate his meals, but he spent nights with the dasi. He completely ignored his wife, never looked at her, and so he didn't even know what she looked like. All this was due to the dasi's deceit.

One day a heavy rain fell as he was about to leave for the dasi's house; he had eaten and was standing by the door, hesitating because of the rain. It was pouring and he had no umbrella. Behind him, his wife stood, praying quietly, "If I am a chaste woman, let this little piece of my sari keep him dry." She tore off a piece of her sari, gave it to him and he left. When he entered the dasi's house, she was surprised, "Why did you come in this storm? Hey, how come you're not soaked? Not even a single drop?" He told her what his wife had said and how she had protected him. "Her chastity is powerful; I must get rid of her," she thought and put in motion an even crueller plan.

"Go back to her, eat her food and ask her to give you an: oil bath. Sleep with her, and when she's asleep, send a guard to take her into the forest and kill her." He went back and did as she said; when he asked for an oil bath and lay down to sleep with her, the poor girl was filled with desire. But he deceived her and ordered the guards to pick up her bed, take her into the forest, cut off her legs and kill her. They cut off her legs, but they didn't have the heart to kill a woman, so they left her there alive. When the guards brought back the legs, the prince kept them in the dasi's house - up in the rafters, above the door, but he didn't pay to them any attention. He thought she was dead.

When the wife awoke, she was confused, "I lay down in a palace and now I'm in a dark forest." Sitting in prayer on the bed in the middle of the darkness, she thought, "I'm all alone, no one, no help anywhere. Don't know where to go, and all the paths are thick with, thorns!" She entered into deep prayer, which disturbed the meditation of a powerful muni, who angrily cried, "What's your problem!" "I am a princess, but the prince abandoned me in the forest and did this to me. I have nowhere to go. Please help me," she pleaded. "I will send you a maid who will be your legs and look after you," the muni said and left.

One day, when the raja - the prince had become a raja now - was hunting in the forest where she lived, he got thirsty. He asked her for water, but she couldn't stand up because she had no legs, so she told the maid to get him water. He looked at the woman, very carefully, and thought she was beautiful. He came back the next day and for several days in a row; soon he was deeply in love with her. For a full year he came, but still he didn't recognise her; you see, even if he had looked at her carefully before, he wouldn't know her now because the dasi had disfigured her photo. Besides, he thought his wife was dead. She, of course, knew full well who he was. A woman knows these things.

Eventually, she gave birth to a boy; when he was five he kept asking the raja, his father, to take him back when he left the house in the forest. Finally his father agreed but his mother warned him, "If you go there, to the dasi's house, she'll try to poison you. She'll give you yogurt and buttermilk, and coax you to eat. But don't eat anything from her! Here, take this puffed rice, and keep it in your shirt pocket; as you go along, drop the rice on the ground, but don't let your father know. Later, when your father is talking with the dasi, climb quietly into the rafters, get my legs and run back here."

The next day, his father came again and hoisted his son onto his horse. They rode off, and the little boy dropped the puffed rice in a trail as they rode along to the dasi's house. She offered him milk and yogurt and other things, but he refused it all. Then he said, "I'll go play, father," and stepped outside as if to play. But he snuck back inside, climbed into the rafters, grabbed the legs and ran back home, along the path of puffed rice. His mother asked him to put the legs on her and he did with his own hands. They fit perfectly! She said a mantra, and they stuck!

When the father came back and asked about the boy, she simply said that he had returned early and kept quiet. But when he came on his horse the next day, she stood up and he was amazed! "All this time you failed to show me this kind of respect!" "What respect? I had no legs; that's why I couldn't stand. Now I've got my legs back." "In that case, come back with me to the palace." "Take me tomorrow; I've got work today," she said.

Again she went into meditation and again the muni felt it. When he came, she said, "I called you the first time because I had no legs. I've got my legs and my husband has accepted me back as his wife. Please bless me." He blessed her, and left with her maid.

The next day, her husband came and took her back and they all lived happily. That's when they gave me this sari!

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

15. FAMILY OF THE DEAF

There was a father and a mother, and their daughter. All three of them were deaf, even the daughter, who had now reached a marriageable age. The father of this deaf family ploughed his fields with a cow; one day a passer-by saw this and said, "What are you doing ploughing with a cow? I've got several bullocks idle in my place. Why don't you take a pair and plough with them?" But the man was deaf, so what he heard was: "Why don't you plough my field, too?" "Your field!" he said. "Let my wife come and we'll see about that."

Soon his wife came with his midday meal and he told her what the man said. "Did you ever hear of such a thing!" he cried. "Some guy ordered me to plough his field! Such insolence!" But his wife was also deaf, remember, so she didn't hear exactly what he said. What she heard was: "Why did you and that daughter of yours eat all the beans? Why didn't you bring me any for lunch?"

The words of the passer-by about helping the man with his ploughing had now become an argument about who ate the beans! In reply, his wife said, "Get lost! Come home and ask her if we ate it; then you'll see who's right!" So the husband and wife went home and stood in front of their daughter.

The mother spoke first: "Your father's saying that we ate all the food and gave him nothing. What do you say to that?" And the daughter answered, "If you two have decided it's really best for me to get married, then, alright, I won't object any longer."

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

16. A THOUSAND FLIES IN A SINGLE BLOW

There was a married couple and they were childless. Finally, after many years, they had a child, a son. Because he was their only son, he was everything to them and they spoiled him terribly; his mother cooked for him and his father worked to earn money. They did absolutely everything for him and as a result he became incredibly lazy. He just slept and ate, and never left the house. He was a complete simpleton who knew nothing of the outside world. Soon, however, it was time to get him married, so they found him a bride from a nearby village and conducted the marriage.

When the new bride went to the river to bathe, all the women told her, "Your husband's the laziest man in the village. He's a good sleeper, but he doesn't know anything else. Who's going to earn money for your family when your in-laws die?" They told her the whole family history and she started to worry: "Why did my parents marry me to this man?"

Every new bride feels this way, doesn't she? But this one was very upset. She decided she would have to do something; so she killed a snake and cooked it - you see she now began to detest her husband because he was so lazy. Then she put the dead snake and some rice in a little pot and gave it to him, saying, "Take this and go out and find some work; we can't always depend on your parents. We've got to take care of ourselves. Go to the next kingdom and ask the raja there for some work. On the way you can eat this food."

Now, he was a complete idler, so on the way he fell asleep, with the food beside him. As he snoozed, flies swarmed over the food and the poison killed them all! When he awoke, he saw a thousand flies lying dead on the food. By that time a crowd had gathered and asked him what had happened. "I killed a thousand flies in a single blow!" he answered calmly "Really! Come with us. Our king has been searching for the right leader for our army for a long time." They took him to the king, who looked at him and said, "So you're the one who killed a thousand flies with one stroke." "Yes, sir, I did that," he said. "Then, I appoint you commander of my army."

He spent his days inside the palace, but at night a fierce tiger prowled the forest eating animals and even humans when it came upon them. "If you killed a thousand flies, you'll be able to handle a single tiger. Kill that animal and bring it back!" ordered the raja. "I will, if you give me a knife with a handle long enough for a man to sit on." The raja agreed and had a sickle made just like that, with the special handle. The man put the sickle high up in a tree and then sat on the handle, holding its cord and waited.

The tiger came and smelled a man up the tree, so it circled round and round. Watching the tiger, the man tightened his grip on the cord and when the tiger was in the right spot, he moved forward on the handle, bringing the blade down and cutting off the tiger's head! Carrying the tiger's head and his sickle, he returned to the palace, where the raja was ecstatic. This man had done what no one else had been able to do!

Then the raja received a palm-leaf from the neighbouring raja: it was a declaration of war! The message announced that tomorrow the armies should meet at such and such a place. The raja thought, "Why should we go out and fight when we've got this brave warrior here?" So he called his hero and told him to go fight, to which the young man replied, "Yes, I will, raja. But I don't know how to ride a horse, so you must have someone draw a picture of me riding a horse. Then I'll go to war." The raja

ordered someone to draw a picture of him on a horse; and with that picture, he set out for battle the next day.

An enormous army stood before him - thousands and thousands of soldiers, with spears and pikes and bows! The poor simpleton was scared to death. He turned and saw a coconut tree, which he threw his arms around in fear, while still holding the cut-out picture of him on a horse. Scared stiff, he squeezed so hard that the tree was uprooted! When the opposing army saw him in the picture sitting on his horse and holding an uprooted tree, they were filled with fear. "My god! He's coming at us with a tree. What a warrior!" they screamed and ran for their lives!

The man was so scared himself that he returned to the palace still clutching the tree! But the enemies had been routed so the raja gave him a title and held a celebration for him, put him in a chariot and had it pulled through the streets of the town. After all, he had accomplished big things!

When his wife saw this chariot being dragged through the streets, she thought it was a funeral - she was a stupid villager, you see. Thinking her husband had died, she went in front of the chariot and began to perform her lamentations at his unfortunate demise. As she was crying in the street, someone asked her why and she said, "My husband died because I gave him a snake to eat! And now he's being taken to the cremation ground." "Are you crazy! Haven't you heard? Your husband's become a great man, second only to the raja." "Oh, yes," she said quickly. "Yes, of course, he's a great man."

But the raja wouldn't accept her as his hero's wife because he was too great; so he turned her out and she went her own way. Then the raja found a proper princess for his hero and they were married.

*Storyteller: Kalaicelvi (stories 11, 16, 20, 25-27)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

17. A PARROT'S STORY

A brother and his little sister lived together. One day, when they went out to graze the goats, she and the other children started to play. She climbed a big tree, all by herself, and started to pick its dark fruit. A pey came and all the children ran away, but she was stuck high up in the tree by herself. The pey came to her and asked her to throw him some fruits with her hands. She threw down some fruits, but he couldn't reach her because she was so high. Then the pey asked her to shake down fruits with her legs; again she did, but still he couldn't catch hold of her. Finally, he asked her to throw him fruits with her long hair. She had long, long hair and when she used it to throw him fruits, the pey grabbed hold of it, pulled her from the tree and took her home.

Seven parrots saw this, and when the pey was away, they rescued the girl and took her to their house, a large parrot-house. Then the parrots flew away, saying, "Don't ever open the door! If you do, the pey will catch you. But if you stand on the roof, you can see a well; if you see a lamp burning in that well, then and only then open the door, because that means we're coming back."

The parrots left, three days passed and soon the girl had nothing left to eat. Hungry, she decided to open the door and see where she might find some food. So she opened the door and saw a house nearby. "I'll go there and borrow something to cook," she thought. It was the pey's house, but she didn't know that. She knocked and he opened the door, but she ran back into the other house and shut the door. Chasing after her, the pey said, "I'll get you later," and then fastened his claws on her door - one claw up high and one claw down below.

The next day when she went to the roof and looked at the well, she saw the light and realised the parrots were returning. So she opened the door, but the claws fell on her and killed her! The parrots cried for her, then made a box and put her in it. They put the box into the ocean, where a raja and his minister found it.

"I want the box," said the minister. "Good; I'll take what's inside," said the raja. Opening it, they saw the dead girl. Then they saw the two claws, which they removed and she came back to life.

The raja took her home and wanted to marry her, but there were already three other women in the palace. So he said to the four of them, "I'll marry whoever is the best cook. Each day I'll come and eat in a different house." He gave them each a measure of unhusked rice and told them to pound it, without bruising a single grain, and then to cook it.

"How can I do that?" wondered the girl. As she cried, the parrots flew overhead and saw her. "Look, she's alive, the girl we rescued," they said. She explained what had to be done and the parrots carefully pecked open the husks. She cooked it nicely, while the other wives pounded too hard and ruined the rice kernels inside. So the raja married her.

*Storyteller: Alli (story 17, 28-29, 79)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

18. FOUR THIEVES

A father had four sons: "quarter-thief", "half-thief", "three-quarters-thief" and "total thief". One day he said to them, "Go out and steal in broad daylight."

First to go to work was the youngest son, "quarter-thief". He went to one of those hairdressers who cut your hair and things like that. He had his hair cut nicely but didn't have a paisa on him, so he said to the barber, "I don't have any change, but if send your daughter with me for a moment, I'll get some notes changed in a shop and send her back with the money."

The thief took her and went to a clothes shop, where he picked out clothes for a large family and then said to the owner, "I'll show these to my family - they're just outside there - and let them pick out what they like; then I'll bring it all back and pay for what they've chosen. Meanwhile I'll leave my daughter here with you, for security." He left her behind and ran straight away to his house. He didn't give the barber a paisa and he didn't give the shopkeeper a paisa. Highway robbery, in broad daylight!

The next day the barber went looking for his daughter and found her in the clothes shop. "Hey! What are you doing with my daughter!" screamed the barber. "Oh! I gave three thousand rupees worth of clothes to some guy who said she was his daughter! He let me keep her here until he returned, after showing the stuff to his family."

After this, the barber, the shopkeeper and the girl went to see the raja. Telling his story, the barber concluded, "Ask anyone; they'll say she's my daughter." And everyone said she was. Then the raja said, "Some thief tricked you about your daughter and then took her and fooled the other man. Can't have this sort of thing in my kingdom. Tomorrow we'll place guards at all the clothes shop!"

On the next day, the second son, "half-thief", tried his hand. When he discovered that a watchman's son-in-law had gone to Singapore, he bought some goods and came to the watchman's house, dressed as if he'd just returned from abroad - he looked just like their son-in-law. That fellow had married their daughter and left so quickly that the family didn't know him well.

Anyway, here was this man come back laden with gifts. He talked with them a while, they all ate and then got ready for bed. The father had to go on duty - it was night, you see - so he said to the others, "You all get some sleep; I've got to go on my rounds because there are thieves about." But when he started to leave, the fake son-in-law said, "Uncle, I'll come with you to see the town,"

The two of them, set out and came to the stocks, in which criminals are put - it really squeezes them and kills them, one of those cruel tortures from the old days. "What's this, uncle?" asked the thief. "It's the stocks, for criminals." "Oh, I'll try it out," said the thief, but the father said, "No, No! You might get hurt; I'll get in and show you how it works." Realising this was his chance, he locked the watchman in there very tightly.

The old man said, "Son, this is a little too tight! Get the key from the house and let me out." The thief did go back to his house but didn't ask for the key; instead, he said, "There are thieves about, so uncle told me to get all your things in a box and take it to him for safekeeping. Quickly." They gathered up all their gold and clothes and gave it to him, and he took it straight home. And the man was stuck in the stocks!

In the morning, the raja was making his rounds and saw the head watchman locked in the stocks. When he learned that the thief, disguised as the son-in-law, had tricked the watchman and run off, he said to himself, "There's mischief everywhere in the kingdom!" To his minister he said, "Right! Tonight you will stand guard!"

That night it was the turn of "three-quarters thief" to do some business. It turned out that the minister had a lover, and he used to go to her house every night at about ten o'clock. The thief disguised himself as the minister and went to her house ahead of him, at eight o'clock. "What's this? Why so early tonight?" said the dasi. "Oh, the city is full of thieves, so I came early to protect you! Give me your jewels and I'll store them in the palace, where they'll be safe. If you keep them here, somebody might come in disguise and take them from you. I'll prevent that by storing them in the palace. I'll come back, but don't open the door for anyone else."

Saying this, he left with her jewels and went home. Later, as usual, the real minister came to her house at ten. He knocked on her door but she wouldn't open it. "Who the hell are you! Knocking on my door!" "You fool! Someone's robbed you blind! And now you won't let me in!" "Well, if you really are the minister, tell me some secret that I've told you before. Then I'll open the door." When the minister told her a secret and she opened the door, she understood: "He's the real minister, and the one who came before was a fake - and he's run off with my jewels!"

When he heard that his minister had been tricked and his lover's house looted, the raja decided that he must stand guard himself! That night it was time for the "total thief" to try his luck. This is what he did - he got some bidis and cigarettes and a hurricane lantern, and set up a stall at a crossroads. Circling the town, the raja came to that spot and, seeing a man squatting there, asked him, "What are you doing here with this lantern and shop?" "Well, to tell the truth, sir, this is where the thieves come with their stolen cash to buy things. So I always set up shop right here." "In that case, can you catch the thieves for me?" asked the raja. "Sure, I'll catch them for you. But you'll have to take off your jewels and fine clothes, otherwise they'll recognise you. I'll hide you in a sack; when they come, I'll let you out and you can grab them."

The raja gave the man his jewels, rings, fine clothes, everything - he was stripped naked - and had himself tied up in the sack. Then the thief gathered up all the money and clothes and yelled, "Help! Help! Thieves!" and ran off with the goods. Immediately a crowd gathered and began to beat the body in the sack, until the raja screamed, "You fools! A thief ran off with my things!" They opened the sack and saw the raja, who said, "My god! He's tricked me, too!" The raja and his people were really upset! I was there, too. And that's when I got this sari.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

19. THE BLINDED HEROINE

A raja ruled over his kingdom for many, many years, but he had no child. He was very sad, but eventually he gained a boon and with that boon a child was born. It was a girl. When she was born, the royal elephant cried "Amma!" and then it turned to stone. If that happens to an elephant, it's an evil omen, sir, for the raja, that is. Not knowing why this happened, the raja was distressed.

Soon the girl grew up and became a young woman. She climbed to the top of the palace and stood there. Again that elephant saw her, cried out "Amma" and turned into a stone statue - it fell down and died, in fact. Seeing this the raja thought, "I've lost my palace elephant! I can't keep her any longer. I've got to get rid of her and somehow get another daughter; there's no other way" He ordered his guards to take her away and kill her.

They left her in the forest, and brought back the blood of a jackal or something to show the raja. The poor girl who had lived in a palace suddenly woke up all alone in the forest; she was confused and didn't know why her father had done this. Looking around, she saw a light, far in the distance, about ten or fifteen kilometres away. "I'll go there," she thought. "And maybe I'll survive."

The path was rough, covered with thorns and sharp stones, but she kept walking. Eventually she came to a huge palace, where a girl kept her little brother locked up and guarded by seven guards; she kept him in the forest so that he would never see a woman and would marry her own daughter. When the princess arrived, everyone was asleep, even the guards; only the little brother was awake. Following the light burning in his room, she entered the palace and went into his room.

He was startled and called, "Who are you! How did you trick all the guards and enter here?" "I didn't do anything to anyone," she said. "Then who are you, daring to come in here like this?" She told her story, how her father had tried to kill her, how the guards had spared her, and how she had seen his light. He believed her and kept her in his room, disguised as a man. She stayed with him, but the problem was that he was only given food enough for one person which they had to share. After a few days it wasn't enough, so he said to his sister, "A friend has come; we need another plate of food." The sister got suspicious and angry: "What's he want another plate of food for? Who's this friend?"

She devised a little plan to find out what was going on. You see, the brother always gave everything to the princess first, whether it was food or clothes or whatever - he gave it to her first. So when his sister gave him a pair of magic sandals, naturally he gave them to the princess to try on. The magic was that as soon as you tried them on, you were transported to the sister's room; that's how she had them made. Not knowing anything about his sister's plan, the boy said to the princess, "Sister has made me these new sandals, but I want you to put them on first."

When the princess put them on, she landed at the sister's feet. The sister yelled, "You good for nothing! Ruining my little brother's life which I have so carefully planned for him." She plucked out both her eyes, had her shaved and thrown down a dry well. She was alive, but that was all.

The sister put the princess' eyes in a bowl. She plucked out her eyes so that she would be blind - that's an important point, sir. Inside the well, the blind girl cried and cried for help. No one paid any attention to her, until a wandering sadhu passed by

and heard her cry; he twisted his veshti into a rope and pulled her out of the well. Then he took her home to care for her and fed her from his daily collection of alms.

Because she was blind, however, rats came and ate off her plate. She couldn't see them, you see! Those rats took little morsels to the rat raja, who said, "This is really nice stuff! Where'd you get it?" "There's this girl who doesn't shoo us away when she eats; it's from her plate." "I see; she obviously has some problem. Tonight while she's sleeping, I want you to go and find out what that problem is."

That night all the rats went together, and one by one they searched her hands, arms, legs, until finally a lame rat found that she had no eyes. "She's got everything, except eyes," the lame rat reported. "All right," said the raja rat. "Those eyes have to be somewhere near here. They can't have vanished. Someone's done her wrong. Find those eyes and bring them here!" Each rat went to a separate house to search; the lame one went to the sister's house, where it saw the eyes resting in the bowl. Lifting them out, it took them to the raja. "Tonight, while she's asleep, put her eyes back," said the raja. So, holding the eyes in its tail, the lame rat took them and placed them in her sockets.

When she awoke, with her sight restored, she fell at the sadhu's feet and said, "Swami, you have cared for me all this time! Now I can see again. Get me a cow. I'll milk it and sell the milk and buttermilk, and feed us." He bought her the cow and she began to sell milk in the streets, going house to house, and eventually to the sister's house - who thought the princess was long dead! But the princess recognised her and saw that she had a daughter; so she decided to get her revenge.

She went to their house often, selling milk and buttermilk, and soon had made friends with the daughter, who was about to marry the brother, her uncle. By now the princess' hair had grown very long, and she wore it in a beautiful braid. When the daughter saw her, she said, "Your hair is beautiful. How do you grow it so long?" "Oh, that. I'll tell you tomorrow," said the princess in order to think about what to tell her.

By that time the daughter's marriage to the brother was three days away, so when the princess returned the next day, the daughter asked her to tell her the secret quickly. "I want to have hair like yours, for my wedding," she explained with envy. "Your wedding's tomorrow? I see. First shave off all your hair, then prick your scalp with a needle, and rub chillies on your scalp. Tie a cloth on your head and sit quietly in a corner all night. In the morning, take off the cloth and your hair will be just like mine."

Saying this, she went away - where do you think she went? To the brother, but she didn't tell him what she'd done. Meanwhile the daughter ran to her mother and said, "The milkmaid told me how to get hair like hers, mother! Do it for me, please!" Her head was shaved completely bald, holes were poked in her scalp with a nail and chillies rubbed in - do you know how painful that must have been! They tied a cloth on her head and left her; soon her head was crawling with worms!

The sun rose the next morning, the day of the wedding. The brother told the princess to come to the wedding, disguised like a friend of the family, keeping her face covered with her sari. "Let's see how the wedding comes off; if there's an opportunity afterward, I'll marry you, too." You see, he honestly believed his sister's daughter was going to be a good bride for him; he didn't know anything about how she had mistreated the princess or how the princess had tricked her.

Proudly they led the bride to the marriage hall, but her head was swarming with worms. They hid it somehow and brought her in and sat her down next to the brother. The brother couldn't stand it, the smell was so bad. "Sister!" he yelled. "What kind of a girl have you raised! She's bald, for god's sake! Take her out of here!" Then he gave the bridal sari to the princess and told her to put it on. She did and they were married.

When they went back to his house, the princess said, "We can't stay here because your sister will cause us trouble; let's go to my father's house." So they went to her father's house, where the raja had reached old age and it was time to crown a new raja. When she arrived, she went straight up to him and said, "Father, I'm your daughter, the one you told the guards to kill. But they spared me and I survived in another land where I was protected by a sadhu. And now I have returned home." "I'm very happy, and I'll make your husband the new raja," said her father.

They conducted the coronation, and I saw it all and came back to tell the story.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

20. A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW'S REVENGE

A husband and wife had one son, who was married to a girl from another town. The girl's parents had given her a proper marriage with jewels, so she wasn't a burden. It turned out that her father-in-law was all right, but her mother-in-law didn't like the new bride at all. Every day, after her husband went to work, the girl knew nothing but hardship: she had to clean, wash, cook, everything! And she wasn't given any food. She suffered terribly, but she bore it all patiently and said nothing to her husband.

Even this wasn't enough for the mother-in-law, however, who planned a little something extra. One day after her husband and son had left the house, she put the poor girl in a sack, lifted her onto a bullock cart and took her to the cremation ground. She put the sack on a stack of wood and was about to light the pyre, when she realised that she had no matches, so she went back to get them.

Near the cremation ground, four watchmen who were supposed to guard goats were lying down half-asleep. Inside the sack, the girl realised her mother-in-law had gone and tried to get out. The watchmen thought they heard a strange sound, like a voice crying: "Help me! Someone help, me!" They searched around until they found the sack on the ground, opened it and saw the girl, which frightened them to death - since it was the cremation ground! But she reassured them.

Then the girl filled the sack with charcoal - there's a lot around in cremation grounds, isn't there? - and left with the watchmen. When the mother-in-law returned with the matches, she poured groundnut all over the sack, lit it and said, "That's all for you, honey! I'll marry my son to a rich bride now!" and went back home where she told her husband and son that the girl had simply run back to her parents' house. The son accepted tins and went to sleep.

Meanwhile the watchmen asked the girl what had happened and she said, "My parents married me off well, but my mother-in-law stopped me from speaking or sleeping with my husband and then did this to me!" "Well, it's morning now; you can go safely," they said. She left them and walked some distance in the early hours of the morning.

She came to a Ganesa temple and rested inside; soon four thieves arrived, as they often did, after looting the countryside. Seeing them with their cash, gold and other booty, she hid behind the statue of Ganesa. They emptied their sacks and said, "Lord Ganesa! Here's your usual one-third," and gave necklaces, cash and jewels as an offering to the god.

After they left with the rest of the loot, the girl came out of hiding, dressed herself with this hoard of jewelry and walked back to her mother-in-law's house. Hearing a knock on the door, the old woman opened it and was stunned: "Who are you?" "It's me," said the daughter-in-law. "But how? I tried to burn you! What happened?" "Oh," said the girl, "you burned me all right, but I went straight to heaven and met my parents. Know what they said? "You're too young to have died; you've got years to go yet. Here, take these jewels and go back to earth and enjoy life." Then I came back here." "Really! You must burn me, too, so I can visit my parents and get jewels from them!"

The daughter-in-law consented to her request and, without telling her husband, tied the old woman in a sack, took her to the cremation ground and lit the fire. The old woman died, and the daughter-in-law came back home, where she told her husband the whole story. And they lived happily after that.

Storyteller: Kalaichelvi (stories 11, 16, 20, 25-27)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District

21. THE THREE DIAMONDS

There was a husband and wife, and their only son. He got up to every kind of mischief. His parents died, and the boy was brought up by his grandmother; still he wandered around like a no-good - he drank, he gambled, he did every bad thing possible. "Now listen, son," said his grandmother. "I'm going to die soon; if you would just stop one of your bad habits, just one of them, my soul would find peace."

The son began to think: "What can I give up? Can't stop going to the dasi's house. Can't give up drink or cards. But what about lying? I could try living without that for a while, and I could still do everything else." So he said to his grandmother, "I will never lie again."

One day he went to steal at the raja's palace - he had been wandering around the town and had found nothing to pinch so he tried the palace. On his way, he met the raja in disguise, who asked him where he was going. "I'm going to steal at the palace" - he couldn't he, remember. "Good. I'll come with you," said the raja, who then asked who he was and where he lived, and the boy told him since he had to tell the truth!

"Listen," said the raja, "inside the palace is a box of diamonds; steal it and we'll run off with it." Now the raja had only said there were "diamonds" but when he opened it, he found it contained three. He left one in box for the palace, and took the other two - one for himself and one for his companion outside. Returning to the raja, he said, "Here, you take one; I'll keep the other." Of course, he still didn't know that this was the raja. "This is how I have to make ends meet," he said and left.

The raja thought about all this and in the morning called his minister: "There's been a theft in the palace. Go investigate." "Where would a thief steal in the palace?" wondered the minister. "Oh, right! The box of diamonds!" When the minister opened the box, he saw that two had been stolen and that one remained. "Well," he said to himself, "if I take this last one, no one will notice anything." So he pocketed that diamond and then reported to the raja that all three diamonds were missing. Of course, the raja still had one of the diamonds, didn't he? And the thief still had his; he hadn't sold it yet.

The raja gave the boy's name and address and had him summoned to the palace. Then the raja summoned the whole town to an assembly in order to reveal the truth. When questioned in the assembly, the minister said, "I didn't take anything! Nothing!" When the thief was asked where he was yesterday, he answered, "I came to the palace" - he had to tell the truth. "What did you do?" "I stole." "What did you steal?" "Diamonds. The man with me said there were diamonds in the palace. There were three; I left one in the box for the raja, and took the other two: one for me and one for my accomplice."

Hearing this, the raja said, "I am the person who was with you yesterday. Look, here is the diamond you gave me!" "And here is the diamond that I kept," said the thief and handed it over. When they searched the minister they found the missing diamond.

The raja said, "You liar! The thief openly admitted that he had stolen, but you tried to deceive me! He spoke the whole truth and even gave back a diamond, but you hid it!" So the raja ordered the minister to be beaten and hanged, and then appointed the thief in his place. "As long as you know the value of not lying, you will serve as my minister and I will trust you. That minister was a liar, who tried to hide the truth from me."

And from that day the boy served as the raja's minister.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

22. THE KIND AND THE UNKIND GIRLS

A man and his wife had seven children and they had to feed all seven of them every day. One day, as the mother left the house she said to them, "There're some cakes in that pot; take one each for yourselves and give one to baba" - the littlest one. When she heard this, the next youngest one, a girl about six or seven years, got an idea: she decided to eat both her cake and the one for her little sister. When the cakes were distributed and this girl ate two of them, the littlest one, the seventh one, began to cry. But the others screamed at her, "You little Ear! You ate it; you're just saying she did! Get out of this house." So they drove that little one away. The sixth child ate the extra cake, but the seventh got blamed. She was completely innocent but she had to leave.

Driven away from her family, the little girl walked and walked, a long way, crying all the time. She passed a rose bush, which said, "Little girl, please water me. I'm dying of thirst. If you give me water, when you come back I'll give you roses." So she watered the bush, and went farther, where she saw a pair of grinding stones which were separated. The stones said, "We're dying of thirst in this hot sun; please put us back together. If you do, I'll give you a grinding stone when you return." So the little girl picked up the top stone and placed it on the bottom stone.

She went farther and saw a cow and its calf. The cow cried out, "Amma! They've tied us up in this fierce sun, without any water! Give us some water, and I'll give you a calf when you return." So she watered the cow, which then fed its calf. Again, she walked ahead and saw a horse and a colt standing apart. "If you unite us, I'll give you a colt when you return." So she put the mother and child together, and went on ahead. When she reached the sea, it said, "Amma, if you cross my waters carefully, without disturbing me, I'll give you a bushel of pearls when you return." So she stepped into the sea, gently parted the waters with her hands and crossed to the other side.

She met an old woman, who invited her to her house. The girl told the woman to go bathe while she prepared the meal. When the old woman bathed and returned, the girl had made the dung cakes, cleaned up and cooked the food. She lived in that house, doing chores for the old woman for a long time. She did whatever she was told, and when she grew up to be a young woman, the old woman got her married. The girl protested, "Granny! Who will take care of you?" But she said, "Oh, don't worry about me. You should get married; that's all."

So she did and the granny sent her back to her house. On the way she came to the sea, and there was a bushel of pearls. "Don't forget the pearls," said the sea. She took them and then came to the horse, who gave her a colt, and then to the cow who gave her a calf. The stone gave her a grinding stone, and the rose bush gave her roses. Bringing all this to her house in a lorry, she gave it to her family.

They were ecstatic: "Look at that! We drove her away for eating an extra cake, but look at these things she's brought home! And she's married, too."

Now they decided to drive out the other child, the next youngest girl who had eaten the extra cake. She left but was disobedient and didn't hear what the rose bush said, what the horse said or what the grinding stones asked. She heard nothing. When she got to the ocean and it asked her to cross carefully, she just splashed through, hurting it.

The first girl had been quiet and soft, and got everything, but this one was rough and untamed. When she got to the old woman's house, she didn't do what she was told. She grew up and got married, to a lame man. Then she was sent home - but, who's going to give her anything? What do you think, sir? When she got home, her mother said, "Don't come in here!" The girl was sad and thought to herself, "Oh, this is what I get for not listening to anyone!"

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

23. THE SINGING BONE

A man and his wife had seven sons and one daughter, and when they married the daughter to a good family, they were all very happy. Soon she was pregnant and came back to stay at her parents' house for a while. After staying there for about a month, her parents sent her back with one of her younger brothers, saying, "Take her back to her husband." They dressed her with many jewels and gave her a nice send off; the brother led his sister and her child back to her husband's house, but on the way he stole all her jewels. He killed her and buried her and her child near each other in the forest. When he came back, he said, "I left her with brother-in-law."

After three months passed, her husband began to wonder why she hadn't returned, so he set out to visit her parents' house. On the way, he passed the place where she had been buried, where a rose bush now stood in full flower. Thinking he would take roses to his wife, he started to pluck the flowers, but his dead wife sang to him:

Don't pluck me, my husband,
Don't touch us!
My child and I were cut down.

"There's something wrong here; the flowers won't be any good," thought the man, who then went to pluck flowers from the other rose bush. But there he heard:

Don't pluck me, father,
Don't touch us!
Mother and I were cut down.

When they spoke like this, to prevent him from plucking their flowers, he understood what had happened: "My wife was killed on her way back to me." He went straight to his in-law's house and asked, as if he still knew nothing, "Where is she? It's been a long time, and I'm not eating well." "What? Her brother took her home weeks ago." "Please come with me, all of you. There's something important you should hear," pleaded the husband.

When they got to the rose bushes and went to pluck flowers, the bushes sang to them, addressing each of them in turn by their kin relation:

Don't pluck me, grandfather,
Don't touch us!
My mother and I were cut down.

Don't pluck me, grandmother,
Don't touch us!
My mother and I were cut down.

Again and again, the two bushes spoke like this, one after the other. They sang like this to each member of the family who went to pick flowers, until the last one, the murderer himself, approached. The big bush spoke first:

Don't pluck me, murderer,
Don't touch me!
My child and I were cut down.

And then the little bush said:

Don't pluck me, murderer.
Don't touch us,
My mother and I were cut down.

When they heard this, everyone knew the truth. "You cold-blooded murderer!" screamed his parents. "You killed one of our children; now you can die!" and they beat him up, drove him away, and he died.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

24. THE FISH-BROTHER

There were seven brothers and one sister; the youngest brother was a fish in the river.

Kalaichelvi: You've got to say that the seventh brother was lame and the sister takes food to him.

Storyteller: No, be quiet.

Kalaichelvi: But she takes him food.

Storyteller: No, all the brothers are fine.

Kalaichelvi: But...

Storyteller: Keep quiet and let me tell the story.

The sister used to take food to her brothers every day, and on the way she would give the youngest, the fish, a ball of rice. One day she didn't have enough rice to feed the fish-brother, so she made a ball of dirt, stuck the few remaining rice grains on top and fed him that. When the fish saw the dirt-ball, it thought, "So this is what my sister brings me! And I carry her across the river every day!" Enraged, he cut off her nose with his sharp fin.

The sister lived at home, and did her usual chores. Soon it was time for her marriage and everyone contributed money toward the preparations. But there were no flowers anywhere in that town! Nowhere! They looked everywhere, but found nothing. In the end, they went to the place where they had buried the fish-brother - you see, they had got angry with him for hurting their sister and said, "We've only got one sister and she's got to get married; but you disfigured her like this! How's she going to get married!"

They had got angry and killed him. Then he became a rose bush and that's where they went to get flowers. Begging and pleading, the parents were able to pluck flowers from the bush. They took the flowers home and wove them into a marriage garland. It's said that a garland put on a good person will shine brightly and that a garland on a bad person will turn black. That's what happened here. They put a garland on the groom and it was beautiful, but when they garlanded the bride, the flowers turned black, again and again. At this point, her parents said to her, "Go to your brother and ask for forgiveness; then come back."

She went to the spot where her brother was buried and said contritely, "What I did was wrong. I didn't bring enough food that day; that's why I gave you that dirt-rice. Please forgive me and send me back with your blessings." When he heard this, the fish-brother blessed her and wished her a happy married life.

This time when the garland was put on her neck, it shone brightly. They were married and all were happy.

*Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi (stories 8-10, 12-15, 18-19, 21-24)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

25. THE STORY OF A LITTLE FINGER

A husband and wife lived in a village but they didn't have any children. The wife wanted to make money - you know how women like money - so she practiced what we call country or local medicine. What you do is take a skull and mix things in it - that's the sort of thing she did. At night - you know how the bodies are left to burn at the burning ground - well, at night this woman would go there and pick up things, like fingers and skulls and so on. Then she'd crush it all and sell it as country medicine. This is what she did every night in the cremation ground, although her husband knew nothing about it.

One night while she was in the cremation ground bending over her skulls and fingers, a gravedigger saw her and said to his friend, "Look! A corpse has risen up! It's squatting over there!" He went back to get his shovel and axe, but by the time he returned, she had hidden herself next to a corpse. "My god! Someone's brought another corpse! There was one when we went and now there's two of them!" said the gravedigger and again went to find his friend. When he returned, she had got up and was sitting there. "Look! It's risen up again!"

Again he went back to get his companion, but when he returned, she had laid down again on the border of her sari. "Let's see if these corpses are dead or alive," he said and sliced off a thumb from each body. Her hand was bleeding, but she didn't make a sound, nothing at all. The grave-diggers took the thumbs and left; then she got up, gathered up her skull and things, went back home and continued to sell her medicine.

In the morning, the gravediggers went back to see the corpses, but only one was there; the other, the woman, had vanished. "What! We cut off its thumb and it's gone! Someone's playing tricks on us," they said and went through the streets crying, "Thumbless ones! Come and buy a thumb."

Now the husband knew nothing about what his wife was doing, but he knew that she had lost one of her thumbs. When he heard these men in the street, he called them over and bought a thumb. Meanwhile, she hid inside, afraid that these men might harm her. They left, but first they noted the house. "What are you doing buying thumbs in the street from just anyone!" she yelled at him, but then dropped the issue.

On the next day the two gravediggers came back to her house to rob her because they thought she must be pretty rich. What did she do? She shut her husband up inside the house and waited for them to come; she had a feeling they would come back at night. With their tools they began to bore a hole through her wall, but she was waiting for them. As soon as the first guy stuck his head through, she smashed him with a rice-beater and dragged him inside. When the other guy poked his head through, she did the same to him. "Got them both," she thought with satisfaction.

The next night she put her bed outside in the open air and slept fearlessly. She didn't know there were four or five of them in the gang; two were dead, but that meant there were still three left.

Next day those three began to think, "Those first two went to her house and never came back. Better see what she's done to them." When they came and saw her asleep, they thought, "That's her all right." So they lifted the bed, with her still asleep in it and carried it away.

On the way, she awoke and realised that more men had come and were taking her away. Then she thought of a plan: wherever she could reach, she tore off branches from the mango trees passing above her and laid them on the bed. When the branches with the ripe fruit weighed about as much as a human body, she grabbed hold of a big branch and, hanging on to it, let the bed go ahead without her. The men carrying it didn't notice the difference, since the branches on the bed weighed as much as she did.

Soon more mangoes fell on the bed and they thought, "It's getting heavier! Must be a heavy sleeper." Putting the bed down near a mandapam, they discovered that she wasn't there and got furious: "She's tricked us again!" They sat down, defeated, and then, looking around, they saw some goats grazing and a goatherd fast asleep. The three of them grabbed the goat, killed it, skinned it and cooked it underneath a tree.

It was the same tree that she had escaped into from the bed. One of the men climbed up as a look-out while the others below were eating. "Go on up there, and we'll call you when we're finished so you can eat. Yell if you see anyone." When he climbed up and saw the woman there, he started to scream, but she stopped him: "Keep quiet and I'll make you rich."

So he kept silent and let the others eat below. After a while, she said, "Why not go down and get some food so we can eat something." The man went down, said he wanted some food, got it and climbed back up. As he climbed back, they reminded him: "Let us know if you see anyone; otherwise we'll stay right here."

When he came back with the food, she said, "Feed me and then I'll feed you." As soon as he put food in her mouth, she bit hard on his fingers and he screamed with pain. "Someone's coming!" they said below and ran off, leaving all their money and the rest of the food. She climbed down - the other guy couldn't do anything with his fingers bitten off - ate the whole meal, scooped up the money and went home.

Among the booty she brought back home were the five fingers she had bitten off in the tree. She was satisfied, but her husband just wouldn't leave well enough alone and took the fingers to sell in the market. He went around calling, "Fingers for sale! Fingers for the fingerless!" That day the woman whose husband had been bitten in the tree came to the market. Hearing the offer, she bought the fingers and gave them to her husband - they fit his hand perfectly!

With his fingers restored, he thought again of how this woman had cheated them all! Gathering the others together, they sat down to plan their revenge, saying "She's deceived us again and again; and she's rich, too!" But they couldn't think of a plan, so they went to the raja and reported her: "There's a woman in your realm who is a raksasi; she deals in corpses in the cremation ground, and she's gotten rich from it." "If she's doing that, I'll have her arrested," said the raja and sent out his minister.

The woman was brought back and held in prison. Now, at this time the queen had a terrible cough which just wouldn't go away. No matter how many doctors they called and no matter how many medicines they tried, the cough wouldn't stop. When she heard this, the imprisoned woman said, "Raja, my medicine will cure her." But the raja didn't trust her because of what had been said about her. Slowly, however, the illness got worse and the queen was on her death bed. In the end, with no other recourse, the raja told the woman to prepare her medicines. Mixing the fingers and other stuff in a skull, she gave it to the queen, who recovered immediately!

As a result, the raja put the thieves in jail and sentenced them to death. To the woman and her husband, the raja gave gold and they prospered as the raja's favourites in the palace.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi (stories 11, 16, 20, 25-27)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District

26. CINDERELLA

There was a couple who had only one daughter. When, after a while, the wife died, the man married again and his second wife also gave birth to a girl. So there were two half-sisters, each about the same age, although the first was a little older. The first wife, who had died, was not cremated; instead the man kept a samadhi, a memorial, to her in a corner of the house. Later, though, he buried her in the backyard.

The second wife did whatever was in her power to cause trouble for her step-daughter, the older sister. The girl was able to bear it all silently because, although she had no relatives, her father was on her side. She did all the housework cheerfully - made dung cakes, grazed the animals, collected firewood, all that sort of work, while the other girl, the younger one, was sent to school dressed in nice clothes.

Both sisters reached puberty about the same time, but although the younger one wore the very best, new clothes, the older one was given hand-me-downs.

The local raja had a son, a prince, who was about to be married, but he wasn't set on marrying a princess. He wanted all the girls in the whole kingdom to be summoned to the palace, where he would pick out the one he liked. The raja arranged for this event and everyone came, the rich and poor, from everywhere. Of course, they all dressed up as nicely as possible, in their best jewels and clothes. The mother of the younger girl dressed her in a new sari, expensive jewelry and pottu, and sent her to the event in a carriage. But to the older girl, she said, "You can't leave; stay home!"

The older girl went to the backyard where her mother was buried and began to cry. "Mother! You're dead and I should have died with you! It's not that I want to marry the prince, but I do want to see it all! You're gone and can't do anything for me now."

Bending her head to the grave, she cried, and then she heard a voice. Just a voice, she didn't see anyone. "Don't worry, dear. Everything you need awaits you inside the house. Go and see." When she went inside she found a full set of new clothes, everything from head to toe, and it was all so beautiful! She dressed quickly and went outside, where a carriage was waiting for her and off she rode.

Inside the assembly hall, she sat in a chair with the other girls. The prince looked at each girl, and didn't like a single one. Now the older girl's mother had also told her that she had a time limit and that if she went past the deadline, she would lose all her new clothes and find herself in old rags again. So she kept watching the time, and just when the prince saw her and decided she was the one, her time was up! Rising suddenly, she ran outside and, in her rush, she left a slipper behind; climbing into the carriage, she rode home.

Inside the assembly hall, the prince could think of no one but her! He sent all the other girls away and wondered how he could find the one who had fled. Then, looking at her chair, he saw the slipper. "That's her slipper. Find the girl whose foot fits this slipper!" he commanded his men.

They took the slipper and tried it on the feet of every girl in the whole kingdom. At home, the older girl had changed back into her old self, while the younger girl sulked: "She was so beautiful! That girl who came, the one the prince wants to marry!" The younger one pouted while the older one did her housework.

Meanwhile the raja's men went from house to house, trying to find the slipper's owner, and eventually they came to this house. The bad girl tried hard to make the slipper fit her foot; she pushed and tugged, but it just wouldn't fit. Then the older girl said, "Let me try." "You?" mocked the younger girl. "You're quite a beauty all right!"

But the raja's men said, "Let her try. Everyone must try." She took the slipper, and it fitted her foot perfectly! They took her back to the palace where the prince asked her, "How did you change into such a beautiful girl?" "My mother's dead and my stepmother treated me horribly. My dead mother gave me beautiful clothes and sent me to the palace. She said I had to return by a certain time; if I didn't, I'd lose everything. That's why I had to leave."

She told her story, and the truth was that she was a beautiful girl. When he heard this, the prince said he would marry her. All the arrangements were made, everyone was invited, and he married her.

*Storyteller: Kalaicelvi (stories 11, 16, 20, 25-27)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

27. ANIMAL HELPERS

A man and his wife had a son, but they didn't have much money. Both the mother and father had to work as daily labourers in order to feed themselves. One day, when the boy had grown up and could earn money, he said to his mother, "I can't make any money here. I'll go away, earn some money and bring it back. Give me a food packet and send me off." Oh, there was also a raja who ruled that land.

The son went off and soon came to a thick forest, which he had to cross in order to get to the next town. He saw an old well covered with vines and snakes. He walked along and spied a snake so tangled up in the vines that it couldn't move. "Anne, help me!" cried the snake. Frightened that the snake would bite him, the boy hesitated and again the snake cried out, "Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you. Just set me free." Reassured, the boy cut the vines, lifted the snake out and, just as it said, it didn't harm him. It just slithered away through the forest and the boy walked on.

Next he came to a deep pit - as deep as a well, one of those pits you can fall into by night or day. A man trapped inside called to him, "Tambi, help me get out. I fell in while walking like you, and I haven't eaten for three whole days!" He had hesitated to help the snake but not to help this man; immediately he cut a vine, dropped it in the pit and drew the man up. "If you ever need any help, come to me," said the man who gave his address and left.

A little further the boy came to a tiger with a thorn deep in its foot. Unable to walk, it sat there holding its foot and cried, "Anne! Help me! Pull this thorn out, please." Again the boy hesitated because he thought the tiger might kill him, but the tiger said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you." The boy then took out a knife and cut out the thorn, and the tiger thanked him and went on its way.

After giving assistance to these three, he went still further, a long distance, until he came to a village. He searched for work but couldn't get what he wanted; he stayed a while and decided to go back home. Disappointed, he returned back through the forest, where the tiger stopped him and offered him a big bag which it held in its mouth. "What's that?" asked the boy. "Not much; just some gold and coins. It's for you." "How did you get this stuff?" "A prince came hunting in the forest. All of us tigers got together and killed the horse and the prince. Then we collected these things that he had. He tried to kill us, but you helped me so they're yours. Take them." Without a thought as to what the raja would say if he found out, the boy accepted the gifts and went on.

But he did realise that he shouldn't carry all this wealth home at night. Remembering that the man whom he had helped lived in a nearby village, he decided to spend the night there and go home in the morning. When he knocked on his door, the man opened it and asked, "What do you want?" "I've got some money, but this area is full of thieves so I thought I'd spend the night somewhere safe and go home in the morning." He lay down with the bag near his head, but as soon as he fell asleep, the man looked into the bag. Seeing the prince's jewels, clothes and rings - remember there was only one prince in the area, so he could easily identify them - he said to himself, "Oh ho! He's stolen the prince's possessions! If I tell the raja about this, he'll give me fine gifts for sure."

Leaving the boy asleep, he ran to the palace and said, "I've caught the thief who killed the prince and stole his things - I've got him in my house. Send your men now." A party of mounted soldiers, with spears and swords, rushed to his house.

Waking the boy, the soldiers shouted, "Get up, thief! You killed the prince and stole his things!" The boy was completely confused, since he thought the tiger had killed the prince, and said, "Who told you all this?" "Him, the man of this house." The boy thought to himself: "Look at that! The animals I helped showed me gratitude, but not this human being!"

He was taken to the raja who was in a rage - I mean, his own son had been killed. So he sentenced the boy to die in the morning: he would be stood up in a pit, so his head showed above ground, and then trampled by an elephant. Thrown in prison to await his death in the morning, the boy began to cry; then the snake came to him and asked why he was crying. "I was given this stuff by a tiger and then I slept in the house of a man I had helped, but he lied to the raja and put me in this situation. What's the point of doing good in this world!" "Don't worry. I'm going to bite the princess with my poison and no one will be able to extract the poison. You must go and hold your hand over her; the poison will immediately leave her body and the raja will reward you."

As soon as it spoke, the snake went to the princess' room and bit her. The raja called all the doctors in the land, but none could save her. The boy in prison said he could help, and with no other recourse, the raja ordered the boy to be brought to him. The boy entered the room and did nothing except extend his hand over the princess, yet suddenly the poison left her body.

"Where did you get these powers?" asked the raja. "And how did you kill my son?" "I don't know how that happened, raja. On my way to earn money, I helped a snake trapped in a well, then a man in a deep pit and finally a tiger with a thorn in its foot. On my way back, the tiger gave me these things and then I slept in that man's house. That's all I know." "I see," said the raja. "That snake came here and saved me by first biting your daughter and then helping me to drive away the poison. The animal protected me and the human betrayed me."

The raja was furious! He ordered the man who had turned in the boy to be put in the pit, which was all ready for the boy! But the raja put him in and he was trampled to death. Since the boy was the first one to touch the princess, he was married to her and they lived happily in the palace.

*Storyteller: Kalaichelvi (stories 11, 16, 20, 25-27)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

28. THE CLEVER SISTER

There were seven brothers and a little sister, who did all the cooking for her brothers. The youngest brother was lame, a cripple. Each day the brothers would go out to work, leaving their sister all alone, and come back and eat what she had cooked. One day, after the brothers had left her, a lion came to the house. He was in love with the girl and, seeing her all alone, said, "Come to me. I'm going to eat you." "Oh, please don't eat me. I'll do whatever you want, just like I do for my brothers." "I'll let you live if you agree to marry me." The girl was all alone and wanted to save her life, so she murmured her consent. "Come along to my house," ordered the lion. She refused, but the lion insisted and led the girl to his house where she cooked for him.

When the brothers came back, they found their sister missing. They cried in fright and went to find her. They looked and looked, and finally found her in the lion's house; the lion was away and she was crying inside. "The lion made me say I would marry it; if I didn't, he would eat me," she said. "He's coming back now to marry me." As they stood there trying to decide what to do, they heard the lion approaching. They didn't know what to do, so the sister said, "Hide in the rafters. Come down when I tell you."

As the seven brothers hid in the rafters, the lion entered. "Is the food ready?" he asked. "Yes." "Good. We're going to get married now." "All right. But we have a custom in our caste that the bridegroom must first take an oil bath. The wedding happens after the bath." "Fine. Get the water ready," said the lion. As the sister boiled up a vat of scalding hot water, the youngest brother, the lame one, said to the others, "I've got to pee." "Shut up, will you! If that lion hears us, he'll eat us!" "But I can't wait." "All right. All right. But just a little," said the other brothers.

He peed a little but a lot came out and trickled down from the rafters and into the rice the lion was about to eat! "Hey! What's this water coming down from the rafter?" "Oh! I made some rasam and put it up there; the cat must have tipped it over," she said. The next moment, the youngest brother said, "I've got to go, number two." "Be quiet. If that lion discovers us, we're dead." "But I've got to go!" "Just a little, then." But he dropped a huge pile! Right into the lion's food! "What's this?" he asked. "That? Oh, that's the meal I cooked for you," she said and he ate it.

After his meal, the lion asked, "Is the bath water ready?" She said it was and he asked how he should bathe. "Get right into the tub, and then you can rub on the oil," she said. The lion didn't know about hot water, so he climbed into the tub of boiling water, scalding his whole body, and died. The brothers came down from the rafters and went back home with their sister.

*Storyteller: Alli (stories 17, 28-29, 79)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

29. A FLEA'S REVENGE

A little flea went to a Chettiyar and said, "Sir, please give me some oil. Please." "Nothing doing," said the merchant. The flea got angry and decided to get revenge on the Chettiyar. Off it flew, and a centipede said, "Hey! Where are you going?" "I'm going to get revenge on the Chettiyar. Come along." So the centipede joined the flea, after which they met a cart, who asked them where they were going. "To get revenge on the merchant. Come along with us," said the flea. So the flea and the centipede climbed on the cart and rode along.

Next they came to a scorpion, who asked the same question and joined them. Now three of them had joined the flea: the centipede, the cart and the scorpion. Then a snake came along and said, "I'm going too," and got onto the cart. Soon they saw a grinding stone, who asked them, "Where are you going?" "To the Chettiyar's house." "Oh, then I'll join you," said the heavy stone. Finally a bhuta climbed on and they all rode on the cart to the merchant's house.

When they got to his house, the grinding stone climbed up the door and sat above the doorway; the scorpion hid inside a matchbox; the centipede climbed onto a flea-comb; the snake wound itself around a broom, and the bhuta stood outside the house. When they'd all done that, the flea said, "Tonight I'll jump on his head!"

That night, when the flea began to bite the Chettiyar's head, the man couldn't stand the pain! He reached for the matches to burn off the flea, but the scorpion bit him! Unable to bear that pain, he reached for the flea-comb, but the centipede bit him. Then he reached for the broom to beat off the centipede, but the snake bit him. It was all too much, so he ran toward the door, where the grinding stone fell on his head. Finally, he made it outside, where the bhuta ate him!

*Storyteller: Alli (stories 17, 28-29, 79)
Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

30. THE STORY OF KRSNA

Devati Amma and Kancan were born as sister and brother; their father and mother died, and Kancan raised his little sister in his house. When Devati Amma grew up and reached the age of five, her brother was ready to get married, so Devati said to him, "Brother, a house without a woman is like a house full of ghosts. We've got to find a wife for you."

Kancan agreed and told her to look after things while he searched for a bride. Searching through five villages, he found a girl, fixed the wedding arrangements and came back home. His little sister asked, "Anne, did you succeed or fail?" "Success," he said and his sister said, "We must send invitations to family and friends, to kith and kin." They went to the surrounding villages and gave invitations to their cousins, to their aunts and to their uncles. Eight days later, they all celebrated a grand wedding.

Then, when Devati Amma was ten years old and reached puberty, her brother decided to keep her inside and conduct a special ceremony according to caste custom. They held the ceremony but failed to have her horoscope read; even after her puberty ceremony, when Vasudeva came and asked to marry her, they didn't have her horoscope read. Only after her marriage to Vasudeva, ten days after the wedding, in fact, did they take her horoscope to an astrologer, to a Valluvan.

The Valluvan said to Kancan: "You and Devati Amma were born as brother and sister, and then lost your parents. You raised her like a daughter and married her to Vasudeva. She will conceive seven children, but if the seventh comes of age, you'll be shackled to a mountain and chopped into pieces. It's not me who's saying this; it's her astrological chart."

Hearing this, Kancan came back home thinking, "If the child of my sister is going to kill me, I must kill her first!" He threw away the chart and told his wife to mix turmeric and water, saying, "I'm going to bring Devati home." When he went to his sister's house, she was at home and her husband had gone out to hunt. During the hunt he began to think of his wife: "I've left her all alone, with no one to look after her." Worried, he returned in his cart without completing the hunt. Meanwhile, Kancan was saying to Devati, "Sister, come and stay with me for a while," but she said, "My husband's not back yet; I'll come when he returns."

And when he returned, she told him that her brother had invited them both, but he said, "He's invited you, not me; so I'm not going. You go and I'll wait for you here." She went alone, and when she got there, they put chains on her hands and chains on her feet! Her brother ordered twelve bhutas to take her to the top of a hill and cut her into pieces. "Brother, what have I ever done to you? Why are you killing me?" she pleaded but he remained silent. That night her husband had a dream in which he heard his wife's voice crying, crying a river of tears. He rose, hitched his cart and drove off; on the way he met the Valluvan and his brother-in-law, leading his sister away.

Leaping down from his cart, Vasudeva screamed, "Murderer! Why are you taking my wife in chains to be killed? What has she done to deserve this?" Kancan said, "I'll find you another wife, tomorrow. But now we've got to kill her on the top of the hill." "Killing her and finding me another wife is no good. Release her now! Well! What are you going to do?" "All right. But if you live with her, she must not have any children. If she has children, I'll take my revenge!" Vasudeva agreed to this, and they poured

milk over each other's hands to seal the bargain. Devati was set free and Vasudeva took her home.

For the next twenty years they lived apart - she in the house and he in a choultry. One day, Siva came to her house, disguised as a beggar and said, "Amma, I haven't eaten in eight days! Please feed me." She invited him in, put down a banana leaf and served him food. First, however, the old man said, "Do you have any children?" "Grandfather, I have no children. What can I do?" she said. "I can't eat in a childless house; it's not right," said Siva and he left for the choultry.

Finding Vasudeva asleep there, Siva said, "Friend! I have not eaten for eight days. I went to that big house, but they told me to come here. At least give me a place to rest." When Vasudeva heard this, he said, "Come with me and eat in our house" and led him back to the house. After they arrived and sat down to eat, Siva said again, "I can't eat alone, but your wife said you have no children. If you put down another leaf and eat beside me, then I'll eat." They ate together, and for the first time the wife served food to her husband. After the meal, he asked her to buy six betel leaves, three betel nuts and some lime-paste. She brought them back and the three of them chewed the nuts and leaves. Siva had now brought them together, so now the god disappeared.

Vasudeva and Devati joined together in love and affection and soon she was pregnant. When she reached the ninth month, her brother, Kancan, shackled her hands and legs and imprisoned her. "When your child is born, I'm going to take my revenge," he said and left. As soon as the child was born and the maidservants gave the signal, Kancan arrived, snatched the child, washed it in turmeric water and then smashed it on a rock! He killed her six children in the same way, one after the other, as soon as they were born.

When she was pregnant for the seventh time, she and her husband cried, "We've lost six and now the seventh will be killed. We might as well be dead ourselves!" They were overcome with grief and wasting away. Soon the ninth month came and the seventh child was born, but this time, the maidservants, the twelve bhutas and all the fierce animals of the forest fell asleep for six months.

As they slept, the seventh child was born without any help. Seeing his mother in chains, he said, "If you touch me, your chains will fall off." "But how can I touch you when I'm chained up like this?" cried Devati. Then the baby crawled, little by little, toward his mother and when she touched him, she was free! The child said, "Pick me up, put me over your shoulder and take me to Ayarpati, to Marutamaram Street, to the Konar house where Yasodha lives. She has just given birth to a girl, but she has been put to sleep by magic; take me and leave me there, and bring her child back here."

Devati slung him over her shoulder, just as he said, and started for Ayarpati; on the way the mountains began to tumble down all around her, but a snake spread its five hoods and shielded her as she ran. Reaching Yasodha's house, where they all were under a spell, she put down her child, picked up the baby girl and brought her back to the prison. She put herself in chains, and then the guards awoke from their long sleep. When they saw the child, they screamed, "She's given birth to a girl! To a girl!"

Knowing this was to be the final sacrifice, Kancan took turmeric water and hurried to the spot; but when he saw it was a girl, he realised that his sister had somehow got rid of her son. "No, this is my child, this girl. There's no other child," protested Devati. So they washed the girl in the turmeric water and took her to be killed on the rock.

Suddenly the child flew up in the air and announced, "You cannot kill me. I'm Goddess Kali! If you want to get your revenge, go to Ayarpati, to Marutamaram Street, to the Konar house and kill the child there." Kancan took Kali's advice and sent an elephant to Ayarpati; his plan was that the elephant would trample the child when it went to drink a bowl of poisoned milk.

Meanwhile, in Ayarpati, Yasodha raised the boy, breastfeeding him as if he were her own son. The elephant raced toward the house and everyone ran away, screaming, "An elephant's coming! It's going to kill someone!" The little baby crawled straight toward the animal, made it stop and then lie down; then he pushed aside the poisoned milk, took out a sword and killed the elephant. Yasodha's servant came running and said, "Your child has killed the elephant!" "What! No, he's asleep in his cradle," said Yasodha, who ran and saw that the cradle was empty.

Next day, when his mother took a nap, the little boy saw a milk cow in a nearby house, so he untethered its calf and began to drink the cow's milk along with the calf! The housewife came screaming to Yasodha, "Hey! Your son and that calf are drinking all my cow's milk!" Waking up, Yasodha was startled, "Oh, I dropped off to sleep! Did he go out somewhere!" But when she looked in the cradle, there he was, sleeping away peacefully! No house with buttermilk was safe from his hands! Putting up a ladder, in one push he knocked down all the pots! But when the women complained to Yasodha, she wouldn't listen.

One day, while the boy was sleeping, she picked up a pot and went to the well for water; before leaving, she tied him to a mortar stone so he wouldn't steal anything while she was gone. But the little boy picked up the stone and simply threw it away! When she went to beat him, he opened his mouth and inside she saw the whole world! Seeing this, Yasodha realised that this was not a normal child. "He's a god!" she said, "and I've beaten him!"

Failing at his feet, she prayed, and then his mother and father came and fell at his feet, too. "I raised him; he's mine," said Yasodha. "Yes. I won't say you didn't raise him, but I gave birth to him," said Devati. Kali Amma appeared and gave him to his birth-mother. Then Kali took Kancan to Alakar Mountain, to the place where Kancan had built a fort. She destroyed that fort, and then, in the very spot where Kancan had said he would kill his sister, Kali killed Kancan. That's the end.

*Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

31. THE SEVENTH SON SUCCEEDS

There was a hunter and his wife. They had seven children, but they couldn't feed them all. She pounded rice and he went every morning to Alakar Mountain to cut firewood, but they never had enough to feed their seven children.

One day the father said to his sons, "Your mother pounds rice and I chop firewood, but it's not enough, so tell me what you can do." At first they were speechless; later, their mother cooked some food and asked them again, "What can you do?" "I'll bring back firewood like father and feed us," said the oldest son. "And what can you do?" she asked the second son, who said, "Like you, mother, I'll pound rice and feed the family." The third son said, "I'll fish and put food on the table." The fourth said, "I'll graze goats and feed us." The fifth said, "I'll graze bullocks and help." The sixth said, "I'll make dung cakes and bring us money." The seventh son said, "I'm going to marry seven Kannimar, seven celestial maidens, and feed them all, as well as you."

When he heard this from his youngest son, the father hit him hard and told him to clear out! Off he ran, across mountains and forests, until finally, when it got dark, he reached a house with no children. An old woman there said to him, "It's going to rain cats and dogs; come inside while I put the bullocks in the pen." When he offered to look after the animals, she agreed and invited him to stay with her.

One day while he was grazing the bullocks, the seven Kannimar came down from heaven to bathe, and he stole one girl's silk clothes and ran back to the house. "Sisters!" she cried. "Some fellow has run off with my clothes!" They ran after him, six of them with clothes on and one without, but he slipped into the house. The girls knocked and said, "Amma, that boy stole our sister's clothes; she's standing here waiting for them. Give them back and we'll go away." Then the old woman changed the boy into a five-year-old baby and started to sing a lullaby to him in his cradle.

"There's no young man here, only this baby," she said to the girls. "Search the house for yourself." They searched but found no one. Still the naked girl said, "I can't go anywhere; I've got to stay here until I get my clothes." So the old woman turned the five-year-old baby into a young man, and he left the house with the girl.

Eight days passed, and they began to play panti. He won the first round, but she won the second and said, "Ah! You've lost and now..." but as she spoke, he fell asleep. Seeing this, she ran off to the spot where her sisters usually bathed; and when they arrived they said, "Where have you been? I'm not sure father will take you back after so long." But they all bathed, got dressed and went back to heaven.

When the boy awoke, she was gone! Then he said to the old woman, "I'm going after her, right now! Give me a packet of food; I'm going to heaven." But she said, "Don't go. Many go there to get a woman, but they die by the thousands, losing their arms and legs, and never return! Why do you want to go there?" "I'm going." "All right, but you came to me, a barren old woman, and have become like my own child. If you go away, I must die. Dig a pit, stand me in it, then fill it with wood and light a fire. Then, when I'm dead, you can go where you like." He performed her funeral rites and then left for heaven.

Turning to the left, turning to the right, spinning in front and back, he reached heaven. Spinning left and spinning right, he entered the raja's golden assembly hall. When the raja asked his business, he answered, "I've come for a bride." "Oh," said the raja. "If that's why you're here, then listen: hitch seven pairs of bullocks, sow

twelve bushels of sesame seed, plough the fields seven times, harvest it, clean it and store it all by morning! Can you do that?" "I can," said he.

"That's the first test," said the raja. "This is the second: you must fill a deep well overnight so that a copper pot at the bottom will float up to the top by morning. "I'll do it by morning," said he. "Here's the third: in a grove guarded by tigers and lions, in the middle of a lake protected by snakes and serpents, grows a beautiful lotus, which you must bring to me. If you can accomplish these three tasks, I'll give you my daughters, half my kingdom and a magic horse."

That night he sowed the fields with twelve measures of seed and prayed, "Siva! Parvati! Tell all the ants of this world to harvest, clean and store the crop by morning. If they help me, I'll live; if not, I'll die!" With that wish, he went to sleep, and soon all the ants of the world came, row after row of them, cleaned every one of those sesame seeds and heaped them into neat piles! When dawn broke, the ants said to the boy, "There! You can take care of the rest," and left.

The raja arose in his golden hall and gave orders to his guard, "Go and see if that boy has gleaned and stored all the seeds." He returned and reported, "Raja, it's all put neatly into sacks, but we better measure it." They emptied the sacks and measured the seeds and found exactly twelve bushels - not one seed less! When he saw that, the raja said, "Son, you may sit on my golden throne; I'll relinquish it for eight days. Enjoy all the pleasures that I enjoy, and on the eighth day I'll give you a second test."

On the eighth day, the raja set him the second test: a copper pot would be put at the bottom of a deep, dry well, and by morning, as the sun rises, the pot must be seen shining on the top of the well wall. The boy said, "All you frogs of this world! My life's in danger! They've thrown a pot into the deep well; if you can bring it to the top, you'll save me; but if you wish to kill me, don't help me." Hundreds of frogs came, and one by one, jumped into the well, one landing on top of the other. Lifting the vessel from one to the next, they got it to the top! Putting it on the well wall, they said, "The vessel's safe; we're going home," and left.

In the morning as the sun rose, from inside his golden chamber the raja saw something shining brightly in the distance. He sent his guards, who returned and said, "The vessel is on top of the well wall!" Again the raja called the boy and said, "You are a clever and talented man; take my throne for another eight days."

On the eighth day, he set him the task of plucking a flower, saying, "If you can bring back that flower, you may choose one of my daughters for your wife." With those words, the raja sent the boy on a task for the third and final time. Setting out to get the flower, the boy went far away and eventually came to an enormous lake, which he couldn't cross. Then he said, "Four tortoises that hold up this world! My life is in danger! If you fetch that flower in the middle of the lake, I'll live; if not, I'll die!" Immediately four tortoises came from the four corners of the world and he said, "Pick that special lotus and give it to me." They dug up the lake, destroyed the serpents guarding the lotus and carefully brought it back to him. "Here's the lotus; we're going home," they said and left.

Carrying the flower, the boy approached the palace, where its fragrance spread everywhere; the raja smelled it and sent his guard to check. Back came the guard to say, "It's that boy - he's got the flower. He's sitting outside." "He's got it, has he? Then he is the right husband for my daughters. Make ready the gold and silver chariot and drive him here at once!" When the boy was brought to the palace in the

chariot, the raja asked, "Which daughter would you like to marry?" The boy chose the one whose clothes he had stolen, way back then! He chose her.

They married, and the raja gave him a magic horse, lots of gifts and sent them to the boy's home. On the way, his wife got thirsty, so they stopped to drink. Sitting down, they began to talk and later fell asleep. As they slept, god created a beautiful seven-storey palace for them! And when they awoke, they saw the palace, complete with windows and pillars, gems and jewels, cows and bullocks. Astonished, he said, "This is a sign from god, so we'll live here."

One day, while they were living there, the old woman whom he had buried alive was grazing her bullocks on his land; when the guards saw this, they went to beat her. Seeing this from the top of the palace, the boy called out, "Don't touch her! Bring her here." When the old woman was brought to him, he asked, "Do you recognise me?" "No, sir. I don't know you." Then he said, "I'm the one you protected and fed a long time ago." Suddenly she recognised him, and now he protected and fed her. His mother and father were still selling firewood from village to village to stay alive, but soon they, too, joined their son. And they all lived happily ever after.

Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District

32. THE PRINCE WHO COULD UNDERSTAND ANIMAL LANGUAGES

A powerful raja ruled over a kingdom, and he had many wives but no children. He went to temple after temple, and prayed to god for a child, but even with all those wives he still had no heir. Eventually, god gave him a son, whom he named Kandarupam. The baby was doted on by everyone because they were so happy, and he grew up to be a fine young man.

Soon the raja wanted him to marry and he sent two men with his photo to find a bride. They traveled from town to town but couldn't find a suitable bride, so they decided to stay in one place and wait. At the same time, in another land, a second childless raja had a daughter, whom he named Kandarupani. That raja sent men out to find a proper husband for her and eventually they met the other party; exchanging photos, both parties agreed that this was the right match. The boy's photo was taken back to the girl's family, and the girl's photo to the boy's family.

Back at the boy's palace, they celebrated the wedding with great pomp, inviting everyone for a grand festival! The raja thought to himself, "My son and his wife shouldn't live in such splendour; it might attract the evil eye." So he had a small mandapam built for them in the forest and sent them to live there.

One night, while they were sleeping in the mandapam in the forest, seven Kannimar came from heaven to bathe. Since they did this every night, when they saw the new mandapam, they wondered why it was there. Looking inside, they saw the couple sleeping and said, "What a beautiful man! Let's take him with us!" They took him away with them, leaving Kandarupani to sleep alone.

When Kandarupani awoke, her husband was gone! She told his family and they searched and sent notices everywhere, but the man missing from the mandapam was nowhere to be found. He was in heaven, in a palace where the seven Kannimar hid him away from everyone else.

Before long, however, one of the girls said, "What about his wife down below? We left her behind. How could we do that?" Then they came to a decision: "Let them be together each other every seventh night." So once a week, they brought her up to heaven, placed her in a room with her husband, and in the morning sent her back down again, without her even knowing what was happening.

This went on for some time, until the wife got pregnant, but she was confused because she thought her husband was away. After a few months passed, the whole town started to gossip and soon the news reached the raja. He knew his son was gone, so how could his son's wife be pregnant? He called his minister and said, "Take this woman away from here! She is a disgrace to my kingdom!" She was taken blindfolded and abandoned in a forest, where she sat down and thought, "I've done nothing wrong, but I end up like this! Must be the fate written on my forehead."

Looking around, she saw a cremation ground and a woman watching a burning corpse. Thinking that she, too, should die, she went and threw herself on the fire, but the woman caught her by the sari, pulled her back and said, "What's wrong? You can tell me."

When she heard the princess' story, she said, "My only daughter has just died; I've just lit her funeral fire here. God must have sent you to replace her, so come and stay with me." Kandarupani agreed. When she was ready to give birth, the old

woman went to the midwife and said: "Blindfold the mother. If the baby is a girl, save it. But if a boy is born, kill it, and tell her it was stillborn."

In the event, it was a healthy boy. "Oh, my god!", thought the midwife. "The old woman told me to kill it, but I can't do that!" The midwife hid the baby in her house, came back, took the blindfold off the mother, and told her that the baby had been stillborn.

The midwife kept the baby boy at home for two days, and on the third day she was at her wit's end. So she put the baby down a snake-hole and said, "I can't kill him and I can't keep him. Now he's your responsibility." The snake, a five-hooded cobra, fed the baby on milk and eggs. But after a few days it, too, began to think, "I can't raise this child by myself", and left the boy in a temple.

Then the raja, the baby's grandfather, came to that temple. "Lost my son, drove out my daughter-in-law! What's the use of my wealth and my kingdom?", he thought as he walked to that temple to pray to god. Seeing the baby lying there - he didn't know anything about it - he picked it up and thought, "Look at god's mysterious power! He's given me another son!" Taking the child back to the palace, he raised it as his own son with great joy.

The boy grew up to be a happy young man, with lots of friends. The day before his coronation as the new raja, he said to his friends, "Let's go have a look around the town. If I'm going to be the raja, I better know what it looks like." "What's the rush? Tomorrow you'll be riding on that elephant and can have a good view," they said. Next morning he was mounted on an elephant and paraded through the town, as a huge crowd came out to see the young raja, filling the streets and open spaces just to catch a glimpse of him.

Even his mother stood in her doorway; she was living in poverty, having lost her husband and her child. "Why not have a look at the new raja," she said to herself in the midst of her sorrow. The elephant circled through the town and when it came to her house, it stopped. He looked at her, and she looked at him. She ran inside, thinking, "Why is he looking at me like that? Strange, but he looks a lot like my husband." When he got back to the palace, the young raja was still wondering who she was. To his friends, he said, "I saw a beautiful woman today; I must speak with her."

The young raja went to the old woman she was living with and said, "Tell that woman I'm coming to see her tonight." The old woman went to Kandarupani and told her, "The prince will visit you tonight. Feed him milk, sit nicely and talk with him." The old woman prepared the milk, cleaned up, and left Kandarupani there alone.

On his way to the house, the prince passed by a calf sleeping alongside its mother, when, suddenly the calf jumped up and said, "Amma! Look at that man there, who just stepped over me!" When he heard this - he could speak and understand all languages, you see - elephant language, horse language, every kind of speech - well, the prince stopped and listened to the conversation. "Stepping over you is nothing", said the cow. "He doesn't even know who his own mother is!"

Listening to this, the prince was confused, "Why did the cow say that?" Slowly he walked toward the house, mulling this over in his mind. He entered, and sat down beside Kandarupani, but neither of them could say a word. Total silence. Finally, she decided to get the milk from the other room, to give it to him. But when she stood up

and he saw her face, her breast squirted milk into his mouth, because she was his mother. Then she went into the other room.

Back home, he was even more confused. "Why did the cow say, 'He doesn't even know who his own mother is!' Who was the woman I met? Is she my mother?" He resolved not to eat until the mystery was cleared up.

When his father, his grandfather really, saw this and asked why, he said, "I won't eat again until you tell me the truth about whose child I am." With no way out, the raja said, "I found you lying abandoned in a temple and brought you here as my son. I had no heir, so I raised you as a gift from god; but I don't know who your real parents are."

Then they all went to temple and prayed to god, who came and explained that the boy was the raja's grandson; that the boy's mother was the raja's daughter-in-law; and the boy's father was the raja's son. They brought his father from heaven and his mother from the town, and they were all happy.

*Storyteller: Nakarattinam (stories 32-33)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

33. A DOG, A CAT, AND A MOUSE

A beggar lived in a town, and he had two children - a dog and a cat. When I say a "beggar", you must understand that he was poor, very poor. He begged a little food here and there each day and gave it to his dog and cat. He ate only if there was something leftover; if not, he went to sleep hungry.

One day he wasn't able to get any food; he asked at every house but got absolutely nothing. He was really worried - not about himself, but about how to feed the little ones. Not knowing what to do, he went to a house and said, "Amma, please give me something." The woman gave him a little rice, just enough to feed his family. As he was going home with the food, another beggar came and begged from him, to which the first man said, "Look, I am a beggar myself. I just got this food for my family, and now you come begging from me." "I don't know about that," said the second man. "But I haven't eaten for a long time; just a little would see me through." "All right. You really seem to be suffering; it's just that I don't want my family to go hungry. Here, take what you need from this plate; whatever you leave I'll take home."

The second man took the plate and, as was his habit, ate everything! The first beggar cursed him, but the second man said, "Here, take this little conch shell and keep it safely in this box. Whenever you open the lid, you'll find rice inside. Keep it and you'll manage. You see, I was just testing you, to see if you'd give me any food. You are a good man." Then he left and the beggar took the box, opened it and saw a huge mound of rice!

He now had everything - a house, a garden - he became a rich man and didn't have to beg anymore. He lacked nothing - even the dog and the cat each had a separate cage to run around and play in. He also opened a shop, a rice shop. While the other shops sold rice for three rupees a measure, he sold it for one rupee! What a cheap price! Everyone went to his shop, and it was mobbed all day long. He was a rich man, who lived and slept like a raja, and his whole family was prosperous.

One day, a neighbouring raja came to his shop and asked for rice; without knowing it, he gave him the magic conch shell in the box, along with a sack of rice. The raja took the box to his house, and the rich man soon had nothing, not even food to eat. He sold his shop, his house, his land - everything went! He returned to the state he was in before, and everyone began to talk among themselves, "All of a sudden he got rich, and now he's poor again! What happened?"

Even the dog and cat began to wonder, and the dog asked the cat, "Why did we suddenly become poor again? And how did we get rich so fast?" The cat answered, "Must be that box; when he gave it away, we became poor again. C'mon. We've got work to do. We'll hunt through the whole city and find that box no matter where it is! We've got to help our father because he's done so much for us."

They searched all night. As the dog stood guard, the cat snuck into each house and looked around, but they found nothing in the whole town. "Got to look elsewhere, in another town," they said and set off. On the way, they came to a river, a big river; the dog knew how to swim but the cat didn't, so they couldn't cross. Then the dog said to the cat, "Climb on my back and I'll take you across." The dog swam them both to the other side and they continued on, until they saw a mouse. The cat caught it and said, "I'll eat you, unless you find a box for us." "I'll find it," said the little mouse. "There are lots of mice in my family; I'll call them and ask about the box."

When he did, a huge number of mice gathered and one said that he had seen a box in a house. "Go and get it," ordered the cat, and off the mice went, while the cat and dog waited behind. Meanwhile, the man had come home and found that his two children, the dog and cat, had gone! Now he was not only hungry but also very sad.

Meanwhile, at the raja's house, the box was kept inside ten other boxes, each one inside the next. And the raja himself slept right beside the boxes because he knew what had happened when the box went missing from the other man's house. The mice stole into the room and began to gnaw at the boxes, like this "krrkrr". The raja heard something and woke up, looked around, saw nothing and went back to sleep. The mice kept gnawing away, right through the ten boxes, got the conch, ran back and gave it to the cat and dog. The two friends were very happy and said, "Oh, we're going to be rich again. And think how happy our father will be, too."

The cat and the dog and the mouse left with the conch, but it soon got dark and they had to stop on the way. In the morning they got up, went farther and came to the same river, where schoolchildren were bathing. The dog started to swim across, with the mouse and the cat on its back-and the conch in the cat's mouth. "Hold onto to that conch like it was your life," said the dog to the cat. "If you lose it, I'll kill you!"

Then the schoolboys began to throw stones at them, a hail of stones, and one of them hit the conch and it sank into the water! "Where's the conch?" asked the dog when they reached the other side. "Fallen into the river," said the cat. "You numbskull! You've lost it!" said the dog and drove the cat away. With a heavy heart, the dog went back home, where their father was lying down hungry; he called the dog and said, "Don't worry about it. At least you've come home safely."

Soon they all went about their business as usual. Often they went fishing, and one day they caught a huge fish; when they brought it home and cut it up, inside they found the conch. With the conch inside the house, they became rich and happy once more. And the cat came back, too.

*Storyteller: Nakarattinam (stories 32-33)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

34. THREE GOLDEN SONS

A husband and wife were childless. They went to every single temple and to every holy place in their district, but it didn't bring them a child. So the man married again, but when his second wife didn't have a child he married a third time, and still no children. He married a fourth wife and, finally, she got pregnant and he was happy; he had four wives but only the youngest was pregnant.

One day he called his young wife and said, "I'm going to hunt in the forest; I'll be there for six months and then I'll return to the palace for six months. During the six months I'm away, if you have a little pain, ring this little bell and I'll come back within three days; if you have bad pains during the delivery, ring the big bell and I'll come immediately." Then he left for his six months in the forest.

After a while, his wife felt some pain and rang the big bell; the raja came back immediately, but the pain went away in a day or so and he returned to the forest. Then she got her real pains and gave birth, but the three other wives blindfolded her, so she couldn't see. Seven children were born, and the other wives threw them in the garbage heap, and put seven cockroaches in their place. Then they rang the big bell, summoning the raja to his wife's delivery.

Knowing it was the birth of his child, he came immediately and they said to him, "Foolish raja! You were so proud of your pregnant wife, but look what she gave birth to! See for yourself." When he saw the cockroaches, the raja thought, "She has given birth to these! Are these my children? I don't want her." So he put her outside and fed her like a dog.

Meanwhile, the seven babies were taken and raised by a rat. When they had grown up a bit, the rat said, "I've brought you up this far, but I can't raise you forever. You have a right to the wealth of that palace. Go there and eat for awhile." They went and ate for ten days until one of the older wives saw them and said, "Look! Those children are eating here! We'll fix them; just wait till the raja returns."

Each of the wives lay down in a corner, and when the raja came back from hunting, they said, "We have terrible headaches! Dig up that rat's hole, catch it and kill it because only its blood will relieve our pain." Hearing this, the raja agreed to catch the rat in the morning. What did the rat do? To the children it said, "Tomorrow I'm going to die. But I don't want to be the reason for your death", so it took them to the Kali temple. "Goddess! They'll catch me and kill me tomorrow; please take care of these children whom I have raised all these years." Leaving them with the goddess, the rat left. In the morning it was killed, and its blood cured the wives' headaches.

Kali raised the children for four months and then said, "Go to your house, eat there for twenty days and then return." They went, ate with their mother and returned, but again the wives saw them and said to themselves, "Kali sent them here; we'll have to take care of her." So they rang the bell, and when the raja came, they said, "We have bad pains; if you bring us the blood of Kali, we'll get better." When the raja agreed, Kali took the children to Nagamma, the snake goddess, and said, "I've raised these children for many months, but the raja's going to kill me tomorrow. Now you must look after them." Nagamma took the children, and in the morning Kali was killed and her blood was given to the wives.

Nagamma raised them for seven months and then said, "Others are enjoying what is rightfully yours; you're old enough to go back and eat at home. Go and stay there." At home they ate for a month, until the wives discovered them and said, "I thought they

were dead! Can't we ever get-rid of them? Better ring the bell again." They did and when the raja returned, they said, "There's a snake in a hole out there; you must kill it and give us its blood. Only then will we feel better." Nagamma prayed to Siva and Parvati, "It's not so bad if I die, but don't let these children die. Watch over them." With these words, Nagamma made a pearl pendant and wrote on it: "These children were born on this day, in this place." Then she left them in a Ganesa temple, saying, "Stay here and you'll be all right; I'm going to die in the morning, but you must live." In the morning the snake was killed and its blood given to the wives.

Ganesa raised the children until they were about ten years old; there were six boys and one girl. The girl looked at her brothers and said, "There's nothing to be gained from moving around like this from place to place. We've got to go home. Let's see what will happen." With these words, she led her brothers to a choultry, left them there and then walked to the middle of the town where she made a public announcement: "Good people of this land! We seven children ask you to convene a panchayat and determine how we were born and who we are!"

Everyone gathered in the choultry and asked the seven children who they were and what their business was. "Summon the rajas of this land to listen to us, and when the panchayat is over, we'll go," said the sister. The people sent a group of men to summon the raja, but when they arrived, one guard said the raja was bathing. Another said he was eating. A third said he was drinking coffee. Finally, they had to grab the raja by both his arms and drag him to the panchayat.

Then the people asked the seven children, "All right. Now tell us what is at issue between you and this powerful raja?" "Kind sirs, our father married three women but had no children. His fourth wife was our mother. When she got pregnant, he said to her, 'You'll give birth soon; when you need me, ring the bell.' She rang the bell, but the other wives blindfolded her, threw us away and put seven cockroaches in our place. We were raised by a rat; then we went home, but the other wives saw we were still alive and had the rat killed. The rat gave us to Kali, who raised us until the wives saw we were alive and planned to kill Kali. So Kali handed us over to Nagamma, who raised us for a while and send us home because we were old enough to eat rice. We went home, and soon it came time for Nagamma to be killed, so she gave us to Ganesa. He told us to find our parents and live with them. He sent us home, where we saw that our mother was blindfolded and fed food fit for a dog. Now, you tell us how the raja, our father, could do this. Tell us."

When he heard all this, the raja was overcome with grief and said, "I must have been stupid not to know this. I just listened to what my wives told me. But before I punish them, I'll test your story this way: if you were really born to that woman, she'll treat you with a special respect. And you'll drink her milk."

The children ran to the palace and brought their mother and the other wives to the choultry. The sister poured water into the mouths of her brothers and said, "Spit into her face." When the water from her children's mouths reached the mother's eyes, they lit up like bright lights! Then she breastfed all seven children. When he saw this, the raja shaved the heads of the three other wives, put them in a lime-kiln and burned them up. Then the children and their mother lived a happy life together.

*Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

35. A PRINCESS BECOMES A MONKEY

There were seven brothers, and the youngest was named Devantiran. All the brothers married, all except Devantiran; his parents died before they could get him married so his brothers spoiled him. Before they went to hunt in the forest, they said to their wives, "Let him hang around and do what he likes; don't tell him to do any work." And that's what he did - he wandered around the village, took a bath, slept, ate - and didn't do a stitch of work anywhere.

One day Devantiran said to his brothers, "Tomorrow you're all going to Alakar Mountain to hunt; let me come with you and learn to hunt. If I get married, my wife will want me to hunt so I've got to learn." "You can't come," they said. "The sun is too hot, the way is too far and there's no water to drink. We have to cross seven forests and climb the big mountain." "I don't care; I'm coming anyway," he said.

Preparing the carts, they set out for the mountain, but in the fifth forest, Devantiran got very thirsty. He was dizzy and faint and asked for water. "Didn't listen to what we told you, did you! Take the hunting dogs and find some water; wait there for us. On our return we'll all go home together," his brothers said and left.

Devantiran climbed a tree and saw a pond far away, almost out of sight. "What's the point of going that far? And I'll have to wait for them to return, too," he thought. "Might as well go home and get something to drink there." He drove his cart back and called out, "Sisters! My tongue is dry as straw! My body is feverish! Give me something to drink." But his brothers always told their wives to lock up the house and never to let anyone in until they returned. "Even if someone bangs and begs, even if they scream and shout, do not open the door," they had said. So when the wives heard their young brother-in-law asking for help, they said, "This is strange! Back so soon! Never worked a day in your life and now you're here asking for help!" He pleaded and pleaded with them, but they wouldn't open the door. Faint and weak, he fell down on the ground.

It was dark when the brothers returned with their carts filled with meat from the hunt. "What's that lying in front of the door?" they asked their wives. "Your little brother had the nerve to speak to us very free and easy! But we wouldn't give in and kept the door closed." This is what they said - they lied, you see. The brothers so were angry at their little brother's insolence that after they prepared the meat and fried it, they didn't call him to eat. They left him outside, hungry, and went to sleep.

In the morning the seven brothers went to bathe in the pond; usually they chatted while they bathed, but this time Devantiran and his six brothers stayed apart, not speaking at all, not even small talk. When the six brothers turned their backs and began to go home, the little one thought, "They didn't even ask how I am! All right. There's no point in living with them any longer. I'll go my own way; even if I have to graze goats and eat gruel." With these thoughts, Devantiran went his own way.

When he saw this, the oldest brother said to his son, "Your uncle is going away there. Run to him and bring him back. He'll tell you to go away, but you must tell him you won't leave him unless he comes back with you." The boy went and called to his uncle, Devantiran, who kept telling him to go away. But the little boy wouldn't go, and Devantiran thought, "How am I going to get anywhere with him around?" So, lifting him onto his shoulders, Devantiran came back to his brothers' house.

He waited outside, but still they didn't ask him to come in and eat. Then he thought, "Ever since our parents died, my brothers and their wives have fed me, so I shouldn't speak badly of them." He began to cry, but then he left the house. Away he went, across fields, over rivers and beyond mountains. Six months he wandered and survived by eating nuts and berries in the forest. After six months he saw a huge elephant; he was so tired and hungry that he decided to let it trample him. He advanced toward it, but the elephant took pity on the poor boy and gently lifted him up with his trunk, put him on its back and carried him to a town. Because the elephant couldn't go inside the town, it let him down on the outskirts and said, "Try to find some work here, grazing goats or something, and start a new life."

Devantiran wandered around thinking he might find some work so he could eat. He came to a flower-garden and asked the flower-woman, "Amma, I'm thirsty. Please give me some water." She welcomed him in and fed him; revived a little, he began to talk with her. "If there are goats or bullocks or geese to graze in this town, I'll do it," he said. She thought for a while and then said, "Who you are and where you're from is not for me to ask. And because your skin glows so brightly I'll not order you to work. I live alone here, without a husband or children, making flower garlands for my livelihood. If you wish, you may eat here with me." When he nodded assent, she added, "Look after the garden for a moment while I go and cook something."

When she left, he began to cry because, for the first time in six months, someone was giving him food. She made a little rice and sauce and brought it back to him. After eating, he slept while she collected flowers; then she woke him and led him back to the house. There she threaded the flowers into garlands while he sat nearby and watched; in the mornings she went out and sold the garlands. They lived like this for some time.

One day, after she went outside to get water, he thought, "She won't be back for a while; why not try to make a garland myself?" He removed his ring, put it among the flowers and then tried to make a garland but it was a complete mess! When the woman came back with the water and looked at the garland, she saw it was completely wrong. "Look at what you've done! What can I tell the girl I give the garlands to? It looks terrible!" "Just tell her that you were in a hurry and made it too quickly." She took the garlands, but on the way she stopped and straightened out the flowers so that the garlands looked fine. When she handed them to the girl, however, again they were a mess.

"What's this? You've never given me a garland like this in all these years? It's full of worms and maggots!" "I'm sorry, but the rice boiled over on the stove and I had to make it in a hurry. It must have gotten dirty, but tomorrow I'll make you a beautiful one." After she left, the girl felt something in the garland; parting the flowers, she saw a ring inside! She held it in her hand and placed it on her finger - it fit perfectly! But how did it get there? "I'll have to find out, secretly," she decided.

The next day the flower-woman came and gave her flowers, but she didn't say anything. Ten days passed, and then one day, the man made another garland, with beautiful cuckoo and parrot shapes in it. When she saw that, the flower-woman said, "I've never made anything like it in my life. You've woven a garland of beautiful birds, so she'll surely ask who made it." The man said, "If she really wants to know, if she persists, then tell her the truth. Tell her a man came to your house and made it. If she just asks casually though, don't tell her anything."

When the girl saw the garland, she was stunned, "Flower-woman! You've never made a garland like this before! Never! You must tell me who made it. I won't let you go until you tell me." "There's no one else who could make it since I live alone!" she protested. But the girl wouldn't let her go without getting an answer, so finally she told her; "A young man now lives in my house - he made it."

There was the ring - she still had it - and now this garland! The man who made these beautiful things must be something! So she said, "Tell Mm to come here tomorrow. Tell him I said that." But the flower-woman said, "I'll tell him only if you pour some milk and promise that you will tell no one about this." She poured the milk and said, "I'll not tell anyone; now please tell him to come."

Next day, when the morning chores were finished, the flower-woman said to the man, "She wants you to come there. Go to her." "What? Me go to that lady? How can that be?" he asked. But that night he took betel nuts, betel leaves and lime-paste and approached the palace. Climbing a wall, he calmly entered her room, sat down and enjoyed himself chewing and spitting the betel leaves and nuts all over her. As soon as he left, before daybreak, she awoke with a scream, "What this? I'm covered with sweat!" She called to her maids to bathe her. And so for a whole week he deceived her. Then the girl told her maids to get her a huge copper pot, full of milk.

The maids placed the milk vessel in her room, and as she went to bed that night, she prayed to Siva and Parvati, "I don't know who is doing this to me, but for a week I have had to bathe in the early morning, before daybreak. Tonight when he comes, please spill this milk; then I'll wake up and discover who he is." She put the milk near her and went to sleep. As usual, he entered and sat down - suddenly the milk spilled and she woke up! She grabbed him and asked, "Why have you been making me bathe like this for a week?" "Well, you told me to come. But how could I? I mean, how could you and I get together? That's why I spat on you - so that you wouldn't want me." "What did you do with the ring in the flowers?" he asked and she showed him the ring. So they became lovers.

Every day the girl was weighed in a scale, with flowers on one side to balance her. At first she and the flowers weighed the same, but now, day by day, she went lower and lower and the flowers went higher and higher. She said to her lover, "My parents won't tolerate this disgrace! I can't stay in the palace; take me to your place." "All right. We'll go by horse, but the forest is full of wild animals; if you cry out, the horse will drop dead. Then we'll have to walk through the forest for another six months." "That's all right." "But you won't be able to keep quiet." "I will. I promise."

They tied her belongings and some food on a howdah on a horse and rode off. Riding through the forest, the animals screamed wildly and when she cried out, the horse stopped dead. He was furious, "You are a stupid woman! We'll have to spend the night in the forest and continue on foot in the morning." "Don't be so angry with me just because the horse won't go on," she said. As they talked, he fell asleep, and as soon as she saw this, she ran pell-mell back to her house and slept comfortably there, leaving him all alone in the forest.

In the morning he awoke under a tree, in which lots of pey were screaming: "I'll take his head!" "I want his heart!" "I'll eat his legs!" "Oh, god," he thought, "they're going to eat me alive. Dying is bad enough, but to be eaten alive!" And he cried a river of tears.

Then a group of monkeys appeared: there was a head-monkey, a judge-monkey, a treasurer-monkey and a sweeper-monkey - they had all those kinds of officers just as we do. When these monkeys saw the man crying under the tree, they said, "Look! Such a beautiful, rose-coloured man! But he's crying a river of tears because all those peys are talking about dividing up his body!" So the monkeys decided to do something. Going to the peys they said, "Out there in the forest, fruits and berries have ripened; go and eat them. They're there, waiting for you; we won't show you the way, but you should go and eat them."

When the peys left, the monkeys gathered around the poor man and asked him why he was crying. He explained that he had come with a woman who had abandoned him. "I thought I would be eaten alive, so I started to cry." "Right. Here's what you must do: we'll send the sweeper-monkey into the mountains to get three fruits. When you eat the first fruit, you'll become a young monkey; you'll still be human but you'll look like a monkey. Conceal the other two fruits, one in each hand. Then we'll call our whole monkey tribe and start ripping up the palace garden; one word and our entire tribe will descend and cause chaos."

"Then the army will arrive, but you'll be invincible, protected from harm by guns, nets, stones or staves. Leap around and play in front of her, and she won't be able to resist. They'll throw a net over you, but keep jumping around and she'll be fascinated and ask to see you. Then throw the second fruit at her; when her servants wash it with water and she eats it, she'll become a monkey, too, a lady monkey. Then you can change her back into a human, take her away and live happily."

He ate the first fruit and, just as they said, he turned into a monkey. Then the monkeys went and raided the gardens, and the alarm went out: "Monkeys are stealing the plants!" He leapt around as the lame-monkey, and they tried to shoot him; then they tried to beat him, but nothing worked. The raja told them to throw a net over him, but he continued to run and jump around inside. The princess was overcome with curiosity, "Look at that monkey! Look at it playing!" He leapt right into her lap and spat the second fruit at her; she ate it and changed into a monkey. The raja's men tried everything to change her back into a princess. They dug up all the herbs on Alakar Mountain; they heated five vats of sesame oil, and for four days they rubbed the potion on her. But nothing worked.

The man-monkey sat under a mango tree which had not fruited for twelve years, saying, "Let this withered tree revive, let it bloom, let it fruit, let it flourish!" And when the tree bloomed, fruited and flourished, he sat there and said aloud, "They've tried everything to cure that princess! But I'm the only one who can save her!"

A cowherd who overheard this ran to the raja and said, "There's a man in the forest who made a dead tree give fruit! And he says he's the only person who can cure your daughter!" The raja told him to summon this man, but when the cowherd went back and said, "The great raja wants to see you," the man under the tree said, "Am I supposed to walk to the raja? Go away!" Back went the messenger and told the raja, who said, "There's a cart over there; take it and bring him back." Dragging the cart to the man under the tree, the messenger told him to get in. "If I do," he asked, "can you pull it?" "Of course," was the answer, but no matter how much he pulled, it wouldn't budge. He pulled the rope so hard, his back was covered with blood.

Then the man said, "Look. Don't strain yourself. If the raja wants to see me, tell him to build a palace connecting me with his daughter; and tell him to send a golden carriage. If he does all that, I'll come, but not before." The blood-stained messenger ran back to the raja and repeated the message. The raja agreed, and had a palace

built that connected the tree to his daughter's house. He also sent a golden coach which brought him to the palace.

When the man saw the raja, he said, "Why have you called me?" "My daughter became a monkey, but we can't change her back to human. We've tried everything, but nothing works. That's why I called you." "Suppose I change her back, what will you give me?" "Whatever you ask." "I want eight carts of bamboo and eight carts of banana leaves, and a water pipe by my house. Finally, no one, absolutely no one, should see what I do." The raja gave him eight carts of bamboo, eight of banana leaves and a public water tap nearby.

He took the monkey-princess away to a big house; making sure that no one was around, he had the first cart of bamboo unloaded. Then he scolded her, "Are you the one who danced with those silly monkeys!" and beat her with the bamboo striplings. Afterwards he soothed her body with turmeric and oil, and gave her a bath. The next day, he unloaded another cart of bamboo and did the same, for eight days!

At the end of six months, the raja came, celebrated their marriage and gave them a big dowry. He sent them off with a grand procession, but on the way, they stopped by the side of a well. He left her for a moment to arrange for some musicians to welcome them at their new home. While he was gone, another woman got her to take off all her jewels, gave them to her own daughter and pushed the princess into the well. When he came back and saw the other woman, he understood at once that she had done away with his wife, but he didn't know who this other woman was. At home, he didn't speak with her or do anything with her; they even ate separately. Eight months passed and in the ninth month, the woman in the well came out. When a poor merchant passed that way, she said, "I'm pregnant with no one to help; take me home and help me. I can't stay here."

The merchant took her home with him, but he was poor - if he got some rice husks and sold it, he ate; if not he went hungry. His family suffered, and now with more mouths to feed, things got worse. Soon the princess gave birth to a son, and they lived with the merchant.

Meanwhile her husband didn't like the other woman, the one who had pushed his wife into the well. He shaved her head and burned her alive in the lime-kiln, and lived by himself. Then one day, when he took the dogs out, he heard a voice singing a lullaby to a child:

Your father was born among seven brothers
Dear son, son of Devantiran,
Sleep, my son, sleep.

He realized it was his wife singing! He talked with the merchant and brought her home to his brothers' house. And there, together, they lived happily.

Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District

36. DISOBEDIENT MUTHIRALI

There once lived a Pallan couple, named Kalatti Pallan and Kalatti Palli. They had seven sons, but no daughter and so they performed tapas to Siva, standing on one leg, with a needle through their tongues. Siva and Parvati were feeding everyone in the 12,000 worlds, every creature from ants to people, when Parvati saw them and said, "Look at that couple doing extreme austerities down there. Ask them what they want." Siva went to them and said, "Take out the needles and tell me your desires. I'll satisfy them." "Oh, Lord," they said, "we have plenty of land and wealth, but no daughter. That's why we're doing this tapas."

You see, they thought a daughter was important - so important that they did tapas for one. "Give us a daughter," they pleaded. When Siva looked into the girl's horoscope, he saw that her parents would die. He told them that and said, "You don't want this girl." But they insisted, "We want a daughter; both a son and a daughter should perform our funeral rites. We have sons already, and if we also have a daughter to perform our rites, we'll gain moksa."

"Because you won't change your mind, I'll grant your wish," said Siva. "But on the thirty-second day after her birth, you both will die, and she will be raised by your sons. However, if you still want the child, I will give her to you." "We don't care if we die," they said. "We want a daughter to perform our death rites. Then we will reach heaven. We must have a daughter." "Granted. Now you may go," said Siva. "But what name shall we give her?" they asked. "Call her 'Muthirali'," Siva answered and left.

Nine months passed, and during the tenth month, the girl was born and given the name, "Muthirali". As the thirty-second day approached, the parents called their sons and said, "We are going to die in a few days. Before that, you must get married; the seven of you must go to seven towns and marry seven women. After we are gone, all of you must raise Muthirali as if she were your own child." The brothers married, then buried their parents and said to their wives, "You seven must take turns pushing our sister in the swing. If you are careless or speak angrily to her, we will cut you up into little pieces!"

The seven wives, those seven childless women, hung a swing from a tamarind tree and pushed the sister. As the brothers left for the fields, they gave them orders: "Three of you pound rice; two of you pick cotton; and two of you push sister in the swing."

The girl was now about eight or nine years old and she wasn't allowed to stay in her cradle; she had to be placed on the swing and pushed. Before they could start their work in the morning, the seven wives had to go to Muthirali and ask sweetly, "Amma, get up. Eat something. We have to do some work." But she wouldn't obey them: "If they picked her up, she wouldn't sit still; if they sat her down, she ran away."

The wives went to their husbands in the fields and complained, "Swami! We did nothing to hurt your sister. Still, no matter what we do, she won't settle down. Please ask her what's the matter." Still holding sticks [for driving cattle] in their hands, the seven brothers spoke to their sister, "Did anyone harm you or hurt you, Muthirali? Tell us - because if they did, we'll scatter their seven bodies on seven doorsteps." "They did nothing to me. But if I don't visit father's eight plots of dry land and twenty acres of scrub land, if I don't pick cotton and spin it, I'll never do anything you ask."

Her brothers responded, "You won't listen and your tongue is loose. If you go to the land of the Kallars, beyond the country of the Turks, through the dark forest so dense even a crow cannot perch, through the forest where no sparrow will fly, if you go there, you will belong to this house no more!" "I don't care what you say. If I don't go there and pick cotton, I'll refuse to touch water," she said and lay down. Seeing this, the brothers said, "All right, sister. Take some servants and the cart, and come home safe."

She set off with three carts and thirty servants. On the way they said to her, "Please ride in the cart," but she said, "You may ride in the cart; I will go on foot." They crossed the land of the Kallars, crossed the country of the Turks, went through the forest so dense not even a crow could alight, through the forest where no sparrow could fly, and came to the eight plots of her father's land. She surveyed the fields and sent servants to pick the cotton, while she slept in her father's wooden bed. They picked and cleaned the cotton, loaded it on the cart and then woke her. "It's morning; we should go," they said. She got up, looked at the cotton sacks and cried, "Our family's lost everything we ever had! Not even a single betel leaf remains; Siva has not blessed us."

When the servants had loaded the carts to return, again they said, "Climb in, amma." But she said, "If I climb in, there's no room for the cotton. I'll walk; you ride." So she walked, back through the dense forest, through the land of the Turks, through the land of the Kallars, and reached home. The brothers ordered their wives, "Boil water for her bath; pour scented water over her; remain awake and sing her lullabies." And the seven wives took turns singing to the little girl, as if she were their own daughter.

Eight days passed. "Two of you sell the cotton in Reddiyar Market; three of you pound rice and bring our lunch to the field; two of you look after our sister," said the brothers as they left to plough the fields. When she heard this, Muthirali said to herself, "What's this? I was born a woman, but I crossed the land of the Kallars, I crossed the country of the Turks, went through the forest so dense not even a crow could alight, through the forest where no sparrow can fly, and I got the cotton. And yet they won't let me go to market to sell it!"

Refusing to eat or drink, she took to bed. One by one, the wives tried to rouse her, but she wouldn't move, so they ran to their husbands in the fields. "Swami, we've done nothing to her, but still she won't eat or bathe, won't drink milk and just lies there! Come and help us." The seven brothers unyoked the seven bullocks and came home. "Muthirali, amma. Who hurt you? Who harmed you? Tell us, and we'll scatter their body in pieces on the seven doorsteps." "Brothers, no one has done anything to me. But if you don't let me take my own cotton and sell it in the market, I'll never eat or bathe!" "C'mon, sister. Listen to reason. Should you go all that way alone, through three forests, just to sell cotton? Why go to all that trouble?" But she stubbornly said she must go to the market.

Her brothers told their wives, "Bathe her and oil her hair; put jewels on her hands and feet; place a necklace on her neck and a pottu on her forehead. Wrap her in a fine silk sari with a beautiful border." They dressed her, made her beautiful, and then her brothers gave her a grand send off.

She walked on and on, farther and farther, until it got dark and she reached the town. All the shopkeepers called to her, "Come here. Sell your cotton to me; I'll give you a good price." But she answered back, "Don't think we are just one or two. Ten or twelve of us have come to sell and it'll take all night to weigh it!"

A mile to the west of the town stood a lone shop, belonging to Mukkan, who bought cotton. When she reached that shop it was ten o'clock and he was locking up, but when he saw her, he was dumbstruck with love! Recovering, he asked her who she was and where she came from. "I've come to sell this cotton; weigh it up and pay me." "What's the rush? Why not have something to eat with me here in my house first?" "Nothing doing. Mind your own business. Besides there are ten of us, and the others are waiting for me. Weigh the cotton quickly and give me the money," she said sharply. "Sure. Tell your friends to come here and cook; you can all eat and go in the morning." She said, "All right. But give me the money first, then I'll go call the others."

After she took the money and left, he cooked a big meal of rice, flayed a goat and fried up mutton, prepared fifteen vegetable dishes and waited. Expecting them all to come, he sat down and waited; all night long he waited, until the sun rose, with the food sitting there.

Meanwhile, Muthirali returned home, where her brothers again spoke to their wives, "Bathe her and sing her lullabies." Again eight days passed and the brothers said to their wives, "Two of you sell the rest of this cotton in the market; two of you pound rice and bring us our lunch; and three of you look after our little sister." After they left for the fields, the wives tried to feed Muthirali, but she said stubbornly, "I won't eat a thing; I'm going to Reddiyar Market to sell the cotton!"

Once again the wives ran to the field and complained to their husbands, "She refuses to eat; you better come home." Unhitching the bullocks, they hurried back and asked, "What's the matter?" "I'm going to go to Reddiyar Market - that's all." "How many times are you going to disobey us? You've already done it twice!" "If you don't let me go, I'll die right here," she shouted. What could they do? They had her dressed in a beautiful sari and jewelry, and then sent her on her way.

Passing through a forest, she came to a banyan tree where the Maravars from Pancalankuricci had camped for the night. They had unhitched the bullocks, tied up their hunting dogs and were fast asleep under the carts. But as she sped past, the dogs began to howl and the Maravars awoke. Seeing a woman passing, one of them sneered, "Who are you, little girl? Why not stop and chew some betel leaves?" "I don't have any lime-paste; besides, who are you that I should chew betel leaves with?" "All right; if you don't like leaves how about betel nuts?" "I don't like nuts! And who are you anyway? My cousin or something?" "Haughty little thing, aren't you!" they said and loosed the hunting dogs on her. The dogs grabbed her sari, and little by little it began to unravel. At that moment, she realized what she'd done: she was in this fix because she hadn't listened to her brothers.

"Call off your dogs before they kill me," she said. One of the Maravars tied up the dogs and asked her where she was going. "To sell this cotton at the Reddiyar Market," she said. "Which way are you coming back?" "By this path," she said. Grabbing her, he said, "I don't believe you. We'll get some milk from the Konar's house and make you promise that you'll return by this path tomorrow."

But before he could get the milk, she drank from a nearby pond and ran away. He ran and caught her and said, "Do you swear on the goddess of Alakar Mountain that you'll return by this path tomorrow?" When she promised, he let her go and waited for her there.

Meanwhile, she remembered the man who had fallen in love with her before the Maravar had stopped her. She went back to Mukkan's shop, where for two days he had been spinning cotton. She sold her cotton again, got her money, and left. Still

thinking she'd return to him, Mukkan sat inside and waited, with eyes wide open in expectation.

Morning came and the Maravar waited for her on the path. "It's time she was here, but there's no sign of her!" he thought. Studying his palm, he saw that that she had taken another path. Quickly he grabbed his dogs, climbed into his cart and drove off; she was leaving one forest and entering another, when he stopped her. Brandishing his magic sword, he went to strike her, but she said, "Don't hurt me. I thought this was the path. Put that sword down; I only did what I thought was right."

She tricked him and he put down his sword. "All right. Get in the cart and let's go." "I don't want to ride in the cart; you get in and I'll walk." "That won't do; get in!" he insisted. "If I ride with you, you must stay a distance of six firewood bundles from me. And first I'm going home; then I'll come right back. You can unhitch the cart and rest for a while in that choultry there."

He lay down and she left for home, where her brothers were crying their eyes out! Where was she? Where was their precious sister? When she arrived, they dried their tears and ordered their wives to boil hot water, bathe her and sing songs to her all through the night. Then the wives took turns pushing her on the swing, but when the last wife's turn came to push, and the others were all asleep, Muthirali went to a shed to cook. She was thinking about the Maravar who was left alone and hungry. As she cooked, the last wife pushed an empty swing back and forth, saying to herself, "She comes and she goes - who knows where! We can't say a word against her. I just push this empty swing."

Muthirali cooked rice, mutton curry and lots of vegetables and invited the Maravar to eat. When he asked the way, she said, "The threshold to our house, with a thousand gates, is guarded by spiteful women; better come to the Konar's house. He'll pretend that he didn't see us." She met him at the Konar's house and invited him to sit down and eat. Then he said, "You're a Pallan, an untouchable. I can't eat your food." "All right. If you won't eat my food because I'm an untouchable, then you'd better leave now." "I see. That's how it is. I guess I'll eat then." He washed and sat down to eat, sighing, "Is this my fate? To eat in a Pallan's house?" Hearing that, she said, "And is it my fate to cook for a no-good Maravar who doesn't even know what a kitchen is?"

She served him and then they prepared to leave. As she left, she looked at the things in the house - stores of rice, lentils, corn, firewood, all those cattle, chickens, and goats. Her tears wet the Konar's doorstep, and the Konar too began to cry. Inside he was thinking, "What will become of you, Muthirah, whom I have raised all this time?" But he let her go, without saying a word.

In the morning the wives went to call Muthirali, but the swing was empty! "Where is she? Who saw her last? Did you? Not me! Who then?" they shouted and screamed among themselves. "Who's going to tell our husbands? You do it! Not me!" Finally, they said, "We'll prepare seven pots of rice, go as seven, and tell them as seven." On the way all seven pots spilled at the same time! Seeing that, the brothers cried: "My god! Something terrible has happened at home! They brought seven pots, and seven pots spilled at the same time!"

"Muthirali's gone!" the wives said. "This is what happens when you let her run around. I'll find her wherever she is and chop her into little pieces! I won't come back until I've killed her," vowed the oldest brother. Only the youngest brother said, "Brother, let her live. Wherever she is; let her be." But the oldest wouldn't listen and went hunting for her; he searched and finally found her with the Maravar. The

unhitched cart was under some banyan trees; he had gone to wash and she was cooking over a fire. At that moment, her brother spied her. When the Maravar saw him, he thought, "He's going to kill us both," and hid. The brother went to Muthirali and asked for a light, and when she went to blow on the fire, he said, "Is this our reward for raising you! To see you bending over a fire?" Then he lifted high his magic sword and brought it down with a single stroke! She was cut in two, and the brother left, knowing he'd killed her.

The Maravar came out of hiding and saw his wife lying in two pieces! He joined her head to her body, wrapped a cloth around her three times and touched her with a magic wand three times. He brought her back to life! "Muthirali, what's this? You're covered with dirt!" he said. "Oh, my brother asked for a light and I fell down," she said. "No. Your brother came and said, 'Is this our reward for raising you - that you should bend over a fire? You disgraceful woman!' That's what he said and then he cut you in two, but I put you together again."

When she heard this, she cried, "Siva! Parvati! My true father and mother! Destroy all they have - their rice, firewood, lentils, corn, cattle, goats, chickens, and lands. Destroy it all! Then, let's see if they can survive." And that's what happened: from that day the seven brothers and seven wives lived by selling the firewood they gathered from Alakar Mountain. They suffered and ate gruel, while Muthirali bore three daughters and lived in comfort.

Eight or ten years passed and, then, one day they happened to carry their bundles of wood near her house. Seeing them, she took pity and told her cook to buy all fourteen bundles. "Wood-sellers!" said the cook. "Put your bundles here; we'll buy them all." They got 100 rupees for each bundle and were told to bring more the next day! "Tomorrow we'll go up the mountain and the next day we'll bring the wood," said the brothers. On the way home, they talked happily among themselves: "If we can sell wood to that palace, we'll do all right. That lady's kind, isn't she! Gave us a hundred for each bundle!"

Two days later, when they came back with the wood, the seven women received saris and seven men received veshtis. They bathed, dressed in new clothes and sat down to eat from fourteen leaves piled high with rice and mutton. But twelve of the meals had turned to maggots and flies! "Only two meals remained as I cooked them," said the cook. "The other twelve are ruined!" Muthirali came and stood at the doorway to the kitchen where they were sitting, ready to eat. Tears streamed from her eyes as she spoke, "Brothers! Only one of you didn't want to hurt me; the rest of you killed me! This is your reward!" All fourteen rose, embraced her and cried, "Sister! How terrible!" Then she said, "Go home now; I'll come tomorrow."

The next day, she took all her possessions with her, went home and married her daughters to her brothers. Then they all lived happily.

Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District

37. A MISTREATED STEPDAUGHTER

Three brothers set out to make their fortune. One of them got married and had a child, but when his wife died soon after, the father was desolate. Still, he decided to raise the child by himself - and it's really tough to raise a motherless child! It needed milk, so the father got a goat from a goatherd, milked the goat and gave it to the baby. That's how he raised the child.

He left that place and walked on and on, until a man grazing a buffalo saw him with the little child. The man took a pail of buffalo milk and gave it to the father, saying, "Here. Give this to the little thing." He used the milk to bring up the girl, and things went on like this until she was seven or eight years old. Then her father found another woman, got married and had a son.

Because he showed so much affection to his daughter, the new wife began to hate her. She started to give her old rice husks and water for food, until the little girl was starving! She cried to god, "Help! I can't live on this!" Then, when her stepmother went to the river to bathe in the morning, she planted cucumber seeds. Later, as the cucumbers grew, she picked them one by one and ate them, but she wouldn't touch the rotten stuff her stepmother gave her. Soon the stepmother got confused: "I give her insect-infested gruel for every meal, and still she's growing healthier and healthier every day. We feed our own son milk and fruits, yet he's hardly growing at all!"

She said to her son, "Find out what she's up to when I leave the house." After she went to the river that day, the boy stayed near his stepsister, who showed him the cucumber plants, saying, "Let's eat some." They ate their fill, and when his mother came back and found him munching the cucumbers, he said, "Mom, don't blame me. Look! She's got piles of cucumbers! You feed me rice and milk, but these cucumbers keep her healthy." The stepmother scolded the girl and beat her, and then she lay down as if she were ill.

When the father came home and saw his wife lying down ill, he asked what had happened. "There's some cucumber plants out there. Cut them down and bring the flowers so I can put them on my forehead; then I'll be better," she said. He dug them up by the roots and gave her the flowers, and she pretended she was better. After that, the stepmother watched the girl closely, who, although she ate nothing, showed no signs of hunger.

Later, when the girl was crying in the forest, an old woman heard her. "No one looks after me!" she sobbed. The woman showed her a pot of milk and a pot of buttermilk, and told her to drink whenever she was hungry. She drank the milk and buttermilk, day after day; again the son was amazed: "Mother gives her nothing but lousy gruel and yet she grows so strong!" He followed her the next day, and although she tried to drive him off, he wouldn't go. So she took him to the spot, where they both drank the milk and buttermilk; he took some of it back to his cruel mother. "This is what sister drinks, mother," said the boy. "We'll take care of that," she said and broke all the milk vessels.

Again, the little girl had nothing to eat and she cried, "Siva and Parvati! Mother and father! Do I deserve this fate?" Before long, when she passed puberty, she told her stepmother, who said, "Why tell me? Tell your father." She went to her father, but she didn't know what to say to him, so she just cried. When he asked what she wanted, she said, "Father, I can't stay here. Marry me off to someone, somewhere,

and I'll manage somehow." But her father said, "Marry you off? Forget it. Leave this house immediately!"

Driven out, she went far away to distant lands, with dark forests, thick bushes and tall trees. For a while she lived by eating ripe mangoes that fell from the trees. One day Siva came back from his rounds of feeding the world and saw this young woman with long beautiful hair, crying under the mango tree. "Who are you and why are you alone?" he asked. "After my mother died, a stepmother came who hated me and drove me out; I had to survive somehow, so I ended up here, crying and miserable because I've lost my mother." "What do you want?" "Just give me a little hut, some place to survive among these trees and bushes, and I'll be happy," she said. Siva created a house for her, a little house, with some land to grow food, and then he flew off.

She lived in that house and had enough to eat, but there were wild animals about - lions, tigers and bears. She grew a little afraid: "Siva gave me this house, but he lives way up there and left me down here!" The lions, tigers, and bears came to her house, but when they saw the smoke from her fire, they went away and left her alone.

One day a raja, who was hunting in that forest, got thirsty and told his minister to find water. He climbed a tree, saw the smoke and took the raja to the house. When he reached the girl's house, the raja said, "Amma. We are very thirsty; our tongues are dry as sand. Please give us something to drink." "I'm not going to open the door, but if you want I'll give you some water through the window," she said. When she gave them a small vessel through the window, the raja said, "Amma. This little cup won't hold enough water to quench our thirst." But she said, "Even if your whole army drank from it, raja, they couldn't drain the water from this cup." How could such a little cup hold enough water for a big army? Well, the raja took the cup and drank, and then his army drank, too, and still there was water left! "Minister, we must take her back to the palace. A woman who can make a little cup satisfy the thirst of an entire army is quite a woman!"

The raja said he wanted to take her away, and the minister wanted her, too, but she said, "Raja, you desire me and so does your minister, but I'm not going to be a slave to anyone! You've drunk your water; now leave without saying another word! You're not like the flowers and mountains and animals, who leave me alone in this forest! You want to trap me in your palace, but I'm not coming with you. I could never leave this forest and the animals here." The raja stared at her, and left.

Back at his palace, all through the night the raja thought about the girl; the next day he returned and said to her, "Come with me to my palace or I'll kill myself right here on your threshold!" When she heard this, she softened, thinking, "This raja is prepared to die for me! Well, if I do leave this house, I'll cut off my little finger." She said to him, "Raja, if I leave with you, I must first cut off my little finger and leave it on the door, so when the lions, tigers and bears, who own this forest, come and ask for me, the finger will answer them." She cut off her finger, stuck it on the threshold and went away with the raja.

That night, the wild animals thought, "She's living all by herself; let's go see how she is." When they got to the house and called out, "Amma! Amma!" The little finger answered, "Yes, hello!" "Oh, she's still there," they said to themselves and then to her, "Don't worry about anything, amma. We're here to protect you." Thinking the voice of the finger was the woman, the animals left.

At the palace, the raja already had three other wives, and when he brought back this woman, they were angry. "Now what are we going to do?" they said. "He's set her up in a separate room and all that! What's there between him and us now!" They took their complaint to a panchayat, where the raja was asked what he was up to.

"I'll marry a thousand women if I like," answered the raja. "As long as I feed all of them, what's wrong? If I don't take care of them, tell me and I'll put it right." "All right," said the assembly. "All four of you, you four women, must live in one place. Eat and live together." They joined the hands of all four of them and blessed them to be happy.

*Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

38. NALLA TAMBI

There were two brothers. The older brother, named Vedan, said, "Born from my mother, good little brother, place the nets between seven mountains, between seven mango trees, to catch seven running deer." And the younger brother, named Nalla Tambi, responded, "Anne, my good brother, do not fear; all the running deer will be caught by me." That's the way they were, these two brothers, born of the same mother. Although they'd lost both their parents, they lived together in perfect peace. But the older one was bad, and the younger one was good.

One day the younger one said, "A house without a wife is a house full of ghosts. We must find a bride for you somewhere and get you married. When you're married we can hunt wherever we like." "All right," said the older. "I'll go look for a bride." In seven towns he searched, and in the seventh he found a dark-skinned girl; when he returned, his younger brother asked, "Anne, did you find a bride?" "Yes, and today is our wedding. We'll give all the ceremonial gifts to her family." They invited all their relatives, cleaned the courtyard, spread out mats and distributed the gifts.

When the wedding was over, he said to his little brother, "Tambi, don't go inside when she's there. Get your food by standing at the threshold and eat in the shed." "Brother, your happiness is my happiness. If you put my food on the threshold, I'll gladly take it away and eat separately." Then the older brother said to his wife, "Serve him his food on the threshold." But she said, "I'm not going to do anything like that; if I feed Mm on the threshold, what would the neighbours think? I mean we're just married! No. He's your brother, so you feed him."

That's what happened - the older brother put out food for the younger one, who ate and lived by himself. After a few months, when his wife was pregnant, the older brother said to the younger one, "When shall we go hunting?" "I'm ready to go tomorrow, if you like," said the younger. But the older brother delayed and delayed, until the tenth month when the baby was born. After the birth, the brothers set out for the hunt, but when they sat down in the forest they realised they had no arrows. "We left them at home," said the older. "Go back home at once. Don't stop for anything; not to talk and not to drink, even if you're thirsty. Go straight ahead - don't even swerve to avoid a bullock - and ask your sister-in-law for the arrows. And don't cross the threshold, either! Just stand there and ask for arrows. Get them and come quickly."

Wanting to obey his brother's words, Nalla Tambi hurried back, without a moment's delay; he didn't stop to drink; he didn't stop to talk, and he didn't swerve to avoid animals on the path. He stood at the threshold and said, "Sister-in-law, brother left without his arrows; please give them to me so that we can go hunting." She answered him:

Rice is cooking on the stove,
your brother's son is in bed;
Milk is heating on the stove,
your nephew is in the cradle;
Enter, my sweet brother-in-law
and take the arrows yourself.

"My brother told me not to enter the house, not to speak to anyone, not even to get out of the way of a wild animal," thought Nalla Tambi. So he stood motionless at the doorway, for eight whole days! She wouldn't give him the arrows and he wouldn't enter. In the end, he ran back to his brother and said, "I stood there like you said, for

eight days, but she refused to give me the arrows. Why don't you go back and get them?" "No. I can't go," said the older brother. "Go back and stand there until she gives you the arrows, even if it takes a month. I'll wait here." He repeated his instructions and sent his little brother back.

Again Nalla Tambi stood at the threshold, this time for fifteen days, until he got frustrated: "He told me one thing and she's telling me another! What am I supposed to do?" Finally he decided to enter the house, come what may! He took three steps inside and when he picked up a handful of arrows, she grabbed him and led him to her soft bed. There they chewed betel leaves; and when he left the house to return, his hands and knees were all cut and scraped. Seeing this, he said to her, "What am I going to tell brother when he sees this? He'll know that I disobeyed him, that I broke my promise and came inside;" "Tell him you were standing in the window frame, one foot in, one foot out, and when you stretched to get the arrows, you stumbled over a cat, fell down and cut your knees. Tell him that," she said. With that advice, he took the arrows and walked back through the forest toward his brother.

When he had reached the fifth forest, his older brother looked at his palm and at the back of his hand, and saw what had happened. "He's ruined my wife and home! He'll pay for this," he thought with murderous anger. Through the sixth forest and into the seventh forest, Nalla Tambi ran and said to his brother, "Anne, she wouldn't give me the arrows. So, with one foot in the window and one foot out, I stepped on the cat, fell down and cut myself. Here, take the arrows." When he heard that, you know what the older brother did? He snatched the arrows and shot them with such force that they cut through seven deer, knocked down seven mango trees and pierced the pit of his brother's stomach! Leaving him in the forest, near a cremation ground, he picked up the seven deer and went home.

At home his wife asked, "Come back alone? Where's Nalla Tambi?" "I hunted first, so I came home early; he'll come back later." But she understood, "Oh god! He's killed him, just because his knees were scraped from being with me in the house!" Then she said to him, "How do you want me to cook these seven deer?" "Skin them, fry them and make fourteen side dishes," he said. She told him to rest on the soft flower-bed while she fried the meat for him. After he lay down, she prayed to Siva and Parvati, "Amma! I'm going to bury these seven deer and when I dig them up again, please make them as fresh as they are today!"

She buried the deer, came back and again prayed to Siva and Parvati to send her seven jackals. She cooked them and the various dishes on the stove - fourteen types of sauces and vegetables! She boiled and fried, drained and strained, and it was done.

By the time he awoke, the food was ready and she told him to wash and sit down to eat. When he had finished, she told him to lie down and take a nap while she cleaned up. When he lay down, she picked up her three-month-old son, placed him in a box and prayed again to Siva and Parvati, "Keep the house locked for six months! Keep my son from crying and my husband from waking. Put them to sleep for six months, while I go find Nalla Tambi."

With these words, she began to search for him, but she had to go through the seven forests, didn't she? She didn't know the path or the direction, so she asked some cowherd boys, "My Nalla Tambi died on a hunt; he died in this forest I'm told. Did you see anything, boys?" They answered, "No, amma. We didn't see anything. He may have died in the next forest; go and ask there." In that forest, she asked the head of the goatherds, "Anne! My Nalla Tambi may have died in this forest. You're the leader

of the goatherds; did you see anything?" "We've seen nothing here; go and ask the Konar in the next forest; he knows everything." She went to the next forest and found the Konar sitting under a tree cooking a meal. She loosened her long hair, like a grieving woman, and asked him, but he, too, had seen no one. He told her to go to the next forest, the bear forest.

She went there, into that forest, and found the bears gathered round a pond, where they drank and gave milk to their children. With her hair disheveled, she approached them and said, "Bear brothers, do you know what's happened? My Nalla Tambi has died, but I don't know where and I'm miserable. Have you seen him?" The bears were ready to tear her to pieces, but then they saw her misery and said, "Amma! We've not seen anything here; but go to the next forest, the lion forest."

In that forest the prowling lion fed its young, drank from a pool and lay down in a deep sleep. She came and said, "You are the raja of the forest, but you're sleeping! You think I can sleep? Have you seen anything special here?" The lion awoke, growled in hunger and leapt toward her - but it stopped when he saw this lone woman. "No, sister. I've just been around the forest and I saw nothing. But go to the next forest, the tiger forest." She went there, where the tigers roam all over and lay with their young. "Tiger, ane! Ruler of this forest! Have you seen my Nalla Tambi?" "No, amma. I've seen nothing here; go to the next forest, the crow forest."

She went to the crow forest where the crows bring fruit from everywhere and feed their young. She saw a lame crow and asked, "Oh, crow, you fly everywhere collecting berries. Did you see where my Nalla Tambi died?" "Amma, I can't fly or walk, but I've seen nothing here; go to the next forest, the eagle forest and ask him."

She went there, where the eagle flies high in the sky, and asked, "Oh eagle, you fly over the 14,000 worlds; have you seen anything of my Nalla Tambi who died hunting in the forest?" Finally, the eagle told her what had happened: "Amma, you don't want to see his corpse. He's lying there, by the edge of the cremation ground, with arrows in his body, covered with insects, his intestines guarded by a five-hooded snake, while wild animals swarm around! How are you going to be able to look at him?"

"Even so, brother," she said, "I must find him. I'll tear off a piece of my sari, tie it to your leg and hold on as you fly. Take me there; I must see his corpse." She ripped her sari and tied it to the eagle's leg; it flew off, with her hanging on, and took her to where he lay with the arrows stuck in his body.

When she approached, the five-hooded snake said to her, "Save him if you can; I've been watching over him for many days. Now see what you can do." She plucked out the arrows and then, like a magic wand, touched him three times. His life was restored! As if rising from a long night's sleep, he got up and said angrily to her, "Why have you left your family and traveled through these seven forests in search of me? What's it to you? You shouldn't have left your child and husband like this." "Swami, if he knew about this, he'd kill me. I put my son in a box, put him to sleep, locked the seven palace gates and struggled through these seven forests to see you. Take it as god's blessing that I was able to find you."

"Your husband will never set eyes on me again," said Nalla Tambi. "The dead do not rise again. Stack up the firewood, smear it with kumkum and sandal paste, and burn my body. Kill me and go back to live with your husband and son. He shot those arrows through seven deer, through seven mango trees into my stomach and killed me. I'll have nothing more to do with him! Light my funeral pyre, then purify yourself by bathing and go back home."

Three men appeared with a bullock and seven donkeys, pulling a cart piled high with kumkum wood and sandal wood for the cremation ground. They saw her, with her long hair hanging loose, crying and crying, and they stacked the wood for Nalla Tambi's funeral pyre. Then they surrounded her and dragged her to their cart, but she said, "If you want me, go up the mountain and get three berries; then I'll get in your cart and be your wife." They went up the mountain, got the berries and threw them down to her, ninety-eight leagues away. Worried that she wouldn't get the berries, they ran faster and faster, and fell over a cliff and died.

Then she lifted Nalla Tambi's body onto the stack of wood and lit the fire. The bullock was dead, the donkeys were dead, the three men were dead, and now the fire was blazing. She went three times around the fire and prayed to god, "Let one of his hands and one yard of his veshti remain. Let one of my hands and one yard of my sari remain forever unburnt. My son will find them, revive us and make us happy again." She prayed and then burnt herself with Nalla Tambi.

After six months had passed, her son began to cry and her husband awoke. Seeing the seven gates locked, he thought to himself, "She's gone to find him, has she! Well, I'm not going to look for her." He raised the boy himself, and when he grew to be five or six, he sent him to school. His schoolmates called him a "motherless child" and teased him every day. "I'm going to ask father about this," he thought, but each time he thought about it he forgot. One day he picked up a stone and put it in his pocket: "This will help me remember; this time I won't forget." When he got home and crossed the threshold, the stone dropped out of his pocket and he knew what he had to do.

"Father, who is my mother? I've got to know; I'll starve myself to death until you tell me. All the boys tease me and I can't stand it any longer. Who is my mother?" "Listen to me, son," said the father. "Your mother died; I buried her. And if those brats say anything to you about it, tell them to come to me." "Take me to the spot where she's buried', demanded the boy.

Lifting him on his shoulders, he went straight to the spot where he'd shot his brother, which he'd not seen since then. "Over there, those ashes; that's your mother. Go and look; I'll stay here." The father crouched behind a tree as the son went to the pile of ashes; he searched through them and found the hands and pieces of cloth. Placing her hand next to her sari piece and his hand next to his veshti piece, he touched them three times like a magic wand and prayed to Siva, "Lord, make them into my mother and father."

When they came alive, he said, "Come to our house, as mother and father." "I'll never set foot in the house of my murderer," said Nalla Tambi. "Take your mother home, but I'm not coming." But the boy said, "If you don't come, I'll kill myself right here in front of you!" Nalla Tambi relented and the three of them left together for home; the father, who had been hiding, walked some distance behind them. As he walked, thorns and briars tore his body so that he could hardly walk. The others walked ahead, but he lagged behind and eventually was eaten by wild animals - because of the terrible thing he had done.

When the others reached home, the woman went to the spot where she'd buried the seven deer - remember the deer? "Siva, Parvati!" she said. "Back then I asked, that you keep these deer until I needed them. Now I want them, so let them be like they were on the day I buried them." She dug them up and they were as fresh as if they had been killed that day. She flayed them and cooked them, and the three of them

lived happily and prosperously together, as mother, father and son. Meanwhile the other one was killed by the animals - that's what he got for what he'd done.

Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District

39. THE RAT-WIFE

There were two brothers living together. One day the younger one said to the older one, "We shouldn't live like this; you should get married." The older brother agreed and went off to hunt for a bride. When he returned, the younger looked at him and said, "Well, how did it go?" "Get lost will you!" came the answer and he sat down without a word. "What's the matter?" "Well, I was lying down on this verandah and a woman came outside and yelled at me. I told them that I'd come with my money to find a bride but couldn't find one anywhere! She said she might marry her beautiful daughter to me, so I went back to sleep. When her husband came home, the two of them talked in whispers until about three in the morning. I think they didn't really have a daughter, but they spoke in whispers so I didn't hear it clearly."

Now, what that woman said to her husband was this: "Some guy's come with ready cash and he's looking for a bride, but he can't find one. He was sleeping on our verandah, so I yelled at him and he said something back and got up to leave. Then I told him that we might marry our daughter to him." "Why'd you lie like that? We don't have a daughter," said her husband. Just then, as they were speaking, a rat fell from the rafters! Quickly they trapped it, put it in a box and gave it to the man, taking his money in return. "Don't open it, don't look inside until you get home," they warned him.

He didn't look until he returned home, but when he finally opened the box, he saw the rat! It scurried out and hid in the rafters, while the man said, "Skinny little rat! Who the hell are you!" "Hey, watch your tongue!" said the rat from the rafters. "Don't insult me. You gave them money and brought me home safely in that box." "You... I'll set those rafters on fire," he said angrily. "Go ahead. I'll just escape to another place. Remember they cheated you out of your money," said the rat. "I'll... I'll let you have it, somehow!" "And I'll escape to the fields." Then the man said, "Look. What am I going to tell my younger brother? The money's all gone!" "Tell the truth," said the rat. "You tell the truth!" said the man. "All right. I'm not afraid to speak," said the rat. When the younger brother came in as they were talking like this, they both went silent.

The older brother was miserable, the house was desolate and he cried. "Why are you crying?" asked his brother. "Go away!" "I see," said the younger one. "You went off to find a bride and paid all that money, but came home without a wife! Who cares about the money - you don't have a bride! That's the real problem." "Hey!" said the rat. "Watch your tongue when you speak about me. He brought me home safely in that box." "I'll burn those rafters down!" said the younger brother. "So what? I'll run away and hide."

Soon the older brother told the neighbours the whole story: how he'd gone to find a bride; how he had been given the rat; and how he had insulted the rat which was hiding in the rafters. "What can I do?" he asked and they answered, "That's not a big problem. Burn the rat out." But he didn't know what to do and grumbled to the rat, "No money! No wife! What'll I do?" The rat said, "Hey! Watch how you speak to me. Now, listen. Get a bucket of water, a pan and a griddle, and leave the rest to me." "All right, but if I come back and the water's gone, I'll kill you!"

The rat lit the fire, cleaned the threshold, painted a kolam design on the threshold, made cowdung cakes and swept the floor. It cleaned and boiled rice, prepared pickles, cooked sauces, ate a little and then left the rest for him and returned to the rafters. Seeing that a fire was burning in the hearth, the older brother entered the

house and saw all the dishes laid out for him. He ate and left, without saying anything to anyone, not even to his brother.

One day the younger brother said, "You went and married a rat; now give me some money so I can marry a real girl." He got the money and brought back a wife. When the rat saw the girl, it said to the older brother,

"Now look! You've got to give me a sari just like his bride; and you must buy a veshti and shirt for yourself, just like him. Whatever he does for his bride, you must do for me." "What's all this to you? You're a rat, aren't you?" "Shut up!" The younger brother overheard them speaking and said, "That rat-wife of yours has a big mouth, talking like that!"

By now the younger brother and his wife had set up a separate household, and each brother had half of the family money. The rat-wife cleaned her half of the house and stole stuff from everywhere, storing it all away safely. But the other one, the younger brother's wife! She just spent money like there was no tomorrow! Everything the younger brother earned went out the window, while the older brother saved and saved.

Suddenly the younger brother's in-laws were invited for a feast, so he said to his brother, "My in-laws are coming and I've got nothing to feed them. What am I going to do? Ask your wife to do something." The older brother spoke to his rat-wife, who said, "Get a bushel of rice, pour water in a pot, light the fire and go away." He did that and then the rat came, rinsed the rice and cooked a fine meal. When the new bride's parents saw it, they said, "How is this possible? The food's cooked, but no one's here to cook it!" "Oh, your daughter came last night and prepared it all," said the younger brother. Next day they had to lay out a banquet, so they again asked the rat, who told them to get another bushel of rice. Then the rat called all her companions, who helped her gnaw off the husks and prepare it for cooking. In the morning, the brothers got up and saw a huge supply of freshly husked rice. "Did that rat do this, too?" asked the younger brother. "Who else? That rat does everything," said the older one.

The next day the bride's parents said to their son-in-law, "Let's see your wife make a kolam. Tell her to make one." He told his brother, who told his rat-wife, who said, "Do as I tell you. Bring me some lime-paste, rice powder, red powder and a cloth." "You skinny, little rat! How are you going to make a kolam?" "You'll see. Just shut up." When they brought the things and went to bed, the rat called its friends, who drew a perfect kolam. The brothers awoke to see a beautiful design on the threshold, and the wife's parents said, "Hey, skinny, little rat! Who made this?" "Don't speak like that to me," said the rat.

Next day was the wedding, so they had to invite all the relatives. "Skinny, little rat, I can't buy any rice. I'll have to borrow money. And who can I invite to the wedding?" moaned the younger brother. "Don't worry; just listen. Bring a big pot and a goat. Go and invite all your family and leave the rest to me," said the rat. It cooked pots and pots of rice for his relatives.

On the third day after the wedding, the younger brother's bride arrived in the afternoon and saw that the house was locked up and that everyone had gone. The rat hid in the rafters and watched as she ran off with two pots of rice and a necklace! Then the rat said to the older brother, "You divided the family money evenly, but she's spent it all and now she's run off with our rice and a necklace! Are you going to

let your brother starve you to death? Make her bring that stuff back, or I'll break your bones."

The older brother said to the younger one, 'Your wife stole that stuff.' "I don't believe it." "The rat saw her; besides you've spent all the money you had." "So, you think we've wasted our money!" said the younger brother who then told his wife to show him their money. It wasn't much, so the older brother said, "That's all? We've saved our money and even added to it." "Really? You've got lots of money? That little rat gets it, doesn't she?" "Don't call her that," said the older brother, who led his brother back to his house. When he saw it was full of food, the younger brother said, "Why didn't you tell me? You've got everything here - dhal, coconuts and mangoes!"

The younger brother said he'd call a public meeting to make an announcement: "All the work in my older brother's house is done by a rat! She's not a human wife!" He said he'd beat the drum so that all the women in the village would come and hear this. Then the older brother said, "Rat, he's planning some big event, for all the women and their husbands. Who can I go with?" "I'm here, aren't I?" "Yes, but..." "Well, then, you'll go with me. Besides, he's wasted all that money so how's he going to put on a show?" "I'm not going," said the older brother. "Listen. Just tell him to put on a drama - I'll definitely go to see a drama," said the rat.

The younger brother arranged for the drama and announced that all the couples should come in their best clothes and sing kummi songs. The older brother said, "Rat, the drama is tomorrow, and they're going to sing kummi songs. But who can I take?" "Shut up and listen to me. Get a sari, a blouse, and a tali like hers, and a veshti and a tuntu like his. Bring them to the well and wait for me there at ten o'clock, after everyone has gone to the drama." He did as the rat said.

As the villagers filed into the tent, they were talking among themselves: "He hasn't come yet; his older brother isn't here." He could go only if he went with his rat-wife, so he went to the well where the rat was waiting in a bucket. He let it down into the water - down, down, down, and when he lifted it back up and poured out the water - there she was, a beautiful woman!

Taking the clothes, they went home, worshipped god and got dressed up and went to the drama. While everyone was still wondering where they were, they entered the tent like a groom and bride, with her sari, tali, and flowers. When they saw her, they said, "My god! With a beautiful wife like that, what's all this talk about a rat?" Then they said, "The rat-wife is the clever one; the other wife wastes money!" So they gave the prize to the rat.

That's the end. I can't talk anymore, my throat is dry.

*Storyteller: Nevvi (stories 39-40)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

40: SATTITALAICCI

There was a raja who had three sons and a daughter. When he sent his daughter to school, he asked the teacher, "Is she studying well?" "Yes, she's a good student," said the teacher. She went on studying in that school and soon she reached puberty. One day she left her bag at school and went back to get it; when she asked the teacher to give it to her, he said, "Come in. This is a good time."

Later the teacher told her parents, "If you get that girl married, she and her husband will die. Better have a carpenter build a box and put her wedding sari, her jewelry, her mirrors and combs inside. Then put her in the box and float it in the Vaigai River. If you do that, the problem will be washed away and misfortune will never cross your door." He was thinking, "If I ask for her directly, they'll never give her to me; but this way I can fetch her out of the water."

She was put in the box, dressed in her bridal clothes, and put into the river. Then the teacher said to the schoolboys, "See that box floating in the river! Go get it for me." They all went to the river and waited, while inside the box, the girl prayed, "Let even a sannyasi get me, but not that teacher!" It was four o'clock when the box floated into a sluice in the river. The teacher saw this and ran back to get a stick; but, wading out into the river, he drowned and his dead body floated on the water. Some people saw his body, lifted it out and buried him.

The girl opened the box and climbed out. Then she hid all her wedding clothes, jewels and fine things inside a small clay pot. "When I die, I'll die with this pot," she said. Having hidden the pot, she saw a washerwoman on the riverbank and went toward her. That woman had no child, and she was washing clothes for someone whose husband was going away and had told her to bring the clothes that afternoon.

Sattitalaicci, the "pot-head girl", looked at her and said, "Amma, please give me something to wear. And something to eat." She gave her a torn cloth and a bowl of rice, and later said to her, "See that big house over there; go there and tell them I sent you. I'll come in the evening with the washed clothes." When the girl went to the big house and said the washerwoman had sent her, they asked her name and she answered, "Sattitalaicci". "All right, Sattitalaicci. Mind, we're not rich, but you must make the dung cakes, cook the rice, sweep the floor and water the animals."

As soon as she had made the dung cakes, they told her to make more. When she had pounded the rice, they told her to pound more. When they had eaten, they poured cold rice water into a bucket and told her to drink it, and then feed the leftovers to the animals. In the evening, they told her to bring back the cows, tether them and sweep the floor. When she had done that, they shouted, "Sattitalaicci! Make more dung cakes and sweep this floor, then you can eat." When she'd finished all that, they poured her a little bowl of cold rice water. She sat down to eat, but these rich people gave her a cracked bowl to eat from, a bowl with holes in it.

At seven in the evening the washerwoman came to the house and called out, "Sattitalaicci! How are you?" "I came here like you said. They asked my name and I told them. They have a son, an educated son, who lives here, but I told him to leave me alone." The washerwoman said, "That's terrible! They'd have to pay at least ten rupees just to get someone to look after their cows. I only sent you here because I thought they had no one. But they're feeding you gruel, like an animal; if you don't like it, run away, and take the cows with you,"

Sattitalaicci said, "Their son stops me and tries to talk to me; then the woman next door got angry and scolded me." So the washerwoman said to the family, "I sent her here to help you, but you work her too hard! You think you'd like drinking the stuff you feed her? And you with all your money! I'll take her away with me..." After she'd said all this, the family spoke sweetly to Sattitalaicci, "Come dear, please sit down," and gave her a rice meal on a proper plate. "You can go, now," they said to the washerwoman. "We'll look after her. C'mon, eat up, girl."

The washerwoman left and Sattitalaicci stayed in that house. Days passed. When she took the cows to pasture, she went to a shop and bought a little oil and some face powder. Walking where no one could see, she went down into a well, took her clothes from the pot, bathed and oiled her hair, powdered her face and put on turmeric powder; she combed her hair out long and put on her nice sari. Then she climbed out and looked around to make sure no one was there. Sadly she said to herself, "I'm forced to graze cows because of what that cruel teacher did to me!" Then she took off her clothes, put them back in the pot, rubbed dirt on her face and went back home with the cows.

The next day the shopkeeper, where she'd bought those things, asked where this Sattitalaicci lived. "She's in our house," said the young son. "For how long?" "About two months now." "Every week she buys oil. and special powder. She's that kind of woman; every village has them," said the shopkeeper. Another week passed, Sunday came and again she went and bought oil and powder and went to her spot. But this time the son followed her, as she led the cows to graze, and saw her go down a well. He went to the edge of the well and looked in, but he couldn't see her while she bathed. She put on her beautiful clothes, combed her hair and powdered her face. Sobbed, "That cruel teacher did this to me!" she put her nice clothes back into the pot, climbed out of the well and led the cows back home. The son saw all this.

At home, the mother said to her son, "Your cousin, your aunt's daughter, is ready to marry you. You, must go and see her. It's all arranged." He refused and said he wanted to marry Sattitalaicci. "Her? Can you eat what she cooks? Forget it! Marry your cousin. Your aunt could make three other matches, but they want you." "No, I will marry Sattitalaicci," he said and ran to her, saying, "You must cook rice tomorrow. They'll all be there, including my father." "But how can I marry you? They'll never agree. Think of who are you and who I am," she said. "Listen to me," he said. "Put on your sari and blouse, oil your hair and powder your face. Cook the rice and wait in this room."

She cooked the rice and laid out the banana leaves. Then she dressed herself beautifully with her clothes from the pot and cried to herself, "I'm a cowherd because of what that cruel teacher did!" Entering the house dressed in her fine clothes, she carried her pot, but the son grabbed it and smashed it on the ground!

Then he put her in a room, hiding her from his parents. When his parents had eaten the rice she cooked, he said to them, "She cooked it, even though you drove her away! Wouldn't even give her cold rice! Now she's run away, so what am I going to do?" "She cooked this meal? The sauce is tasty! Why did she cook it and flee? Still, with a little more salt it would have tasted better," said his mother. But they had praised her cooking, so the son stood up and ran to get Sattitalaicci. Finding her in the forest, he brought her back to the house, saying, "They liked your cooking."

Back home, his father said to him, "If you really want to marry her, go ahead. What can we do?" "Really! Do you mean it?" said the son, who then got her dressed again in her sari and put her in a separate room. Then the father and son arranged the marriage, as if they were from two different families.

They fixed the date, but the son said, "We shouldn't do it like this; we must invite everyone, including her parents." The invitations went out and everyone came, including her father and mother. After the tali was tied on in front of the large crowd, the bride and groom were told to stand up, but seeing her parents in the crowd, Sattitalaikki prostrated before them. Clinging to her mother's feet, she cried and cried, "Amma! Amma!"

They were stunned: "Our daughter died years ago! Who is this girl calling me mother?" The groom stepped forward and said, "She is your daughter." The parents took her to their house, saying, "We thought she was dead because we believed that teacher. And now you have married her! We'll give her wedding gifts, many wedding gifts." So they celebrated the wedding with musicians and everything and all were happy. And then they gave me this sari!

Storyteller: Nevvi (stories 39-40)
Melalavu, Madurai District

41. SELLING YOGURT FOR PEARLS

In a town was a raja. He had only one son, to whom he gave him everything a father could give, and brought him up to be a fine young man. One day he said to his parents, "I want to get married." "All right," his mother and father said. "Tell us openly who you want to marry and we'll approach her family." "There is a girl in the next town; she's the one I want to marry. I'll go and ask her family. I'll speak openly, and if they agree, we'll arrange the wedding; if they refuse, that's all right, too."

Off he went and asked the girl's parents, who said, "How can we marry our daughter to you? You're a prince, fit to rule over this whole world, while she is only a poor girl. How can we agree when a prince like you comes here and says he wants a poor girl? It's more like abduction than a marriage!" But the boy responded, "I must marry her; my mind's made up and I won't marry anyone else!" "It can't be done," the girl's parents insisted. "Look. We'd have to entertain your whole family, including your father, the raja. How could we do that?"

In the end, they decided to exchange photos: the girl's photo would be sent to the raja, and a photo of the boy would be sent to the girl. "If they like each other from the pictures, then we'll agree to the marriage," said the girl's parents. When the boy's photo was sent to the girl, she said, "This is the man for me; I want to marry him!" The prince said the same thing, and so they were married.

They lived together for a while, but soon the husband started an affair with the woman next door. He ignored his wife, who kept waiting for him to come back to her: "Will he come today? Tomorrow?" She was distraught, but he kept going to his lover. Then she prayed, "Siva! Parvati! A night of rain, a day of rain, three days and three nights, let it rain without stopping." If it rained he wouldn't go to his lover, would he? That's what she thought.

So she prayed for rain, and it did rain, buckets and buckets, without a break, and finally he came home to eat something. What did she do? Took some dirt, a few tiny stones, unhusked rice, cooked it all and served it to him. She just wanted him to speak to her, to ask why she was serving him such an awful meal! What did he do? He simply got a needle, picked out the stones, ate and made his way back to his lover's house, halting now and then for the rain to stop.

The wife was at her wit's end: "He didn't stop going even in that rain; he didn't even speak to me about the stones. All right, we'll do something else." She served him cold rice without salt, but he still didn't say a word to her. He silently ate the saltless rice; in fact, he ate whatever she served him, without tasting anything! He wasn't even aware that she existed, so completely was he involved with that other woman.

Desperate, she said to her mother-in-law, "When he asked to marry me, I said no and my family said no. But I came here as his bride and now he's disgraced me! He's living with that harlot! How long am I supposed to put up with this? I called down the rains. I served stones in his rice. I served saltless rice. Nothing works and he won't come back to me." Listening to all this, the older woman gave this advice to her daughter-in-law: "Let him be for now. He'll come back, and when he does he'll still be your husband." "All right, but your son has even taken my pearls and given them to that woman. I want them back now," the daughter-in-law said angrily.

Then she got an idea: she boiled buttermilk, made yogurt and carried it in a pot on her head to the lover's house, like she was selling yogurt. When the lover saw her selling yogurt, she told her servant to call her because she needed to buy some.

Setting down the pot, the disguised wife said, "Amma, I sell each pot for a pearl." "What?" said the woman in disbelief. "That's right - one pearl for one pot of yogurt. Everyone else pays that price; you're the only one who asks why. If you don't want to pay, you don't get any yogurt." "My god! We buy five pots a day, so that means five pearls!" "So what! I sell thousands of pots every day, for thousands of pearls!" In the end, the woman bought the yogurt, five pots every day, day after day, until she had given back all the pearls. At home, the wife stored them up carefully.

Then, one day after she'd bought her yogurt, the woman cried, "Now you've taken all my pearls! I've none left, but I need one more pot of yogurt." "I sell each pot for one pearl. I can't give it away free!" But she relented and decided to give her an extra pot - I mean her husband was the one who was going to drink it, wasn't he? She poured out an extra pot and then, as she turned to go home, she loosened her long hair. It was long, very long and very beautiful, each strand falling perfectly straight. When she saw that, the other woman was taken back and said, "Look at her hair, will you!" "What's her hair to you?" the man said.

But she turned to the yogurt-seller and asked her innocently, "Amma, how did you grow your hair like that?" "First, you have to shave off all your hair. Pluck out any stumps, too; dig out every single hair from your head. Then boil some nettles and smear it on your scalp. Finally, tie a cloth on your head and keep it there for three days. After three days, take it off and your hair will look even better than mine." [Teller laughs: You see, she's going to kill her.]

The woman said to her husband, "She told me just what to do to grow hair like hers. Tomorrow I'm going to shave my head." "Are you crazy? Don't believe what others tell you. Besides, won't that hurt?" he said. "I don't care if it hurts. I know what I'm doing. I want to have beautiful hair." She got a knife and had someone cut off her hair, and then with a needle she dug out all the roots. She spent the whole day making herself bald! Next she crushed the nettles, boiled them and smeared them all over her head, and covered it with a cloth.

That evening, her husband ate at his wife's house and then ran off, as usual, to his lover's house. When he saw her, he said, "What's all this on your head?" "This is what I have to do to grow nice hair." "Do what you like," he said and left. On the third day, the poison did its job and killed her. When he went to her house and saw she was dead, he swore, "That yogurt-girl killed you!" He had her buried properly and went home.

Even then he didn't speak to his wife, not a word about his lover's death or burial, or anything. He continued to think of nothing but his lover, just as before. Finally, his wife spoke to him: "Is this right? Back then my family tried to stop this marriage, but you wouldn't take no for an answer. We knew it was wrong to marry a poor girl to you, but you said you'd kill yourself if you didn't marry me! Now for the past six years you have ignored me, your own wife! Now you don't even speak to me; you might as well take me back home." "If you don't like it, I'll take you back to your parents!" was all he said.

He led her back to her parents' house. He walked in front and didn't even turn back to look at her; she walked close behind, but he didn't say a word and went straight ahead. She kept thinking he would turn around and speak to her. On the way, he saw a tree of dark naval berries. Looking up, he saw beautiful berries at the top, so he climbed up, picked them and ate them all himself. His wife, stood below and thought, "Isn't he going to throw me a single berry? Not even one?" But he didn't look at her! Not for a moment! You see, if he looked he might miss a berry or two! He ate

his fill and suddenly saw someone standing below and said, "Hey, you; catch these berries."

And then he saw her, as if for the very first time! "That's my wife whom I've ignored all this time. Standing there waiting for me to throw down the berries!" he thought. So he picked more and threw them down to her; and when he got down, he went up to her and asked kindly, "Where are you going?" "I'm going to my parents; you're taking me there, remember?" Finally they were talking to each other. "What do you mean I'm taking you there?" he asked. "All right. Come back with me, if you like."

She agreed to go with him, but she still didn't tell him what she'd done. One day, after they had begun to live together again, she said, "Remember those pearls you took from me? Well, I was the one who went to her house as a yogurt-seller and got them back. She gave them back to me, day by day! I brought them back here and stored them. Then I showed her my hair - that was my plan to kill her, and she died, didn't she!"

Finally he realised what had happened, that his wife had got back her pearls by selling yogurt. "She's very clever! She got back all the pearls!", he thought and they lived happily together after that.

*Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

42. THE SANDALWOOD MERCHANT'S DAUGHTER AND THE KUMKUM MERCHANT'S SON

The kumkum merchant's son married the sandalwood merchant's daughter. On the very night that he was to be married, he received news that he had a job in Rangoon. Immediately, he said to his bride, "Listen. I've got to go away and work in Rangoon. Stay here and wait for me for six months, or maybe a year. I'll earn money get a house built and then send for you. In the meantime, wait here." With these words, he left.

Left behind, the young bride lived with her mother-in-law. Because the older woman was concerned about the young wife who had been left all alone, she kept her inside the house. After a while, the son sent a letter from Rangoon in which he wrote: "It will be a full year before I come back. Watch after my wife carefully." Before he left he had wrapped a shaving of betel nut in a piece of cloth and hidden it away, saying: "If my wife remains as chaste as she was in her father's house, this shaving will look the same when I return. But if she has an affair with someone, it will turn wither." In truth, his wife waited for him patiently and loyally.

Then one day she gave her clothes to the washerwoman for washing; she washed them and put them out to dry. Wonderful smell! As sweet as sandalwood! When the Raja of Vada Madurai came that way on his hunt, he halted his chariot and went for a bath. Giving his towel to the washerwoman to wash, he asked whose clothes were drying there. The woman told the truth: "They belong to the daughter of the sandalwood merchant; she's married to son of the kumkum merchant. On the night of their marriage, he was called away to work in Rangoon. These are her clothes."

The raja gave her some money and said, "Give those clothes to me; I'm going to find out what kind of a woman she is." Taking the clothes, he climbed back onto his chariot, drove back to his palace, unhitched the chariot and went to sleep. In the morning, he covered himself with ash, got a lute and a bag, and went around as if begging alms. Coming to her house, he said, "Give me food, amma." "I don't have any," said the wife. "Only if you go and buy me some paddy would I be able to cook anything for you."

Of course, her mother-in-law had to interfere! When she went inside, the older woman said to her, "Why tell a he like that? We've got a lot of rice here." "She's scolding me again," said the wife to herself, as she brought out a bowl of rice for the sadhu. He was standing at the bottom of the steps, so she had to climb down; she went down the first four steps, but when she put her foot on the fifth step, the bowl overturned and the rice scattered on the ground. He gathered up the rice and sat on the verandah.

"Tonight I will sleep here, on the verandah," said the sadhu. "You can't do that; there's no space. Go and sleep somewhere else," she said. "What kind of a person are you?" said her mother-in-law. "The verandah is completely empty; let him sleep here." So he began to sleep there and, before long, he took her clothes to her and became her lover. This went on every night for a while, and eventually the village began to talk: "That sandalwood merchant's daughter, the one married to the kumkum merchant's son! He's not around and she's with that raja!"

Before long, a year had passed and the husband came back from Rangoon to take his wife back with him. Passing along the street, he looked in at every doorway and asked, "Is my wife here?" "Your wife! She's everyone's wife!" the neighbours laughed. To himself he said; "I'm not going to listen to what others say. The betel

shaving that I left behind will tell me the story." He entered the house and went straight to the place where he had kept it. It was completely withered.

"That's it! She's no longer my wife," he said to himself firmly. After that he refused to eat or drink, and completely ignored her. Watching this closely, his wife thought to herself, "Well, I may have done this and that, but I am his wife. He left me here and took off, didn't he? And now he's completely ignoring me. What's the point of living?" For ten days she agonised like this and on the tenth day she killed herself. The village was aghast: "Oh, my god! She's gone and killed herself!" They bathed the body, dressed it and carried it to the cremation ground.

About that time, the raja came looking for her. When he saw the crowd at the burning ground, he asked who had died. "She's the daughter of the sandalwood merchant, the one who married the kumkum merchant's son. They say she did wrong, but I don't really know. Now she's dead and they're going to burn her body."

As they placed her body on the stack of wood, the raja drove his chariot at top speed up to the husband and asked, "When the daughter of the sandalwood merchant burns, shouldn't the son of the kumkum merchant join her?"

"Sir, immediately after our marriage, I left her behind and went off to earn money. Are you saying that I, who knew no pleasure with her, should burn with her! What about he who did enjoy her? Shouldn't he burn, too!" When he heard that, the raja got down from his chariot and leapt onto the flames. Seeing this the kumkum merchant's son thought, "If he, who wasn't even married to her, he who had no formal bond with her, has died, how can I remain alive?" So he, too, jumped into the fire and died. Now tell me: who was the best among them, among the three who died? [silence]

Man in audience: I don't know.

Teller: The best was the raja. Because he's the one who leapt into the fire when he heard what the husband said. After him the others jumped, and they all three went to heaven.

Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District

43. THE FISH-BOY AND HIS WIFE

A fisherman and his wife had seven sons. Seven sons, but they were too poor to raise them - you can only raise children if you've got money, you know. "We've got seven children," they said. "What are we going to do? We'll have to abandon them in the open fields!"

Finally, they decided to send the seven brothers out to find their own living. They asked each one what he proposed to do. "What work can you do?" they asked the oldest one. "I'll graze goats and cows," he said. "What about you?" they asked the second son, who said, "I'll make dung-cakes." The third said, "I'll sell firewood." The others said they'd work as a cook or a watchman, but the last one, the seventh brother, said he didn't know any trade. "But you'll have to find something to do," said the parents.

"All right. I'll fish for my food," said the boy, who then got a hook and a line. Soon a huge fish swallowed the hook and rose to the surface of the water, its mouth gaping wide for air. When the boy tried to put the fish into his basket, he fell into the fish's open mouth, and went right down into its stomach, which hurt the fish. It struggled and struggled on the hook, finally got free and landed on the riverbank.

A man found the fish and dragged it through the streets, crying, "Fish! Buy a fish! Come and see!" But no one came forward to buy it. "We don't want it," they said. "It's mouth is cut by the hook; it's no good."

Finally he sold the fish to a raja's house. They cleaned it in the backyard and put it away carefully. Later, when they went to cook it, the fish opened its mouth and the boy inside cried out: "Amma! Rice! Give me some rice!" He'd be hungry down there, wouldn't he? Anyway, the raja's family were amazed. A fish asking for rice! They made some balls of rice and placed the fish on a plate. And when it opened its mouth and cried like a baby for its mother, they fed it little balls of rice. The boy inside also had to bathe, didn't he? When others in the house took a bath, he called out, "Amma, give me oil for my bath. I want to bathe." "What is this! The fish wants to take a bath?" But they brought the soap and oil, left it for the fish and came back in the morning to get it again.

Day by day, the boy grew larger and larger inside the fish. One day they decided to cut up the fish and cook it, but again they heard his voice: "Don't cut me up; don't commit the sin of killing me. Don't do it." "My god! Listen to that fish talking! Just like a person, crying 'Don't cut me.' Better not do anything to this fish," said a young girl, who left the fish alone.

The fish lived, and the boy inside continued to grow. When he became a young man, he said loudly, "Amma, I want to marry a young woman, a beautiful young woman." "Oh, no! Now this fish wants to get married! And who's going to marry their daughter to a fish?" they asked in shock. "On the other hand, we don't have any children and the fish is like our son. Let's take some money and go look for a bride for him." Off they went, hoping to find a girl somewhere to be his bride.

They went from village to village, calling out, "A bride for my fish-son! Who has a bride for my fish-son?" But who is going to marry their daughter to a fish? Finally, they came to a bangle-seller, who had two daughters, the older by his first wife who had died and the younger by his second wife. When this second wife heard them calling, she said to her husband, "Hey! They're offering a whole bag of money for a bride; let's give them the older girl and we'll keep the younger one at home." She

called the visitors over and said, "Will you accept my daughter as a bride?" "What do you mean 'accept'? We want a girl, any girl, that's all." So they handed over the money and took the girl back home.

At home, the fish called his wife, "Hey! Bring me some food." She put some rice and sauce on a plate and placed it in front of the fish; after she left, he took off his skin and ate it. Putting the skin on again, he said, "Bring me some water." He drank it and went to sleep. This is what he did, every day

One day Siva came and gave some advice to the fish-boy's wife: "The fish may look like if s about to swallow you, but you must feed it a handful rice and tap it once with a wand. A second time, give it rice and tap it twice. And then a third time, give it rice and tap it three times. It may look like it's going to eat you, but everything will turn out well."

With these words, Siva left. That day she did exactly as he had said: three times she carefully put out rice and touched it with the stick. So the fish-boy survived, but she didn't know how to find out who he really was. "He sleeps like a normal person; he eats like one and even bathes with soap and oil!" she thought and waited, hoping that one day she would get the chance to discover who he was.

Slowly the childless family who had bought him began to regret what they had done. The father grumbled, "We didn't have any children. We got this fish and even paid a lot of money to get him a wife. Now he wants oil and soap when we bathe, and he wants dosais when we eat dosais." But the wife said, "Let's keep him as our son; we don't have children. We'll treat him as our child." They went back and forth like this: when he was feeling bad she was happy, and when she grumbled he was content.

Then, one day, the fish-son told his wife to prepare his bath, "Bring the oil, soap and hot water. And then shut the door." "All right. This is the day to find out," she thought as she heated the water. Putting everything in the room for him, she shut the door, but this time she opened it again and watched him as he took off his covering, soaped his whole body and rubbed himself with oil. He glowed with beauty! "He's deceived me all this time, ruining our married life. I'll change that," she thought and threw his covering into the fire. The rest of the family were very happy and said to him, "You have become our son and lifted our burden, though we thought you were only a fish."

Then the bangle-seller and his wife, the ones who had sold their older daughter to become the fish-son's wife, came to see her. When they arrived and saw their son-in-law's prosperous house, the wife got angry with herself: "Why didn't I give away my own daughter, instead of my stepdaughter?" They stayed a short while and went back home.

But they soon returned and said to their son-in-law, "Your wife's pregnant; we'd better take her home for the birth. What do you say?" "Of course, by all means. Take her home for a while." So they prepared things for her childbirth and decked out the young wife with all kinds of jewels.

When she was about to leave with her parents, her husband said, "Make your handprint on the wall with this sandal paste." Next he said, "Here. Take my ring and give me yours." She did, and both the rings fit the other person, but the girl's parents knew nothing about any of this. "One last thing," said the husband. "Put your clothes away where you can find them on your return." He made her do these three things

because he didn't trust his in-laws, yet he couldn't refuse them permission to take her away.

Back home, the mother said to her step-daughter, "Your younger sister has to fetch water; why don't you two sisters go together? And why not let your younger sister wear your jewels." As soon as the jewels were put on her own daughter, the mother led them to the well, pushed the older one in and took the younger back home. Inside the well, a snake looked after the girl. Meanwhile, back at the house, the mother dressed her own daughter in the sari and jewels of the other girl.

Then the mother took her daughter to the fish-son as his wife, leaving his real wife in the well. When they arrived, the husband saw that the ring she was wearing didn't fit her; looking at the ring, he knew she wasn't his wife. Then he asked her to get the things his wife had hidden, but she said, "How am I supposed to know where they are?" Finally, he asked her to put her hand on the print made on the wall with sandal paste, but her hand didn't match it. He realised that his in-laws had substituted her for his wife, but he didn't know where she was. So he kept quiet about it.

Inside the well, the girl gave birth to a boy, who grew up with the snakes down there. Whenever the snake went out, it told the girl to feed milk to her sixteen snake-brothers; the girl heated the milk, cooled it carefully and fed them all.

One day another bangle-seller passed that way on his travels, crying, "Bangles! Bangles for sale!" Hearing what he thought were human voices inside the well, he went over and shouted down, "Bangles! Bangles for sale!" A voice called to him, "Bangle-seller! Come here. Do you have bangles for my young son?" "I have." Then the woman's voice said, "Black cow! Help the bangle-seller down into, the well." The black cow told the man to grab hold of the rope and bucket; holding on to them, he climbed down, fitted the boy with bangles and climbed back out.

Back at the raja's house, when the fish-boy realised that the younger daughter wasn't his wife, he thought, "I owe this woman nothing! I'm not even going to speak to her." So he refused to talk with her; he just ate and slept, that's all. This went on for days, until the bangle-seller came to their house and sat down for a rest. "Sold any bangles today?" asked the fish-boy. "I've traveled all over this country, sir," he said, "but today I sold bangles to a woman in a well, protected by a snake! And her son is a beautiful boy!" The fish-boy listened very carefully and asked, "Where is this well?" "A long way off. Why?" "I don't care how far it is; take me there."

Immediately, the fish-boy ordered a deep pit dug and had his false-wife buried up to her head. Then he issued a command: everyone who went to the toilet had to shit and pee on her head! If they didn't do that, they would be hanged! That day the false bride's parents again decided to visit their daughter. Bringing her sweets, they reached the house and looked around but didn't see her. The mother had to go to the toilet, so she asked someone where to go and was told: "Go over there and look for a head. You see, the raja here ordered us all to shit and pee on that head. And if we don't we'll be hanged!"

The mother went and defecated on her daughter's head! "Everyone here is doing this to me, but why must you?" cried her daughter. When the mother realised what had happened, she dug her out, took her to the river and tried to wash off the stains; they scrubbed and scrubbed, but it wouldn't go. Then a washerwoman said, "You won't get the dirt out that way. Grab her arms and legs and beat her head against a stone; that's the only way." They did as she said, and the girl's head split into a hundred pieces.

Meanwhile the bangle-seller led the fish-boy to the well and said, "This is the place." He called out, "Bangles! Bangles!" and heard the voice, "Bangle-seller! Do you have bangles for my son?" "Yes, and the cow is here, too." "Black cow!" she said. "Help him come down into the well." Going into the well, he gave her bangles and said, "There's someone up there to see you." "Who can it be?" she asked. "Cow, help me climb up and see who it is." Up she went and saw her husband! Embracing him, she cried and said, "This has been my fate. When I left you they took me and threw me in this well."

"Stay here and wait for my snake-father; we'll say good-bye to him," she said. As they stood there, the snake came closer and closer and was about to strike, but she said, "Anne! Bite me, but don't bite my son or him! He's my husband. He's found and rescued me." "Forgive me, amma. I didn't know. If your husband has come, it's time for you to go to your own home; first feed milk to your sixteen snake-brothers, then go home with your husband." But that poor girl forgot to cool the hot milk before giving it to the snakes. They drank it, and slowly all sixteen died, one by one.

When the snake-father saw this, he said, "So much for the kindness I showed to her! She's killed my sons. I'll kill her, even if she lives in a stone fort!" But when the snake found their house and looked for the girl, it heard tins lullaby:
Oh, fish-son, with a snake-uncle, my dear little boy!

Hearing this, the snake thought, "She uses our name when she sings a lullaby to her child! How can I possibly bite her! She heated the milk but my children didn't wait for it to cool. I can't blame her for that." With these words, the snake struck the doorway three times and died.

In the morning when she opened the door, the wife saw the dead snake and cried, "My father! You who saved me and raised me! What has happened?" Putting the snake in a jewelry box, inside a little bag, she placed it at the head of her bed, with a prayer: "Protect my son and me."

A month passed, and a priceless pearl appeared in the jeweled box with the snake. Then the snake spoke, "I came to kill you, but I couldn't do it because you gave my name to your child. So I died on your doorstep. Please keep this pearl as a memento."

After they were reunited, the fish-boy tested his new wife: she was wearing his ring; her hand fit the handprint on the wall; and she got the things from their hiding place. In the end, the younger daughter wandered aimlessly and never married, while these two were happy as husband and wife.

*Storyteller: Velliyamma (stories 30-31, 34-38, 41-43)
Melalavu, Madurai District*

44. TWO CHEATS

There were two cheats, one of whom lived in Thanjavur while the other lived in Tiruvayaru. Since neither could make a living, they just wandered around, came home and let their wives feed them. But the wives could only feed them if their husbands made money. After going a few days without food, these guys decided to look for some work. They didn't know each other, but they happened to leave home at the same time.

As he was about to leave, the Thanjavur cheat said to his wife, "Give me a small bundle of rice." But how can she do that when he hasn't earned anything? In the end she gave him a packet of animal feed that looked like a bundle of rice. It was the same story in the Tiruvayaru cheat's house: "Give me a little rice and I'll go out and earn some money," he said. But his wife had nothing in the house, so she took cow dung, made it round like a dosai, tied it up in a bundle and gave it to him.

The two men, thinking they had tasty food with them, set out from opposite directions; between them lay the river. They reached it and stood on opposite sides, not knowing how to cross. There wasn't any bridge and the river was full, so if they waded across, their food packets would get soaked. Both the Thanjavur man and the Tiruvayaru man sat down, stymied, on opposite sides of the river.

The Thanjavur man said to the other man, "Why not leave your bundle there, wade across and eat my bundle of food? She's given me some tasty tamarind rice." "Good idea", said the Tiruvayaru man. "You can wade across and eat my food - she's cooked hot dosais."

They jumped in and swam across, and when they reached the bank, each grabbed the other's packet and ran off to devour it. Hiding behind rocks, they eagerly opened their packets: one found insects and the other found cow dung! They raced back to the river, accusing the other of cheating, "Rogue! You can't cheat me like this!"

They argued but later made peace because they had no alternative and then walked down the road together. When they reached an old woman's house, they called, "Granny, give us something to eat. We've got no work." "I've got a water buffalo," she said, "and a flower garden with a well. If you water the garden and graze the water buffalo, I'll feed you." The two men agreed.

While the Thanjavur man took the water buffalo, the Tiruvayaru man went to water the garden. The well was forty feet deep, and the bucket was full of holes so every time he lifted it up, the water leaked out! He hauled it up, again and again, but couldn't get even one bucket of water into the garden. The other one, who went to graze the water buffalo -well, that beast dragged him all over Thanjavur District! It just wouldn't stop for a second, and he was chasing it all day long. When it finally came back home, he tied it up and went to eat. The Tiruvayaru man had also sat down to eat. "How did it go?" the Thanjavur man asked. "Oh, the well. It took me only ten buckets to water the whole garden and I slept the rest of the day." "That's nothing. I let that old milk cow graze by itself all day long," said the Thanjavur man.

"Really? Suppose I graze the water buffalo tomorrow and you water the garden?" They agreed to switch jobs. The next day the Tiruvayaru man ran after the water buffalo all day long, like the Thanjavur man had, while the Thanjavur man couldn't get a single bucket of water into the garden, just like the Tiruvayaru man.

That evening they said to the old woman, "You know, there are lots of, thieves around now. You better tie up all your valuables and put them in the well, otherwise you might lose them." "Yes, you're right!" said the granny. "Go next door and get a leaf to eat from, while I gather all my things and put them in my trunk." As soon as the two cheats left, she put her heavy rolling stone in the trunk and locked it securely. The men came back, ate, tied a rope around the trunk and lowered it into the well.

In the middle of the night, when everyone was fast asleep, the two cheats got up and went to steal the trunk from the well. They couldn't lift it! The Thanjavur man said, "I'll shimmy down the rope and lift the trunk up a little; when I give a tug on the rope, you pull it up." But when he got into the well, he broke open the lock to grab what he could for himself. Looking inside the trunk, he saw the rolling stone, threw it out, climbed inside and tugged on the rope. Feeling the tug, the Tiruvayaru man hauled up the trunk and ran off with it, without helping the Thanjavur man to climb out of the well! Because it was heavy he thought there must be a lot of good stuff in it. He ran a long way, until he heard a voice, "Hey! Put me down! This jostling up and down is killing me!"

Once again, they had been defeated and so they sat down and wondered what to do next, for a third try. One of them said, "C'mon. Let's steal something." They found an empty house, entered, threw everything in the house in a sack and ran out the back, where they saw dozens of haystacks. The Tiruvayaru man, who had the sack, ran and hid under a haystack; little by little, he moved, carrying the sack on top of him and then sitting down for a while. While he was trying to escape like this, the Thanjavur man was desperately searching for him, running between the haystacks, but he couldn't find him.

Then he saw a cow with a bell on its neck; taking the bell, he held it in his hand and began to rub his nose against the stacks, one after the other in an effort to find his friend. Thinking this was a bull about to gore him with its horns, the man under the stacks shouted, "Shoo! Shoo! Go away!" Finally, the Thanjavur man caught him by the leg and pulled him out.

Even their robbery had failed! Realising that they were complete failures, they went back home, separately.

*Storyteller: Tirunanam
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

45. "CLAW-PAW": THE STORY OF A GOATHERD

There was a goatherd who looked after a hundred goats. During the summer, he grazed them in the open fields, but in winter he kept them in a pen. You see, at night lions, tigers and foxes might come and eat them, so he had to keep watch all night long. The goatherd shared this nightwatch with his son: one would eat while the other watched, and then they'd switch.

But the boy did something behind his father's back. About nine o'clock one night, his father said to him, "I'm going to eat; look out for any wild animals." When he'd left, the boy thought he'd grab a goat and sell it and get some money for himself. He wanted a big goat, but because it was nighttime he had to search for one. Meanwhile a tiger had come to catch a goat and it, too, wanted a big one; when he heard the father and son talking, it hid beneath a big animal. Searching around for a big goat, the son saw the one that the tiger was hiding underneath - but it was dark so he couldn't see very well. "Nice and big," he thought, "I'll take this one. It'll fetch a good price." He lifted it onto his shoulders and decided to store it in a nearby Ganesa temple, until his father came back and he could leave.

In the light of the temple lantern, however, he saw the claws of the tiger and screamed, "It's a claw-paw!" Throwing the tiger down, he ran into the temple to hide, but the tiger thought some ferocious creature called "claw-paw" had gotten hold of him and it, too, ran off in a fright.

A jackal stopped him, "Oh, King of the Forest! Why are you running away?" "A huge 'claw-paw' tried to kill me!" "What?" "Yes, it grabbed me and I was lucky to escape." "Where is this claw-paw?" asked the jackal. "It's hiding in a Ganesa temple," said the tiger. "Show me; just for a second." The tiger took him back to the temple where the boy was hiding. "There, there," said the tiger trembling with fear, as the jackal advanced boldly toward a niche in the temple wall where the boy was hiding. The jackal looked into the niche, but couldn't see anything, so it stuck its tail into check. When the boy grabbed it, the tiger yelled, "See! I told you! It's the ferocious claw-paw!"

Then the jackal screamed with fright, and the boy grabbed a broom and shoved it up its buttocks. So the tiger and the jackal ran off together.

*Storyteller: Jeyaraman (stories 45, 52, 54, 80)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

46. RESCUING A PRINCESS FROM THE UNDERWORLD

Once there were two rajas. One was the Thanjavur raja, and the other was called Haventiran. The Thanjavur raja had a son, while the other raja had a daughter. She went to school but got bad marks, so Thanjavur raja's son beat her with a stick. They were cousins, you see. She cried to her mother, who said, "Don't cry. It's disgraceful." "All right, but are you going to marry me to him?" she asked. "Yes. To him and no one else," came the answer.

The cousins, the boy and girl, continued to study together. Soon the father of the boy, the Thanjavur raja, wrote out a palm-leaf formally asking for the girl as a bride for his son. The marriage was agreed and the girl's family sent her in a chariot. On her journey, she passed a pool where the white elephants of the gods used to come down to play and drink water. Seeing the water, she wanted to bathe there, but when she did the water turned yellowish. The white elephant came, saw the yellow water, lifted the princess onto his back and took her to the Pakasunda Forest. In the forest, it put her down and lay down to sleep, while she rested with her head in its lap.

Back at the Thanjavur raja's palace, they were expecting her and when she didn't come, the prince set out to find her. He entered the forest, climbed a banyan tree and saw the princess in the elephant's lap. When he found her, she said to him, "There are many women like me in this land, please marry one of them." "Never," said the prince, who then fought with the elephant for six full months. They were a perfect match; neither could conquer the other.

Soon Parvati said to Siva, "Look, they have been at it for six whole months but neither is going to win. You've got to do something." "What do you suggest?" asked Siva. "Well, you've got to let either the boy win or the elephant win." In the end, Siva let the boy conquer the elephant, and when he killed it, he led the princess back home.

An Asari, a goldsmith, who had gone with the boy, led the prince and the princess to a banyan tree. He gave the prince a sword and told him to sit down and close his eyes, like a sage. While the prince sat there, a snake came and took the princess away, so when he opened his eyes he saw only the Asari. "Where's the princess?" he asked. "She was taken away by a snake," said the Asari.

When he heard this, he grabbed some creepers, tied one end to a root near the hole, tied a rock on the other end and lowered himself down the rope into the snake hole. When he got there, he saw that the snake had abducted many women just like the princess. He killed the snake, rescued the princess and sent her back up by the rope; but when he was climbing up, both the princess and the Asari pulled on the rope. Rubbed back and forth, the rope suddenly broke! The prince fell back into the hole and his body shattered in sixteen pieces. The Asari took the princess but not before she had managed to lay out the prince's bones - his head, his legs, his arms - in the right position and to bring him back to life. Revivified, he began to search for her.

Meanwhile, the Asari planned to marry the princess, but she said, "First I must fast for eighteen days in a place where the sound of rice pounding is not heard, in a far away place. Build me a little house like that." The goldsmith built a hut where she began her fast, while he began to make wedding preparations. The wedding day was approaching and the prince, who was now a leper, continued to search for her. One day he met four men carrying firewood for the wedding; one man looked at him with pity and said, "Let him have a bundle of wood; he can sell it and get something to eat." "Right. Give him a bundle," said another.

The prince joined them, and when they reached the house where the princess lived, the Asari recognised the prince and told the others to enter the back door; then the Asari called the prince, killed him and buried him in a place full of worms. There he lay.

At midnight an old woman, who brought flowers to the fasting princess, had a dream in which she was told to put worms among her flowers. In the morning, she went to the spot where the prince was buried, gathered worms and planted them with her flower bushes. Soon a man appeared, a man without hands or legs, just a body sitting in the garden. "Who are you?" she asked. "Let me live with you, granny," he said and she invited him into her house.

"Granny, let me weave the garlands," he later asked and again she agreed. Then, while making the garlands, he removed his ring and put it among the flowers the granny took to the princess. When the princess smelled the flowers, she saw the ring and asked the old woman, "Is the person who owns this ring in your house?" "Yes. He's there." "Tell him to bathe, and I will come soon," said the princess.

The prince bathed and soon they met, but as they walked along together, he began to think, "She was with that elephant; is she still pure?" He lit a fire to test her. "Step into the fire," he said. She did and came out unscathed. Then he remembered that she was with the snake and again wondered if she were impure. So he dug a pit, and she went into it and came out again. Then she cooked him some food and he ate it, but the leftovers were full of worms. To test her again, he thought, "Let's see if she eats these worm-filled leftovers." She ate them.

Then they walked farther, but this time he fell into a well. She cried and cried and cried, and finally he emerged in the shape of a prince - before this he was a leper, remember. Then he took her home in a procession with elephants and soldiers, and they got married.

*Storyteller: Nilavati (stories 46, 50-51)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

47. THE BOUQUET

A raja and his minister. One day the raja called the minister and said, "Today let us send our sons into the forest to hunt." They called the boys, told them to get their horses and sent them out to hunt. The prince and minister's son were both married, so they called their wives and said, "We're going hunting for six months; you must stay at home and give no reason for anyone to speak ill of you." They demanded this and their wives agreed.

The two friends mounted their horses and rode far away into the forest. Before long the prince told the minister's son that he felt thirsty. "There's no water nearby," said the minister's son. "But I'll climb a tree and look around." He climbed up and saw a temple, which he thought would have a tank. It was a big temple, with tall towers and painted walls, and it had just been consecrated. On the wall near the entrance was a painting of a woman holding a bouquet of flowers. Approaching the temple, the prince saw her and forgot all about the water he had asked for. "I want this girl and that bouquet," he said. "But she's not real," said the minister's son. "It's just an image. How is she going to give you the flowers!" "I don't know about that; I just want the flowers." He was adamant, and wouldn't eat or drink until he got the flowers.

The prince was immovable, so the minister's son tethered the horses and sat down to wait. When the temple priest appeared, he asked him who had painted the painting. "The mason who built the temple and painted the wall lives in such and such a place," said the priest. After the minister's son left to search for the mason, the prince stood rooted to the spot, repeating over and over again: "Give it to me! The bouquet! The bouquet!" He neither moved nor ate.

When the minister's son found the mason, he asked, "Did you paint that woman from a book? Or did you paint her from life? How did you do it?" "One night as I was coming home from work, a hunter came from the other direction and showed me something that glittered, like gold or silver. I bought it and took it home, but in the morning I saw it was a woman's fingernail. Looking at the beauty of that nail, I was able to imagine the beauty of the woman and that's how I painted her," explained the mason. The minister's son then asked about the hunter and the mason told him where he had met him. Going there, the minister's son waited for the hunter.

Eventually the hunter came and the minister asked, "Where did you get the nail that you sold to the mason?" "Well, I always hunt near a big banyan tree, where lots of birds live. I found it there, but it was night so I didn't see it clearly. Then the mason appeared and I sold it to him. That's all I know." After finding out where the tree was, the minister's son went and sat underneath it.

The tree was full of birds' nests. A male bird and a female bird laid an egg every day and left; then a snake would climb up and eat the eggs. Every day the birds went across the seven seas to find food for their young, but by the time they returned the eggs had been eaten by the snake. The minister's son sat underneath this tree with drawn sword, and when the snake climbed up the tree, he cut it in two.

When the mother bird returned, it was surprised to see the little birds: "How is it that my young hatched today? Not one has survived for all these years!" The baby birds answered in their bird language, "A man came and killed the snake; if not for him, we wouldn't be here. That snake used to come every night and eat us."

The bird flew down to the minister's son and said it would do anything he asked in return for his saving her young. "Amma, I don't need any help. I just need some information. About a month ago, did you drop a nail near here?" You see, the minister's son knew animal languages - bird language, heron language, all of them. "A nail? Yes," said the mother bird. "We cross the seven seas and look for food. One day we saw something shiny below and brought it back, not knowing what it was. We couldn't eat it; it was a nail, so we tossed it away. That's probably how someone got it, but I do know where the nail came from." "Then there's only one thing I wish you to do for me. Take me to the place you saw the nail," said the minister's son.

Climbing on the male bird's back, the minister's son flew across the seven seas, to a palace covered with diamonds and gold. "This is where I saw it. Look here," said the bird. The minister's son made his tuntu into a sack and scooped up dozens of diamonds and gold pieces, climbed back on the bird's back and flew to the kingdom of the raja whose daughter had lost her nail. Arriving there, the minister's son took leave of the bird, but first asked, "How can I summon you when I want you?" "When you have seen the raja's daughter and want to return, light this as an incense stick," said the bird, giving him one of its feathers. Then it flew off.

Taking out his jewels and gold, the minister's son set up a temporary shop in the forest. Soon local people warned him, "Thieves roam about here; they'll kill you for sure. Better set up shop in the high street and sell your things there. We've got a raja who'll buy from you." When these people also told the raja about the new merchant, the raja said, "Bring him here. He's such a big merchant that we must build him a house near mine."

When the house was built for the minister's son, he had a secret tunnel built between it and the palace, but no one knew about this. He went on selling his jewels. One day, after doing a lot of business for two or three months, he said to the raja, "I'm going home for a week. Please look after the shop." He locked it up and made as if he were leaving, but he hid inside for a few days, reappeared and announced, "I've brought back my wife to live with me, so you must come and meet her."

"She is very welcome after the brisk trade you have created here," said the raja. At this point, the minister's son went through the tunnel to the princess' room and said to her, "I'm not going to harm you; I'll treat you as my sister. But you can save a man's life, a prince who has been staring at a painting for six months without food or drink. I will send you to him, and when he asks for the flowers you must give them to him and explain all that has happened." "But my father is a tyrant; how can I come with you?" "I'll find a way to trick him. You must agree to come; that's what counts."

Then the minister's son invited the raja and his family to visit his house and meet his wife; before they arrived, he brought the princess through the tunnel to pose as his wife. Looking at her, the raja thought, "She looks a lot like my daughter, yet he says she's his wife." When the raja returned home, he saw his daughter there - you see, the minister had sent her back through the tunnel.

On another occasion, the father locked her in her room and went to the minister's son's house. While he was being served food by this woman, the raja spilled a little sauce on her sari as a way of trying to discover who she was. The minister's son saw this, however, and when the father left he said to her, "Run back home and put on a new sari, exactly like the one you're wearing now." When the father got home and saw his daughter just as he had left her, in a clean sari, he no longer doubted that the woman was the wife of the minister's son.

Next the minister's son posted a letter to himself, saying that he must go home immediately; he told the raja he must leave soon and then explained this to the princess. Her father, however, locked her in her room, saying, "I'm going to say bon voyage to the merchant and his wife. Stay inside." But she went through the tunnel and joined the minister as his wife. As the raja, the merchant and his wife stood on the quay ready for the departure, the merchant lit the feather as an incense stick and the two birds appeared. After asking the raja to watch their house until they returned, the minister's son mounted the male bird and the princess climbed on the female bird, and they flew off across the seven seas. Only then did the raja discover that his daughter was gone; he found the tunnel and realised that the minister's son had deceived him all along.

When they approached the temple where the prince stood, the minister's son explained to the princess: "A prince has been standing there for months, without food or drink; when he asks for the flowers you must give them to him. And when he asks for me, you must say that while rescuing you, wild lions and tigers ate me. Let's see what he does then."

With these words, the minister's son hid, while the princess advanced with a bouquet of flowers and gave them to the prince. "Where's my minister?" he asked. "He brought me back across seven seas and almost reached home, but he was eaten by wild animals. He told me where you were, so I've come looking for you," she said. "If he who suffered so much to bring you here is dead, why should I live?" the prince declared and cut off his own head! There he lay - dead on the ground.

"Oh, god!" said the princess. "I was supposed to marry him and left my family and country, and came here all alone. If he's committed suicide, I will, too." Saying this, she took the same sword and killed herself. Two corpses lay there. Coming to see how the two of them were getting on, the minister's son found their dead bodies. He had a carpenter make two boxes, put the bodies in them, tied them to a horse and rode off.

Back home, the prince's wife and the minister's son's wife were waiting for them. Near the minister's son's house was a Kali temple in a deep forest with wild animals; since they would return home that way, the minister's son's wife had prayed to Kali: "If my husband comes home alive, I'll give you my right hand."

When the minister's son arrived home with the box containing the dead princess, he put it in the house, while his wife cooked and they talked all about what had happened. But his wife didn't ask about the prince because she thought he would have gone straight to his own house. That night, she took incense, coconut and so on to the temple, to fulfill her vow of sacrificing her right hand to Kali.

Seeing her go in the dark, her husband followed. In the temple she raised the sword high to cut off her right hand, saying, "Amma, my husband returned safe and as I promised I give my hand to you." Suddenly Kali said, "Don't! No one has ever worshipped me as piously as you have! Do not cut off your hand; rather think that Kali is in your hand and that if you touch a dead person, he will be revived, irrespective of his merits or demerits. My power is in your hand. Go and live happily with your husband."

The next day the minister's son went to the palace to see how the prince's wife was bearing up. He went at night and discovered that she had gotten very friendly with a deformed beggar at the Ganesa temple. There was nothing she wouldn't do for him! She cooked for him, sent him in a palanquin to the temple, bathed him, fed him -

everything. From his hiding place, the minister's son watched all of this and thought, "Look at her! And my wife was ready to cut off her hand for me!" While the prince's wife was still at the temple, the minister's son hurried to her room in the palace and hid behind her door.

When she entered, he said, "Amma, how can you do this? You're a princess!" But the princess rang a bell, which she used when she felt threatened - hearing it, the raja, her father-in-law, would come. The raja arrived and said, "Now that you've rung the bell, the royal assembly will convene and you'll be dishonoured. You shouldn't ring that bell without good cause." "Listen to me," the princess said. "My husband hasn't returned. This guy must have killed him, because he's come here and grabbed me!" Hearing this, the raja ordered the minister's son to be beheaded early in the morning.

"Before I die," said the condemned man, "I'd like to speak with my wife." You see, he had accepted that he had done wrong and would die. The raja sent two or three guards to take him home, where he said to his wife, "Listen. The bird has cursed me that if I told the story about the nail, my body would split into sixteen pieces. But I'm going to tell the story anyway; when I do, my head will fall off and the raja won't have to behead me because I'll have done it myself. But don't worry. Just arrange my limbs properly, sprinkle water on them with your right hand and I'll come back to life."

He also arranged for the two boxes to be brought to the assembly. As the sun rose next morning, everyone gathered in the royal assembly, including his wife. He was summoned, and the prince's wife came forward and was asked what the minister's son had done. "He came to me and I asked about my husband but he said, 'Why ask about him? Come to me.' Then I rang the warning bell." "Is this true?" the raja asked the minister's son.

"I will tell you everything that happened from the beginning, from the day we rode away from the palace," said the minister's son. "However, I have been cursed to die if I tell this story. So you needn't behead me. I'll behead myself by telling the story," he said. "All right," thought the raja, "let him tell the story and we'll see if his head falls off."

The minister's son began and explained all that had happened; meanwhile, his wife had bathed and was standing nearby. When he finished his story, his body split into sixteen pieces - legs/arms, head scattered everywhere. His wife didn't cry; she carefully put the pieces in their proper place, touched them with the wand she held in her right hand and he came back to life! Everyone was astonished, "What a chaste and pious woman! What a righteous man!"

When the raja asked about his son, the minister's son said, "I'll show you; just a moment." He told his wife to bring the two boxes and asked her to open them. She did, and when she touched the bodies of the prince and the princess, they stood up as if from sleep. "There's more to the story," said the minister's son. "Your daughter-in-law used to go to the Ganesa temple where she had an affair with a beggar. When I told her it was a disgrace, she rang the bell and accused me in this way. I can forget that now. As for this princess, your son fell in love with her and sent me to find her; I persevered and brought her to him."

"Now, here's the question: Will you accept this princess or your son's wife as a daughter-in-law?" Hearing all this, the raja declared: "That wife of his is no longer welcome here. She has disgraced this family and kingdom." He ordered the wife to be burned in the lime-kiln and they celebrated a wedding with the princess. They

even invited her father, the other raja - remember him? And they all lived together happily.

Storyteller: Puspavalli (stories 47-48)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District

48. THE MAGIC RING

A mother lived with her son, and they were terribly poor. There was no father and no one to earn any money. One day, the mother went to her uncle's house and got a loan of fifty rupees; then she gave the money and a sack to her son and told him to go buy something with which to set up a shop. The boy took the money and the bag and set out; soon he came to a village, where he met someone else carrying a bag. Inside was a cat, which the man was going to throw away because it was a nuisance. When the boy saw the man with this sack, he asked, "What's in your sack?" "Oh, just something for a shop," said the man. "In that case, I'll buy it; here are fifty rupees," said the boy. He gave him all the money and took the sack home.

When his mother opened the sack and saw the cat, she scolded him, "I told you to buy something for a shop, not a cat!" "I didn't know it was a cat; he just said it was for a shop. Let's feed it, mother." So they kept the cat. A few days later, the mother went again to her uncle's house, borrowed another fifty rupees and said to her son, "We'll keep the cat, but this time get something useful to start a business with."

This time the boy met a man carrying a snake in a basket; it was a cobra, a good snake that wouldn't harm anyone, so he was going to let it go in the forest. "Where are you going?" asked the boy. "I've got something to sell in a shop." "Oh, I'll buy it," said the boy who handed him the fifty rupees and took the basket home. When it was opened and the snake crawled out, his mother shouted at him, "We can't start a shop with a snake!" "Oh, mother, it won't bite. It's a good snake. They were going to get rid of it, so I bought it. Let's keep it, like the cat." Somehow she managed to feed it a little rice, but they still couldn't open a shop.

Time passed, and one day the cat said to the snake, "They've spent all their money to buy us, but they're very poor. We should do them a good turn." They spoke like this, but the mother and son didn't hear their animal talk. Soon after this, the mother died, leaving the boy all alone, with nothing. One day, the snake said to him, "You brought me home here and cared for me. Now, please come with me to my home and visit my mother; we'll give you all the help you want."

"I can't," protested the boy. "Your mother will bite me." "No. I'll tell her that you raised me. Just take me to my hole and wait above ground while I go down and tell her; she'll invite you in. When my parents ask you what reward you wish, you must be careful and ask only for my father's ring. It will do whatever you wish, so don't accept anything else."

The boy agreed and set out with the snake and the cat. They came to the hole, where the snake told him to wait above, while he went down. "When I go down there," he said, "I'll become a man again; we look like snakes only when we're above ground. My parents will come, but don't be afraid." The snake went into the hole and met his parents, who had thought he was long dead. Seeing him, they shouted, "It's so wonderful that you're back," and asked about everything that had happened. "You left me for dead, but a poor man fed me milk and raised me, without eating anything himself. He's up there, waiting. Invite him in."

The snakes left the serpent-world in a chariot to invite the boy back to the underworld. They fed him like an honoured guest, since he had saved their son, but all he said was: "I paid fifty rupees for him; then mother died and I was all alone. Now your son has invited me here." "All right, but what would you like? You may have anything we have. Come down into our world and see how we live, in cities and splendour," said the snakes.

Then he remembered what the snake had said about the ring, and he responded, "Please give me your signet ring." "Ask for anything else, son. The ring brings danger. I'm not saying I won't give it, but you must be very careful with it. Once you put it on, do not let anyone remove it." "I'll keep it safely," said the boy. When the snake gave him the ring and told him to return if he ever needed help, the snakes rode their chariot back into the hole, and the boy left with the cat.

On their journey, the cat said, "Anne, let's try out the ring. The snake said it would bring whatever we wished." As they were sitting on the shore of a lake, the boy wished for a nice house and immediately a big one appeared! He wished for a cook and for a girl with long beautiful hair; when they both appeared, he married the girl. They didn't lack anything; as long as the ring was on his finger, he got whatever he wished - food, fruit, everything.

There was also a raja in that region, and an old woman who brought him flowers. She saw the big house and wondered whose it was. Going up to the house, she introduced herself and soon made friends with the boy's wife by bringing her flowers. One day, a hair from the wife's beautiful long braid fell into the river, a fish ate it, a man caught it and then sold it to the raja's cook who cut it open and saw the hair wound around a stick. He unwound it and measured it - it was sixty feet long! "If her hair is this lovely, think what the woman herself must be like!" said the raja.

At that moment the old woman arrived with her flowers and said, "I know a girl with sixty-foot-long hair; I take flowers to her." "If you bring her to me," said the raja, "half the kingdom is yours."

Next day, when the old woman took flowers to the girl, her husband had removed his ring to take an oil bath. The old woman sat down by his wife and said, "Oh, that's a big ring your husband has, isn't it? Let's try it on." "He's very kind, but he won't let anyone wear that ring," said his wife. "What kind of a husband is that, then? Won't let you wear a ring! Never heard of such a thing! Tell him you won't cook for him if he won't let you wear it and then see what he says." "He won't believe me, and he won't give me the ring," said his wife. "Just try," said the old woman.

The wife spoke to her husband while he was taking an oil bath: "Let me wear the ring." "Anything but that; I can't let you wear it," he said. "All right, then I won't cook for you." You see, that old woman had stirred up a good fight between them. "What's all this, my dear? It's not that I don't want to give it to you; it's just that disaster will strike if I give it to anyone. It must stay on my hand." "Give it," she demanded. "All right; but don't lose it," he said. "I'll finish my bath in a minute."

Then the old woman, who was squatting in the corner, got up and said, "Let me wear it." She grabbed it, put it on and immediately thought, "Let her go to the raja." That's the way the ring works, doesn't it? Whatever the wearer wishes comes true. Suddenly the old woman and the young wife appeared before the raja, who saw that she was the woman whose hair he had found in the fish. He wrote over half his kingdom to the old woman and kept the young woman. "She's beautiful," said the old woman, "but the secret is in the ring. If you lose it, you lose her. Keep it safely."

Meanwhile, the young man had finished his bath and came out to get his ring, but when he stepped out of the bathroom, he stood in the open air! The room was gone, the house was gone and so was his wife. Again he had nothing; back to his old days of poverty, starving with his poor cat.

Back at the palace, the raja locked the ring in a little box, put that in another box, and so on, inside seven boxes, all locked up tight. He had locked the room, too, and put a guard outside. Then he began preparations for his marriage, but the young woman said, "First I must observe a period of forty days seclusion. That's the custom in my caste: for forty days before the wedding, I must not see anyone's face." The raja agreed, built her separate apartments and gave her servants. Then the forty days began.

Time passed and soon only two days remained before the forty days were over. Meanwhile, the young man and the cat happened to be passing by the palace, when they saw a photo posted on the wall outside the room where his wife was in seclusion! It was a photo of the young man, his wife and the cat, and somehow she had it put up outside her room. Seeing that, the cat said, "Anne, there she is, in that photo! Let's find out why."

They thought a bit and again the cat said, "I'll go inside and see what I can find." The cat could go anywhere, couldn't it? Through gates, inside rooms, down tunnels, windows, everywhere. It landed on a window sill, saw the girl inside and told the boy, "She's there. I'll bring her back somehow. Don't worry, just wait here." The cat went inside again and saw a group of rats, ten of them. When it caught the biggest one, the others shook with fear: "It's going to eat us all!" "No. I'm not going to eat you, as long as you get something for me." "What's that?" "A ring is locked inside seven boxes in the palace. Bring the ring to me and I'll let you all go".

The rats went in a group, gnawed through the boxes, got the ring and gave it to the cat, who gave it to the boy. Immediately, he put it on his finger and thought of his wife and house, and they reappeared! The forty days were up, but when the raja went to her apartments, she was gone! So he called the old woman, "You've deceived me! She's gone!" "I told you to keep the ring safe. Better look for it," said the old woman. Looking in the boxes, the raja saw the ring was gone.

In the end, the young man and his wife lived a happy life.

Storyteller: Puspavalli (stories 47-48)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District

49. THE POMEGRANATE AND THE MAGICIAN

A family of hunters, six brothers in all, lived in the forest. One day, the oldest brother took his wife hunting but didn't catch anything and sat down dejected. When all the brothers fell asleep, a mantiravati, who was searching for a first-born son in order to rid himself of a curse, passed that way. Looking at the brothers, he spotted the oldest and led him to a Kali temple, where he cut off his head and thus redeemed his curse.

When the man's wife awoke and saw her husband was missing, she searched for him everywhere. Exhausted and unable to find him, she sat down by a stream and began to cry. The stream flowed down to a spot where a sage was in deep meditation. Realising that the water was salty, he looked upstream and saw the crying woman. She explained that she had lost husband and that someone had probably killed him. Immediately, the sage said, "There's a magician in this forest who probably killed your husband to keep his mantras effective. Listen: there's also an old woman nearby whom no one can make cry, but if you take some of her tears to sprinkle on your husband, he'll come back to life."

The wife went to the old woman and told her her story; she tried everything to make her cry, but she failed. Still she lived there with her for some time like her daughter. One day she asked the old woman, "Is there anything you desire." "Yes," the old woman said. "In the forest is a big house with many mandapams, and inside is a pomegranate. If I eat it, I will never die. Many people have attempted to bring it back, but none has ever succeeded. Some have brought back a piece, but never the whole fruit. There's also a guard whom you must pass, and remember - you must get the whole fruit."

She set out to get the pomegranate and approached the guard. "I've come to get the pomegranate," she announced. "You may pluck the fruit, but you must give me half," said the guard. The woman wondered what to do, since she had to bring back the whole fruit! "All right," she said, "but if I give you half the fruit you must agree to give me something that I want." Then she went in and plucked the whole fruit; when the guard asked her for half, she gave it and then said, "You promised to give me something - well, I want your half of the fruit!" She got it from him and returned to the old woman with the whole fruit. "Now I'm immortal," she said and began to cry in ecstasy! Taking her tears, the wife sprinkled them on her husband and he came back to life.

Then he said, "We must get revenge against the person who killed me." "I don't know who it was," said the woman, so they went to the sage. The sage said, "In the seventh forest is a mandapam, and inside the mandapam is a tiger with a lamp; underneath the lamp is a magic wand which the mantiravati used to kill you. If you destroy it, he will be powerless. Guarding it are a snake, a scorpion and a lizard, but do not fear them. Walk right past them and kill the tiger - that's all that counts."

They went into the seventh forest, walked fearlessly past the snake and the other animals, and finally came to the tiger. The tiger leapt on the hunter and bloodied him, and his wife fell down unconscious. But he was a hunter, wasn't he? He fought ferociously with his knife against the tiger. He stabbed it and it drew back but then attacked again; finally, he stabbed it and the mantiravati went blind in one eye.

The mantiravati now knew that someone was fighting with his tiger and went there to kill the intruder. Meanwhile, the hunter killed the tiger, pushed aside the lamp and found the magic wand; he revived his wife and then the wand flew on to the mantiravati, who changed into a small, ordinary man.

The little man said, "Thank you for saving me. Previously I did wrong and was turned into this demonic mantiravati. Now that's all over."

*Storyteller: Celvantiran
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

50. ECLIPSE OF THE SUN

A raja had just one daughter, whom he raised tenderly from birth. Every day, on the seventh floor of the palace, he weighed her using lemons as counterweights; he also kept her surrounded with maidservants. Every morning and every evening, the girl would rise from her bed and laugh at the sun. Now, the sun was curious and thought, "Why does this girl mock me like this every day?"

One day the sun went to the raja's house without anyone knowing -he's Siva, you understand. He slipped into the house, lay on the princess' swing, chewed betel nuts and spat betel juice all over the floor. In the morning, the princess called to her servants, "Do something, will you! Look at me! And this room is a mess." Then the princess asked for hot water and took her bath. That night before she went to bed, she called her servants again and said, "I don't know who came in here last night. Tonight I'll wear my jewels tight, to pinch me and keep awake so I'll discover who this person is."

That day, when they carried her to the seventh floor and weighed her as usual, she was a little heavier than usual! The raja turned to the servants, "Yesterday her weight was normal, but today she's heavier! What have you been doing? Who has visited her?" "No one, sir. We don't know anything," they said. That night, she put on her tight jewels and remained awake throughout the whole night. When Siva entered her room, she screamed, "Who are you?" "Well, whom do you laugh at when you circle the seventh floor every day? That's who I am." They were happy together.

After several days, Siva said, "Take this ring and wait for me; I'll go and arrange for special food to be sent." Siva left for the world of the gods, while she bathed and waited in the palace. In heaven, Siva gathered several baskets of delicacies, wrapped them in special cloth and ordered a servant to take them to the princess. Halfway on his journey, the servant stopped at the house of a soldier to rest. Wondering what this fellow was carrying, the soldier looked into the bundle and saw all the food; then he took the food and put an iron griddle in the cloth bundle.

Not knowing what was in his bundle, the servant took it to the palace, where he said to the princess, "This is what the raja sent to you." After he left, the hungry princess opened the bundle and saw the iron griddle! How's she going to eat that? She summoned her servants and said, "No matter who knocks at my door, do not open it without my permission."

Soon Siva returned and knocked but was not admitted. Then he cursed the princess, "Come the dawn, you will lose everything you own - your lands, your possessions and your kingdom. You will go and sit under a tamarind tree; desperately hungry, you will seek work in a faraway land. No one will give you anything. Only later will someone take pity on you and give you work. When you harvest the paddy stalks with a small sickle, you'll slice off four or five of your fingers! The person who took pity on you will give you a handful of paddy, which you will have to eat with the meat of a water buffalo." Siva issued this curse and left.

In the morning, just as he said, the princess was left with nothing. She took a hand-sickle, cut the paddy stalks, sliced off her fingers and was given some rice. She cooked the rice and ate meat. That was her life.

Ten months passed and she gave birth to a child. He grew up and went to school, where all the other children ate their lunch. But her son had no money and the other children teased him: "Doesn't know his father's name!" "Mother," he said, "all the

others eat, but I just watch them. They call me a 'child who doesn't know his father's name' and they beat me. What's father's name?" "You can't go see your father now; wait till you're older and then you can go." "No. You must tell me his name; whether I go and see him or not is another matter, but first you must tell me his name."

She gave him the ring which Siva had given her - that's all she had - put some food in a bundle and said to him, "Go to the river and wait there for an old woman to come to draw water. When she tries to lift her pot of water to her hip, she'll need your help. When you help her, take off this ring and put it in her pot of water." That's what he did: he sat by the river, helped the old woman and put the ring in her pot. And when she took the pot home and put it down, there was only enough water for one tumbler in the whole pot! One tumbler from the whole pot! Siva came on his rounds to feed all the people in the world, got tired and asked for a drink of water. But in that big pot, there was only enough water for a single glass! She poured the water, including the ring, into a glass and gave it to Siva.

When he drank, he found the ring and wondered where it came from. He asked the woman, "Who helped you with this pot?" and she said, "I'm an old lady but usually I do it myself, but today I couldn't lift the pot onto my hip, so I asked a boy."

Siva told her to bring the boy, and Siva took him to the world of the gods, where there were piles of jewels, gold, and diamonds in every corner! When he sat down to eat, he began to think, "My mother is sitting there under that tamarind tree and my father is this rich!" "Father," he said, "I'm going back home." "Why not stay for another ten days and then go?" said Siva but the boy insisted, saying he must return to school. "All right," agreed Siva. "I've put everything you'll ever need inside this box. But don't open it until you reach your mother. Do not open it on the way."

When the boy had gone halfway, he opened the box and suddenly he had everything - wealth and houses, lands and livestock. But the boy didn't know how to put it all back in the box. He felt bad that he had opened the box when his father told him not to. As he cried, a snake approached and asked, "Why are you crying?" "My father gave me this box and told me not to open it until I gave it my mother; but I opened it because I knew my father was rich. All this wealth came out and now I don't know how to put it back in the box."

The snake said, "Don't worry; I'll put it back for you. On one condition: on the day of your marriage, I will bite you. If you agree, I'll put it all back in the box." The boy thought for a moment and said, "All right. Bite me on my wedding day, but now put everything back in the box." After the snake put it all back, the boy took it to his mother, and she regained all that she had lost before.

Soon the boy grew old enough to be married, and his mother said, "Son, I want to see you married before I die. Let's look for a bride." But he said to her, "Mother, what's the hurry about my marriage?" He kept delaying the marriage, afraid that the snake would bite him. Still, his mother was stubborn and eventually found a bride and made arrangements for the wedding. She sent an announcement to the boy's father, but he replied, "I can't come myself; you may conduct the ceremony yourself."

When the day for the wedding came and the bride and bridegroom circled the holy pot, the snake was curled around it, ready to strike. Siva saw this and thought, "That snake, which normally hangs on my neck, is about to bite my own son!" [Man in audience: How was he his son? Teller: He was the son of Surya Bhagavan, right? Born when the sun entered the princess' room.] So Siva stuck out his leg, to protect his son, and the snake bit it. And that's how we get the eclipse of the sun.

Woman in audience: Yes. Once a year the moon is blocked out, isn't it? That's because Siva told the snake to block it with its hood, when he asked that his son be saved.

Man in audience: All right, but I still don't understand if the boy was Siva's son, or Surya's son.

Teller: Surya's son.

Woman: But Siva asked for his son.

Teller: Right, but Siva is Surya Bhagavan.

Man: Oh, I see.

*Storyteller: Nilavati (stories 46, 50-51)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

51. THE FAKE HORSE

There was a raja who was completely childless. He spent six months in his palace and six months in the forest. While in the forest he set up a sharp needle and sat on top, performing austerities for a child; when the six months were over and his tapas finished, he would go back and spend the next six months in the palace. Before long his queen got pregnant, but just when she was about to give birth he went back to the forest. So when the child was born - a daughter - he knew nothing about it.

The mother thought, "She's a girl; better not let her go outside." So she built an underground tunnel and raised the daughter inside; they had everything in there - a teacher, bathroom, kitchen - everything you'd want.

The raja's six months in the forest were completed and he came home, where the girl was living inside the tunnel. She never went out since she had everything inside and there was no reason to leave the tunnel. When his six months at home were over, the raja returned to his tapas on the needle in the forest. When that period was over, he climbed down and started for home again, thinking sadly, "Well, I've tried and tried; performed tapas, given charity, but there's still no child in sight." That day, as her mother was talking next door, the girl came out of her tunnel and stood on the threshold drying her freshly washed hair. The raja saw her and fell in love with her.

When his wife returned, he said, "Come. We're going on a journey." "What's this?", she asked. "You've been coming and going, back and forth all this time, and now suddenly you tell me we're going on a journey!" He insisted and they set out; as they entered a forest she said, "Why aren't we going by the road?" Then he drew his sword, killed her and threw her body in the river.

Back home, he called the girl and told her he would marry her: "You may ask for whatever you wish; write a list and I'll get it all for you." Now what could she do? She wrote a list: dresses and tresses, rices and prizes; flowers and showers, she wrote it all down in a very long list. The raja went first to the flower shop and showed them the list; then to the clothes shop where they too had to get everything on the list; and then to the rice shop. Each shop had to supply things on the list. It took a long time.

Meanwhile, the young girl took a bag of money and went to a carpenter and said, "Make me a fake-horse, and make it quickly. It must be big enough for a person to sleep in." Two days later when he brought the horse to her, she took all the things the raja bought for her - money, jewels, clothes, food - and climbed inside the fake-horse and locked it. When the raja looked for her, she was gone. Nowhere to be seen.

Soon he began to gamble and lost everything - his money, his lands, and his palace. In the end, he only had that horse, so he took it to sell in another city. In that place, a prince was getting married; the bride had been selected, and all that remained was the tali-tying. Standing on his balcony, the bridegroom saw the raja carrying the horse, which he wanted very much, so he told servants to tell his mother to buy it for him. They bought the horse and brought it up to his room. He also ate in that room, where the servants would bring his meals.

The next day he noticed that half his food was eaten - half the vegetables, half the curry - and half the water drunk! That night after the servants came and laid out his food, he lay down to sleep but kept awake; he saw the girl come out of the horse, eat half of everything and start to climb back into the horse. But he grabbed her by her long braids! "Who are you?" he asked. "That man who sold you this fake-horse - I'm

his daughter. My mother raised me without him knowing about me. After he killed her in the forest, he asked to marry me, but I put him off and got this horse to hide in. He lost everything and had only this horse, which he sold to you."

This prince wouldn't give her up; he married her at the same time that he married the other girl. So he had two wives. After the wedding, the first wife's mother said, "I'll treat this other wife as my own daughter and take her home with us." She took them both home and they all lived together.

Now, the first wife wasn't very pretty, but the second one, the one in the fake-horse, was as radiant as gold. After a while, the mother said to her own daughter, the first wife, "She's very beautiful and that's bad for you. Here's what you should do: invite her to come to the well with you, and then ask her to take off her jewels so that you can put them on. Then, when you two look into the water to compare your beauty, push her into the well."

So the first wife called the second wife to come with her to the river, and on the way she said, "Sister, let's compare our beauty by looking in this well. Take off your jewels so that I can wear them." She put on the jewels, pushed the second wife into the well and went home.

Soon the raja came to their house to bring his second wife back home with him. Before this he had told her to put sandal paste on her hand and make a handprint as high up on the wall as possible; he had also given her a ring and told her to keep it safe: "When you come home, you can give me the ring," he had said to her.

When he saw the woman he thought was his second wife, he asked her where his first wife was. "She'll come back in a few days time," said the imposter. At home, the raja said, "Put your hand on that print on the wall and bring me the ring." Of course only the second wife knew about this, and the woman in disguise did not. So she just sat there and stared. The raja locked her up, dressed himself as a bangle-seller and wandered about calling, "Bangles! Bangles for sale!"

By now his second wife, the one inside the well, was pregnant; when she was pushed into the well, she landed on a snake, who acted as a midwife and looked after her. As her husband came calling "Bangles! Bangles!" a little snake, sitting on the edge of the well, heard him and asked him to sell bangles to his newborn nephew in the well. The raja got afraid, but the little snake said, "Don't worry. We just want bangles for my sister's son." Down they went into the well, and there he saw his wife.

When she explained everything, he wanted to take her back but she had to ask permission from the snake. "He's my husband; I want to return with him," she explained. "All right, daughter," said the snake. "But first heat some milk for your little brother and then go." She heated the milk and then, in her haste, forgot to take it off the flame to cool it. When the snake-brother came and asked about his sister, the big snake said, "She's gone away, but she put out some milk for you. Drink it." He did and burned his tongue. "Just because her husband came she forgot me! I'll bite her!" the snake hissed and went to find her.

At home, the princess bathed her child, rubbed it with oil and laid it in a cradle while she was cooking. The snake slithered up the rope and then started to crawl down into the cradle, but the child saw it and cried out happily, "Look mother! Uncle has come! Snake-uncle is here!"

Could the snake bite him now? How could he? Then the princess heated some milk for her snake-brother; he drank it and went back and everyone lived happily.

*Storyteller: Nilavati (stories 46, 50-51)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

52. OUTWITTING THIEVES

There was a house with a well, which was used to water the fields. In this isolated house, some distance from any other house or field, lived a couple, an old man and an old woman. The thieves in that area were on the lookout for any old people living alone, especially in an isolated spot. One night they came to this old couple's house and sat beside the well waiting for the old man to go to sleep before they could steal something. But the old woman saw them and said to her husband, "Thieves are out there; if they get into the house, we're done for." Her husband got an idea and said, "Here's what we'll do. We'll say loudly, so that they can hear, 'There's lots of robbers about; we'd better put all our valuables in a trunk and lower it into the well.'"

The couple went outside and said all this in a loud voice, but they didn't really put anything valuable in the trunk, only stones and rocks. When the thieves overheard them, they thought they were lucky: all they had to do was empty the well and lift out the trunk.

That night the thieves began to draw water from the well so they could get at the trunk. It took all night so, while they were drawing out water, the old man snuck over to his fields and channeled the water to his crops - why should he waste that water? The thieves were too busy drawing out water to notice anything. By morning all his fields had been nicely watered, and the old man said to the thieves, "Thanks very much; you've watered my fields for me!" They had been made complete fools!

Storyteller: Jeyaraman (stories 45, 52, 54, 80)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District

53. THE SLANDERED SISTER

A mother, who had both a son and a daughter, worked as a daily labourer. That's how she survived, by pounding rice. One day she brought home some fish, counted them and said to her children, "There's ten fish here; if there's even one less when I return, I'll kill you both. Don't touch it until I get back."

She left and the boy started to cook, but the girl cried because she was hungry. "Give me something to eat," she cried. "Wait till mother comes back; that's what she told us," he said. But the girl continued to cry until her brother gave her one of the fish to eat.

When the mother returned from work and sat down to eat, she counted the fish - one was missing! "I gave sister one because she was crying," said the boy. "Shouldn't have done that. You never listen to what I say; get out of this house!" she screamed in anger and drove them both away.

Carrying his sister on his back, the brother walked a long way, until they came to a village, where a rich man saw them and asked who they were. "Our mother drove us out of the house because we ate a single fish; now I don't know what to do," said the boy. "Come to my house; you can graze my cattle and I'll give you some rice," said the man. He let them live in a little hut; every day the boy grazed the cattle and the man gave them a measure of rice, which the sister laid out to dry, then pounded and cooked. That's how they ate.

But she was a little girl, wasn't she? So as soon as she put out the paddy to dry she'd run away to play, and the chickens and birds ate the drying paddy. Gradually the rice got less and less, and the boy scolded her, "Look, our mother drove us out and now you're doing this! How are we going to manage? Be more careful."

The next day, the girl set a noose and sat in a corner to see if she could catch something; when a bird came, she pulled the cord and caught it. "You're eating our paddy every day, aren't you! If my brother finds out, he'll kill you for sure! What do you have to say?" asked the girl. "If you take a grain of rice, wash it seven times, put it in a pot and say 'sparrow', you'll get a whole pot of cooked rice. Then wash your pan and think of whatever sauce you want and you'll get that sauce." "I don't believe you; and if I let you go, you'll fly away. Let's first see whether you're telling the truth or not." "All right. Test me," said the bird.

The girl did what the bird said and, in the end, she found a pot full of cooked rice and sauce. Then the bird said, "You must keep this secret to yourself. If you tell anyone, your head will split into a thousand pieces." Every day when her brother brought home his wages, she bought a little paddy and used just one grain to make a full pot; this way she was able to save most of his wages.

One day she said to him, "Anne, why don't you get married? That'll be good for you." "No. How can I do that when: I've got to take care of you? After I find a husband for you, I'll get married." "No. I'm young; you get married first." "But we'd still need money for the marriage ceremony, for food and all." "Don't worry about any of that," she said.

When the marriage preparations began for the brother, his sister used her hidden money to buy all the necessary things. Afterward, her sister-in-law came to live with them, but the sister continued to cook as before. One day she got ill and the new wife had to cook, but of course she didn't know the sister's secret. A measure of rice was

brought home, pounded and left in water as usual. But in the morning, there was nothing.

That day the brother got angry, "Where's my lunch? I'm exhausted at work but you didn't bring me anything!" "There isn't any rice," said his wife. "What? My sister has been cooking meals for me for a long time." "I don't know about that. Maybe she earns money somewhere else," said his wife. Her brother was furious that his sister would act like that and decided to get her married right away.

He found a bridegroom in a family of seven brothers; the youngest was unmarried and didn't have a job either. But he didn't care who he married her to. He arranged this marriage, gave her gifts and sent her to live with her husband's family. Her husband's family worked but they had nothing left over to give to the couple because they were poor after the weddings for the other six brothers.

Seeing the poverty of her husband's family, one day the sister followed what the bird said and made a huge vat of cooked rice and sauce. She fed the whole family, and they were amazed: "We work all year long and can't make ends meet, while this woman, who has nothing, can feed us all! She must be doing something bad." So they told their brother, her husband, that they couldn't keep a woman who was such a disgrace.

They decided to kill her and burn her in the cremation ground, but she said to them, "Go ahead and kill me, but you must invite my brother and sister-in-law and all our friends." They were invited to her husband's house, where she announced, "I'm going to tell you a story. I have done nothing wrong. It's true that I have saved money, but listen to my story. When our mother drove us away and I was a little girl, the birds were eating all our rice. I caught a bird who told me that if I washed a grain of rice seven times and washed a pan, I'd get all the rice and sauce I wanted. Because of that I was able to save the money my brother brought back, which I used to get him married. One day when sister-in-law had to cook, she told lies about me; so he thought I was a bad woman and got me married - just because of what she said that day You can look in my brother's house and find all the money I saved before his marriage; it's still there."

After she told her story, her head split apart; she died and they cremated her.

*Storyteller: Kamala (stories 53, 96)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

54. "LIFE IS TOUGH, EVEN WHEN WE'RE DEAD"

There was this pundit, who was an Aiyar. He knew all the languages - Malayalam, English, Hindi - and he could read all of them, too. He could even read the language written on our heads, on our craniums; he was that kind of a pundit. And he had traveled all over the world, doing this research.

One day he found a human skull upon which was written a strange message. He read it through carefully. It said: "Life is tough, even when we're dead." "How could we suffer after we're dead?" he wondered. In order to penetrate this statement, he decided to do some research. So he wrapped up the skull in a cloth and took it home.

Seeing this, everyone thought he was crazy. "What's he doing with a skull?" they asked. It frightened the children, too. "You don't understand," he told them. "It's something only I understand. Let me keep the thing here." But they kept up a chorus, shouting: "He's got a skull! A skull! A skull!" Finally the local magistrate came, grabbed the skull and pounded it to bits in a mortar! Then he threw the powder in the river! When the pundit came back and learned what had happened, he realised what that strange message meant - that you suffer even after death. I mean, what could be worse than having your skull pounded to dust!

Storyteller: Jeyaraman (stories 45, 52, 54, 80)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District

55. A FAIR OF CAKES

An old woman lived with her son. This was long ago, when there were no machines and she had to go from house to house, pounding rice; that way she'd get a measure or half-measure of rice as her pay and cook it for their meals. The boy grazed goats for a rich family and got a little food from them. That's how they lived.

One day the people whom he worked for gave him some tasty cakes called kevala afai. They cooked the cakes for themselves but gave one or two to him since he herded their goats. Going home, he told his mother to make the same tasty food, but she said, "I can't. We just don't have the money for that kind of food, but if you can get some of that kevala flour from their house, I'll make the cakes for you." He got the flour and brought it home; next morning she made the cakes and then went off to work, leaving two cakes for him - a big one and a small one.

When the boy finished his work with the goats and came home, he saw the cakes inside the house. But he couldn't decide which to eat first - the big one or the small one. People back then didn't have much intelligence, you see. So he held them both up, one in each hand, and considered: "If I eat the big one first, the small one will lose its companion; but, then again, if I eat the small first, the big one will lose its companion."

Pondering this question, he sat down, still in a quandary. Soon it was evening and the people he worked for got angry since their animals hadn't been fed or watered. They went straight to his mother and complained. She assumed her son must be ill, so when he got home, she asked him, "Are you ill? What's the matter?" "Nothing like that, mom. I'm fine, but I can't decide which of these cakes to eat first. If I eat the small one first, the big one won't be a pair; but, then, if I eat the big one first, the small one won't make a pair either." This made his mother furious: "I go out and work hard to get us something to eat and you sit here idly thinking about which cake to eat!" She beat him hard and he ran off, still holding the two cakes in his hands.

All alone, in the forest, he still couldn't make up his mind. "Shall I eat the big one or the small one?" He kept saying this over and over again as he walked through the forest. Two Kannimar, two sisters, who were playing in the same forest, overhead him babbling away. Hearing his question - "Shall I eat the big one or small one?" - they thought he was a monster out to eat them! "He's going to get one of us," said the older sister. "We've got to do something fast!" So they stopped him in the woods and said, "Look, what's all this about eating the big one or die small one? You don't have to eat either of us!" Then they gave him a purse - they thought he was talking like that because he was hungry - and said, "Take this purse and go to the next village; get yourself cleaned up and then find someone who'll serve you ten rupees worth of rice. After you've eaten, put your hand in the purse and you'll find ten rupees to pay them. Then come back here." This is what the Kannimar told him.

He put the purse into his pocket and went to the village and called out, "Who'll give me ten rupees of rice?" He went up and down the streets of the town, but no one took up his offer. This happened a time long ago when a measure of rice cost just half a rupee, so ten rupees worth of rice would be an enormous amount of food. "No one can eat that much!" the townspeople said to themselves and refused to feed him.

Finally he went to a dasi's house, who said she would serve him the ten rupees of rice. He bathed, said his prayers and sat down to eat on the verandah. When he'd finished eating, he put his hand in the purse and found ten rupees, which he gave to her.

He slept that night on the verandah of the house opposite, and the following day he ate in her house again since no one else would serve him. Each time he ate he gave her ten rupees. Having watched him take all those rupees from his purse, the dasi decided to have a look at it while he was asleep, but it was empty. It was an empty purse.

Next night, when her lover came, she said he could stay only if he brought her visitor's purse to her. While the young man was sleeping, the lover pinched his purse and gave it to the dasi. The next day, he got up as usual, washed his hands and face and sat down to eat, but when he'd finished and put his hand in the purse, there was no purse, no money.

"It only works for a few days! Those women in the forest tricked me!" he thought and ran back to the forest. Again, he repeated over and over his problem: "If I eat the small one, the big one isn't a pair; if I eat the big one, the small one isn't a pair." And again the two sisters in the forest heard him coming and got afraid; this time the younger one said, "Oh my god! He's lost that purse we gave him. Even ten rupees of rice won't fill his ravenous stomach! We've got to do something else fast; got to give him something really valuable, something that gives him more money."

By that time he had reached the spot where they were standing, and they said, "You needn't eat us. Take this beautiful goat and tie it up wherever you sleep. When you awake in the morning, you will find that the goat's droppings have turned to pure gold! Give that gold to whoever feeds you and you'll never know hunger again." With these instructions he left, but of course he had already tried every house on the first trip, so he went back to the dasi. He tied up the goat and slept in the house opposite, and in the morning he saw that the goat's droppings were pure gold! He collected all the gold, ate in the dasi's house and gave it all to her.'

This went on for a week or two. But does desire ever loosen its grip? The dasi told her lover that he'd have to bring her the goat if he wanted to enter her house; so he took the goat away and left an ordinary goat in its place. When the man got up next morning and saw the droppings were not gold, he again felt cheated: "It only works for a while and then stops. Who's going to feed me now?"

After three days, he was so hungry he again ran back to the forest, repeating his question. The sisters heard him and the younger said, "There's absolutely no way to satisfy his hunger! He's going to eat us sooner or later; there's no escape. We're fated to be his prey; we tried twice to get rid of him, but he always comes back. There's only one hope. We'll try it and if he's clever, it'll work and we'll escape; if he's not clever, it'll fail and he'll be back."

The young man came to them and said, "That purse didn't last long and neither did that goat. I'm still hungry. Shall I eat the small one or the big one?" He still had those two cakes safely in his pocket, you see. "Don't eat either! Here, take this wire and this hoe. Where have you been sleeping?" "Only in one place, the whole time," he said. "That's it, then! Go back and sleep in the same place. In the morning, after your prayers, ask this wire, 'What's the news?' Then it will wind itself around that person, and the hoe will beat him and drag him to you. You must demand your things back and they will appear in your hand. Afterward, you can live your life by yourself; you won't have to return here, and we won't either."

With this advice, he went back to the village and slept in his usual place. When the dasi saw him she wondered what riches she would get from him this time. "I'll wait for a few days and see what he's got with him," she thought. In the morning, he finished his prayers and then said to the wire and hoe, "What's the news?" In a flash they went and wound around the dasi, beat her and brought her to him. He said, "Give me the things I gave you!" He repeated it over and over, again and again. Soon all the gold and money he gave her appeared; he scooped it all into a bundle and thought, "They were right. This woman was tricking me, just because I gave her a lot of money to feed me, she got greedy. Better not stay here and get fleeced again."

He left and traveled to another kingdom, with his bag over his shoulder. It was mid-afternoon when he arrived and all the houses were locked up. When he knocked on a door and asked for a glass of water, the woman pulled him inside quickly and said, "Drink this water, but don't go out now. Stay the night and go in the morning." "Why? What's going on here? Why lock your doors at three o'clock in the afternoon?" he asked. "A mad elephant comes here every day at three. That's why! It kills and then eats anyone its meets! The king has issued a proclamation that anyone who can conquer the elephant will marry his daughter and receive half the kingdom. But there's no one around here who is equal to the task. Whoever cuts off the tip of the elephant's ear and tail and shows them to the raja will get the reward. That's what's going on here and that's why no one goes out after three o'clock."

After the boy stayed with the old woman for two or three days, he began to think to himself, "I've got that wire and hoe, so I can catch the mad elephant myself." He asked the old woman where he could find the elephant and she said, "In the daytime it goes into the forest. See that washerman's pond over there, that big, wide pond - that's where it'll come to drink about three o'clock. That's the only time and place you can find it." He told her his plan and she tried to dissuade him, but he went ahead anyway.

He got to the pond early, bathed and then hid up in a tree. When the elephant rushed at him, he said to the wire and hoe, "What's the news?" Immediately the wire wound around the elephant and the hoe killed it, cutting off the tips of its ear and its tail. When he returned to the woman's house, she said in a fright, "It's eight o'clock at night! What happened to you? Well, at least you're safe." He ate, slept and in the morning, without telling anyone what had happened, walked toward the raja's palace.

He came to the spot where they throw out food from the palace - it came from the raja's table so there was a lot of good food! Immediately, he began to scavenge among the leftovers - it was his old habit, remember. Standing high on the palace balcony, a princess saw him and sighed, "Poor fellow down there eating leftovers! Who's going to marry his daughter to someone who scavenges among leftovers?" He heard her but didn't get embarrassed; he just kept eating and then went home.

Meanwhile, when a washerman went to the pond to clean clothes, he saw the dead elephant there. He cut off a bit of the already mutilated ear and tail and showed it to the raja, who didn't inspect it very carefully and decided to marry his daughter to this man. When the wedding ceremonies were in full swing, the young man asked the old woman, as if he knew nothing, "What's all the commotion for?"

"Don't you know? The washerman killed the elephant and showed its ear and tail to the raja. He's going to marry the princess." "Really? I've got to attend this wedding." "No, no. They'll never let the likes of you inside!" "But I'm going." "All right, but I'm not; the guards would kill me." She found some old yet clean clothes to dress him in and sent him off.

At the main gate, the guards refused him entry; he tried another gate and then another, but no one would let him in. Frustrated, he screamed, "What kind of a raja is it who doesn't know what an elephant's tail looks like! What kind of a wedding is this going to be!" He raised such a racket that he was brought before the assembly. "Why are you criticising our raja?" he was asked. "Did the washerman actually bring the tip of the elephant's ear and tail? Did you inspect them carefully?" Suspicious, they stopped the wedding and checked the elephant parts and realised that they weren't the true tips of the ear and tail.

Everyone then wondered: "Then who did kill the elephant and how?" When the young man showed them the real tip of the ear and tail, they put the washerman in the lime-kiln and killed him because he had lied.

Immediately, the young man was married to the princess, but the princess was too^a ashamed to face her husband - remember what she had said when she saw him scavenging among the leftovers? She had said, "Who's going to marry this guy?" and now she was his wife! She didn't know to face him, she was so ashamed. So they lived together and ate together, but didn't sleep together or do anything like that.

Six or seven months passed, and the man told the king that he wanted to see his mother at home. "Yes. I'll write over half the kingdom to you and you must ride home in this chariot." But the man said, "Raja! I must tell the truth: I was born in a low caste. Let me first go home and smooth the way so they'll understand. I'd rather not use the chariot; I'll walk home. And I'll leave my half of the kingdom here, until I return."

"All right," said the raja. "But what about my daughter? She knows only the palace; how can she walk through the forest to your home?" But the princess said, "No matter who she is, a woman must follow her husband. [Teller: That's the true character of a Tamil woman.] I'll walk with him." Her parents accepted this but added a condition: "You must ride in the chariot up to the beginning of the forest; then, you can walk, if you like. Don't cause me pain by forcing me to see you leave on foot."

So they rode in the chariot up to the edge of the forest, got down and sent the chariot back. Then they began to walk and soon came to a town where they heard a public announcement. "Let's see what this is all about and then go on," said the man. It turned out that the palace in that town had a large and very beautiful garden of jasmine flowers. At night the flowers were everywhere, but in the morning there were none! And no one could catch the thief. The local raja had promised his daughter and half his kingdom to whoever could catch the thief, but no one had been able to do it.

The man turned to his wife and said, "Let's stay here for ten days or so; there's work to be done." "Why? What is it?" "There's a thief here and I must catch him." "But how can you? These other men couldn't - I'm afraid." He convinced her and then went to the raja and asked about the garden. He asked the raja to build him a hut in the corner of the garden, with a well to bathe in. The raja agreed and the man and his wife lived in the hut; two or three months passed but he wasn't able to catch the thief.

You know those small melons called kummatti, don't you? Well, he got the ashes of that fruit tree, planted it in the garden with manure and began to water it. Before long, the melons began to grow. One day while he was watering the plants, he remembered what his wife had said about him that day when she stood on the balcony and saw him eating leftovers. He thought that she hadn't changed her opinion of him and still wouldn't come close to him.

Suddenly, throwing down his spade, he fell over unconscious. Immediately, she ran out to him - if a man falls down, what wife will not be anxious? Holding his head in her lap, she sprinkled water over him to bring him back to consciousness. But he said, "I'm not unconscious. You remember that day when you saw me from the palace and said something about me? Well, you still haven't let me get close to you. So I did this to see how you felt about me inside, to see how shy you really are." After that, they lived normally as husband and wife.

Two months passed, the flowers in the garden were in bloom and the melons were spreading all over the ground. Two Kannimar came down from the world of the gods to pluck the flowers; they did this every day, but one day, after they had gathered the flowers and were ready to fly back, one of them got her legs caught in the bush. She started to fly up, but got stuck and her clothes came off. There she was - standing stark naked. In the morning, the man saw this beautiful woman and asked, "Who are you?" She answered, "We came down from the heavens to pluck these fragrant flowers and take them back to the gods. They smell so nice. But someone who lives in that hut caught us, and our clothes are lost. What I did was wrong." She was contrite, so he led her to the raja who said, "You have caught the thief. But this thief steals for the gods; besides we don't want the sin of detaining this poor girl. We must send her back."

Then the Kannimar said, "If you want to send us back to the world of the gods, you must fast as people do on Ekadasi: from morning till night you cannot eat or drink anything. You have to mix flour with cold water, pound it and set it aside; then you have to do pujas with incense and everything. At five in the morning, you have to call the washerwoman and have her pound the flour; no one else should do it. If you do everything right, I'll get my silk clothes and be off."

They agreed and began the preparations; they called the washerwoman and told her to pound the flour. She looked at all the women gathered there and thought, "What's going on here? All these women are sitting around and I'm the only one to pound the flour!" So when she pounded the flour, she hid a little handful in her sari; she didn't eat it but kept it for later, thinking it would be tasty.

When the incense was lit, the Kannimar's clothes returned and she left for heaven. After she left, the washerwoman tasted the little flour she had hidden; then the Kannimar came back down and said, "Right! You fasted until the incense was lit, so you can come to heaven with us." Lifting the washerwoman onto the palanquin, they ascended to heaven.

After all this, the raja married his princess to the man, since he had caught the thief, and now he had two wives. After staying with the raja for a few days, the man said he was going back home, and this raja also sent him in a chariot as far as the forest. When he got close to home, he told his two wives to wait for him while he went alone to the house. His mother was very old by now.

When he called to her, she didn't even recognise him. "I'm your son," he said. "My son! I drove him away years and years ago! He's probably dead," she said. "No, mom. Look! Here are those two cakes you cooked for me that day," he said and held out the cakes as proof of his identity. "Good god! You still haven't decided which to eat! I'll beat you again, you fool," she said.

But he said, "Don't beat me, mom. You gave me a big one and a small one, and now I've brought you a big and a small one, two daughters-in-law!" [laughter] He called his two wives and showed them to his mother. "How did you get these beautiful wives?" "Not just beautiful wives, mom. I'm also the raja of two kingdoms!" And they all lived happily.

Teller: Even today this story is the reason Ekadasi is celebrated the way it is, so strict. On other fast days you can sort of, well, do this or that, but Ekadasi is really strict. Even today women won't eat that melon fruit.

Man in audience: Really, they won't eat it?

Teller: They won't touch it. Definitely.

Man: Who told you this story?

Teller: It's a purana story. It was read. My father read it to me. He used to read the Ramayana. And I would pick up this book he had and read it. I read it in there.

Man: This story is in the Ramayana?

Teller: Yes. You know the Ramayana is made up of lots of bits and pieces. This is one of those pieces.

Another teller: It's a branch-story.

Teller: Yes. One of the branch stories, a separate story, like you get in the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

*Storyteller: Suppiramaniyan
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District*

56. BROTHER, SISTER, AND SNAKE

A raja got married and had two children, but soon his wife died. He decided not to remarry and raised the children by himself, but when they became a little older they said to him, "Appa, we can't go to school and it's hard on you; you should marry again." "If I do, your stepmother won't raise you right; you'll end up telling me she beats you. You don't want me to marry again." But the little girl said to him, "No, father. No matter what she does, even if she beats us, we won't say anything. You must remarry." She insisted and he agreed and got married again.

His second wife gave birth to a daughter, but he had more affection for his first wife's children, the brother and sister who were very close and went to school together. Soon the second wife thought, "He loves those two and not my daughter; he'll never care for my daughter." So she called a snake-catcher and said, "Bring me a twelve-year-old snake and I'll give you two bags of money." [*Man in audience*: A twelve-year-old snake? *Teller*: Yes, a snake whose skin is shrunken and withered, and is about to fall off.] He killed an old snake, gave it to her and she paid him bags of money

The brother and sister continued to go to school together, until one day the stepmother put the snake in their water-bottle. Every day those two walked together, ate together, did everything together. On this day, his sister said to him as they were walking along, "I'm really hungry; let's eat." But he said, "I've got to write out this lesson for the teacher first. You eat and I'll come along later." When she ate and drank the water, the snake entered her stomach, where it stayed, growing bigger day by day.

At home, her stepmother pointed at her and said to her father, "Look at her! Her face is all pale and her stomach's huge. What kind of a daughter is this? Doing something or other with her own brother! I won't have that in my house!" She said all this to her husband, the raja, who then called his minister and told him to take the girl to the forest and kill her. Then her brother spoke up, "I'm not going to live here if you do this; she didn't do anything wrong. If you take her to the forest, take me and kill me, too." Brother and sister were taken to the forest and abandoned, but they were not killed.

In the forest, the brother tried to get some medicine to make his sister's stomach better, but nothing worked. Her stomach got bigger and bigger, day after day. Then, one day the raja and his minister came hunting in that forest and, not recognising who they were, saw the two children all alone. The raja prayed to god and a palace appeared, right in the middle of the forest; that's where the brother and sister lived.

Each day the brother locked his sister in their room and went about his office work. At night, he couldn't sleep for worry about her: "What can I do to cure her? Nothing seems to help her; what's going to become of her?" Then one night, the snake crawled out of her stomach, and when the brother saw it emerge from her mouth, he ran and got a knife and hacked it to pieces. Then he locked the pieces in another room before she awoke. When she did awake, she said happily, "Brother, what happened? My stomach's fine; it's smaller." "Yes," he said. "You're better now. It's over."

She felt better, and her brother continued to go to the office every morning. Then a bad day came; in the morning he left all his keys on the table and went off without them. Seeing his keys, the sister thought, "He never gives me the keys, and now he's left them here. I wonder what's in that other room." She opened the lock and inside

saw a flower garden! Such flowers you've never seen before in your life! Flowers everywhere! She plucked them and stitched them into clothes for her brother - a shirt, trousers and a cap.

When he came back from the office, he realised he'd left his keys behind and got worried. But she said, "Brother, listen to me. I'm going to tell you to do something and I want you to agree." Now, the brother always did what his sister asked of him, so he said, "All right, tell me." "I've made flower-clothes for you - trousers, shirt and a cap. Put them on." "No. I better not put them on," he said. But she insisted and, because his sister had made them for him, he put on the clothes. As soon as he put the cap on his head, off he flew! "Anne, anne!" she screamed and ran after him. Away he flew, into a snake-hole, where she ran, crouched down and started to cry.

As she wept, the raja and minister came hunting in that forest again. "I'm dying of thirst, minister. Go and find me some water." Seeing a stream of water, the minister brought some to him, but when the raja drank it, he said, "This is salty. Like tears, a woman's tears. Let's find her." Following the stream of tears, they saw a girl crying and asked her what was the matter; she explained that her brother was in the snake-hole.

They used spades and picks and dug up the hole; they dug and dug, but they didn't find him. "He's not there! He's gone!" she sobbed and sobbed. Finally, they dug some more and found him, in the form of a snake! "That's him! That's my brother!" Then the raja said, "I've found your brother, so you must marry me." "No." she said. "Well, then, tell me your story" he said. "You see, I'm your daughter," she said. "Our mother died and we told our father to marry again, but he didn't want to. We were stubborn and said we'd never complain. So he married and then our stepmother did this to us."

"Where's your house?" asked the raja. When she showed him their house, the raja asked his wife about what had happened; at first she denied it but then said, "Yes, I did it. I got the snake-catcher to give me a snake. I did it because you loved only your first wife's children, not mine." Immediately, the raja had her burned in the lime-kiln; then he married his daughter to the minister and his son to his step-daughter. All of them lived happily.

Storyteller: Mallika (stories 56-57)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District

57. THE SQUIRREL-BROTHER

There was a raja, who got married and had five children, all sons. Then his wife died, and the little children were left alone so he married again, and his second wife gave birth to one son, a squirrel-son. She raised him, plus the five others from the first wife, and soon those first five sons grew up and got married. Then the raja himself died, and the squirrel-boy and his mother lived with his big brothers, but they wanted to get rid of Kim. They didn't like the idea of keeping a squirrel in their house; so they talked among themselves about how to drive him away with his mother. Afraid they might do something, the squirrel hid in the rafters to overhear what they might be planning.

In the morning, he said to his mother, "My brothers are all married and father is dead. We can't go on like this. Go and ask them for some good land." When his mother asked the brothers for land, four of them and their wives scoffed at it: "That squirrel-brother wants some land! What cheek!" But the oldest brother said, "Oh, well. We've got that piece of scrub land. Let him have that." So they told him he could have that bit of land.

The next day, the squirrel told his mother to ask his brothers for bullocks. She went and asked, and the four brothers and their wives laughed at her, "What! We give that squirrel some land and it comes back and wants bullocks! He's got a lot of nerve!" But the oldest brother said, "We've got ten or fifteen bullocks - we can give him that old, lame one. Besides, he was born in our house - he is our brother."

His mother took the bullock and said to him, "Your oldest brother and his wife gave us this; the others just laughed at you." The squirrel took the bullock and the next day - every night, you see, he hid in the rafters and listened to what his brothers were saying - the next day he said to his mother, "Go and ask them for some millet."

This time, the four brothers and wives were furious, "Millet! Don't give him anything! Better kill him, right now!" But again the oldest brother took pity on him and said, "Brothers, there's some millet in the storehouse; give him a measure or so. He's our brother, born in our house." When his mother brought back the millet, the squirrel told her to cook three measures of rice; she pounded, cleaned and cooked the rice and gave it to him. He took the rice and millet, strapped it on the old bullock and left home, traveling across barren ground.

He called the birds, herons, crows and squirrels, and he fed them all. Then he said, "Clear this wasteland and plough it up like it was ploughed with a bullock." "He's done us a good turn, so we'll help him," thought the animals, who then cleared the brush, burned it all and made a nice field. The squirrel went home and told his mother to give him more rice and some millet seeds. Taking that, he went back to the scrub land, where he fed the birds and squirrels and said, "Take these seeds and plant them in the field, and then fill your mouths with water and water each seed." The animals planted and watered the seeds, and soon his field was bountiful. But his brothers' crop was short and stubbly.

When the brothers went to the wasteland and saw the squirrel's crop, they were amazed: "Look at this! His crop is so perfect, in this wasteland! Better cut it down tomorrow night!" But the squirrel heard all they said and asked his mother for rice, which he fed to the animals and told them to harvest the crop the next day. They did just that, filling up sack after sack with the millet crop. When the brothers and their wives went under the cover of darkness, ten of them, with ten sacks; they swung their sickles, but there was nothing left on the stalks! Nothing fell into their sacks!

"That squirrel's tricked us again! Now what are we going to do?" they said. "Burn down his house and kill him, that's what!" they decided.

Before they came, however, the squirrel knew their plans and said to his mother, "My brothers are going to burn down our house. First I'm going to sell the crop. You sleep somewhere else tonight, and I'll sleep in the rafters in their house." When brothers burned down his house, the squirrel gathered all the charcoal in sacks; then he sold his millet crop and brought back a bag of money.

In the morning the squirrel told his mother to borrow a measuring vessel from his brothers. The five wives said to their husbands, "I thought you burned down his house! We thought he was dead! But he's asking for a measuring vessel!" "Hmm. Let's see what he's up to," they said and stuck a little piece of tamarind on the bottom of the vessel and gave it to her. The squirrel used the vessel to count his money and then sent it back. When the brothers saw some money stuck to the bottom of the vessel, they decided to call on the squirrel and find out how he'd got his money.

"How'd you get all this money?" "Oh, that," said the squirrel. "You see, after you burned my house down, I scooped up all the charcoal and sold it in the Brahmin agraharam over there." "Really! If we burn down our big house, how much money can we get?" "Lots and lots," said the squirrel. And so the brothers burned down their house, gathered up all the charcoal and took it to the agraharam to sell. "You dogs!" screamed the Brahmins. "Trying to sell us charcoal from your hearth!" they shouted and beat the five brothers.

The brothers were penniless and furious with their brother. "We've lost our home listening to that stupid squirrel! Got to destroy him! We'll kill his bullock - that's how he's been able to do all this!" They killed the bullock, and waited at home, but the squirrel buried the animal, went to the agraharam, stole a bag of money and came home. Again he sent his mother to get the measuring vessel, again the brothers stuck tamarind on the bottom and again it came back with money in it.

When his brothers called him to find out how he got the money, the squirrel explained, "You killed my bullock, didn't you? I just took the meat to the agraharam, where they took pity on me, a poor squirrel, bought the meat and gave me a lot of money." "I see," they said. "Let's-kill our bullocks and sell the meat." "Right, good idea," said the squirrel. So they killed their thirty bullocks and took the meat to the Brahmins - but who's going to buy cow meat in an agraharam? The Brahmins grabbed them and gave them a good thrashing!

Now the brothers decided to capture the squirrel, tie it up and kill it once and for all! With stakes and ropes they went, caught the squirrel and tied it up in a bag. "Can't let him escape this time; this is the end! Lied to us about getting his money and tricked us into burning our house and killing our bullocks," they grumbled as they took him to the cremation ground. But they forgot the matches, so they left him there and went back.

Meanwhile a goatherd wandered by and said to the squirrel, "Why are you in that sack?" "You see, my wife mocks me as a hunchback. But she said that if I got into a sack like this, my back would straighten out!" "Really? My wife says the same thing to me. Get out and let me try it," pleaded the goatherd. So the goatherd let the squirrel out and climbed in himself, while the squirrel ran off with all the goats. The brothers came back and burned the sack, thinking it was the squirrel.

After six months or a year, the squirrel returned to his brothers' house, with a herd of cows and a herd of goats. "How did you get these?" they asked. "Remember, you burned me in the cremation ground? Well, when I went to heaven and saw my parents, they gave me all this livestock and sent me back down here." "Well, then, please kill us, too!" The squirrel took his brothers to the cremation ground, killed them and burned them.

Coming back home, he told their wives to pray in a corner for fifteen days till their husbands returned. After they had crouched in the corner for fourteen days, he said, "If I perform their funeral rites, they'll come back." He did the rites, but fifteen days passed, a month, six months, and still none of the brothers reappeared. Finally, the wives asked, "Where are your brothers, squirrel-boy?" "You treated me cruelly, didn't you? Well, I killed them all, those husbands of yours!" Now that he had their wives, their children and all that money, the squirrel-brother lived very happily.

Storyteller: Mallika (stories 56-57)
Sakkottai, Thanjavur District

58. A CRUEL MOTHER-IN-LAW

In a village there was a poor farmer, who had just one son. They were a poor - actually a very poor - family. While the boy was growing up, they all suffered a lot; when he was ten years old, his father died and his mother raised him all on her own. She worked as a daily labourer, working very hard so that he might have a good life. She put him through school, but after school he couldn't find work. He had studied a little, but still had no job, so she thought she should get him married. They were still poor but they found a girl from a family that was better off. He was handsome and educated, so they were able to make this alliance with a family that had a little money.

The new couple came to live in the man's house, where they still didn't have any money and he still didn't have a regular job. In the end, he did coolie work and could only give her a little money. Time passed and the mother-in-law began to mistreat the new bride. "Don't serve my son; just cook the food. He's my son and I worked hard to bring him up; and until I die, I'll serve him myself." The wife became a cook, but she wasn't allowed to serve her husband. The mother-in-law gave her oil and vegetables and told her to make a sauce; and when it was cooked, she inspected it, to see that all the vegetables were still in it. Only then did she serve it to her son, leaving the leftovers to his wife, who went to sleep hungry.

Things went on like this for some time, until the son said, "Mother, why not let her serve me? You brought her here as my wife, so let her serve me. Why trouble yourself in your age?" But his mother answered, "No. I'll feed you myself for as long as I live! How I suffered for you all those years. You think I'd let another woman feed you! She can wait till I'm dead."

After a mother says this to her son, what can he do? He kept quiet, and things continued as usual. Finally, his wife complained to him, "I might die the way she treats me." "I can't say anything to her," her husband replied. "But listen. Tomorrow make a really nice vegetable sambar, with tamarind and brinjal. Cook a lot and eat as much as you want. You've been so obedient all this time; now do something that you want. Eat well and leave a little behind, and then see what she says."

She did as he said. Until that day she had obeyed the old woman, but that day she ate first and only left her a little. When the woman saw the leftovers, she fished around in the sambar, found a few vegetables and was furious: "What's this? Where's the food!" "I ate it," said the daughter-in-law defiantly. When she heard that, the mother screamed, "Leave this house! I won't have a daughter-in-law who won't obey me. I worked hard to keep this family together! To raise my son! What audacity to disobey me! This is the end for you." She called her son and told him to stack up firewood in the cremation ground, saying, "We're going to burn her alive. Then we'll find another bride for you."

It was true that his mother had suffered to raise him, so he really couldn't disobey her - but he had an idea of how to obey her command. When he had stacked the wood in the cremation ground and returned, his mother told him to get a sack, beat his wife, put her inside and burn her alive. He didn't beat her, however, only put her in the sack and carried it toward the cremation ground; halfway there, he stopped and let his wife out, saying, "We can't change her ways or stop her mistreating you. So we've got to try another tack. I'll take you to a friend's house, where you can stay until I call for you."

After he left her at the friend's house, he went to the cremation ground, lit the wood and took some of the ashes back to his mother. "I've killed her, mother." "Good. That's over and now we can arrange another marriage," she said as she fed him.

He waited four or five days but didn't say anything about another marriage. Then he went to his friend's house and told his wife, "Come back to our house in a few days, and say you've been to Yama loka. Take these two saris; wear one and bring the other. When you come, I'll scream that you're a ghost come back to eat me. I'll scream that and hide, but you must say, 'No. I went to Yama loka and saw your father. He asked about you and about his wife. I told him that you two had burned me in the cremation ground and he said, 'Oh, wear this new sari and take this other one for my wife; she probably needs a new one.'" That's what you must tell my mother."

And so, a few days later she went to her mother-in-law's house, wearing one new sari and carrying the other. When she appeared, her husband screamed, "Look! I burned her to ashes, but she's come back!" He ran away and his mother said, "I'll take care of her." Brandishing a broom in her hand, the mother addressed the ghost, "So what's your story, young woman? How dare you come back from the dead!" "Oh, after I died I went to Yama loka and met father-in-law. He was really sympathetic and said, 'Your sari is all dirty.' Then he asked about you, gave me these saris, one for me and one for you, and told me to bring it to you. I only came to give this to you; I'm not going to stay a minute longer."

"Good gracious! You went there and got all this stuff? How did you do it?" "Well, first you have to shave your head. Then you ride on a donkey through the streets announcing, 'I'm going to Yama loka!' At the cremation ground, they'll light the flames and then you're there - in Yama loka. That's how." Immediately, her mother-in-law said, "I'm going there, too! He's rich up there and I'm not going to miss this chance."

She told her son to make a public announcement: "My mother is going to Yama loka," so that all the village would give her a proper send-off. The next morning the crowd gathered and shaved her bald; then they put her on the donkey and sent her on her way.

When she arrived at the cremation ground, the firewood was ready -her son had arranged everything. She lay down on the wood and said, "Light the fire!" Her son, who hated her, lit the fire and she burned. But she didn't go to Yama loka; she just died. The son and his wife had many children and lived together happily.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

59. A CRUEL DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

There was a rich family who owned a lot of land. They had married off their daughter but they also had a son. He, too, was educated and prosperous, so they found him a bride, an educated girl from a very wealthy family. Her family was even more grand than his. The mother-in-law was getting old, so the young daughter-in-law wouldn't obey her and made sure her husband didn't either. She insisted that he listen only to her! Soon her husband was completely under her control. "She's from a fine family; I'll just let mother die. Who cares?" he said to himself. He began to treat his wife like a goddess and learned to hate his mother.

When his mother tried to talk to him, he said: "Don't get in our way! You embarrass us in front of our educated friends with your village speech and habits! I don't want you in this house any longer. I'm going to build you a little hut where we'll feed you; you're to stay there and not set foot in this house again!"

They built the hut and she lived there. Of course, now she was even older and began to mumble to herself, "I'm ready to die; nothing more to live for. As long as my son, whom I struggled to raise, has a good life." They brought food to her, but she never left the hut.

Before long her son and his wife had two children, two sons. Now and then they sent one of them to take food to the old lady. "Why are you in here, granny? Why not eat with us; it would be easier than us bringing the food to you," the boy said to her. And she replied, "No, I can't do that because your mother and father won't have me. They make me stay here; if I enter that house, they'll give me a hard time. They'll beat you, too, if you don't go back. Go along now and play." Things continued like this for a while until, eventually, the grandmother died of sorrow.

The couple raised their sons, educated them and made good marriages for them. At first, however, they couldn't find a good job. After a while, their mother began to harass her daughters-in-law, just like she'd harassed her mother-in-law. Immediately, the sons said to her, "Look mother! Get this straight from the very beginning! Don't interfere in our lives. Got it!" And she said, "How I struggled to raise you, and now you speak to me like this! Tell me to get out of your way, will you? I'll thrash you both." When they heard this, the sons said, "Remember grandmother? And what you did to her - put her away and fed her in that hut, didn't you?"

So they built a hut for her and fed her a little rice, while they all ate big meals in the house. It was too much for the mother, who said to herself, "I suffered for them and now look where I am. What's the point of living any more? They don't want me! Might as well die," and she did.

After that, the sons and their wives lived happily.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

60. A HUNTER'S STORY

There was a hunter. Every day he had to go into the forest and kill something or other to survive. It was all done with a bow and arrows, because he didn't have a gun. This was the only way he could survive - go into the forest, shoot a bird, or a dove or a rabbit, sell it in the market and eat. This is how he passed his days, though he was a pious man; that is, he was a man of true religious devotion, but he lived by killing animals. For years he lived like this, killing something and bringing food to his family; it was a tough life - if he didn't kill anything, he didn't eat.

One day - this is a story about how animals are better friends than humans - one day he picked up his bow and arrows and went hunting but got nothing. It was late afternoon but he still hadn't gotten anything and was exhausted, tired and hungry. He wandered farther and farther in the forest, but still found nothing; when it began to rain, he decided he would have to go home empty-handed. It was dark and he was in a terrible state, when suddenly a tiger leapt out! Scared to death, the hunter climbed up a tree, going high up so the tiger couldn't reach him.

But a bear was living in that tree, and when the hunter saw it, he thought he was done for: "Oh, no! I flee from a tiger only to face a bear. He's going to eat me for sure!" His whole body shook with fear, but the bear said, "Don't be afraid. You have sought refuge here, in my house, so I'm not going to harm you. You're my guest and may stay here until the tiger leaves." With these kind words, the bear gestured to him to come closer, and the man began to feel less afraid and lay down to rest.

Down below, however, the tiger was still waiting and said, "Brother bear! He's a hunter who kills the likes of you and me. Yet you offer him refuge with sweet words. Beware! In the morning he might kill us both. Besides, I'm famished. Push him down here so that I can have something to eat and you can be safe; that way we both benefit." "You have a point," replied the bear. "He is a hunter, a killer. But, you see, he's come here to my place, and I can't harm someone who is in my house, even if he is a hunter, even if he might harm me. No matter what you say, I'm not going to push him out, so you might as well go along home."

The man was tired and started to nod off; he almost fell off the branch, « when the bear said, "You're going to fall right into that tiger's mouth because you're tired. Better lay your head on me and go to sleep. I'll hold on to you." Believing the bear, the man rested against it and went to sleep. Then the tiger said, "Now's our chance! If you don't take it, we'll both lose because he's going to harm you in the end. Push him down now and then we'll both be happy. Why shouldn't you? After all, he's a killer of us animals!" "Nothing doing! I'm not going to harm a man who is a guest in my house. There's no point in repeating your plea," said the bear.

After a little while, the man woke up. Now the bear was sleepy and said to him, "Let me sleep for a while in your lap. You stay awake and when I wake up, you can sleep some more." When the bear went to sleep, the tiger below spoke to the man, "Listen to me. I only wanted to eat you because I'm hungry and you're a hunter. Let that be. You've taken refuge with that bear, but he's got a secret plan. He's going to eat you in the morning; don't think you're going to get away alive. I'm about to leave anyway, but that bear's going to make a meal of you." "Really? What can I do?" asked the man from above. "He's sleeping in your lap, right?" said the tiger. "Just push him a little, and I'll eat him up. I get my meal, the bear's dead and you go safely home."

Thinking this over, the man said to himself, "He's right. That bear could eat me tomorrow." So he said to the tiger, "Here comes the bear," and he pushed him down. But as the bear fell through the tree, he grabbed hold of a branch and saved himself. When he began to climb back up, the man got really scared: "I've betrayed him; he'll never let me off this time!" His whole body was shaking, his mind frozen with fear, as the bear came slowly up to him and said, "You've done wrong; you tried to kill me. Still, this is my house and you came here seeking my help. I'll not harm you, ever. Believe me."

With these words, the bear calmed the man's fears and let him sleep in the tree that night. Seeing this, the tiger realised that he was never going to persuade the bear and had better look elsewhere for something to eat. So the tiger left.

In the morning the tiger was gone and the bear said to the man, "You can go home safely now. The tiger has gone. However, don't ever do again what you did to me. Change your ways and live a moral life. You did wrong, and if I hadn't been lucky I would have been eaten by that tiger. I escaped, but I didn't take revenge on you. Now go."

You see, the point of this tale is that humans have a worse nature than animals.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

61. AN OVERZEALOUS SERVANT

In a town there was a raja, who was a just and righteous ruler. He never did anything wrong. There was also an uneducated man, a poor man, but he was incredibly strong and could beat up fifty men at a time. The raja thought he would be perfect as his personal bodyguard, especially since he had heard that this man was very loyal to him. So the raja asked him to accept the responsibility of being his guard, and he agreed.

As the raja's personal guard, he beat up anyone who said even the slightest thing against the raja! A tiny word of criticism earned a bruised body. He was ruthless. The raja kept him nearby, even when he was asleep, because this man was capable of protecting him from any danger or enemy who might approach. The bodyguard thought, "The raja has given me a heavy responsibility and I must protect him from every sort of harm, even if it means my life." With firm resolve, this loyal man guarded the raja.

One day, in the afternoon, the raja got sleepy and lay down, while the guard stood by his side in case any untoward event occurred. As he was standing there, a little fly came and rested on the raja's throat. Right away the guard got angry: "This fly, which sits on everyone's feces, dares to sit on His Highness, our Raja! I won't stand for it!" Furious at the fly, he took out his sword and brought it down, cutting off the raja's head! [laughter] The raja died! Overcome with grief at what he'd done, the guard committed suicide.

You see, that's the nature of a fool. And it's hardly surprising that they should end up killing themselves.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

62. A TALE OF GREED

Once there was a great bhakta, a pure and pious man. He always wore clean veshtis, his wife wore gold-bordered saris and they smeared themselves with holy ash. The neighbours were jealous of them. There was also a "rowdy" in that town, so the neighbours gave him 500 rupees and said, "I want you to burn down a certain house. Take this advance; afterward, you can get the rest." The rowdy agreed but asked, "How will I know which house?" "That's easy. I'll put a lotus flower on the roof of the house. Start fires both inside and outside that house."

With this agreement, they separated. Later when the neighbour plucked a lotus flower and brought it home, his wife asked, "What's the lotus for?" "It's from a special flower garden. Don't touch it." In the middle of the night, the man got up and put the lotus on his neighbour's house and went back to sleep. His wife couldn't sleep, however, got up, saw the lotus and thought, "Why should they have our beautiful lotus?"

So she got it and put it on their roof. Soon the thief came, looking for the lotus, house by house. Then he saw the flower... and burned the house down.

*Storyteller: Arunan
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

63. A CLEVER DAUGHTER

A boy was born in a poor family, and when he was young both his parents died. He grew up with great hardship and had to do coolie work to feed himself. Eventually he decided he should marry and went to another poor family to ask for a bride. That family agreed and he got married. He continued to work as a daily labourer, bringing home a little rice each day. His wife pounded and husked it, and picked out the stones; whatever was left, she cooked for their night meal.

This is how they lived, day after day, in their little hut. He didn't even have a decent shirt to wear. They ate what he brought home every day, and if he didn't work they went hungry. He saw no way to make a better life for themselves. His father-in-law had given them two calves as dowry, and soon they grew up to be bullocks. But they too became a problem: they needed to be cared for, yet his wife refused, saying, "My father gave them to you, so you take care of them. I've got a lot of other work to do." They went on like this, eating whatever he brought home each day, with nothing saved.

One day a violent rainstorm washed away their hut. There he sat with absolutely nothing, in total despair. All he could do was take the bullocks and plough someone else's field. He said to his wife, "I'm going to take the bullocks to plough; bring me some lunch at midday." "How am I going to do that when we don't have anything in the house?" "You don't have even a handful of rice? Nothing saved for my lunch?" he growled but shouldered the plough and drove the bullocks to the field.

He spent the whole morning trying to harness the bullocks because they wandered all over the place, and by the time he'd caught them and ploughed a little, it was eight o'clock in the morning already! He was disgusted and felt defeated.

Back home, his wife didn't know what to do; he had told her to bring him "a half measure" for lunch, but she had no rice. In the end, she swept up all the rice husks, enough for a half measure, boiled that and set out for the field. It was nine o'clock, and he was dying of hunger, when she arrived and called him over to eat. He unhitched the bullocks and sat down, but when he saw the food, he said, "This isn't rice! It's just husks!" "Well, what do you expect me to do? You told me to cook 'a half measure'. So I did." "This is the end! I'm no longer your husband and you're no longer my wife," he screamed.

"I've suffered a lot in this marriage," she said and he replied, "Fine. Go back to your parents. You've suffered enough and so have I. We can't stand this any longer. Go away." Still burning with hunger, he went back to plough the field.

She went away and thought, "He said I must go away because we 'can't stand' any longer." So she went home and stood on top of the mortar stone! When he came back, fed the animals and entered the hut, he saw her standing like that! "What are you doing?" he asked. "You said I must go away because we can't stand any longer. Well, I'm standing now." He got even more furious, whipped her with the lash used for the bullocks and told her to get out!

This time she went to the local raja and told him the wrongs her husband had done to her. "We have had nothing in the house since the day we were married, yet he tells me to cook meals. How can I do that? And when I can't, he gets angry, whips me and tells me to go back to my parents. Look at these welts!" The raja was incensed! How could she possibly cook for her husband if he doesn't give her anything? And then hitting her for not cooking when she has nothing! That's wrong, absolutely wrong.

The raja sent a man to summon the husband. Now the raja also had a daughter, who was well-educated and sat watching all of this. She was an only child, and a little spoiled. When the husband came to the raja's assembly, the raja asked, "Why did you beat your wife and tell her to go to her parents?" "I work hard every day and give her my wages. That's how we get by. But when I tell her to bring me 'a half measure', she brings me a half measure of rice husks! Then I tell her we 'can't stand this any more', and when I come home she's standing on the mortar! What a dumbbell! I'd rather die than live with a wife like her. That's why I beat her. I don't think I did anything wrong."

"Well," said the raja, "if you had provided her with enough money, that's one thing. But how can you expect her to cook when there's nothing in the house? You shouldn't beat her. It's wrong and here's your punishment..." At that moment, his daughter, who was listening to every word, interrupted, "Father, don't punish him. She didn't manage the family well, so why punish him?" "What do you know about these things?" demanded her father and she said, "He worked hard every day and gave her his wages; shouldn't she be able to save a little bit from that? I think she's the one to blame."

"You're wrong. He didn't earn enough," answered her father. "No, father. Even if she has only half a sari, a wife can manage if she has her wits about her. But this woman couldn't survive if she had a thousand rupees!" "How dare you oppose my decision in this case!" shouted her father. "If you think he's right and she's wrong, and that a woman should be able to live on half a sari, then prove it! You're no longer my daughter anyway, since you contradicted me. Here, take this torn sari and live with this man in poverty to prove your point. Leave my house, tie on the tali and go to his house. And you [to the wife], go back to your parents."

The raja was furious because his daughter had shown the temerity to challenge his wisdom. "All right," said his daughter, who then left, married the man and went to live in his house. Entering his hut, she looked around and saw rice husks in one corner, dirty rice grains in another, dust and dirt everywhere, complete chaos.

Quickly she set to work: she swept away the husks, cleaned the grains, picked out the stones, pounded the grains, and before long she had four or five big bags of cookable paddy. Every morning she rose at 4:30, made the dung cakes, put them out to dry and cooked a little rice. From the small amount of paddy he brought home every day, she cooked some and saved some, and little by little their lives improved.

Soon the neighbours got jealous, and thought, "How could this man, who had nothing, suddenly be better off than us? How could he be so practical, so frugal!" While they grumbled among themselves, wondering how to ruin his life, a man across the street killed a snake. This was their chance, they thought, and one of the women threw it on the roof of the couple's house. That dead snake would bring them bad luck, she thought.

Meanwhile, the raja's wife had been taking her bath; she removed her diamond necklace and all her jewels and laid them aside. At that moment, an eagle flew overhead and spied the glittering jewels. "Looks like something good to eat," it thought, swooped down and flew off with the jewels. Pecking at the jewels, it realized it was nothing to eat. Soon the eagle saw the snake lying on their roof, so it dropped the jewels and flew off with the snake. Jewels worth thousands of rupees - they came from the raja's palace, after all - now lay on the roof!

In the morning, when the raja's clever daughter rose and went outside to make the dung cakes, she saw something glittering on the roof; at first she had no idea what it was but then realised they were diamonds, golden necklaces, and priceless gems! Looking closely, she thought they looked like the jewels in her mother's house, but didn't give it another thought and kept them safely in the house.

At the palace, there was an uproar! "Theft! Jewels stolen!" They searched here, there and everywhere, but they couldn't find the jewels. After that people began to talk about the raja's shortcomings and his fortune began to decline; eventually, little by little, he lost all that he had, while his daughter had good luck and acquired more and more. The raja went from bad to worse, and in the end he was reduced to begging for his food. While he begged on the streets, she was living in a mansion - you see, she carefully sold the jewels and worked hard and now her husband enjoyed a very comfortable life.

One day as the old raja went on his begging rounds, he passed her house, not knowing whose it was. She heard someone asking for food and stepped outside to give the man some food - and saw it was her own father! Without revealing who she was, she said, "Come inside and eat."

After he ate, she invited him to stay in their house for a few days, but he refused, saying, "Amma, you'd have to feed me forever and that wouldn't be right." "Well, who are you? How did you come to this fate?" she asked. When he told his story, she told him who she was.

Then he said, "I see it all now. I'm suffering because I did wrong and caused you to suffer. And you got to this position with half a sari! You were right back then, my daughter! You are a clever girl!" When he had admitted that his daughter had made the right judgment in the assembly, the raja died and the others lived happily.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

64. THE CLEVER WIFE RECOVERS THE JEWELS

Once there was a devotee, a true bhakta, who was very intense in his devotion to god and lived a pious life. He and his wife knew no hardship and lived very comfortably. This pious family led a life free of trouble, but the man next door got nowhere, no matter how hard he worked. He struggled to get ahead, but nothing went right for him and so he got jealous of his neighbour. "This isn't fair! I work just as hard, maybe harder, but he's much better off!" With these thoughts, he waited for a chance to ruin the other man's life. Of course, the bhakta trusted everyone, because he had faith in god.

One day the pious man said to his jealous neighbour, "We're going on a month-long pilgrimage, to see all the famous temples and I don't want to keep our cash and jewels in the house because someone might steal them. I'd like to hide them near the temple; please guard them until we return." You see, he trusted everyone and had no idea that this man was jealous of him. Putting the jewels in a bundle, he hid them in a niche in a wall near the temple. No one knew about this except the other man, to whom he said, "Keep an eye on this for me; I'll come back in a month."

Exactly thirty days later, after they had traveled to all the holy places and worshipped all the gods, he and his wife came home. Before going directly to his house, however, he thought he'd check on his jewels. But they were missing! What had happened is that the neighbour saw his chance and took it, reassuring himself by saying, "I'll just say I know nothing about it and tell him someone must have stolen them."

When the bhakta went to bed that night, he was miserable and his wife said, "Why all this worry? We've just gone to all those wonderful places? What's wrong?" "My dear! All our jewels are gone! I hid them, trusting in god, but they're gone. What am I going to do? If I ask our neighbour, he'll say he doesn't know anything. What's gone is gone, but how are we going to live?"

"Don't worry," his wife said. "I've got a plan." "What's that?" "Go back to the same man and tell him you're going on another pilgrimage and that you want him to look after some more jewelry - say you kept some of my best pieces in another box. Then ask him to add them to the others and to keep them safe. Tell him you'll give him the box in a few days."

So the bhakta went to his neighbour and said, "We're going to visit a few more temples because we missed some; the thing is, I've got more jewels to give to you for protection. Add them to the others, and I'll get them all when we return." "Good idea. Give them to me and I'll look after them all together," said the neighbour. "Wait here for a moment while I go and get the jewels; then we can put them with the others," said the bhakta. Now the other man thought, "Better put back the jewels I stole so that he doesn't notice they're missing; after he puts these other ones there, I'll take the whole lot!"

Grabbing the jewels he'd stolen in the first place, the jealous man ran to the hiding spot, buried them again and ran back home. He was sitting there nonchalantly when the bhakta arrived with the second box of jewels. Of course, this box was completely empty. "Let's go and put this box with the others," said the bhakta and the two of them set off. When they got there and looked, the bhakta saw the jewels that he had put there in the beginning. "She was right!" [teller chuckles] he thought to himself and then said to his neighbour, "These jewels are a little dirty; I better take them home and clean them."

Putting those jewels in his empty box, he went back home and told his wife the good news. The neighbour thought that god had caused the man to recover his jewels, so he changed his bad habits and lived a good life thereafter.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

65. THE POWER OF JEALOUSY

Once there was a bhakta, a very pious man. His wife, too, was very religious. They had no children, but they prayed and worshipped and eventually a child was born. It was a girl and they raised her affectionately. From the time she was five years old, she obeyed her parents dutifully; even at her young age she washed pots and swept the house. At school, she got the highest marks of any child in the school, and she always spoke kindly to everyone, to all their neighbours, to anyone and to everyone. However, when the neighbours watched her grow up like this, they got jealous: "We've worked so hard to bring up our kids, but they're not like her at all! She's so much better than our daughters. No matter how much money we spend on them, they don't turn out like her!" Her good marks, the way she helped her parents, her kindness to everyone - all this made the neighbours jealous.

She grew up in this atmosphere of jealousy, but she still gained the best marks in school. Then, when she came of age, her parents stopped her education - that's what they did back then. She had reached a marriageable age, so they kept her at home and started to look for a husband for her. Several prospective grooms came, but whenever the neighbours saw a man approaching the house to look at the girl, they called him over and said in quiet tones, "That girl is a little crazy; something funny in her head. Wanders around at night like a ghost. If you were going to marry her and take her away, we wouldn't be saying this to you; but if you stay here, you're bound to ask why we didn't tell you about her in the first place. So we thought we should say it now. You can make up your own mind, but I'm telling you she's a bit funny, not quite right."

Because they dropped these hints all the young men who came went away and never came back. This is how the neighbours - as a group - managed to turn away every single man who came to the girl's house. The girl herself, despite all this injustice and cruelty, kept a cool head and continued to do her work diligently.

While the neighbours were ruining her marriage chances, a man from a nearby village came there on business. He was a small-time merchant, who bought cardamom seeds and grains and whatnot and went around selling them to make a living. During his rounds, he had an opportunity to observe this girl, her behaviour and habits, and he was very impressed.

"What's going on here?" he wondered. "She would make an excellent wife, but she's not married; why are the neighbours telling people she's no good? Well, I know she's a good person, so I'm going to marry her, no matter what they say." Having made up his mind, he went to the house and asked to marry her. Her parents said, "If your family accepts us, we are ready to marry her to you." With this temporary agreement, he left, but as he was leaving, the neighbours spoke to him, "Don't be a fool. A hundred men have come and none have returned. She's possessed by ghosts, you see, and wanders through the village at night. She only seems to be obedient and normal. We're only telling you all this because we know you so well and respect you; otherwise we wouldn't say anything. If you marry her, there'll come a time when you'll get angry at us for not warning you; that's why we're telling you now. Better marry someone else. On the other hand, if you want to marry her, by all means do so. It's really nothing to us, one way or the other."

They spoke to him as they did to the others, but he replied, "Keep quiet! I'm going to marry her. That's all there is to it." He left and quickly returned to tell the girl's family that his family had accepted the marriage. So the wedding went ahead.

After the wedding, he took his bride to his own house. His wife was such a good woman that the first thing she said to him was this: "Why should you run around selling things like this; it's bad for your health. Stay at home and rest." But he said, "Things don't work like that. People respect me only when I've got cash in my hand. Somehow or other, I've got to earn money." So he went on his usual rounds of business.

He had a younger sister, who also lived in the village, and he did whatever she said; she was educated and a little proud. In her husband's house, the new bride was very dutiful toward her mother-in-law and did whatever task was given to her. She always fed her first and always gave her the hot bathwater first. She served her husband with great respect, too. The man and her mother thought she was simply a goddess!

When the sister saw that her mother and brother respected the new bride more than her, she felt angry and jealous: "Who is this little chit anyway! One way or another, I've got to do something!" Before long, when she realised that her mother respected and loved her daughter-in-law because of her unrepachable character and behaviour, she got an idea.

One day, after her brother had left the house, she came over and pretended she was upset. Her mother asked what was the matter and she said, "Well! You and brother think this woman is some kind of goddess, but you don't know her! She's clever all right, because she's involved with the guy next door. She hides it from you, but everyone knows they're doing it and they laugh at us behind our backs. Brother's at work and you're inside the house, so you don't know anything. But when I go out, everyone laughs at me. I can't bear it any longer - it's driving me to suicide. But what's the point of telling you? You think she's a goddess!"

With tears, she told her story, but her mother scolded her, "You stupid donkey! Brother's wife is not at all like that; she's pure and good. Don't speak about her like this!" At that moment, the man next door came and called for the brother - because the sister had told him he was at home - and the new bride leaned out the window and said he had gone out.

Hearing these voices, the sister said to her mother, "See that! What'd I tell you. She's talking alone with that guy!" When she heard this, the mother began to wonder: "Could she be ruining the family? But she's so good. Still, maybe she is doing this. Maybe what my daughter says is true."

The brother came back from his business and saw his sister was in a strange mood; he was surprised because she was always so cheerful. "What's wrong, sister? Don't tell me that your husband beats you," he said to her. "No, not at all. He does whatever I say. Runs when I say 'run' and stops when I say, 'stop'. He's not the problem; another person is, and I don't .how. long I can bear it." "What is it?" insisted her brother. "Are you going to listen?" "Tell me." "Are you sure?" "Good news or bad news. I want to know."

"Well, you and mother think your wife is some kind of goddess. But I tell you she's up to no good with the guy next door and the whole village is laughing at me. Can't hold my head up in public; it's humiliating! You don't know what's happening, but I do. I

know if I told you, you'd never believe me, so I decided it's better to die and not tell you. That's why I'm so upset. I don't want to tell you this, but..."

"What are you saying about my wife! She's not like that! How could you speak like this!" "That's what I expected; I knew you'd say that. That's why I want to die; but even mother's seen them. Ask her if it's true or not."

He called his mother and asked her if what his sister said was true. Their mother kept silent, and the sister said, "C'mon, mother. Aren't you going to tell him what you saw? Didn't you see her talking with him? Did you or didn't you, mother!" "Well, I don't know, son. They said something through the window... I don't..." Because he trusted his mother he decided that what his sister had said must be true. "My wife is deceiving me," he thought in anger.

His wife had prepared the food and called him to wash up and eat, "Come along; you must be tired from your long trip. Come and eat." But he shouted, "I don't want your food. Get out." "What's wrong? I've never heard you speak like this before. Why are you scolding me?" At that point, the sister, who was sitting nearby, said, "You see what I mean! You thought she was a goddess, but here she is, speaking back to you. You don't believe me, but here it is in front of your own eyes!" Now he was convinced, and he cut off both her hands!

At that moment god appeared and asked her why she was crying, and she answered, "I've lost my hands; please give them back to me." "If I do, what will you do with them," asked god. "I'll use them to serve my husband as long as he lives," she said. God restored her hands and vanished.

Brother, sister, and mother all watched this scene with utter astonishment. The brother realised that his wife was faithful after all and that his sister had lied. They fell at her feet and asked forgiveness, but she asked them to forgive her: "I'm sorry for any wrong I may have done." You see, she never criticised them, not even then!

In the end, the brother killed his sister, and rest of the family lived happily. This shows that although the sister was educated, her jealousy brought about all this trouble. The wife was dutiful to the highest degree - that's why her husband and mother-in-law respected her.

*Storyteller: Kariyaperummal (stories 58-61, 63-65)
Thanjavur, Thanjavur District*

66. THE FOUR FRIENDS

Once there was a raja. He had a beautiful daughter, whom many, many men wanted to marry. One day the raja announced, "I've made my decision. The man who will marry my daughter must pass tests; he must show skills. Only a man who does that can marry her." When a bhuta heard about this, he fell in love with the princess, so he disguised himself as a prince and abducted her. Then the raja announced, "Whoever can rescue my daughter may marry her." Throughout the land, men attempted to rescue her, but no one succeeded.

In that district there also lived an old woman who raised four children, each of whom had a separate talent. The oldest had a mirror in which he could see where anyone was; the next had the strength to carry four men; the third had the ability to catch a bhuta in a sack; and the last could shoot an arrow from his bow and kill, from a great distance. Four men, with four skills.

Going to the raja, the four of them told him that they would bring back the princess. The raja replied, "Bring her back if you can, but I'll marry her to whoever actually rescues her." Only the combined strength of the four could bring back the princess, so there was going to be a problem.

The first man looked into his mirror and saw where the bhuta held the princess. When he identified the place, the second man, who had the strength to carry four men, took them all to the bhuta's place. He was sleeping, so the third man put the bhuta in the sack. Then they all ran off with the princess. Soon the bhuta awoke and started to chase them, but the last man took his bow and shot an arrow which killed the monster.

They brought back the princess, but the raja had a big problem. Four men brought back his daughter - so who should marry her? Now, you have to tell me the answer. Who should marry her?

Storyteller: Murugesan

67. THE GREAT INDIAN SCIENTISTS

Great men from America, Russia and India gathered together and talked about their nation's achievements. The first to talk about his country's greatness was the Russian scientist: "In the field of space, our success is phenomenal. Our man, Yuri, was the first man sent into space. We are first in space."

Next was the American: "Our country was the first democracy. We showed the way for individual thinking and all sorts of modern progress. Although we were colonised by the British, and thus were unable to be first in space like the Russians, we were able to send a space mission to Mars."

The Indian spoke last: "You have both achieved much, but we are going to do something even greater." "What is that?" the other two asked eagerly. "We will achieve something that neither of you has achieved. We will land on the sun."

The two other great men were amazed: "The sun is too hot, even on earth it goes over 100 degrees. How can you land on the sun and survive?"

"We've thought all about that and we have a plan," said the Indian. "We will land at night!"

Storyteller: Puvita

68: THE DUMMY MOTHER-IN-LAW

Two brothers got married and lived separately. The younger brother's wife wanted to have a mother-in-law so she asked her husband to make her one. He made a dummy mother-in-law, which held up both her hands and spread out the five fingers on each. His wife then asked her sister-in-law, "I don't understand. Why is she holding up her fingers?" "Oh, that," answered the older brother's wife. "Ten fingers mean she's asking for ten measures of rice. You're supposed to pound all that rice and then sit down in our house for about half an hour."

Every day the younger sister-in-law pounded ten measures of rice, but in the end she got nothing! You see, after she had pounded it and left, her sister-in-law would come and take it all to her own house. She didn't leave a single kernel behind. When her husband came back, he asked his wife, "Where is all that rice I left you?" "I pounded it, all ten measures that mother-in-law asked for." "Che! You can't run a household. Clear out!"

The young woman who told this tale said she read it in a Tamil magazine. She ran off, taking the dummy mother-in-law with her, and found a tree to sleep in that night. As she slept, four thieves arrived with their loot and began to divide it beneath the tree. Just then she had a dream and dropped the dummy mother-in-law, which frightened the thieves: "A ghost! A ghost!" they screamed and ran off, leaving all the money behind.

She scooped up all the money, went back home and gave it to her husband. Soon her sister-in-law asked how she got the money and the younger woman said, "I took my dummy mother-in-law, slept in the tree and then the thieves left their money behind."

Immediately the sister-in-law said to her husband, "Make me a dummy mother-in-law just like hers. I'll get us some money." So he made a dummy, which she took and climbed a tree; when the thieves came, she threw it down on them, but she wasn't sleeping - you see, she did it deliberately. And so the thieves shouted at her, "You fooled us then, but not this time." They beat her terribly, and she returned home empty-handed.

Storyteller: Suriyakala

69. A FARMER'S DAUGHTER'S RIDDLE

A farmer got married, but for ten whole years he had no children. He was very upset and thought, "What's wrong with us? Everyone else has children, why not us? Well, they say you will get a child if you go to temples." So he went to a Murugan temple and soon a daughter was born. As the years passed, she grew up to be a beautiful girl and eventually went to school.

People said to him, "Too bad that you have a daughter; a son would have been better." "Perhaps," he said, "but she is god's gift." The child was very intelligent and talented, even at an early age - she was born with god's blessing, you see. If anyone came to their house while her parents were away, she would tell them they had gone to work in the fields. But she said it in a particular way.

One day a man came and asked for her mother, and this is what she said: "She left today to revive yesterday's dead." Then the stranger asked for her father and she said, "The nurturer left to nurture."

The man stood in disbelief, unable to comprehend her answer: "Amazing! She's only five and talks like the *Tirukkural*. How are we going to figure out what she said?" He racked his brains for ten minutes but couldn't understand anything. Asking directions to her family's field, he decided to go there and ask her parents directly.

When he arrived at the field and her parents welcomed him, the visitor said, "I've come on important business. Our son is getting married and I wish to invite you to the wedding; so I've come personally." The parents got out a wooden plank for him to sit on.

Then he said, "I also asked your daughter where you were and she gave me this strange answer: 'She left today to revive yesterday's dead. The nurturer left to nurture.' I don't understand it at all. You've got to explain it to me."

"C'mon! You don't get it? 'Yesterday's dead' means the young shoots picked yesterday to be transplanted today. The other bit - 'the nurturer' - is a secret saying among farmers. We plant and water and care for coconut trees, banana trees, guava trees - so we're the nurturers."

When the father got home, he felt proud of his daughter and said to her, "You are a wonderful girl, a gift to me." He was proud, very proud.

Storyteller: Tankavel (stories 69-70)

70. GREAT DESIRE BREEDS GREAT DISASTER

There was a potter named Periyappan, and he was really stupid. There was also a big landlord, a Gounder, who owned a lot of land - corn, wheat, sugarcane - all very fertile lands, while the potter owned a mere two acres. He went to the Gounder's house and asked his wife, "Amma, how many seeds should I plant on my land?" "Use one bushel. It'll grow fine," she said. "One bushel for my two acres," he repeated to himself and returned home, where he saw all his pots lined up: a one-bushel pot, a two-bushel pot and so on. He took a one-bushel pot, smashed it, ground up the pieces into fine powder and sprinkled it over Ms fields! What kind of harvest is he going to get? If you plant rice, you get rice; if corn, then corn - but broken pots? Well, he got a field of flowers! Incredibly beautiful flowers!

He went all around the town boasting about his wonderful crop! At first everyone was astonished, but later they got jealous about the potter's fertile field. Soon Indra's white elephant, Airavatam, attracted by the flowers, came down from heaven and began to graze in the potter's field. The elephant's legs looked like mortars, so the potter thought, "I see! Can't stand a stupid potter getting ahead, can they? No, they've got to graze their mortars in my field! We'll put a stop to that!" So he collected all the mortars in the town and tied them up.

That was the first day. On the second day, as the elephant was eating the flowers, the potter saw its tail swinging back and forth. This time he said, "Yesterday they tried to graze their mortars and now they're sweeping my fields'." So he grabbed all the brooms in the town and tied them up. Watching this, the people in town began to wonder if he'd gone totally insane!

On the third day he saw the elephant's trunk swinging up and down and cried, "What! Now they're grazing pestles in my fields! Well, they can't ruin my crops so easily as that!" So he rounded up all the pestles and tied them up.

On the fourth day, he again saw the tail swinging to and fro and he seized it, saying, "I'll take care of those brooms once and for all!" He hung on as the elephant swung him to Indra's heaven, where the animal said to Indra, "I've been grazing in this stupid potter's field, so you owe him a gift. Besides, he is a total idiot; thinks my legs are mortars, my tail's a broom and my trunk's a pestle."

Indra responded by giving the potter two bushels of gold coins. Tying up the gold in a sack, the potter again grabbed hold of the elephant's tail and swung back down to earth. Now, his wife hadn't seen him since the morning when he went to the field; so when he showed up, several days later, with the bundle slung over his shoulder, she shouted, "Where've you been?" "Been? I grabbed hold of this broom grazing in the field and it swung me somewhere or other, where they gave me two bushels of this stuff. Fry it and let's eat."

They tried to fry the coins but nothing happened. "Okay, let's boil it and eat; I'm famished," he said. Of course, you can't boil gold either, so he said, "All right. We'll eat it raw." He put the coins in his mouth, but they just went round and round! "This stuff is useless," he cried and threw it all in the rubbish. In the end, they went back to their old ways and ate cold rice.

There was also a goldsmith in this town, a very poor man. One day a woman came and asked him to repair her broken nose-pin, but the poor man didn't even have charcoal for a fire! So he said to his wife, "Go over to that potter's place and get some charcoal from his rubbish pile." As she stirred the rubbish to get some

charcoal, she saw those gold coins the potter had thrown out! Deeper and deeper she dug until she had gathered the entire two bushels of gold, put it all in a bag and went back to her husband.

She was overjoyed: "We're rich! No more poverty!" When she showed it to her husband, he too was happy, but said, "Better hide it away quickly; it could bring trouble. Meanwhile, I'll go and have a chat with that stupid potter."

The goldsmith went to the potter's house and said, "Hello! How're you doing, friend?" "Oh, pretty good. Yesterday, these brooms were grazing in my field; they swept me away somewhere and I was given a present. But I couldn't fry or boil or chew it! So I threw it away." "If you go again, will they give you more of that stuff?" "Sure. Those brooms grazing in my fields are generous. They'll probably give you something, too."

The next morning, the goldsmith and the potter went to the potter's field. "How do you grab hold of the broom?" asked the goldsmith. The potter showed him by grabbing the elephant's tail, and then the goldsmith grabbed onto the potter's legs. Suddenly the elephant flew off, with the two of them dangling below.

Midway to heaven, the goldsmith asked the potter, "By the way, how much is a bushel of gold?" "About this much," said the potter, spreading his hands. He let go of the elephant's tail and they both fell to earth and died.

That's why they say, "Great desire breeds great disaster."

Storyteller: Tankavel (stories 69-70)

71. A NEVER-DO-WELL SUCCEEDS

A Kallar man and his wife lived together with their only child. One day as they left the house, they said to him, "Look after the baby goat, son. We'll be back soon." After they left, the little goat was chewing its cud, but the boy thought it was mocking him so he hit it on the head and accidentally killed it. When his parents returned and asked about the goat, he said, "It mocked me and I killed it." They accepted that and continued to keep him at home.

Again the parents left and told him to look after the house; when they were gone, the boy started to look around for something to do. He saw a rat and grabbed a pestle, but the rat ran up to the rafters. "They told me to look after things," he thought, so he lit a lantern, which burned down the house. When his parents returned, he said, "I was looking after the house and a rat came so I burned it up."

They didn't know what to do - he was their only child, you see. Again they just told him to stay at home and went to work, cutting bamboo. They left some rice in the house for their supper, but he ate it all. When they got back and he said he'd eaten all their food, they were furious, "What's the point of keeping him," they shouted and threw him into the river, tied to a piece of bamboo.

He floated downstream and came to a banana grove, where the owner lifted him out of the water. "What's your name," he asked. "Name? It's 'Skins-cover-ground'," said the boy. "I see. Well, look after the garden until I come back," said the man. After he left, the boy proceeded to eat all the fruits, littering the garden with skins. When the man returned and saw the boy tossing the fruit skins everywhere, he screamed, "Get out of here!"

Off the boy went and met a washerman and washerwoman. "Give me some work," he asked. "What's your name?" asked the man. "It's 'He's-gone'," was his answer. Then the woman asked and he said, "'He's-come' is my name." One name to the husband, and one to the wife.

Then, when they weren't looking, he grabbed the clothes they were washing and ran off. "He's gone! He's gone!" screamed the husband. "He's come! He's come!" screamed Ms wife. Thinking she was mocking him, he beat his wife. "He told me Ms name was 'He's-come'," she explained and then they realised he had deceived them.

Next the boy came to someone grazing a horse, who asked him his name. "My name is 'horse-man'," he said. "Look after my horse, till I return," said the man and left. When he came back and the horse was gone, he went running around screaming, "Horse-man rode off on my horse! Horse-man on the horse!" But everyone laughed at him, "Of course a horseman rides a horse! What's it to you anyway, stupid!"

Then the boy came across an old woman and a young woman standing by the riverbank, unable to cross. "Granny, I'll take her across and then come back for you," he said. The old woman agreed, "All right, son. Take her first. What's your name?" "Lady's-man," he said. He went across but never came back, and the old woman ran around, screaming, "Lady's-man! Where's the lady's-man!" Everyone howled with laughter, "Looking for a lady's man, are you, granny?"

Off he went with the young woman, but another man saw them and thought, "Looks like he's running off with someone else's wife." Then, as the woman lifted her sari to cross the river, this second man saw a mole on her thigh! Now he ran after them,

shouting, "She's my wife! Mine!" "No! I got her myself!" the clever boy insisted. They each claimed her as his own.

How to decide this? They found a boy who was grazing bullocks and told him to decide. He said, "There's only one way: I'll tie you both in sacks and whoever she carries farthest is her husband." The second guy said, "She's mine! That mole on her thigh! She's my wife." But the clever boy said, "I worked hard to get her, and this guy is butting in."

In the end, the clever boy kept her as his wife.

Storyteller: Papu

72. THE CRUEL SISTERS-IN-LAW

Seven brothers, who were all married, lived together with their little sister. One day they said to their wives, "We're going hunting; take care of our sister." But as soon as they left, the wives mistreated the sister. When they ordered her to make lots of dung cakes, the little sister prayed to her dead parents: "Are these sandalwood hands fit to touch dung cakes? Should these kumkum hands cook rice? If my father is good and my mother chaste, let the dung cakes appear." Immediately her parents came as gods and made the cakes for her.

On another day, the wives took the lid from a large storage vessel of paddy and told her to cook all of it immediately. Again she prayed to her parents: "Should these kumkum hands cook rice? If my father is good and my mother chaste, let this vat of paddy become cooked rice." Again her parents came as gods and cleaned, pounded and cooked all that paddy. Then the wives thought, "She did all that! What else can we do to her?" They took a big pot of dirty water, left over from rinsing paddy, and said to her, "Here, swallow this pot whole." "Swallow that huge pot?" the sister thought to herself. "All right. I'll do it," she vowed and prayed: "If my father is good and my mother chaste, let me swallow this pot." She swallowed the whole pot - down it went, right into her stomach.

When her brothers returned and asked about their little sister, the wives said, "Her! Wait till you see! She's in the back room." Looking into the room, the brothers saw their sister with a huge stomach. "Don't know who's done this," they said and took her into the forest, to a mandapam. There they bathed her with oils, laid her down to sleep and told the birds to watch over her.

When she awoke she thought, "They've abandoned me! What am I to do?" She beat a drum to call the people and she wrote a message on palm-leaf, describing what had happened; then the people took the message to the brothers. When they read it, they thought, "Our wives have treated her badly." So they stoked up the fire in the lime-kiln and burned all seven wives in it. Then she lived happily her seven brothers.

Storyteller: Sundararampal

73. DYING FOR A DOSAI

There was a poor Brahmin who loved to eat hot dosais. I mean, he really loved them. Now it happened that there was nothing in the house to eat one day so he said to his wife, "I'll go and get some rice and dhal." "How?" she asked. "You don't have any money." "Well, just give me a tiny drop of oil." "We don't even have that," she said.

So he went to a shop and said to the owner, "Please give me a drop of oil." Taking pity on the poor Brahmin, the man poured out a little oil, which the Brahmin rubbed all over his body. Then he went to the street with all the rice shops; he rolled on the ground in front of the first shop [laughter], got up and brushed off the rice kernels into a pot. Then he went to the next shop and rolled in front of it, so the kernels stuck to his body - and so on in front of all the rice shops. And he did the same with the dhal: got some oil, rolled on the ground and collected it all in a pot.

Taking the rice and dhal home, he told his wife to cook some dosais. She took the stuff, prepared the batter and cooked three dosais - that's all there was, three dosais. Then the fight began. The wife said, "I get two." "Oh, no," the man said, "I worked hard, rolling around to get the rice and dhal - I get the two dosais." "But who cooked it all, huh? I did; so I get two."

They argued and argued and finally came to an agreement: they would both lie down and the first person to get up would get only one dosai; the other one, who got up last, would get two.

They made this pact and lay down - they slept and slept and slept. Morning came and went, afternoon, evening, and then it was night again. The house was completely locked up and the neighbours wondered, "What's going on in there? Haven't seen a soul all day long." They knocked softly on the door, but heard nothing at all inside. Then they broke down the door and saw the two of them lying there, like logs. They called to them, then slapped them, but no response, [laughter] They thought they had died, so they washed the bodies and prepared the funeral bier.

Because the couple had no children the neighbours also had to carry the bodies and light the cremation fire. When they put the bodies on the wood and lit the fire, the woman screamed, "Oh, it's too hot!" and sat up. Everyone was scared because a corpse had come back to life, but she tried to reassure them, "No! No! I'm alive; let me tell you what happened!" Then the husband stood up and said, "Right! I got up last, so I get two of them."

Everyone was afraid, confused that "two of them" meant two villagers - until the couple finally explained their pact about dosais. "I see," said the villagers. "So this is the type of people you are. Don't ever show your face in this town again," and they ran them out of town.

Storyteller: Panamati (stories 73-74)

74. THE CROW AND SPARROW

A sparrow and a crow lived in the same town. The crow built a house of mud and the sparrow made a house of stone. One day, the wind lashed and the rain pelted, and the crow's house collapsed. Going to the sparrow's house, the crow knocked on the door, "Sister, sister, open your door." The sparrow was cooking snacks and didn't want the crow to eat them, so she said, "Wait, wait." When she'd finished cooking and putting away the food, she opened the door.

Then the crow said, "My house was destroyed, but your stone house is strong; let me stay here." The sparrow was afraid that the crow would find the food so it kept a careful watch. "I'll sleep in the rafters," said the crow to be polite. But the food was stored in the rafters, so the sparrow said, "No, no. Sleep here below." "Please, I'll just curl up in a corner up there and be gone in the morning," said the crow.

The sparrow agreed but stayed awake the whole night, watching to see if the crow would eat her food. First the crow started to munch on a murukku, making loud crunching sounds. "What's that?" asked the sparrow, and the crow answered, "Nothing. I'm just chewing a little betel nut." Next came another crunching sound and the crow again said that it was chewing betel nut. This went on all night long, until the crow had gobbled up all the food!

Seeing that it had fooled the sparrow, the crow flew away in the morning. The sparrow soon discovered that it had been deceived and said, "That rascal crow! I'll get her for this." Flying all around, the sparrow found the crow hiding in a banyan tree. Speaking sweetly, the sparrow said, "Sister, why did you leave so hastily? I wanted to feed you a feast; all the food was ready, but you left before I could serve you this morning." Believing the sparrow because it had spoken so kindly, the crow flew back to its house.

"Look, there's vadai and payacam, and everything else, ready on the stove. I'll give you an oil bath and then you can eat." So the sparrow rubbed oil on the crow, but then poured scalding water all over her. Not content with that, the sparrow tied the crow up in a sack and took it out to the street, calling, "Tiger! Tiger!" She sold it for a good price, took the money, bought more food and had a good meal.

Storyteller: Panamati (stories 73-74)

75: SAIVA WIFE AND VAISNAVA HUSBAND

This is the story of a Saiva wife and a Vaisnava husband. You see, the husband was one of those who put a namam on their foreheads, but his wife came from a family who put viputi in horizontal lines on their foreheads. His mother died and on the first divasham, that's the annual commemoration of her death, he invited a group of Vaisnava Brahmins, with their namams, to eat a special meal; that's because serving them food would bring merit for him and also pacify the soul of Ms dead mother. He sat them down on the verandah and then said to his wife, "All the respected guests are here. Prepare the food; I've got to go to the fields for a moment."

After he left, his Saiva wife saw all these Vaisnava Brahmins with their namams and decided to get rid of them somehow. Making sure the guests would see her, she took out an old pestle and sat inside the house, decorating it with sandal paste and flowers. When they saw this, the Brahmins were baffled: "She's decorating a pestle, yet he's invited us here to eat a feast!"

So they approached her and spoke softly, "Amma, can you tell us what you're doing?" "Well, I really shouldn't say this, but... you all seem like good people so I think I can tell you. If my husband finds out, though, he'll beat me something terrible." "Don't worry, amma. We won't tell anyone."

"Well, you see, when my mother-in-law was dying she had a hard time breathing, like asthma. One day she told us to hit her in the back with this pestle. She said it wouldn't hurt, but we just couldn't bring ourselves to hit a dying person with that pestle; I mean, she was his mother, wasn't she? So we didn't do it but then she died suddenly, and ever since her unhappy soul has been circling around our house."

"We decided that we'd invite a couple of guests on the first anniversary of her death and give them a good beating. That's why he called you here and that's why I'm doing a puja to this pestle. I just had to tell you because you seem to be such nice people."

"Good lord! He's invited us here for a special meal to do that to us? Lucky we found out," said one Brahmin. "Yes! But we can't tell him, can we?" said another. So off they ran, as she continued her cooking.

Soon the husband returned and said, "Where are those two Brahmins I invited?" "Listen. They asked me to get a pestle. I did and then they told me to wash it and do a puja to it, and I did all that. But when they told me to give it to them, I refused. You see that's your mother's pestle, from the old days. They got angry and said, 'This is a disgrace! We've been invited to a feast by a family who won't even give us an old pestle!' Then they left."

"You fool! Why refuse a poor Brahmin who asks for a pestle? Give it to me." When she did, he ran off with it, chasing after the Brahmins, who saw him and screamed, "His wife was right! He's coming to hit us." They ran and ran, and finally escaped.

Storyteller: Satiyamurtti

76. MISFORTUNE STRIKES

Alakantiri Raja had all the riches in the world, but he had no children. His wife, Sembavalli, had gems and jewels, but she was childless. So they took pongal to the temple of Sani, the god of misfortune, and did puja for a child; every day they went to the temple with a pongal offering - for ten days, for forty days and finally for two months. In the end, the queen got pregnant, but they still went to the temple; she carried the baby for ten months, and every day they offered pongal to Sani. Finally, they put up a thatched shed near the temple, where she had her labour pains and gave birth to two children.

They cut the umbilical cords, again offered pongal, and then husband and wife each carried a baby home. Leaving his wife and children at home, the raja then went back to the temple of Sani to offer pongal. Sitting under a banyan tree at the northern entrance, Sani asked him: "Shall I visit your children in their youth or in their old age?"

"I'll go and ask their mother," he said, but when he got home he forgot. Each day Sani asked him and each day he forgot; the god wanted to know, but he kept on forgetting. "Put a stone in your pocket and when you feel it, you'll remember," said the god. So the raja picked up the stone and he did remember to ask. "Sani wants to know whether he should come in their youth or old age," he said to his wife, who answered, "Tell him to come in their youth; we can manage that. Let him come now."

Then Sani's misfortunes struck. Their seven-gated palace caught fire and burned to the ground, leaving their palace of jewels in a heap of ash. Holding the children's hands, they escaped but soon got tired and the children's legs were swollen from walking. They were hungry but when they opened their bag, they saw only two little coins. Everything else had gone up in flames!

They set up house under a tamarind tree, and the wife went into town to earn money by pounding rice. She found some work, took her wages in left-over paddy husks - it was no more than animal feed - and brought it back to cook. While it was boiling, she set out three places to eat, but Sani came and ate it all, leaving only a few husks for them to eat.

"We can't stay here; let's move on," said the raja and they walked further; they got hungry and rested under a tamarind tree, and again his wife went to do coolie work in town. When a woman asked her to pound rice, Sembavalli got her wages. "I've got a bad headache; boil the rice for me," said the woman. But after she had cooked it, Saturn came again and it ate it all.

"We must leave for another land," the husband said and they went, but Sani's misfortunes did not let up. Alakantiri Raja couldn't find a sickle, but an old woman gave him a knife and he began to harvest. It was a large field, with tall, beautiful rice stalks, but Sani was inside the sickle and made him cut his finger. Seeing this, the old woman said, "You needn't harvest any more. Here, I'll give you two bags of paddy; one for you and one for your wife."

He didn't have to work then and they were very happy. 'Took! She's given us two whole bags of paddy!' he cried to his wife. Taking those two bags, Sembavalli borrowed a big vat from a Konar's house and boiled the paddy; then she set it out to dry on the threshing floor, but Sani sent donkeys to eat it all. After that, only a few grains remained for the two children to eat.

Picking up those grains, Sembavalli cooked them, while her husband went to fish in the pond. He couldn't find a proper net, but later he got a torn net and flung it in the water. Finally, a tiny little fish fell into the net and he brought it home. Sembavalli washed the fish, gathered firewood and cooked it in a pot with a little handful of rice. But again Sani got angry, grabbed the pot and swallowed everything. "Where's that fish I brought?" demanded the raja and his wife answered, "Sani came and took it all. What am I supposed to do?"

Again they left for another land and set up house under a tamarind tree. She went into town to look for work, where a ship merchant's wife engaged her to pound rice. When the rice was pounded, the merchant's wife said, "I've got a bad headache; cook the rice for me." She cooked the rice, got her wages and went home. When the ship merchant came home, he asked, "Who cooked all this rice?" His wife said, "I had a headache so I asked a woman to do it." "Will she come tomorrow, too?" "Yes, she'll come."

When she returned and asked, "Shall I pound more rice?" the husband said, "If you pound one bushel, you'll get one measure of rice; if you pound two bushels, you get two measures; if three, then three." She wanted that rice, so she continued to work in his house. But the merchant took her away, across the water to his ship, where she said, "For six months I will fast and will not open this door. Only when my wedded husband comes will I open it." On the ship, he put her in a room, but she locked the door so that no one could enter.

Not knowing where she was, her husband took their two children and searched for her; he searched and searched and eventually came to a river. Putting one child down on the riverbank, he lifted the other on his shoulder and swam across; but as he was crossing the river to get the other child, the water carried him away. The children were stranded, one on each side of the river, while the river carried the raja to Madurai, where some people pulled him out. He was in Madurai, she was on the ship with the merchant, and their children were alone, crying on either side of the river.

Then a childless Konar woman passed the river and saw the children. She picked up one, crossed the river, got the other and took them both home. She had no children, but she was well-off. She cleaned them, gave them shirts and trousers, and fed them butter and milk. Then she sent them to school where they began to learn day by day.

These boys were studying well, but one schoolmate, a minister's son was really bad; he threw stones, pulled hair and all that. The teacher said to the Konar woman, "Take your boys out of school; that minister's son is a bad influence on them. Let them study at home." So the boys stayed in the Konar's house, while their father was in Madurai and their mother was locked up on the ship.

Then the minister put his daughter in a box and gave each of the raja's sons a magic sword and said to them, "Stand guard over this box; if it moves, cut it through with your sword." As the two brothers sat there, watching the box, the older one said, "I'm hungry; I'll go get some wood for a fire. Watch the box carefully; see that it doesn't move. If it does, split it with your sword."

When the older brother went to the cremation ground to get a light, bhutas surrounded him. Swinging his sword right and left, he cut them down, and then he brought back the fire and cooked some food and they ate. Soon they got thirsty and the older brother said, "I'll find some water. Watch the box. If it moves, cut it in two!" After the older brother left, a gang of thieves came and stole the box with the

daughter and all the wealth from the minister's house. They stole everything and took the booty to a Kali temple, to give a portion to the goddess and divide the rest among themselves.

When the older brother returned, the younger one asked, "It's daybreak! Where've you been? A gang of thieves came and stole the box with the daughter and took her to the Kali temple." "I'll set her free," said the older one and he brought back the box and opened it. Seeing this, the minister married his daughter to Alakantiri Raja's two sons.

Then there was a play, a drama. The Alakantiri Raja came to watch and the ship merchant - who had stolen his wife - brought his boat and anchored it by the shore. Everyone went to the play, even the merchant, but someone had to guard the boat, so he ordered the two boys to guard it. While on guard, the older said, "Tell me a story, brother. Let's wile away the time." "What kind of story? A made-up story or the story of our life?" "Our life-story," said the older and the younger told the story of their family. He told the whole story - the story I'm telling you now - throughout the night. When dawn broke, the merchant paid the boys for watching the boat. !

But Sembavalli, the raja's wife, was still locked up inside the ship and she has to get free, doesn't she? Remember that she said she'd open the door only if her husband came. So Alakantiri Raja went to her, knocked and the door flew open, and they were reunited. But still the sons must recognise her, mustn't they? When they put her behind seven curtains and the two sons in front, her breast milk squirted directly onto their faces! Then they knew who she was and the whole family was reunited. And Sani fled.

Storyteller: Kullapillai (stories 76-78)

77. A THOUSAND PARROTS

Once there were a thousand parrots. They flew off to get fruits, but one of them was lame and didn't get any. The lame parrot flew toward Maliyapuram, where the daughter of Muttu Chettiyar stood on the seventh storey combing out her long hair. As she stood there, one of her nails fell to the ground; the lame parrot picked it up and took it to the thousand parrots. Seeing this, the parrots scolded and beat the lame one, "We got fruits and you bring this stupid nail!" The lame parrot flew away, and the nail fell to earth.

Later a hunter came that way through the forest, picked up the nail and took it to a potter's house, where a woman was turning pots. "Amma, buy this for two rupees," he said and she bought it from him.

Then the potter woman showed the nail to a prince, who was dazzled by its beauty! The prince was accompanied by the minister's son, who asked where she'd got it and the woman said, "I didn't find it. A hunter sold it to me. Find him." To the hunter they said, "How did you get this nail?" "I got it while sitting under a banyan tree over there." The prince and minister's son went to the banyan tree and asked the lame parrot where it found the nail..

"Across the seven seas, the milk sea, salt sea, gold sea, pearl sea, in the town of Maliyapuram, the daughter of Muttu Chettiyar stood combing her hair on the seventh storey. Her nail broke off and fell, and I got it," said the lame parrot.

Off went the prince and the minister's son on a journey, until they came to a temple where the priest was offering worship and cooking pongal. The minister's son said, "If you feed pongal rice to this prince, I'll give you half our money. And you must keep the prince locked inside the temple; if you open it up, he'll run away. Don't open the door for anyone," the minister's son insisted and left.

On his journey, the minister's son came to a palmyra tree where little birds were sitting in their nest. Up the tree crawled a cobra snake, but the minister's son climbed up the tree and slashed the snake with his sword! When the snake fell to the ground in pieces, the baby birds cried, "Anne! Our Savior! Our mother will return soon; I'll tell her to take you wherever you wish to go."

The mother bird came, saw the snake lying dead on the ground and asked her chicks what had happened. The baby birds called the minister's son, and when the mother asked him where he was going, he said, "To Maliyapuram, beyond the salt sea, the gold sea and the pearl sea, to Muttu Chettiyar's house."

The bird took him there, across the seas, to the pearl sea where he gathered up pearls and put them in a cloth bag. Reaching the street where the Muttu Chettiyar lived, he walked along, calling, "Pearls! Pearls for sale!" The Chettiyar asked to see them and bought them, and with that money the minister's son built a big house.

The merchant had a daughter. When the minister's son built the house, he also had a tunnel dug between his house and the merchant's house. The daughter used the tunnel to visit the minister's son and cook for him; he needed to eat, didn't he? Back and forth she went, dressed like an old woman, without her parents knowing.

One day, the minister's son invited the merchant and his wife to eat at his house. "We're going to eat at the minister's son's house; you stay here," they said to their daughter and left. But she put on a different sari, went through the tunnel and served

them food. They asked for rice and she served them; they asked for sambar and she served them; they asked for ghee and she served them. Looking at her, the merchant wondered, "She looks a lot like our daughter; she can't be his wife." So when she served them ghee, he smeared a little on the border of her sari. "When I get back, we'll see what our daughter's sari is like," he said to himself.

But the minister's son saw all this and told her to change her sari when she returned through the tunnel. She went home, changed her sari and waited. After the meal, the merchant and his wife returned and called her. She came to them, and his wife said, "See! She is our daughter. And you thought she was over there."

Then one day the minister's son announced that he and his wife were leaving to visit his village. "Come," said the merchant to his wife. "Let's give them a good send off." Now, earlier when he had saved those baby birds, the mother bird had given him two feathers, saying, "Whenever you want us to help you go anywhere, think of me and wave these feathers; then I'll come."

Holding the wings, the minister's son prayed and the bird suddenly appeared; he climbed on one wing and the merchant's daughter on the other, and the bird carried them away. They went to the palmyra tree near the temple where the prince was locked up. To the merchant's daughter, the minister's son said, "The prince will come out and embrace you; when he asks where I am, you must tell him I'm dead." He hid and left her standing there.

When the temple was opened, the prince emerged and embraced the girl; then he asked about the minister's son. "He's dead," she said. "What's the point of living when he's dead," the prince said and killed himself. "They're both dead; what's left for me," the girl said and killed herself. When the priest saw their three bodies, he also decided he had no reason to live and stabbed himself. Finally, another priest arrived and looked at the three bodies; sprinkling water over them, he revived them all.

The minister's son paid the priest and left with the prince and the girl. The three of them traveled, and along the way the girl did something bad. Both the prince and the minister's son suspected her of having sex with the other man, so they didn't talk to one another. They sat apart, but the minister's son was still wondering exactly what had happened.

Then he saw a sage, who kept a woman in his long hair. When he saw the sage let the woman out of his hair, the minister's son ran to the merchant's daughter, fell at her feet and said, "Don't be angry. I want you to cook a big feast today." She agreed and asked how many people would be eating. The minister's son answered, "Three here and four there - seven all together."

She boiled the rice and spread out eight banana leaves to eat on. When they all sat down to eat, she served the sage first, but the minister's son said to him, "Before you eat, great sage, why not call your lover to eat, too?" He let her down from his hair, and she sat in front of a leaf.

Then the minister's son turned to her and said, "There's so much rice here; why not call your potter lover to eat, too?" She let him out and he took up another seat. Then as the merchant's daughter sat down to eat, the minister's son said, "Well, you're eating a lot, aren't you? Why not call your washerman lover?" So she called her washerman lover and he, too, sat down to eat.

Finally, the prince and the minister's son married her to her lover and left! That's the end! [laughter]

Storyteller: Kullapillai (stories 76-78)

78. THE PROPHECY OF THREE WIVES

A poor raja and his wife were childless. They struggled hard to make ends meet: if they sold wood, they ate; if they didn't sell any, they went hungry. They'd sell a bundle of wood, get half a handful of millet, grind it and eat. All this time, his wife was thinking, "Someday, we'll have a son," so she saved money in a pot. She had saved ten rupees by the time she got pregnant; a midwife was called and a boy was born. When the midwife had finished her work, the wife took the pot, emptied out the ten rupees, gave two to the midwife and said to her husband, "Use these eight rupees to buy a chicken and rice for the birth ceremony."

After the ceremony, the husband went back to collecting and selling firewood; each day he'd get half a handful of millet, grind it and they'd eat. But how long can one person work like that? One day he said, "Bring the baby along with you, so we can both work; then we'll get two bundles of wood and sell it for twice as much millet."

Taking the child, they went to the mountain, where they put him in a cradle in a margosa tree. In a hole in that tree, lived a cobra who had lost a thousand eggs; it had laid that many eggs but they'd all been destroyed and the snake was still childless. Putting their child in the cradle tied to the tree, the couple went off to collect firewood.

"I've lost all those babies," thought the snake, "but here's a nice child." Crawling into the cradle, it lifted up the baby and cooed and played with it; then it put the baby back in its cradle before the parents returned. Day after day, the snake brought the boy up like this, and even taught it how to walk: "This is how you do it, son; first this leg, then that." It raised him tenderly for a long time, and soon he was a young boy.

One day the snake unfolded its five hoods, which startled him, but it said, "Grandson! I'll never harm you. Listen to my advice; listen and prosper!" "What's that?" the boy asked and came closer. "Young prince! You will not marry among common people. No. You will marry three wives: first Chandra, daughter of the sun and moon; then Tenaval, daughter of honey; and lastly Puniyavathi, daughter of flowers." The prince would have three wives, the snake said and then slid into its hole.

When the boy was seven years old, he went to school and studied until the 8th standard. Then his parents began to talk about his marriage: "He's old enough to get married now; let's find a bride and get him married." When he came home from school one day, he said to his parents, "What are you talking about?" "Well, you're old enough to get married; that's what we've decided. We need to find a bride." He hadn't told them what the snake had said; he had kept it all to himself. But now he said, "One bride? I'm going to marry three: Chandra, Tevanal and Puniyavathi!" "How are you going to marry those high class women?" mocked his parents, and his mother cut him with a knife.

When that happened he ran away - just grabbed a veshti and shirt and ran off. Before long, the Sun and Moon god blocked his path and asked him what he wanted. When the boy explained, the god went straight to his daughter, Chandra, who was bathing in a pool with her serving maids. When he tied a tali around her neck, she asked, "What's this?" "Go with him," said her father, pointing to the poor raja's son. "He's your husband; go live with him."

When the prince took her as his first wife, she changed her Sun form into a human form and they left. They went a long, long way, to a rich man's house. "Sir," said the poor man, "I'll work as your servant, grazing your animals and everything, if you will

feed us. I'm married, so we'll need a room, too." The man arranged a room for them to live in. Leaving his wife in the house, he went off to graze the animals; but he spoke to the cobra and it guarded her. For the eight days he was in the fields the cobra encircled the house and guarded the entrance to his wife's room.

After eight days, he returned and said to the rich man, "Sir, tell your washerman to wash my wife's sari. I'll pay for it." The owner called the washerman, "Wash my cowherd's wife's sari." "What! A cowherd's wife's sari! Get lost!" said the washerman. But the rich man insisted and the washerman took the sari home to wash.

Washing it at home, the washerman was overcome by its fragrance - it belonged to Chandra, remember, and she was the daughter of the Sun and Moon. Then the washerman, having got a look at Chandra, ran to the rich man and said, "You think your wife is special! Well, that cowherd's wife shines like the glorious sun!" That stupid, rich man then asked his minister for advice and was told: "Tell him to go and collect honey; the bees will sting and kill him." The raja summoned the cowherd, gave him fifty rupees and ordered him to get honey.

Going home, the cowherd sat down in a corner, and his wife asked, "What's the matter? What did the landlord say?" "He gave me fifty rupees and told me to get honey." "I see," his wife said and gave him food for the journey. "Take these five pots and fill them with honey; stay clear of the bees. Here, take this packet of rice, also." He went, got the honey and brought it back to the rich man's house, where he poured it out into the pots.

He also brought back his second wife, Tenaval, daughter of honey. Eight days after he returned, the washerman came to wash the second wife's sari. Again he was dazzled by her and ran to the rich man, saying, "Raja! Forget your wife! That cowherd has two of them as beautiful as Rati herself!" The raja called his minister, who this time said, "Send him to get flowers; he'll die this time." "Cowherd!" called the rich man. "We need flowers for the children; take these fifty rupees' and get me two bunches of flowers."

Again he went home and sat down with a sigh. Chandra, his wife, asked him what had happened, and he said, "He wants to kill me by sending me to get flowers. He gave me fifty rupees, but I'll never come back alive." "Go ahead," his wife said. "The flower-daughter is my sister and won't harm you. Take these seeds and this food and get the flowers."

He went, ate the rice and sowed the flower seeds. When the flowers grew, he took the flower-daughter, Puniyavathi, back home. Now he had three wives, just as the snake had predicted. Another eight days passed and the washerman washed the third wife's sari, and again he was mesmerised by her scent. Running to the rich man, he said, "Oh raja! Who cares about your wife! That cowherd has three of them, all as beautiful as Rati!" The rich man called his minister, who now said, "Tell him to graze bulls that haven't eaten for three days; that'll keep him busy." When the cowherd was told, he left to graze the bulls.

Meanwhile, the rich man and his minister came to the cowherd's house to see his three wives. They reached the house where Chandra, Tenaval and Puniyavathi lived, but the snake was also there, lying across the doorway. "You go first," said the rich man. "No. You go first," said the minister. When the rich man put his foot on the first step, the snake bit his leg. Falling down in pain, he screamed, "Call the cowherd! Quickly!"

Stripping a branch from a margosa tree, the cowherd came, touched the snake-bite with the leaves and drove away the poison. "Oh, I didn't know you had this power," said the man and fell at the cowherd's feet in deference. "So," he said, "you came to see my wives while I was away? Is that it?"

Later the rich man had a deep hole dug in the seventh ocean and threw in his ring. Then he said to the cowherd, "If you can bring back my ring, I'll give you half of everything I own - half my lands, half my livestock, half my kingdom." The cowherd dived into the water, again and again, without success. Then the Sun and Moon came down and dug a tunnel connecting the seventh sea with the cowherd's house. Chandra said to him, "I'll retrieve the ring and float it on the surface of the ocean; you dive in and put it on your little finger. Dive in without any fear." In he dived and came up with the ring on his finger, and went home via the tunnel. When he dived into the ocean, the rich man and minister thought he was killed so they filled the hole with the dirt from sixteen villages.

Safe inside his house, the cowherd was dressed up by the Sun and Moon and his three wives. They gave him ten glass rings, ten veshtis, ten shirts, ten tuntus, and a golden parasol. "Look!" they said. "He's as beautiful as a god!" Then they said to him, "Go to the rich man, who'll be amazed by your beauty and your rings, and say, 'Why should you live above ground? Below, in the ocean, everyone has these things.' Tell the rich man that."

When the cowherd told the rich man all this, he ordered the seventh ocean to be dug up again, and the minister had it done. Who do you think would be the first to go into that ocean? C'mon! I'm asking you. Who do you think? Yes, that rich man. He went in first, along with his wife and his children, the whole family! They roasted a goat, they dressed in fine clothes, they wore flowers and sacred ash and then they all dived in after those precious rings.

"You first," said the rich man to his wife and pushed her in; then, pushing in his sons and daughters, he jumped in, too. They all jumped in and were buried with the soil of sixteen villages. They all died.

The cowherd then took his three wives and went to the raja's palace. Their marriage lasted for eight days, while they feasted on rice, curry and vegetables. For eight days they celebrated.

Meanwhile, back home, after the cowherd had left, his mother had given birth to two more sons. They went to school and studied up to the 8th standard. At school, the children teased them, "Your older brother ran away! Are you going to do the same?" At home the boys asked their mother, "Is it true? Do we have an older brother? Tell us, or we'll run away" "Who's been saying this to you?" she asked. "Just tell us: is it true or not?"

She admitted it was true, cooked rice, gave them each ten rupees and sent them on their way. They journeyed to five villages and soon then-food was gone and their clothes were torn. The older brother said, "I'm hungry and can't go on." "C'mon; we'll go just a little further. If we find him, good; if not, we'll die, too," said the younger. On they went, until they reached another village and sat on a wall. "I'm starving," said the older. "I can't go on." "Just a little farther; I'll get you some water," said the younger. They went farther, turned down a street and heard some music over a loudspeaker. "Listen!" said the older brother. "Might be a marriage or a funeral; let's go find out what it is."

The little brother led the older one as they walked slowly toward the sound. They entered a house, where coconuts were being smashed and three talis were being tied on three brides. When they were invited to eat, they sat down and were served by the three brides. After the meal, they went to sleep without even washing their hands. They were that exhausted! The next day, they were served more food, and again they ate and slept without washing their hands.

For three days this went on; then the prince, their older brother, came to see them. Sitting on a bed, he asked, "Who are you and where are you from?" "We have an older brother who refused to have only one wife. He said he'd marry Chandra, Tevanal and Puniyavathi. Our mother got angry and cut his forehead. So..." Before they could finish, the prince embraced his younger brothers. They cried tears of joy and went together to the palace, where they were given new clothes. Then they held another huge feast, with roasted goats and chickens. The boys ate well, were bathed and dressed in fine clothes. Now there were three bridegrooms and three brides.

They went back home in a car to see their parents, who were amazed. The oldest one had done what he said. Then all the brothers got married: the oldest married Chandra; the next one married Tenaval; and the youngest married Puniyavathi. The youngest brother took his bride back to the raja's palace, while the two older brothers stayed at home with their wives.

Man in audience: I see. The raja promised him half the kingdom if he got the ring. That's why he was the one who went back. Isn't that right?

Storyteller: Yes, he's the one who had to go back.

Storyteller: Kullapillai (stories 76-78)

79. A HUSBAND'S FOOD CRAVING

One day a newly-married man left his wife behind and went alone to his mother-in-law's house. When he arrived, they were cooking kolukkattai cakes, a delicacy that he had never eaten. Tasting those cakes for the first time, he loved them! He ate lots of them and decided to run home and tell his wife to cook them. Before he left, he asked his mother-in-law, "What's this called?" "It's called 'kolukkattai'," she said. "Tell her to make 'kolukkattai'; she'll know what to do." Just so he wouldn't forget this word, he kept saying it over and over as he walked home, "kolukkattai, kolukkattai, kolukkattai..." again and again. But when he leapt over an irrigation channel near his house, he forgot the word and started to repeat, "Attiripoccu, attiripoccu," instead.

He continued to repeat that word until he reached home and said to his wife, "Make me some attiripoccu and fast!" She didn't know what he was talking about. "Make me some attiripoccu, now!" he demanded. "Listen, I really don't understand what you're saying." "What do you mean! I ate them at your mother's house, and she told me to tell you to cook them! You're lying, aren't you?" "No, honestly, I've never heard of this attiripoccu." Getting this answer, her husband smacked her hard and her face swelled up.

Soon the neighbours came to see what the commotion was about, and when they saw her face, a woman said, "Oh, my god, her face is swollen like a kolukkattai!" "That's it!" said the man. "That's the word. I forgot it and said attiripoccu." Then she understood and made him those kolukkattai cakes.

Storyteller: Alli (stories 17, 28-29, 79)

80. RAMA'S BEST DEVOTEE

When Rama was setting out for the forest, all the citizens of Ayodhya followed behind him. As they left the city, Rama said to them, "Oh men and women of Ayodhya! Please return to your homes." Obeying Rama, they returned. Then, after fourteen long years in the forest, after meeting Hanuman, Sugriva and everyone, and after battling with Ravana, Rama finally returned to that same spot.

There stood an old man, with a long beard and moustache. Rama asked who he was and was told, "He's been standing like that for fourteen years, your highness." When Rama asked the man why he was standing there, he answered, "Oh, Maharaja! I came with the others when you left Ayodhya so long ago. You told the 'men and women' to return to the city, but you didn't tell me."

"Who are you then?" asked Rama. "I'm neither man nor female. I'm a hermaphrodite. So I've been waiting here for you all these years." Then Rama said, "You are the best of my devotees!"

Storyteller: Jeyaraman (stories 45, 52, 54, 80)

81. A CLEVER WOMAN'S RIDDLE

A raja went to the village tank to look for a bride. Seeing a poor girl there drawing water, he said to her, "I'm going to tell you a riddle; see if can you answer it." Then he sang out:

Girl born and raised among sesame seeds,
What seed is smaller than the sesame seed?

To which she replied:

Handsome prince born and raised among flowers,
what flower has only two petals?

Neither could answer the other's riddle! So the prince said, "I'm going to marry you and lock you up in prison until I find the answer to your riddle." To which, she said, "I'll marry you, but if I don't have your child, without you even knowing it, then I'm not the woman I think I am." She made this pledge, but he married her anyway.

They were married and she was locked up in a stone prison. He visited her there, chewed betel nuts and enjoyed himself; meanwhile, however, she dug a tunnel from the prison to her parents' house and went back and forth between the house and prison.

"This stupid raja won't recognise me," she thought and disguised herself as a dancer, with her father as her teacher. Soon the raja called them to dance in his assembly, and when she danced he was infatuated. To her teacher, her father, he said, "I'll give you as much money as you want; just let her stay with me tonight!" But the teacher said, "We can't manage without her; I'll let her stay only one night. That's all."

So she spent one night with the raja, and in the morning she asked for his ring and riding whip as mementos. Then she went home and back through the tunnel to the stone prison. Soon she was pregnant and in time gave birth to a son. The boy grew up in his father's house and, one day, he pushed his father out of his golden bed and stole it; then he took it to the foot of a mountain, where he buried it. When the raja saw that his bed was stolen, he order his guards to find the thief: "Find him whoever he is; search for him as far as the mountains. I'll come there tomorrow."

Meanwhile his son had buried the bed deep in the ground, at the base of the mountain. When a man asked him what he was doing, he answered, "The raja is searching for me; he'll come tomorrow. I'll pay you well if you tell Mm that the thief will come here and that he should hide in this sack." When the raja arrived, the man told him to hide m the sack and he did.

When the raja's men arrived at the mountain and saw the raja's son, they thought he was the raja himself! He was sitting on the raja's horse, shouting, "Thief! Thief! In the sack!" Then the son beat the sack with Ms riding whip and said, "Take this thief back to town for punishment." But when they opened the sack in the palace, they found the raja, and still they couldn't tell the difference between him and his son. "Who are you?" they asked the raja's son. "My mother's the woman in the prison; let her out and she'll tell you the whole story."

When they brought her from the prison, the raja said, "How did you give birth to a child?" And she said, "Well, here's your ring and your riding whip. Remember now? Anyhow, I won the bet."

Storyteller: Sivakanti

82: TWO GREAT LIARS

Two great liars lived in adjacent towns. They were both good talkers, very clever, and the whole region wondered who was the better liar. One of these liars had defeated everyone in his town, but then he heard about the other great liar in the next town. "Well," he thought, "if I'm a great liar, I suppose he could be, too. Better go and find out."

So he went to the next town, asked for his rival and was told his house was down a little lane. When he got there and asked for the big liar, only the man's son was at home. "Where's your father gone?" he asked. "He's gone out," said the son. "When will he come back?" "Well, there's this crack in the sky and he's gone to fix it. He'll come when that's done." "A crack in the sky! Nice lie," thought the visitor. "If this is his son, the father will certainly be a great liar!" With this thought, he returned home.

After a while the boy's father came back, and the son said that someone had come looking for him. "I said you were out. He asked when you'd return. I said when you'd finished repairing a crack in the sky." "What! Why did you lie like that? Why not tell him I'd be home soon?" The father got angry, beat his son and then threw him in a well, because he had lied.

Inside the well, the son wailed and screamed and a passer-by heard him. He lifted him out, and the son ran back home. His father was amazed: "I threw him into that well just a moment ago, yet he's already returned and he's only a child!" "Hey!" he called to his son. "How'd you get back here?" "It drizzled a bit, father, so I caught hold of one of the drizzles and pulled myself out." When he heard this one, the proud father exclaimed, "Now you're talking, son! That's a good lie, even better than I could do. You have arrived."

You see this was the only difference between the two great liars - one had a son who also told lies!

Storyteller: Sadasivam (stories 82-83)

83. THE BEGGARS' PACT

Three men lived together in a village. One had conjunctivitis, the second itched all over and the third sniffled all the time. None of them could work, so they got together and begged as a group; they went everywhere as a group, begging, sleeping, everything. But during the rainy season, when the mosquitoes started to bite at night, they had a problem. The itchy guy kept scratching all night; the blind guy sat up and clapped his hands to drive away the mosquitoes; and the sniffer kept snorting like an engine!

One night the itcher turned to the sniffer and said, "We beg together and eat together, so let's sleep together peacefully! All right?" "Sure, good idea," said the sniffer. "But first stop scratching your nose!" Then the blind man said, "Listen. I've got an idea. We've all got to control ourselves."

"Go on. What's your plan?" asked the others. "Well, if anyone sniffles while we sleep, he has to feed us for six months. If anyone scratches, he, too, must feed us for six months. And if anyone claps his hands, then he must feed us."

They all accepted this pact. The next day they went out and begged, brought their food back, ate and went to sleep. Soon the mosquito bites itched terribly, and the itcher wanted to scratch badly! The sniffer wanted to suck in a big blast, and the blind man had mosquitoes swarming all over his eyes. But they couldn't do a thing! If they did, it would mean six months of slavery to the others.

Finally, when he couldn't stand it any longer, the itchy man sat up and said, "You know today when we went to that house to beg. Did you see that murunkai gourd in the sauce! My god, it had long and deep grooves like this," and he raked his fingers along his legs. He had escaped!

Next the sniffer spoke, "Yeah. And did you smell that sambar in the next house? How delicious!" and he sucked in through his nose long and hard. He also had escaped.

Last was the blind man, right? He shouted, "That's wonderful!" and clapped his hands together loudly. He'd escaped, too! No one had lost and they continued to beg together, but until their dying days they couldn't sleep together peacefully!

Storyteller: Sadasivam (stories 82-83)

84. SEARCHING FOR THE SECRET OF FOOD CHARITY

In the village of Arakkampatti there was a Brahmin, who had one son. When the man died, the son was left with his mother. Sending the boy to school, she pounded rice at the palace to earn money; that way she got a handful of paddy, which she took back and cooked for her son and herself. When the son came back from school, he would sleep while his mother cooked. They were very poor, but if a wandering sadhu called out, "Amma, give me some food," she always gave him some rice and sambar.

One day the boy came home from school and, rather than sleep, he watched his mother cook their meal. But when a sadhu came by, she called to him and gave him rice and sambar. When she served her son, he asked her, "You work so hard to get that handful of paddy, which just feeds me and you, but you still give some to others. Why do you do that?" "I don't know," said his mother. "But before your father died he used to talk about the five charities: to oneself, to others, in the middle, at the beginning and the gift of food. The greatest of these, he used to say, was the charity of food. So I do it on your behalf. But if you want to know the secret of giving food, you'll have to go and ask god."

"Make me a packet of rice for a journey, mother. I'm going to find god, wherever he is!" said her son. "Go and find god! But you can't," she said alarmed. Still he insisted, "I'm going; whether you give me any food or not is your choice." She cooked rice and packed it in a leaf with a little pickle and sauce, tied it in a cloth and gave it to him. "Go, my son, and ask god about the secret of giving food."

On his journey he first met a man without hands or legs; he was a torso that just rolled around on the ground. "Where are you going, boy?" "I'm going to ask god about the reason for giving food." "I can't eat and I can't die, so please ask god to find a solution for me," said the man. The boy wrote that on the inside of his arm and went ahead.

After a little while he came to a well, where a man was using bullocks to draw water from the well to irrigate his fields. The water ran in a channel to the fields, but when the boy drank from the channel he found it was brackish. When he asked the man why, he said, "Son, the water in this well has been terrible since the day I had it dug! It's ruining my fields and I don't know what to do. By the way, where are you going?" "I'm going to find god and ask him about why we should give food to others." "Please ask god what I can do about this water." The boy wrote that down too and went on.

Then the Tiruchendur Raja came that way - he knew this boy - and when he saw him he said, "Hey, Murthy? Where are you going?" "Raja, I'm going to god to find out the reason for giving food to others." "Listen, son. I have a thousand coconut trees and not one has fruited in the past four years! I've got to do something. Ask god and tell me." So Murthy wrote that down, too, and went on.

On and on he walked, along the path to Alakar Mountain. Farther and farther he went, until it got dark and he started to cry, "Protect me, Lord! It's dark and I can't see the path. Wild animals will attack." Soon a hunter and his wife heard his voice; they lived in a little thatched shed, ate honey and slept on a high ledge to keep away from the animals below. "Who's that walking around alone in the middle of the night?" called the hunter. "Come up here; there are animals around at night." "I can't see the path. Where are you?" asked the boy. "On top of this mountain; climb up."

When the boy got to their hut, the hunter said to his wife, "Make three portions of honey since we've got a guest." "Nothing doing; there won't be enough for me. I'll make two portions as usual," she said. So the hunter took his half, put it on a leaf in front of the boy and said, "Eat this, boy, you must be hungry." "No, sir. You must also be hungry. You eat first." "You're my guest, so you must eat." The boy ate a little and left the rest for the hunter.

The hunter and his wife slept on this ledge on the mountain. That night he said to her, "Move over a little so this boy won't fall off the mountain while he's sleeping." "Get lost; I'm sleeping right here, like I always do. You move over," she said. In the middle of the night, as the three of them slept, the hunter turned over and rolled right off the ledge! A tiger ate him, leaving only his skull behind.

In the morning his wife awoke and saw her husband was gone. "Where is he?" she asked. "I don't know, I was asleep," said the boy. Searching below in the forest, she found his head! "Oh, my god! What will become of me," she cried in agony and died.

The boy headed east, calling out, "God! I'm searching for you and I'll find you, wherever you are." On his journey he passed a mango tree and heard a voice: "Where are you going, son?" "Who's speaking to me?" he asked "Me. This mango tree." "Mango tree? Can you talk?" "Yes. But who are you?" "I'm on my way to ask god about the point of giving food." "Listen. I put forth buds and blossoms and lots of fruit, but no one, not even an ant, ever eats me. Please find out why and tell me." He wrote that down and went on.

Next he saw a snake stuck in a hole - half in and half out. It couldn't move, so it called to him. "Who's that calling me?" asked the boy. "It's me; a female snake. Where are you going?" "To ask god about the reason for giving food." "Listen. I am a thousand years old; I have thousands of children. But now I can't eat and can't die, either. Please find out why." So he wrote that down and continued on ahead.

On he went, with this unshakeable desire to see god. God knew this and appeared to him as a sannyasi, with a long beard, an ochre robe and a walking stick; but the boy didn't know he was god. "Where are you going?" asked the sannyasi. "To ask god about why you should give food." "Listen to me, son. You can't see god with your own eyes. But here, take this turmeric and sacred ash; keep it carefully. I don't know about why you should give food, either, but god did tell me to tell you something. That's why I'm here."

"Over there is a town called Alamur where the raja is childless. Go to him and say, 'Raja, I know your house is childless.' He'll wonder how such a young boy as you could know this, but you must say, 'Take this turmeric and ash and mix it in a glass; then face the sun, pray for a child and give it to your wife to drink.' If he does that, his son will live to be seventy-five. That's what god says. And you must stay there with them until the child is born." The boy wrote this down, too.

Then he said to the sannyasi, "Grandfather, there's a snake that can't eat and can't die; she asked me to ask god what to do." The sannyasi answered, "Her poison has turned into an emerald that's stuck in her throat; if she dies the jewel will be wasted. But if she spits it out and gives it to someone, she can die happily. Tell her that."

The boy wrote that down and then said, "There's also a mango tree which gives fruit but no one eats it." "North of the tree are buried seven golden ploughs; when the sun is hot they cause the fruit to go bitter. If you dig out those ploughs, the fruit will be sweet and everyone will eat it," said the sannyasi.

"There's something else," said the boy. "A well with brackish water." "There's a diamond blocking the spring that fills the well and it spoils the taste of the water. If you move that diamond out of the way, fresh water will fill the well."

"Another problem is that a raja has one thousand coconut trees but they haven't fruited for four years. He wanted me to find out why." "You see, that raja has a daughter whom he keeps in his house although she is old enough to be married. She's mad with desire for a husband and wanders around at midnight in great sadness; her sighs of longing prevent the trees from fruiting. Do you understand? If she is married to someone, the trees will flourish. Tell him that."

The boy wrote that down and then said, "There's one more thing." "What's that?" "A man without hands or legs; he can't eat or die." "He's a great scholar, son, a man of enormous learning, who knows all about the ancient wisdom of Valluvar. If he dies, all that learning will go to waste, but he if teaches it to someone, he can die peacefully." Having said all this, the sannyasi made sure the boy had the turmeric and ash, and then he disappeared! "He must be god!" thought the boy.

So the boy went to the raja, as the sannyasi ordered, and told him what he was told. The queen drank the water and later, when she got pregnant, she thought, "It's all happened just as that little boy predicted." The raja rewarded him with a palanquin that he rode around in all day long. He waited until the tenth month of the queen's pregnancy and then said to the raja, "Tonight a son will be born and I will ask him about the benefit of giving food," but the raja didn't understand what he meant. When exactly ten months had passed and the wife began her labour pains, they called a midwife and the boy said to her, "She will give birth tonight. But the baby should not touch the earth or your hands; deliver it on a golden plate. And bring him to me."

At four-thirty in the morning the son was born, and the midwife brought him on the golden platter to the boy. Holding the baby, he said, "Tell me why we should give food to others?" The baby spoke, "Do you remember the hunter and his wife in the forest? He gave you food and she refused? I am that hunter who gave you food. Later I fell off the mountain and was eaten by the tiger, but I have been reborn with this long life of seventy years because I gave food just that once! My wife, who wouldn't give you food, committed suicide and is over there, in that untouchable *ceri*, where she's been reborn as the seventh child of an animal. That's the benefit of giving food!"

Hearing this, the boy gave the baby back to the midwife and said, "Take him to his mother; no matter what happens, he will live to be seventy years old!" Then he went to the raja's assembly, told Mm the news and added that he must return to his own mother. But the raja stopped him,

"Son! You have brought a child to this childless house; ask for whatever boon you wish." "Whatever you give me I will accept," said the boy. "Here, take these bags of gold, find a wife and prosper," the raja said and sent him on his way.

On his return the boy saw the snake, who was waiting for him. "Did you find out the reason for giving food?" it asked. "Yes. There is an emerald in your throat. It will be wasted if you die; but if you spit it out and give it to someone, you can die happily." "You went and asked for me, so I will give the emerald to you," said the snake, who spat it out, washed it and gave it to the boy. Then the snake entered the hole and reached moksa.

Putting the jewel in his pocket, the boy went to the mango tree, which asked, "Did you find the answer?" "Yes. To the north are seven golden ploughs which cause your fruit to be bitter. If we dig them out, your fruit will be sweet." "Oh, fourteen years ago a sannyasi came from the south and tried to dig up those ploughs, but he failed and went back home. Dig there, in the north, and you'll find the golden ploughs," said the tree. The boy dug out the golden ploughs and started to leave, but the tree said, "Take the golden ploughs with you."

Then he came to the man with the bad well, who asked, "Did you ask god about my water?" "Yes. There's a diamond blocking the water from the spring; if you get it out, your well will be full of fresh water." They got the jewel out and fresh water gushed into the well; they drank it and found that it was sweet. When the boy started to leave, the man said, "Son, you did this for me, so you must take the diamond." "But the diamond was in your well," said the boy. "No. I'm giving it to you because I want to."

So the boy took the diamond and found the raja, who asked, "Did you ask god about my barren trees?" "Yes, I did. He said that you have kept your daughter in your house for four years and that she is mad with desire for a husband; she searches for a husband at midnight, sighing with sadness which ruins the trees. If you marry her to someone, your trees will fruit," said the boy. "Really? Then I'll marry her to you! Besides, I'm old. I'll crown you as raja, and you can rule Tiruchendur."

After the marriage, the boy spoke to the raja, "I've got to go home to see my mother; it's been a long time." "All right, but take your wife with you," said the raja. The boy started to go, but the raja said, "Don't walk. Here ride on this white elephant." He and his new wife climbed onto the elephant and rode to his mother's house as raja and queen. Soon someone told her that her son had arrived on a white elephant, as the new Raja of Tiruchendur! "But he is long dead," she said and then saw him there, her own son! She welcomed him and his wife, saying, "I thought you had followed your dead father."

The boy said, "Mother, look at the riches in this bag. My father-in-law, a raja, gave them to me." "How did you get this emerald?" "A snake gave it to me." "These golden ploughs?" "A mango tree gave it to me." "And this diamond?" You see, she couldn't believe it all and thought perhaps he had stolen these things from somewhere! "A farmer gave it to me," he said as he spread it out in front of her.

Later she celebrated his marriage with a big feast, and he built her a nice house in Tiruchendur where they all lived happily.

Storyteller: Karuppan

85. A CHAIN TALE

A bird laid seven eggs in a tree, and when they hatched, the bird called a carpenter and said, "Please make a hole in the tree so my children can live." "I'm doing work for a big raja, so how can I bore a hole for you?" "I'll tell that raja to get rid of you then!" said the bird, who flew to the raja. "Raja," the bird said, "I need a hole in that tree; why not kill off that carpenter who won't make it for me?" "If I did that I wouldn't have anyone to work for me, would I?" "All right, then I'll tell the deer to eat up your forest," said the bird.

The bird went to the deer and said, "Why don't you destroy the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make a hole for me?" The deer said, "But if I destroy the forest, what about me?" "I'm going to tell the hunter to shoot you," said the bird who went to the hunter and said, "Why don't you shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?" "Well," said the hunter, "if I shoot the deer for you, what about my hunting?"

"As you like, but I'm going to tell the rat to gnaw through your bow," said the bird, who went to the rat and said, "Why don't you gnaw through the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?" "What good is that to me?" asked the rat. "All right, but I'm going to tell the cat to catch you," said the bird, who went to the cat and said, "Why don't you catch the rat who won't gnaw the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?"

The cat said, "What's it to me?" "Listen, I'm going to tell that old woman to beat you," said the bird, who went to the woman and said, "Why don't you beat the cat who won't catch the rat who won't gnaw the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?" And the woman answered, "Why should I beat a cat for you?"

"I'm going to tell your old man to beat you," said the bird, who flew to the man and said, "Why don't you hit the old woman who won't beat the cat who won't catch the rat who that won't gnaw the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?"

"If I do that, who will fetch water for me?" said the man. "I'll tell the cow to butt you," said the bird, who flew to the cow and said, "Why don't you butt the man who won't hit the old woman who won't beat the cat who won't catch the rat who won't gnaw the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?"

"Well, if I do that, who will milk me?" "I'll tell that calf to bite your udders," said the bird, who flew to the calf and said, "I laid eggs in a tree and they've hatched. Why don't you bite the udder of the cow who won't butt the old man who won't hit the old woman who won't beat the cat who won't catch the rat who won't gnaw the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole in the tree for me?"

"But if I bite her udders, how am I going to drink any milk?" said the calf. "I'm going to tell that field worker over there to pluck out your eyes," said the bird, who flew to the man and said, "Why don't you pluck out the eyes of the calf who won't bite the udder of the cow who won't butt the old man who won't hit the old woman who won't beat

the cat who won't catch the rat who won't gnaw the bow of the hunter who won't shoot the deer who won't eat the forest of the raja who won't kill the carpenter who won't make the hole for me?"

"You've told all these people and that hole still hasn't been made?" said the man with great anger. Then he immediately plucked out the calf's eyes who ran and bit the udder of the cow who butted the man who hit the old woman who beat the cat who caught the rat who gnawed the bow of the hunter who shot the deer who destroyed the forest of the raja who killed the carpenter who made the hole for the bird.

Then the eggs hatched and the seven happy children flew off.

Storyteller: Pecciyammal (stories 85, 88)

86. ALL BECAUSE OF A SINGLE PEA

When a marriage was celebrated in a town, the newlyweds were treated to a feast by their relatives. They wanted the husband and wife to sit side by side while they were served on banana leaves, but the husband didn't like the idea of sitting next to his wife while eating. Still, the others insisted and he had to agree.

When they started to eat, a single pea rolled from his wife's leaf onto his leaf. Suddenly the husband pushed his leaf aside, stood up and announced, "I'm going to Benares and bathe there to wash away this sin of eating food touched by another person." Everyone told him that that was unnecessary, but he wouldn't listen to them and set out for Benares.

Benares is a long way away, and he had to walk. On the way, he got hungry so he asked some people where he might get food and they pointed to a house. Going there, he told the family that he was a very traditional man and must be fed on a new banana leaf with clean food. But the problem was that this village didn't have any banana leaves! The people in the house thought: "He's our guest and we can't send him away hungry; that's not right." So they got a banana leaf, spread it out and served his food.

When the man had eaten and went to throw away his leaf - as he always did - they stopped him. But he said, "It's all right; I really don't mind throwing away my own leaf. Why shouldn't I?" "Well, because that leaf has been used in our family since our grandfather's time. There's no other leaf around, so we always wash it and keep it safe for the next guest." He was horrified and thought, "Now I'll have to wash myself a second time in Benares! The pollution from my wife was one thing, but this is too much!"

Later, in another village, he found another house that would feed him, but he thought, "Last time I got that old leaf, so this time I'll ask for a terracotta dish to eat from." But they didn't have terracotta dishes in that village! Still, they found one and set it before him where he sat down to eat. Before that, however, something else happened. You see, the grandmother was holding a betel nut in her hand, wondering how to crack it open to chew. Seeing her trouble, the guest kindly took it from her and cracked it open with his teeth. Then the granny said, "Look at that, will you! I've been chewing on that nut for ten days, trying to crack it, and he does it on the first try!"

Determined to avoid any more of these disasters, the man said to himself, "In that first house they wouldn't let me get rid of the leaf, but I'm going to get rid of this plate for sure!" When he'd finished, he took the plate and smashed it on the floor. Then the grandmother ran up and scolded him, "How could you do that to my husband's favourite plate? Until his dying day he used that to pee in and now it's gone!"

He was dumbfounded and didn't know what to do. Then he realised that all these horrible things happened, to him because he had been upset about a little pea from his wife's leaf. With a change of heart, he went back home to his wife.

Storyteller: Peter Raj

87. A DOG'S STORY

There were two sisters-in-law, married to two brothers, who raised a dog in their house. When the wife of older brother gave birth to a girl, the dog ran away. "Look at that, will you? Why did we waste food on that dog? At least this baby girl will give us grandchildren," they said. Hearing this, the dog came back and lay down next to the baby girl. "Look! It's back and it's lying next to the baby. Just like a mother!"

And there the dog lay, as the girl's companion, feeding and bathing her, taking her to the bathroom and rocking her in a cradle. Before long the girl was old enough to be married. The prospective sons-in-law came, but the dog refused to give her away in marriage. They came from the east and it barked to the east; they came from the west and it barked to the west. From the north and from the south - from all four directions they came, but when they heard the dog bark not one of them would enter the house.

The girl reached twelve years old and still they couldn't get her married. It wasn't that her parents weren't wealthy or that she had no jewels - in fact, her parents were very rich. No, it's just that the dog prevented the marriage. Finally, the girl said to her family, "It's my dog-mother's fault that I'm not married. She won't let any prospective bridegrooms into the house. There's only one thing for me to do: I need a disguise like an old woman. Change me into an old woman and I'll live as a servant in someone's house." So they had a disguise made and gave it to her, along with jewels, ornaments and special clothes.

Looking like an old woman, she left and the dog couldn't find her anywhere. She looked and looked, but the girl was gone. She ran here and there, asking people, "Have you seen a girl go this way?" "Oh, she went far, far away, to the west," came an answer. The dog ran west, but couldn't find her there. Asking again, she went to the east, but didn't find her there, either. Searching in all four directions, the dog eventually came to the place where the girl had gone.

The girl had ended up in a house where another woman lived with her young son and daughter. In the form of an old woman, the girl had said to them, "Please let me work for you and live here. I'll make the dung cakes, bring you water and everything if you let me stay." The son and daughter said, "Why not let her do all that work?" and the mother agreed. So the girl, disguised as an old woman, made the dung cakes and grazed the cows.

She lived there for about a month, when one day she took the cows to graze. You know how it is with cows and cow dung in the fields - well, she was so filthy even the cowherd boys wouldn't touch the rice she cooked. She cooked herself a little food, took off her disguise and was bathing in a well, when a little boy came to get some food. Seeing her, he said, "She's beautiful! Not dirty at all."

Then he told the son in the house where she was staying, "That's no old woman living in your house; she's a real woman. Marry her; your parents don't have to look elsewhere for a bride." The son couldn't believe that the dirty old servant could be his bride, but the next day he hid in a tree and saw her beauty. Then he said to his parents "I'm not going to marry uncle's daughter; I'm going to marry the old woman." Hearing this, his parents wept and his mother swore, "If you do, I'll drink poison!" "I want to marry her! That's all there is to it," he insisted.

His parents were aghast: "What's this?! There are three other girls he can marry, but he wants this servant who makes dung-cakes! What money has she got?" "I must marry her!" "Son, don't bring ruin to this family." "But I will marry her." Eventually, his father said, "He's not going to change Iris mind, so we better accept his choice."

"Mother, come along with me," said the boy, "and I'll show you how beautiful she really is." Hiring a taxi, the boy took his mother to the distant field where the girl grazed cows. When she took off her disguise and the mother saw her beauty, she agreed to the wedding. But she still didn't know why she had a disguise.

Meanwhile, the boy and girl made plans for their marriage; soon they were dressed in their wedding clothes and sitting in the marriage room. At that moment, the dog arrived! And it wouldn't leave her alone! She shooed it away, but it wouldn't go. She said to him, "Give me a few days - so I can get rid of this dog and return." To his parents, she said, "Let me go back home and bring back my parents; after all, I'm an only child." His parents agreed.

She put back on her old woman disguise and went off with the dog. That's the only way she could escape. She took the dog and put it in an abandoned shed and scolded her, "First you abandon me, then you ruin my marriage, and now you arrive but haven't even brought me a sari!" "You're right, dear," said the dog. "Just in time, too, because today is the weekly market. I'll go and get you a nice sari."

In the market, the dog went slowly from shop to shop [laughter] looking at the saris, picked out a nice one and ran off with it in her mouth. The shopkeeper shouted, "Hey! A dog's got my sari!" (laughter) and another shopkeeper threw a stone which broke the dog's leg. Carrying the sari, she limped home to her daughter and cried out for help, "They're coming after me!" But the daughter sang this verse:

God of stone standing there!
 Won't you lighten my heavy heart?
 I had to drink kanci and draw water,
 So what if the shopkeeper broke your leg.

The next day the daughter said, "You haven't given me a tali for my wedding!" "That's right, dear," said the dog. "I'll have to go to the goldsmith for that." Going to the goldsmith street, the dog grabbed a small tali and ran away, while they all shouted and threw stones. A stone hit the dog's leg - a second leg was broken - and she limped home on her two good legs. It took a long time, and remember that the daughter only had a few days before she had to return to her in-laws or they would come searching for her. When the dog reached home, the daughter sang again,

God of stone standing there!
 Won't you lighten my heavy heart?
 I had to drink kanci and draw water,
 So what if the goldsmith broke your leg.

On the following day, she said, "Shouldn't I have a special necklace for my wedding?" The dog went to the jewelry shop and took a necklace, a simple one - she didn't know much about jewelry - but then her third leg got broken! She had only one good leg now and barely made it back home, where she said, "See, daughter, how I suffer for you! I can only use one leg now."

Still thinking of how she could get rid of the dog, the daughter said, "I don't have a nice mat to sleep on." "You're right. You never asked before, did you?" Off went the dog, hobbling on its one good leg, and grabbed a mat in its mouth, but the shopkeeper threw a stone and broke its last good leg. The poor dog had to crawl all the way home, and it was midnight when it got there. Again, the girl cried her song, not knowing what to do.

This time the dog said, "Put me inside a box, lock it and I'll turn into a necklace with a thousand pieces of gold." "All right," said the daughter. "I don't have any jewels, from my mother's or my father's family. So I'll wear you as a gold necklace at my wedding."

Then she put the dog in the box and went back to her husband's house.

Storyteller: Sitamma

88. THE ELUSIVE THIEF

Once there was a raja who had a watchman, whose job was to keep watch over rice paddy after it had been boiled and spread out on the ground to dry. He slept in a little hut and received a monthly salary of only 100 rupees. The watchman had a son, and the two of them were very poor. One day the son said to his father, "What about me doing some work like you?" "The raja won't go for that," said his father. "I'm the only one he needs for this work. There's no work for you." "Hmm. Is this raja rich?" "Rich? He's very, very rich! The bed he sleeps on is made of gold, even the legs are pure gold."

"I see. He's that rich, is he?" thought the son who went and got four branches from a tree, which he then cut to size. "Where's the entrance to the raja's house?" the son asked. "There isn't really an entrance," said his father, "only a drain that you have to crawl through."

That night the son took the pieces of wood and followed his father through the drain and into the palace. The father really loved rice and curry, so he just sat there and ate away. But the son took the legs off the raja's golden bed one by one, put the wooden ones in their place and escaped. He called for his father, but the man couldn't get out through the drain. The sun was almost up and he realised he'd be caught, so the son cut off his father's head!

When the son got home, his mother was shocked: "Why did you do this?" Her son said, "He ate too much and couldn't get out; besides, the sun had risen and if I left him there they'd know who it was and would come after me, so I chopped off his head." Not knowing what else to do, the mother and son just waited to see what the raja might do.

In the morning the people in the palace saw the headless body but couldn't identify it, so the raja told the townspeople to tie the body on a donkey like a scapegoat and drag it through the streets of the town in a procession. "We'll find the golden legs of the bed in the house of whoever grieves at the sight of the body," thought the raja.

When he heard about this, the boy said to his mother, "They're going to drag his body through the streets. When you see him, you'll want to cry, won't you? So listen: I'll climb up in that nearby tree, while you stand outside with this clay pot of water. When the body comes close, I'll fall down on top of his body; then you'll smash this pot in front of father, embrace me and cry, 'Oh, god! My son has fallen from the tree!' That way you can fulfill your duty to mourn for father." The mother agreed and stood ready with the water pot.

As the body was pulled through the streets and approached their house, the boy climbed the tree and his mother stood by as if she'd come back from the water tap. The body came, the boy fell with a crash, and the mother smashed the pot and embraced him, crying, "Oh, son! You've fallen from the tree!" After that, they continued dragging the body through the streets, but no one claimed it. Meanwhile the son finished putting the golden legs of the raja's bed onto his own bed.

Finally, realising that no one was going to claim the body, the raja ordered it taken to the cremation ground for burning. The son went out in the paddy fields and got some snail shells - you know those big shells? - and brought them home, where he packed them into two tight bands and tied them on his legs, like anklets that jingle loudly. When the corpse started to burn, everyone expected the thief to come with the dead man's head - you've got to burn the head, too, don't you? Well, with the whole town

gathered there to watch the cremation, the son put on his snail-shell anklets and ran to the raja's house. Because the shells tinkled like a woman's anklets, he was able to enter the women's quarters and say, "Don't let that thief steal your jewels like he did the golden bed! The goldsmith sent me to collect all your valuables and keep them safe until he's caught." Immediately all the women took off their jewels and ornaments and handed them over to him; back home he gave the jewels to his mother.

Then the son tied on his anklets again, and got two cloth-torches from the local washerman, soaked them in oil and lit them. Carrying the burning torches and his father's head, with his anklets jingling, he ran wildly toward the cremation ground. Everyone there thought ghosts had come and ran in a panic, while the son placed his father's head on the funeral pyre and later collected his ashes, which he distributed in the forest. So he, too, was able to fulfill his duty to his father.

They still couldn't identify the thief. In the raja's house all the women were stripped of their finery, and they didn't know who had done it! The raja thought for a while and said, "Here's the plan. We'll let loose a camel, and whoever captures it must surely be the thief." So they let a camel wander about but no one went near it. Later, when no one was looking, the son grabbed the camel and took it home, where he cut it up and stored the meat and blood in several pots. The camel was gone, but no one knew who had taken it.

How was the raja going to find out? He called an old woman, gave her a huge sack of gold and said, "Use this money to buy camel blood from whoever will sell; once you have the blood, mark that house with a little blood. That way we'll find the house of the thief."

The boy said to his mother, "Listen closely. Don't give any of this camel meat or blood to anyone; I don't care who asks, don't give any. If you do, I'm no longer your son." His mother agreed, but when a poor old woman came and said she'd give a whole sack of gold for a little blood, the mother gave her some. I mean, it was a sack of gold! The old woman got the blood, made the mark on the outside wall and then went to sleep inside the house.

When the son came back about ten o'clock at night and asked his mother what had happened, she told him about the old woman. Seeing the blood mark, he said, "Look at what you've done! That old woman's marked our house. We're done for!" But he dug a deep hole behind the house and, while the old woman was still sleeping, buried her alive! Then he took the blood and put a mark on every single house in the town - not one was left unmarked! When the raja's men came looking for the house with the blood mark, what could they do? Every house was marked!

"All this effort and we still can't catch this guy!" grumbled the raja. "This time I'll spread money all along the road; whoever bends over to pick it up must be the thief!" So he had lots of money strewn along a road. The son thought, "Who's going to pick up that money except me?" First he made gum from those sticky flowers of the murunkai tree; next he went to the police station and got a nice pair of boots; then he got a freshly ironed veshti and shirt from a washerman; and finally he got a ring, a watch and an umbrella from somebody. He had everything you need to look important! Coating the soles of his shoes with the gum, he walked down the street strewn with money. When it all stuck to his feet, he simply went back home and gave it all to his mother.

Meanwhile, the raja asked his guards if anyone had come to pick up the money. "Maharaja," they said, "a big official, a very important officer, came along, but he was the only one and... well, the money's gone!" "Huh?. Is there someone more important than me in this town?" thought the raja. But when he went to investigate, there was no one to be seen; the boy had changed back into his normal clothes so who was the raja going to find?

Finally, the raja got another idea. He set up a shop in the forest, built a private room and put his only daughter in it. He thought that whoever tried to get her must be the thief - who else would be so bold as to approach the raja's daughter! But the boy started an affair with her. Soon she got pregnant and when five months had passed, the raja asked, "Who did this?" "I don't know," she answered. "Well, when he comes again, cut off his little finger and keep it," ordered the raja.

When the boy came to visit her and she asked for his little finger, he said, "I don't have a razor blade with me; I'll cut off a finger and bring it tomorrow." He left and, on his way back the next day, cut off a finger from a corpse that was still burning in the cremation ground. When the daughter asked for his little finger, he gave her a cloth bundle with the finger and said, "My little finger's in here." Immediately the father send his men to search for a fingerless man, but who is he going to find without a little finger? The boy had given away a dead man's finger so no one was missing anything! Again, the raja just couldn't catch him.

Before long the raja's daughter had a child, a son, but no one knew who his father was! Couldn't find him anywhere. The raja decided to do nothing until the boy was five years old; then, after his fifth year, he said, "This is ridiculous! We've got to find this man. Listen to me. Invite everyone in the kingdom for a meal - invite them all, the good and the bad, the poor and the sick - and give them a free meal." He sent out thousands of invitations to be delivered to the people, who came in droves and sat down to eat. This time the boy, the new father that is, knew he wouldn't escape. "After everything I've done, that raja's not going to let me off easily," he thought anxiously.

He came at the end of the meal, the very last person, and took his seat in the last row, where he sat looking like a madman. The raja told the little boy to search row by row for his father, but the little boy couldn't find him until, finally, he went to the very last row and sat in that fellow's lap!

All the important men who had come to the meal were shocked; they had been secretly hoping that the little boy would sit on their lap! But the child had passed them by and jumped into the lap of this madman! Still a child knows his father, doesn't he? All the guests got up and encircled him, until the raja approached. The boy thought the raja would surely kill him, but the raja only asked, "How did you come to sleep with my daughter?" "Well, my father was the watchman for your paddy but you gave him 100 rupees a month - not enough for the three of us to eat. I asked him if there was anyway I could get work in the palace and he said you were very rich. I was the one who stole the legs from your golden bed, chopped off my father's head, took the jewels from your house, hid the camel, buried the old woman, took the money on the road, slept with your daughter and fathered this child. I'm the one who did it all."

"In that case, you are the cleverest man I know," said the raja, "and I'm certainly not going to marry my daughter to anyone else! Sit down here." Then the raja conducted their marriage. That's the end of the story.

Storyteller: Pecciyammal (stories 85, 88)

89. THE TURTLE PRINCE

A raja and a minister were hunting one day. The minister said, "Since we're such close friends, if you have a daughter and I have a son, I'll marry my son to her; or if you have a son and I have a daughter, you must marry your son to my daughter. Let's make a promise." They went to a pond and pledged themselves to this pact by pouring water through their hands. Later five girls were born to the minister, but to the raja only a turtle was born. They fed it some rice and left it alone in its shell.

Before long, the minister's oldest daughter grew up, passed puberty and was ready to be married. The poor raja mumbled anxiously, "If I had had a son, that minister would have to marry his daughter to him; no way he could escape the promise. But with this turtle-son, how in the world can I ask for his daughter?" When the turtle heard this, he said, "What is all this you're mumbling about, father?" "Well," he said sadly, "we made a pledge long ago. If you were a human son, you could marry that girl, but I can't ask now because you're a turtle." But his son said boldly, "Father, go and ask. See what they say."

He went and was received respectfully - he was the king, remember. "Greetings, raja, what brings you here?" "We made a pledge. You have to marry your daughter to my son. You can't refuse." "Are you in your right mind? Who's going to marry his daughter to a turtle? If you had a son, then you'd have a right to ask, but a turtle? It's crazy!"

The girl herself heard this and said, "Father, whether a turtle, a cripple or a midget, I'll marry anyone who can cross the seven seas, to the sacred city on the holy tank and bring back the parijatarn flower." Having heard her decision, the father went back and explained to the son, "She says that she'll marry whoever crosses the seven seas, to the sacred city, to the holy tank and brings back the parijatarn flower." "That's all? Just give me some food and put me in the ocean. I'll return soon."

When they put him in the water, he began to swim and swim; he swam till he came to the place where the chariot of the Sun god, Surya, passed on its daily rounds. There he lay down and slept. When the chariot horses saw him there, they stood still, saying, "Better not trample this little turtle; that's a sin." Then Surya called out, "Turtle-Prince! Why are you obstructing my path? Do you know how many people are expecting me in the south at this hour? It's getting late. Move aside."

"I'll die if I must, but I want to know why I was born in this turtle form. Tell me and I'll move." "When you were a young student, you took a baby turtle from a pond and put it in the hand of a muni deep in meditation. He opened his eye and cursed you: 'Although born human, you will appear as a turtle.' It's nothing to do with me." "Yes, but you'll have to remove that curse now; there's no other way. You must give a boon that allows me to remove this turtle form and to put it back on later, if I wish." Surya granted this boon, and the prince now held the turtle shell in his hand. "Where's this parijatam flower?" he asked. "I don't know," said Surya, "but there's a sage ahead who opens his eyes once during every watch, once every six hours, that is. Ask him."

Surya left and the turtle-prince reached the sage, who asked him who he was. "I'm a raja and I'm searching for the parijatam flower." "I don't know about that, but there's another sage who opens his eyes once every two watches. Ask him." He asked the second sage who said he didn't know either but that he should ask a sage who opens his eyes only once every three watches. He greeted the third sage and explained, "Swami, I want this parijatam flower. They all said to ask you." "I can't get that flower for you; it's very, very special. Besides it's not here; it's in the land of the

gods. Only the seven Kannimar, who bathe near the pond, can give it to you. Steal one girl's sari and run into the nearby temple, but don't turn around! If you do, you'll regret it. Then, when you're inside the temple, make them promise to give you the flower in return for the sari."

The turtle-prince did as the sage said, and the girls promised to bring him the flower. When he opened the temple door to get the flower, they saw him and they were entranced. He shone like the sun! Such glowing beauty!

When they recovered, they fed him, played with him and embraced him. Then they said, "We will go back to our palace to play in the water, but whenever you want us again, just play this vina and we'll appear."

Handing him their vina, they left, and on his return journey the turtle-prince wanted to show his triumph to those who helped him. He played the vina for the third sage, who watched as the Kannimar came, fed and played with him and left. Then the sage got an idea: "Raja, when you go back home, this vina will be useless to you. But as a wandering ascetic, I could use it on my begging rounds. What'll you need it for?" "Well, what will you give me in return?" asked the raja. "Here's a magic wand. It will thrash whoever opposes you." The turtle-prince thought he could use that so he exchanged his vina for it; walking down the road a bit, he told the magic wand to beat up the sage and fetch back the vina. The wand split the sage into four pieces and returned to the prince, with the vina.

Then he went to the second sage, played the vina and was again fed by the seven Kannimar. This sage opened his eyes and watched and, when the girls had left, said, "Why not give me that vina? You don't need it but I'm an old sage." "What will you give me then?" "Here's a magic bag; whatever you want - money or anything - will be inside whenever you wish it." He took the bag, gave the vina and again used the wand to get back the vina.

Going to the third sage, the turtle-prince again played the vina and again the Kannimar came. Watching this, the sage thought, "Oh, that vina is really something! If I get it, I'll have those women!" So he said, "Raja, you don't need that when you sit on your throne; I'll give you something much better. These magic sandals. If you put them on, you can fly wherever you want."

Using the wand to get his vina back, the prince then put on the sandals and was instantly transported to the ocean. He bundled his possessions in a bag, hid it, put on his turtle shell and crawled back home. There he gave the parijatarn flower to his father, who took it to the girl's father, who thought to himself, "She said it didn't matter who brought the flower - a hunchback, a dwarf, a blind man - she'd marry whoever he was. And now this turtle has brought the flower, so we'll marry her to him."

Having taken this decision, he found husbands for his other daughters and got them all married. Then they held a magnificent feast, but the turtle-husband didn't like the food; with a veshti tied around him, he kept spinning around and around on the leaf, while everyone else enjoyed their meal.

Afterwards, when he tried to join his four brothers-in-law on a hunt, they said, "Where do you think you're going? Not on the hunt, I hope! You're a turtle! Better stay behind and sleep; you'd be useless on a hunt." "No, I really want to go. I don't need much; a lame horse and a blind man are enough." When they gave him the lame horse and blind man, the turtle asked them to tie him on the horse. After the brothers-in-law left, the turtle and the blind man set out; holding the turtle's tail, the old man walked

behind and tapped his sword on the ground like a seeing-stick. Then the turtle got down and told the man to tie up the horse and wait.

Taking off his shell, he changed to his sun-form, grabbed the magic stick, put on the magic sandals and flew overhead. He flew at such a speed that all the birds in the sky were dazed by the wind and fell down. Who got them? Right, the brothers-in-law scooped them up - that's all they caught on the hunt - and put them in a sack.

Soon they got thirsty and went into the woods, where the turtle had used his magic bag to get a special ring with which he created a water-tank and flower gardens. Sitting there on the edge of the tank, he played Ms vina which brought the Kannimar, who served and sported with him. Meanwhile the brothers couldn't find any drinking water, so one climbed to the very top of a tree, looked around and saw the water tank.

When they started to drink from the tank, suddenly the turtle-prince shouted, "Stop! What do you think you're doing! Drinking my water without asking first." "Asking permission to drink water! Ridiculous!" "If it's water that comes from the gods, for everyone, that's one thing. But this is my water. You can't drink unless I say so." "All right. What do you want us to do?" "Give me your rings - a ring from each of you if you want water." They removed their rings, gave them, to him, drank some water and departed.

The following day another raja came to collect taxes from the turtle's father-in-law - he hadn't paid, you see. The father-in-law decided to gamble and said bravely, "Look, I can't pay my tax. But you have only a small army and mine is huge. Come and fight me for the tax if you want it!" When that king invaded and raja's army was about to set out for battle, the turtle said, "I can also fight, raja." "This is not a mere hunt, my boy. There'll be horses, elephants, chariots, all sorts of animals and fierce men. One move by an elephant and you're a goner. Don't you want to live?" "All right, but let me at least go and watch from a distance," said the turtle.

The raja agreed and again gave him the lame horse and tied him on top - he's just going to go and watch, right? Riding that horse, he went back to the banyan tree, took out his things, put on his magic sandals and flew overhead. The speed of his upward rush tore up a palmyra tree, completely uprooted it, which drove away the opposing army; not only that, he also smashed the soldiers by throwing his magic stick at them. Seeing all this, the rest of the army fled in panic.

After he descended to earth, the brothers-in-law said to their father, "He's the same one who gave us water that day. If he hadn't given us water, we would have perished. Don't know who he is. Some powerful raja, I guess. And now he's saved us in battle." As they all fell at his feet, he said, "What will you give me as a symbol of my victory?" "What do you wish, sir?" "Your index fingers." They chopped off their index fingers, washed off the blood and gave them to him. Then he went back to the tree, changed his form and crawled home as a turtle.

Back home, the women were heating water for baths since there'd just been a battle - well, when the turtle saw this, he said, "I also went to war, so give me a bath, too." "How are you going to bathe?" "Don't worry about that. Just get the hot water ready; I'll take a bath and come out sparkling new," said the turtle. After they gave him hot water, his wife tiptoed up to the window and peeked in; when he took off his shell and put it aside, she cooed, "Oh, I see! He's been fooling me all this time, with that turtle shell. Have to get rid of it."

Ever so slowly, she opened the door, snatched the shell and burned it. It was done! Having finished his bath, he went to pick up his shell, but it had vanished! And without it, he's done for because he didn't want anyone to know he had a turtle-form. So he told his wife not to open the door and to feed him inside.

He ate, and that's the first night his wife slept well. But everyone wanted to know how the turtle had bathed so in the morning they opened the door, and in the blazing light they saw a handsome hero. "She must have got rid of that turtle and brought this fellow home," they thought. They didn't know who he was, but his wife said, "I'm not going to tell you his story; just tell my father to arrange for another wedding."

When the raja invited all the gods and put up a marriage pantal, the turtle-prince called his Kannimar with the vina and they danced for everyone. Then he told his story: "That day when I allowed you to drink water, what did you give me? You gave me your rings. Here, take them back."

When he had proved his identity, the Kannimar left and he lived with his wife, as the ruler of the land. That's the end of the story.

Storyteller: Sivalingam

90. BROKEN MIRRORS

A man used to sell mirrors, all kinds of mirrors. As he was selling them one day he began to make plans: "I'll sell this lot of mirrors, then start a bangle business, and when I get a nice profit from selling the bangles, I'll go into the diamond business and sell lots of diamonds to kings and rajas. And when I've done all that, finally, I'll be able to marry a princess."

Of course even domestic life has its problems, doesn't it? "Well," he said to himself resolutely, "if there's any trouble in my family, I'll put a stop to it, like this!" and he stamped his foot, right on his bag of mirrors and smashed them all!

And that was the end of his plans.

Storyteller: Cellammal

91. "DEAD OR ALIVE, HE CHEATED US"

In villages we have various local officials, such as Headman, Treasurer, Secretary, and Accountant. Of these, of course, the Accountant is the most powerful. Now it happened that in a certain village an Accountant was appointed, and he was a good man - at least at first. He was very generous and always served his guests good food. There's a saying, "In the Accountant's house you may get a banquet, but when he does the accounts all you get is black and blue." You see, that's when the arguments start.

What happens is that his wife will say, "Is it right to spend the villagers' money?" "Spend money, my sweet? Why I bought all those things just for you! All that meat, dosai, payacam - I bought it all with their money. You think I'm going to go out and earn money myself!" Inside the house they'll argue like this, while the rest of village waits to see the books on the accounts day.

On that day the Accountant will say, "I gave ten to him; five to him," and so on. What he did, however, was this: if he gave someone five rupees, he'd first write "5" but later he'll add a little mark, a "1" in front. So the "5" becomes "15". He only gave the man five, but in the book it's a debit of 15. If he adds a zero to 20, it's 200; if two zeroes, then 2,000!

With these little tricks of the trade, this particular Accountant managed to lead a very comfortable life. But the villagers kept asking themselves, "How come he lives like a king but doesn't work at all, never lifts a finger? We work ourselves to the bone and still can't make ends meet! Not enough to eat, no place to lie down at night, no decent clothes. But him, he walks around without a care, buying everyone tea, coffee and snacks, and pays for everything like a big man."

Sometimes these things end up in court. A judge will order the Accountant to bring his books, and when the judge adds up the expenses and revenues, he may find that they tally. If so, he'll say, "Well that's that. You were wrong to bring a case against him." But usually, in the end, the Accountant will pay for it.

As the years passed, everyone said, "He's gobbled up the whole village! Plucked us clean!" But no one escapes the consequences of his actions, no matter who he is. The Accountant got older and older, and toward the end of his life, he got ill and went to the police station and said, "Inspector Sir, I've cheated a little here and there in my life. Undoubtedly you've had complaints lodged against me. Anyway, when I die, they are planning to drag me through the streets and bury me."

That's what they do, you know, when some official or minister is caught cheating or something, they drag an effigy of him through the street, shouting, "Death to him!"

Anyway, our Accountant continued, "That's what they're planning to do with me. So I've told my son to come here and inform you when I die; when he comes, please send some policemen to my house to prevent these people from carrying out their disgraceful plan."

Then he called all the villagers together and said, "I'm about to die; my days are over. All this time I've cheated you and taken public money for myself. You've been cheated, but I want you to do something when I die. If I'm carried in a bier to the cremation ground like other corpses, I won't attain moksa; that's because I've cheated you. I'll only get moksa if you drag me through the streets and bury me in the ground."

A month later, when he gave up the ghost and his son told the police, the Inspector said to his men, "Quick! Go to his house or they'll do something horrible to his corpse. He may have done wrong, but you must see that he is cremated properly; if anyone tries to prevent it, take care of them."

By the time the police arrived, everything was ready for dragging the corpse; they had spread straw on top of a cart, placed the body on top and were about to pull it. Seeing this, the police issued commands: "Stop this now! Cremate him properly like a normal person!" "Sir," said the villagers, "he himself told us to do this when he died; he wrote it all down, telling us to get a cart and pull him round the village." "That's exactly what he warned us you'd try to do! He informed us before he died that you'd planned this disgrace. And we're here to stop it!"

In the end, they had to take the body to the cremation ground and give it a proper funeral! He set it all up, you see, telling one thing to one group and another thing to another group. After his funeral, the villagers said to themselves, "What a man! Dead or alive, he cheated us. Even after he died, he got the police to harass us."

Storyteller: Nalla Tambi (stories 91, 95)

92. THE KUNNIBERRY GIRL

A sister had two brothers. It came time for the older brother's marriage, but he didn't like the girls he saw. When his father and mother took him to meet prospective brides, he didn't want any of them. "I can't find a bride like my sister, like Kunniberry. What am I going to do, mother? If I don't marry a girl like her, I'll kill myself." His mother couldn't refuse when he put it like that, so she began to make arrangements for him to marry his sister.

The sister had another, younger brother, who was lame. When he was bathing, he heard a crow cry, "Sister's marrying older brother!" It didn't say anything to the sister, just to the younger brother, who went to their mother and said, "Don't marry her to older brother! Let him die if he wants to. I can take care of you if I have to." "Get lost. You're lame and he's handsome!" said the mother. "Are you that stupid? Two people born from the same stomach shouldn't marry." "Drop it," she said and went off to buy things for the wedding.

The sister didn't know anything about this, but when she went to the well, the younger brother said to the crow, "Ka-ka, Ka-ka, don't peck the rice. Sister's marrying older brother!" She turned to him and said, "Lame brother, don't say that, and don't block my way!" "All right, sister, go ahead," he said and let her pass. The next day the lame brother again sang to the crow, "Tomorrow a marriage between brother and sister. Ka-ka! Don't peck the rice." Again the little sister stood there, listening to him.

Her family had bought coconuts for the wedding and stored them in the house. On the third day of the preparations she threw a coconut down the well, saying, "I don't want this marriage; not at all." Then she added, "If I'm a chaste woman, when I come here tomorrow, let this coconut be a full-fruited tree." When she came back it had grown into a tall tree leaning out over the river. Climbing up, she leapt into the water; then the older brother came, climbed up and leapt into the river, too.

They both became fish; she was a long, teli fish and he was a vilanku, a male fish. The brother was taken in by a washerman and the sister by his wife. When the washerman caught the fish, he cried, "I've got a vilanku, so we don't have to buy fish today," while the woman kept the teli fish hidden in the folds of her sari. They washed clothes and went home, where the washerwoman started to cook the fish; but when she took a knife and began to cut the teli fish, it cried out: "Washerwoman! Don't cut me with the same knife you cut my brother with. Don't cook me in the same pot you cook him in. We're brother and sister. I didn't want to marry him, so we jumped in the river and became these fish. Don't do it." She spoke out this, but the brother-fish was silent.

Not heeding her, the washerwoman cut them and put them in the same pot. When she did, the teli fish pieces fell out of the pot but the vilanku fish stayed in. In the morning, when she got up and went to the rubbish heap, she saw kunniberry seeds scattered everywhere.

The washerwoman had a son and a daughter, too, and the boy asked her, "Mother, what fish did you get yesterday?" "While we were washing clothes, we got two: I got a teli and your father got a vilanku. When I went to cut the teli it said, 'Don't cut me with the knife you cut my brother with.' I didn't pay any attention, cut them both and put them in the pot, but the teli pieces fell out and disappeared. The vilanku is still in the pot but it's not eatable; it won't cook right." The son said, "All right, mother, but we don't need to eat it."

When he was about to go to school, he saw the kunniberry seeds scattered near the rubbish heap and called his sister, "Sister, let's play panti with these seeds. Look at them all! Get a board and scoop up all the seeds." She scooped them up, put them on the table and then they went to school, but when they returned, only one seed remained! They had put all the seeds there, but now there was only one! You see, brothers and sisters shouldn't play the game, so only one seed remained.

The lame brother said, "What happened to the seeds? Did you play with them?" "No. When I went to school, they were all here, but now there's only one. I don't know what happened to the rest." And when she went to show him the one remaining seed, even it was gone!

Later, the sister and her mother and father died, leaving the boy alone. His paternal uncle, who was an unmarried teacher, looked after him and his schooling, telling the boy to study hard. "You can get a good job and then get married. Until then we'll live together in this house." In the morning, the uncle went to work and the boy went to school, but first he did all the cooking and cleaning.

One morning he decided not to cook rice, thinking, "I'll come back at noon and just have some cold rice." When he returned, he saw a full, hot meal waiting for him: rice, curry, vegetables! Not fish curry, but meat curry, with a tasty sauce and all. Wondering how this came about, he sat down to eat. He was amazed, and assumed that his uncle had done it for him. But when he asked him, "Did you cook curry and vegetables for me today?" the uncle answered, "No. I didn't get back till four today." "That's strange because a full meal was waiting for me at noon." "Oh, well. Someone or other made you a magic feast!"

Next morning the boy wondered if anyone had got into the house while they were gone, so he locked all the doors and went to school. But when he came back at noon, he heard a noise inside, like someone sweeping the floor. He listened again and heard the sound, but it wasn't like a human being.

"Tomorrow I'm going to find out what this is all about," he thought. The next day he came back at noon and heard the sound, and through a window he saw a full meal waiting for him. Wondering what it was, he looked in through another window and saw a beautiful woman standing in front of a mirror powdering herself and putting a pottu on her forehead. And she was admiring the beauty of a single kunniberry seed held in her hand. As she stood there looking at its beauty, he climbed through the window, ran up and embraced her! Then they were married.

Storyteller: Rajammal

93. THE RAKSASI-QUEEN

There was a raja and a raksasi, a man-eating ogress. When he went hunting, the raksasi fell in love with him; so she changed herself into a beautiful woman and went back with him. The raja also had a queen, who was pregnant. Every night, when it got dark, the raksasi-queen changed into her demonic form, left the palace, and ate horses, elephants and cattle. Each night she ate one animal.

One night when she changed her form and ate the royal elephant, the guards saw her. She realised this and thought she was done for. Then she got an idea and made herself look like the first wife; in that disguise she entered the palace and slipped into the queen's room.

When they saw this, the guards thought, "Terrible! That raksasi who eats horses and elephants is the queen herself!" Inside the room where the queen was sleeping, the raksasi smeared blood on the queen's face and hid away. When the guards knocked on the door and the queen opened it, they saw blood all over her face and clothes. "She's been eating our animals in the form of a raksasi," they said and put her in jail. Jail wasn't all they did to her - they plucked out both her eyes, put them in a box and sent it to the queen's older sister.

While she was imprisoned, her son was born. He grew up in jail and heard the story about how his mother had eaten the royal elephant. When he argued that no one should say this about his mother, they exiled him to the forest. "Somehow," he said to himself, "I must find out what really happened." When he learned that the raksasi had disguised herself as his mother, he resolved that his mother would suffer no more.

Determined, he wandered about and ended up at his mother's sister's house. This sister was also a raksasi, but she took the boy in and raised him in a cave. The sister also kept a girl there, who fell in love with the boy and told him her story: "I'm not a raksasi. I'm a princess whom this raksasi brought here to raise, to fatten up until she eats me. Be careful where you go and what you say."

"All right," said the boy, "but you must find out where she keeps her life-index." That night the girl went to the sister and began to cry. "Why are you crying," asked the sister. "You refuse to tell me the truth." "About what?" "Well, you are raising me, but suppose you die - then who will take care of me?" "Ah! No one can kill me! In a banyan tree, beyond the seventh sea, protected by bhutas, my soul and my younger sister's soul are safe, in the form of bees. So, you don't have to worry, my girl."

She had told the truth, and the next day after she'd left, the girl told all this to the boy. Immediately, he set out and swam across the seas, fending off snakes and all sorts of dangers, until he finally he reached the banyan tree. He climbed up and caught the two bees and, although his arm was swollen with pain, he held on and put them in a box. Then he used magic and flew back to the girl.

There he assumed the form of a bee and fought with one of the raksasi-bees, grabbing its legs with his legs, its arms with his arms, and so on. In the end, he crushed the bee. Then he took the form of a horse and flew away with the girl to the place where his mother was in prison, without her eyes.

At the moment he arrived; she was about to be hanged, but he opened the box, crushed the remaining bee and it turned into the raksasi-queen. "Raja! Look who is the raksasi!" he shouted. Then he removed the noose from his mother's neck, replaced her eyes, and they all lived happily.

Storyteller: Alakammal

94. PEACOCK BEAUTY

Once there was a raja who reigned for forty years without an heir. Finally, a son was born. He was born with a knowledge of all the arts of magic, illusion and shape-shifting, and with a bow in his hand.

One day, as a hunchback woman watched over the parboiled rice drying in the sun, a bird alighted on her hunch. The boy strung his bow and shot an arrow, and her hunch straightened up! "You little rascal!" she said. "With my hump gone, my daughter-in-law will make me go out and work. Now listen. Across the seven seas, Peacock Beauty lives in a prison. If you cross the seas, avoiding the red and black dogs, the tigers and bears, and bring her back, as miraculously as you straightened out my hump, then I will feed you."

He went straight to his mother and told her he needed food for a long journey. "I'm going to free Peacock Beauty," he said, but his mother and father opposed him: "We waited forty years for you; don't go on this dangerous journey." The boy was stubborn, "Give the food now! I must succeed in this; I must do it." They conceded, and gave him food and Ms grandfather's stunted horse. "I will succeed, I will," he kept saying as he rode away on that little horse.

After a while, he came upon a snake burning in the sun, writhing around in the hot sand. "Brother! Help me! Put me in water and I'll help you some day." Getting down from his horse, he picked up the snake and put it in water. Next he saw a frog crying with pain in the hot sun: "Take me away, away from here!"

After he helped the frog, the boy went ahead, past the jackals and wild animals, toward Peacock Beauty. When he came to seven tall mountains, he wondered, "How can I possibly climb them?" He sat there, like a tiny speck at the foot of those mountains, and then he remembered the snake and the frog he had helped. Spreading out its five hoods, the snake moved forward, piling up the earth to make steps. "Climb it and find that girl," said the snake. So the boy climbed up, step by step, and came down the other side.

Crossing the seven mountains, he reached the place where Peacock Beauty was in held captive; there he waited under a tree near the pond where she bathed. Her seven maids saw him and told Peacock Beauty, who came and asked him who he was. "I am the prince of Madurai and I've come here for you." "In the pond floats a braid of hair sixteen feet long. Bring it to me and I am yours," she said. He dived into the water and went down very deep, but couldn't catch the braid; he dived again but still couldn't get it.

Then he remembered the frog: "I helped that frog; let's see what it will do for me." When he dived in a third time, he saw the frog holding the braid in its mouth. Taking the braid from the frog, he climbed out and gave it the servants, who gave it to the girl. She put it on and it fit perfectly! "Oh," the girls said, "we can't let such a talented man as this one get away!"

At that moment, Peacock Beauty walked toward him, and what a beauty she was!

When she spoke the nine precious gems fell from her lips;
 when she smiled rows of red paddy flashed;
 when she walked jewels issued forth;
 when she cried flowers bloomed.
 And each month she brought forth a pearl!

He brought her across the mountains and they rested on the other side. After he tethered the horse and she fell asleep in his lap, a sadhu suddenly appeared and said to her, "Come with me, girl, and I'll treat you nicely. He's no-good; can't trust him." She refused, but the sadhu slit his throat -he killed him! Again he called to her to come and again she refused. Finally, she said, "I'll go with you, but first let's dig a deep hole and bury him. We can't leave him like this." The sadhu dug and dug, and made a deep hole.

While he was digging, she sat under the tree and watched a family of monkeys in the branches above her: a male monkey, his lover, his wife and their son. The male monkey picked fruits from the tree and threw them down to the women below who gave them to the son. Then the male monkey leapt, fell down and broke his thigh in two! The lover ran off, but the mother and son went up the mountain and got the Sanjeevi herb. They pounded the herb into medicine, spread the paste on the monkey's broken thigh and pressed the two pieces together, and, suddenly, the pieces stuck together! When the male monkey awoke, he said, "Where's my lover?" "Why ask for her? When you broke your leg, she fled," said his wife.

Watching all this, Peacock Beauty noted the marvelous medicine that had healed the broken leg. Meanwhile, the sadhu was digging the hole, deeper and deeper so that he could bury the body and run away with her. Soon he said, "I've dug it; let's throw him in." Looking down, she saw it was very deep but said, "First, we should measure it; get in and bend your head down. If the hole is as high as your shoulders, we'll throw him in." He got in and bent over - and with one breath she blew all the dirt back into the hole and buried him!

Then she went back to where her husband lay in two pieces - head here and body there. Going up the mountain, she picked the medicinal plants, like the monkeys had done. Grinding them for a long time, she used the paste to join together his head and his body. As the two parts slowly fitted together, he woke up and said, "Must have slept for a long time. Why didn't you wake me?" "Remember that sadhu who came along? He killed you and went for me, but I refused. He dug a hole to put you in, but I buried him in it."

It was late afternoon and they mounted the horse and rode away - but not to Madurai, not yet. Soon it was dark and they came to a blacksmith's house. "It's late; my wife needs a place to sleep before we go to Madurai in the morning." The blacksmith took the woman inside and told him to sleep in the smithy. She was incredibly beautiful:

When she spoke the nine precious gems fell from her lips;
when she smiled rows of red paddy flashed;
when she walked jewels issued forth;
when she cried, flowers bloomed.
And each month she brought forth a pearl!

He kept her inside, and in the morning, when the prince went to say goodbye, the blacksmith said, "Going? She's already gone! She's not in the house."

Having lost her, the prince went mad and wandered around, calling her name, "Peacock Beauty! Peacock Beauty!" over and over again. The blacksmith kept her in his house, but she wouldn't let him come close to her, saying, "I must keep a vow for six months; after those six months I'll come to you. But on the last day of those six months you must feed whoever comes to the house - ascetics or beggars, you must

feed anyone and everyone!" He kept her there and stored the pearls she produced month after month. She brought forth a pearl whenever she walked, but she stayed away from him.

As her six months drew to a close, all the sadhus were invited, from everywhere, from as far away as Madras! They all came and called out, "Feed me! Feed me!" but she kept repeating her own name, "Peacock Beauty! Peacock Beauty!" in the hope that he would find her. It worked and finally he found her. They embraced, he took her away and the blacksmith's house became barren.

They rode away on his horse, but still they didn't reach Madurai, not yet. They stopped under a banyan tree and he wanted to marry her right there, to build a wedding pantal in that tree and marry her. So he put her high up in the tree and went away to arrange the marriage. When a young potter woman came to the well near the tree, she saw a reflection in the water. "I'm looking nice today! Very nice indeed!" she thought. Then she heard a laugh and looked all around but saw no one; looking in the water again, she saw that the reflection was laughing! "This is strange! I'm not laughing, but the reflection is!" Finally, she looked up and saw the woman in the tree, with all her beauty and jewels.

"What are you doing up there?" she said kindly, as if they were sisters. "Come down." Peacock Beauty climbed down, and then what did the potter woman do? She stole her jewels and her clothes, plucked out both her eyes and pushed her into the well! The potter woman went home and gave the eyes to her mother, then went back and sat in the tree, wearing the jewels and clothes. She sat there, while Peacock Beauty lay blinded in the well.

Now, the prince's marriage to Peacock Beauty had already been announced. With such a lovely bride to see, do you think this would be an ordinary wedding! No! People came from everywhere, and rajas came from every kingdom to see this beautiful bride:

When she spoke the nine precious gems fell from her lips;
when she smiled rows of red paddy flashed;
when she walked jewels issued forth;
when she cried, flowers bloomed.
And each month she brought forth a pearl!

A pantal was erected that stretched from the raja's palace to the tree where the young potter woman was waiting.

Meanwhile, as Peacock Beauty lay at the bottom of the well, a man and a woman who sold firewood passed by and leaned their bundles against the wall of the well. "Help me! Help me!" they heard her cry and lifted her up with a cloth and took her home. But the wife scolded him, "What! Taking a blind woman home with us! Another mouth to feed? We sell those bundles of wood for only two rupees, not a paisa more!" But he kept Peacock Beauty and when she entered their house, their bundles began to sell for ten rupees each. Instead of getting four rupees for their two bundles, now they got twenty rupees!

Blind Peacock Beauty said to them, "You needn't sell wood ever again. Take these two pearls and exchange them for two eyes. Go in the street and call, 'Pearls for eyes.'" The woodcutter took the pearls to town to sell, but who in their right mind would exchange eyes for pearls! Well, the potter woman thought, "My daughter brought me those eyes! Why not sell them for pearls?" Lifting the eyes from a box,

she exchanged them for the two pearls. Taking the eyes back home, the woodcutter washed them and put them into Peacock Beauty's sockets. A perfect fit! But the pearls in the potter woman's house became tarnished.

Before long the woodcutter lived in a seven-storey house. From that day onward he sold no wood, and there was no fire in any hearth in any house! The townspeople complained, "Where is he? Where's the woodcutter?" He was rich now, a powerful man, so he gave them bags of pearls.

Meanwhile, back at the tree near the well, the potter woman's daughter was about to be married. All the rajas were there, but when the tali was brought, this is what they saw:

When she walked, dust and dirt flew!
When she smiled, her teeth were black!
When she let down her hair, worms and maggots swarmed!

"What kind of a bride is this!" the wedding guests cried and left in anger. The husband also went away because this was not his wife.

Calling, "Peacock Beauty! Peacock Beauty!" again he wandered around like a madman. He wandered everywhere, completely mad! As he wandered through the streets of the town, Peacock Beauty stood on the seventh storey of her house, combing out her hair. Hearing him calling her name, she said to the woodcutter, "That man out there, muttering 'Peacock Beauty! Peacock Beauty!' Bring him to me." You see, only she knew her real name - even the woodcutter didn't know. When the prince was brought to her, they embraced and his madness left him. Just as soon as he knew she was his wife, he was cured.

Putting up another pantal between the tree and the seven-storey house, they announced their marriage. They invited everyone, but many thought, "It'll be that same old and ugly bride," and didn't come. Only about half the population turned up, but when she walked on the path from the house to the tree, the ground was covered with pearls!

When she smiled rows of red paddy flashed;
when she cried flowers sprung forth;
when she let down her hair pearls rumbled out!

They were married and lived very happily. That's how the story ends.

Storyteller: Tiralankoti

95. YOUNG NAGAMMAL, THE SNAKE-GIRL

A rich man, a very rich man, lived in a village. He had no children, although his wife prayed and prayed, and kept on praying for a child. One day, when a sadhu came to her door, she offered him alms, saying, "Good man. I go to temples, I feed holy men and still god has not blessed me with a child." "Listen," said the sadhu, "there's a beautiful flower garden over there, with mango trees, guava trees and lime trees. In the far corner, you'll find a mango tree. Pick seven mangoes and you'll have seven daughters."

The very next day, she bathed, did puja and then went to the garden, where she was overwhelmed by the beauty of it all. She found the tree and plucked seven mangoes - but why not more? That's just human nature, isn't it? Yet when she took that eighth mango, she saw a snake, a cobra, which suddenly changed into a man, wearing a small crown fit for a snake. This was Nagentiran, who said, "You were allowed seven mangoes. Why did you take the eighth?" "I didn't know what I was doing." "That's not true; you knew full well and still you did it. For that wrongdoing I will take your life when you are 56 years old. You see, this garden is mine, and I am the sadhu who sent you here. I am also that eighth mango, and you almost killed me. You will have seven children, and the seventh child born from the seventh mango you must call 'young Nagammal, the Snake-girl'." With these words, he sent her away.

At home she ate the seven mangoes, one each day, for seven days. Seven daughters were born and named, and the last was named 'Young Nagammal'. All seven were married, to their mother's brother's sons, their cousins, and soon the seventh girl, young Nagammal, gave birth to a son.

Young Nagammal was the loveliest of them all, but beauty brings danger, you know. The problem was that far away, in another kingdom, lived a mantiravati. Whenever he heard about a beautiful woman, he would pass his magic wand three times around a mirror, then rap the mirror and the woman's image would appear in the mirror. No matter where or who she was, her image would appear in his mirror. Then he would summon a bhuta with huge arms and heavy clubs, and order him to bring the woman to him. For years, he had collected many beautiful women and enjoyed their pleasures.

Among themselves, however, they quarreled as to who was the most beautiful: "I'm the most beautiful!" "No! I am," they would say. One day as they were quarreling like this, the mantiravati and his bhuta entered their room. Turning to the bhuta, the magician asked, "Well! Who is the most lovely?" "None of these," he answered. "Then who?" "Her name is young Nagammal and she lives in Vairapuri." "Bring her here." "Can't." "Why not?" "On orders of Nagentiran, the snake. Anyone who touches her will be burnt to ashes." "Is there no other way to bring her?" "If you use a disguise, you can get her." Seized with desire for young Nagammal, the mantiravati made plans to get her.

Dressed like a Saiva sadhu, the mantiravati headed toward Vairapuri. On the way, he met a man who had two wives but was childless; now when this other man heard the sadhu chanting "Om, Sakti, Om!" he thought he might get a child, so he prostrated in front of him. "What do you want?" asked the sadhu. "I've got two wives but no child." "Take this sacred ash and give it to your wives," said the sadhu, who then went on his way. Holding the ash in his hand, the man walked home and in his excitement, swung his arms back and forth, scattering the ash everywhere. Wherever the ash fell, children were born.

Meanwhile the sadhu headed straight for Nagammal's house, where she was alone since the others had gone some distance to fetch water. Her time was coming; it couldn't be avoided. In that disguise of a sadhu, the mantiravati asked for alms. He also had a chariot, hidden beneath the ground so she couldn't see it. Her husband and brothers-in-law had instructed Nagammal not to cross the three lines drawn on the threshold. "Don't cross those lines to give alms to anyone, no matter who it might be. That way you're safe," they had said.

The sadhu begged for rice and when she agreed, he said, "Come a little closer." "Well, he's a sadhu," she thought. "What harm could he do?" She didn't know about the chariot, of course. When she came closer and poured rice into his bowl, he put the lid over it so that the rice spilled on the ground; and when she bent down to pick it up, he took out his magic wand and turned her into a dog. Putting the dog in the chariot, he flew off.

The husbands and sisters came home, but Nagammal was gone. However, before she gave alms to the sadhu, she had removed a necklace from her neck and hung it on her son. The baby was crying and the sisters were screaming as they looked everywhere for their little sister; their husbands quickly mounted horses and rode off in the direction they thought she had gone. When they got close, however, the mantiravati turned the husbands to stone! Reaching his palace, the mantiravati turned the dog back into Nagammal, but he couldn't touch her or even get close to her. She was fire, like Nalla Tankal. "I will observe a vow for forty-one days," she declared and was given a serving girl and left all alone. She suffered greatly, all alone, with her baby and husband far away. She ate and slept, that was all.

Back home, her son was raised by her sisters. He grew up, but who was there to take him to school on his first day? Not his mother, nor his father - he had been turned to stone. At school he won all the prizes, but the children teased him: "He doesn't even know his own mother! Why should he win everything!" After a while, he asked his aunts, "Where's mother?" "We are your mothers." "No. The mother who bore me. Where is she? And where is my father? And your husbands?"

He was stubborn, but still they didn't say anything. Years passed, he became a young man and again he began to ask them about his mother. He demanded and then threatened to kill himself. Frightened, the aunts explained, "When you were one year old, your mother was stolen by a mantiravati." "And my father?" "Your father and uncles followed after her, but they were turned to stone. We've gone and seen them, but we could do nothing. They're just stones."

Then one day Nagentiran came as a snake and everyone was frightened, except the boy; he was young but he was brave. Changing to his human form, Nagentiran said, "Do not worry about your mother; no harm will come to her. She is kept by a mantiravati but the time for his death is drawing near. You must destroy him; I can't do it. You must do it and rescue your mother." "I'll go, but I have no sword, no staff, nothing at all." Nagentiran stretched out his hand and a sword appeared, which he gave to the boy. "This sword is invincible against evil men and animals; with it you will conquer all and bring back your mother. You and she are also protected because you both carry my family name. However, I must take away your grandmother when she reaches her fifty-sixth year." With these words, Nagentiran changed back into a snake and vanished.

Holding the sword, the boy set out to find his mother. He walked a long way until he came to a large palace, with signs everywhere warning about a fierce tiger that was terrifying the region; it destroyed whole villages and no one could subdue it. The

signs warned: "Do not go this way! Do not go that way!" Studying these signs, he wondered where this tiger might be. He asked a man, who said that the tiger lived in the nearby mountain and occasionally came down to eat any goats and bullocks and humans who might be around.

Entering the palace, he read a sign from the local raja: "Whoever kills the tiger and brings back the tip of its tail and the tip of its tongue, will receive half of my kingdom and marry my daughter, Indrani."

After reading this, he went out and looked around but saw nothing; exhausted, he lay down under a banyan tree. Soon the tiger came and leapt on him, but he grabbed its two front legs in his left hand, drew his sword with his right and slew it. Cutting off the tip of the tiger's tail and tongue, he went back into the palace but decided to take them to the raja in the morning.

In the palace grounds a washerman and his wife washed clothes in a small pool. Having watched Nagammal's son, the washerman ran to the spot where the tiger lay dead, cut off some of its remaining tail and tongue and went directly to the raja. "Raja! I've killed the tiger!" "You?" "Yes. Here's its tail and tongue." The raja saw that it was a tiger's tail and tongue, but he didn't look very closely. "Right," he said and invited the washerman into the palace, served him food and sat him in a special chair. Remember that in those days a washerman had to be submissive; so when he sat, he made himself very small.

When the minister came in and asked what was up, the raja explained, "This man has killed the tiger." "Let me see the tail and tongue," said the minister. Looking at them, the minister declared, "These are not the tips of the tail and tongue. But don't send that man away just yet; let's see what happens next." In the morning, Nagammal's son arrived and said he had killed the tiger; he showed the tail and tongue, which the minister verified as the true pieces. Immediately, the raja gave him half his kingdom and asked when he wanted to be married. "Not now," said the boy. "I must first find my parents. I'll return with them." The raja agreed and gave the boy leave to go.

Having gone farther, he came upon his father and uncles, standing as stones. He could do nothing for them as long as the mantiravati had power, so he continued ahead until he reached the mantiravati's palace. But how was he to get inside? That huge bhuta was there; besides the mantiravati had a magic wand and could turn him into a snake or a scorpion! Not knowing what to do, he sat there and kept quiet. He had to find someone to help him enter.

Soon an old woman who sold flowers in the palace passed by and he called to her. "Who are you?" she asked. "I need your help." "What?" "I've lost my parents, and I have no one to support me. I wondered if you might feed me." "Can you make flower garlands?" "Show me how and I'll do it for you; why should you work so hard at your age?" So he began to live in her house near the mantiravati's palace.

Before long he had learned how to make garlands, and sometimes he took them to the palace himself. Once inside, he slipped past one guard, a second and then a third. About a month passed like this, during which time he studied the layout of the palace, who stood where and when, and so forth. But he didn't tell anyone who he was; they all thought he was some orphan boy. Soon he learned the mantiravati's name and his powers: that he used a magic wand and a mirror to find the women; and that he had a bhuta who fetched them.

After collecting all this information, he asked the old woman, "Granny, he's got all those beautiful women in that palace. Is he some kind of raja? Does he have a queen? Who rules the place?" "Listen son. He's a powerful magician, whom no one can conquer." "Really! What do you mean?" "Well, he's got a woman in there named Nagammal, and she's doing a forty-one-day fast; until those days are over, he can't touch her." "Who feeds her?" "There's a serving maid for that." "Can I meet that maid?" "Of course. I'll invite her here."

When the serving maid came, the boy asked her whom she fed. "Her name is Nagammal and she's kept in the north room, where he keeps the most beautiful women. I heard that she has six sisters and that all their husbands were turned to stone." "What about the mantiravati?" "He's very cruel, very cruel. Better not oppose him." "Who else feeds this Nagammal?" "Just me. No one else is allowed to enter her room." "Can't I see her?" "No. They'd kill you; you're a boy." "I see, but you can help me." "How?" "I want you to take a garland to her; don't give it to anyone else." The serving maid agreed, so the next day he wrote a letter, hid it in the garland and gave it to her, who gave it to Nagammal.

When Nagammal received the garland, she found the letter which she opened and read:

Mother - I'm staying with the garland-lady. Don't worry. I'll kill the mantiravati soon and take you home. But you must do one thing: become friends with the mantiravati and find out where he keeps his life-index.

Reading this, Nagammal was overcome with happiness that she would soon see her son, her husband and her sisters. Next day the mantiravati asked the serving maid about Nagammal: "How is she?" "Fine." "Is she still angry?" "No. She's happy." "Did she say anything?" "She said that you should visit her." Jumping for joy, he powdered his face, dressed grandly and marched off to her room.

When he entered, she didn't go close but she did speak to him. "You are the most powerful mantiravati in the world. No one can kill you. But how is this?" "Because my life-index is not kept with me." "Really? Where is it then?" "In a deep hole, in a cave, in a mountain twenty-three miles from Madurai, lives a parrot. Only if that parrot is killed, will I die." She listened to his arrogant words and said sweetly, "Only ten days remain for my vow; after that we will enjoy ourselves," and then she sent him away.

That day Nagammal wrote a letter and told the serving maid to give it to the garland-lady's grandson - that was his identity. "Here's a letter for you, from that woman in the north room," said the serving maid to him. Reading the letter, he learned the details about the parrot and its location; the letter ended by saying, "Son. To kill that parrot in the cave in the mountain is a difficult task. You don't have to go."

But he set forth and on the way met the snake, Nagentiran, who asked, "Where are you going?" When he explained about the letter, the snake said, "Hold your sword in front, like this, and don't worry about anything. There will be poisonous snakes and scorpions there, but they won't harm you."

Off he went and reached the cave, where snakes and scorpions hung from the roof, but he marched right by them holding the sword. He didn't have to kill them. Then he saw the hole, encircled by high flames, but he passed through the flames, went down passage after passage and finally came to a little room with the parrot. It, too, was protected by a ring of flames. Taking a few steps back, he ran forward and leapt through the fire and seized the parrot. As soon as he did, the mantiravati doubled

over in pain and shouted, "Who's done this?" Enraged, he stumbled toward Nagammal's room, but still he could not touch her, because she was fire itself.

The boy brought the parrot to the palace and confronted the mantiravati, who said, "Who are you?" "I'm your Yama," he said and broke one of the parrot's wings; then the mantiravati's arm fell off. He grabbed the other wing and then its legs, and snapped them off. The mantiravati fell to the floor but managed to grab his wand and rap on the mirror; then the bhuta appeared, but the boy swung his sword and cut him down in one swing. Seeing this, all the captive women fell at the boy's feet and praised him.

Then he took the serving maid and ran to the north room, where he found his mother! You can imagine how his mother felt! Smothering him with kisses, she said, "My son! You've saved me!" Next they went to the garland-woman and wrote over the kingdom to her. Then he hurried to the spot where his father and uncles stood as stones; touching them with the magic wand, he changed them back to humans.

They all rejoiced and went - where do you think they went? To the palace where he'd killed that tiger! Remember that he had won that kingdom and that his wife was there. He was given a tumultuous reception and all were happy, until the snake appeared once more. Everyone was afraid, but the boy said, "That's not a snake. It's my protector, and my mother's protector." Nagentiran tied the tali around his bride's neck, and then they all returned to his parents' home.

When they returned, his grandmother had reached her fifty-sixth year. Nagentiran had to take her life - that was what he said because she had eaten that eighth mango way back then. Everyone knew that, so they dug a deep moat all around the palace, filled it with firewood, soaked it with oil and lit it. Snakes can't go through fire, you see.

They also hung the grandmother's bed from the ceiling and gave her a basket of fruit; this, too, to keep the snake from reaching her. Finally, they all stood guard to prevent the snake from entering the palace. But the snake did enter. How? It came out of a mango in the basket. Her time had come and fate will not be cheated. When they opened the basket, the snake came out and bit the grandmother. Later, after they performed her funeral rites, everyone was happy.

Storyteller: Nalla Tambi (stories 91, 95)

96. BREAKING COCONUTS AT THE TEMPLE

A husband and a wife were childless for a long time. They went to their lineage temple with a large group of relatives believing that if they sponsored a free meal for everyone they would get a child. So, taking along a chicken, rice and other things, they went to the temple, cut up the chicken, boiled it and cooked everything. Now it happened that the couple who wanted a child really liked to eat the chicken's head. "We might forget and serve the head to someone else," they thought to themselves; so they hid it away and then served the others.

The whole party decided to sleep in the temple that night and return home in the morning. At midnight the chicken head, which had been wrapped up in the wife's sari, crowed! Hearing this in the middle of the night, the local villagers were shocked, got up and ran to the temple. "Wake up! You've got a chicken here somewhere," they said to the sleepers. "There's no chicken here. Look around," the others said. Finally, they went to the childless couple and said, "Get up. We heard a chicken here." When they got up, the chicken head rolled out of the wife's sari and into the temple. Inside the priest said, "You did wrong. You served a free meal but you hid the head, and for that god is angry with you."

"We desperately want a child; please forgive our wrongdoing," pleaded the wife. "If I get a child, I will have my husband carry three grinding stones on his head to this temple as an act of devotion!" she promised.

Back home, after she had her child, god appeared in the wife's dream: "You've got your child, but I haven't seen those three grinding stones yet! When is your husband going to bring them to the temple?" Jumping up, she woke her husband, who asked what was going on. "I made a vow that if we had a child you'd carry three grinding stones to the temple. God wants to know when you're going to do it," she explained. "Fool! You promised grinding stones for a child! I'm an old man; how can I carry those heavy stones?"

But the villagers came and encouraged him, "That vow isn't so difficult, really. If you pray to god with true devotion, you won't even feel the weight of those rolling stones." After a week of austerities to strengthen his body, the man carried the stones on his head and placed them on the steps of the temple. "That's that; let's go home," he said to his wife. But before they had finished circumambulating the temple, she made another vow: "When my child begins to walk, my husband will take him up that tree over there."

At home the child began to walk perfectly, and that night god again appeared in the wife's dreams: "He's walking nicely; but your husband hasn't taken him up that tree yet. If he doesn't, something evil may befall your child." Again she woke her husband, who snarled: "What did you promise this time?" "You're supposed to take the boy up and down a tree." "Up and down a tree! I'll probably kill myself and the boy, too!" "But I promised god that you'd do it when the boy began to walk."

Again the husband prepared himself with austerities and prayers, and took the boy to the temple. He went up the tree and came down safely. Then he said, "Right. That's the second and last one! Now keep your mouth shut." But she made a third vow: "We brought three grinding stones, haven't we! Well, we will also be the first to break coconuts on them, even if the coconuts cost a thousand rupees!"

A few days later, god reappeared in her dreams and said, "You said you'd break the coconuts in my honour. That was some time ago, but you haven't smashed even a single coconut! If you begin, others will follow." Waking up, she began to cry; her husband also woke up and asked, "All right. What have you promised this time?" "That you'd break a coconut for god." "That's nothing; let's go," he said.

Reaching the temple, they began to look in the shops which line the entrance to the temple and in which you can buy various things for puja. Enquiring at the first shop, they were told that a coconut cost twenty paisa. "Too high," said his wife. "If we go a little farther the price will drop." They asked at the next shop where they were told "twenty-five paisa". "Still too high; let's ask at the next shop," said his wife. But there they were told it cost one rupee.

By then they had reached the gates of the temple, where a man was sitting with some coconuts. "How much?" she asked and he answered, "These aren't for sale, amma. They're for god. They come from my own coconut tree over there, which I planted specially for god. Go and take as many as you like, as long as they're used for the temple."

"Good. Let's go there and get them for free," the wife said to her husband and led him to the tree. "I climbed that other tree, but I don't know how to climb a coconut tree," he protested. "Go and ask that guy over there," advised his wife, so he went over and asked him. "You climb like this: one hand after the other. At the top, hold on to the frond and break off the coconuts," explained the man.

The husband climbed up, grabbed the frond and got the coconuts, but he didn't know how to get down! There he was hanging from the frond. Looking down he saw a crowd looking at him. "Quit gaping and help me. One of you grab onto to my legs," he said. When someone was hanging from his legs, the husband said, "Right. Now someone else grab onto his legs, so we can touch the ground." A second man grabbed on, and now three of them were hanging from the tree.

The husband, at the top, was being pulled with such force that he was in terrible pain and began to pray to god. Finally, someone from the crowd called out to him, "Stupid! Of course, you can't get down while you're holding on to that frond. Let it go and you'll get down fast. Let it go!" Letting go, the three of them fell down, right on the three rolling stones and cracked their three "coconuts" on them! Then they all went home.

Storyteller: Kamala (stories 53, 96)

97. A STORY TOLD BY A WOODEN DOLL

A man got married, and his wife had a son and a daughter. When she died, he decided to marry a second wife, but the second wife didn't like the first wife's children at all; in fact, she planned to get rid of them. She fed her husband and herself rice, but to the brother and sister she served rice husks no better than animal feed. She also made them promise not to say anything to their father about what she was feeding them.

They lived like this for a while, and then one day she told her husband that he must kill them. It was an order, and he couldn't answer back. "All right," he said, "I'll take them to the temple festival; give me a little rice for the journey." She gave him rice but only husks for the children, saying to them, "Take this and eat by yourselves somewhere; don't eat what your father eats," and sent them all on their journey.

Coming to a pond, they all sat down to eat, but the brother and sister sat apart; when they joined him, their father asked, "Have you eaten?" "Well, she gives us husks," they said. So he gave them some of his rice and then took them to the middle of the forest where he told them a story until they fell asleep. After they were asleep, their father left them there alone.

When the little girl awoke, she called her brother, "Father has left us all alone here in this forest. You better climb that tree and see if there's anyone around here. If you see anything, we'll go there." He climbed up and shouted, "About a mile away they're harvesting rice." "Good. Get down," she said and the two of them ran as fast as they could to the edge of the field where the cut stalks were being tied into bundles.

There they gathered a few grains of rice that lay on the ground, dried them and followed the labourers back to town. They pounded the rice, got a pot from an old woman and began to cook near a temple. The sister was boiling the rice, and crying, when a sannyasi passed by and said, "Why should you cry, little girl?" "Our father left us in the forest; we've just managed to find a little rice to eat. We've nothing left to give you," she said. "Don't cry. Here, eat this lemon," he said and produced a lemon by speaking a mantra. She ate it and got pregnant. Her brother got some work, brought home some money and they were able to eat.

Later the sister died in childbirth, but a girl was born and the brother raised the baby. One day, when she was about four, a woman passed by selling sweets which the brother wanted to buy for his niece. When he was giving the money to the woman, she screamed, "He grabbed me! He touched me!" A crowd gathered, and she said in front of them, "You must marry me because you touched me." So the brother and that woman were married.

He went to work and left his niece with the woman. What she did was take her to the back of a goldsmith's house, dug a deep hole and buried her alive. When the little girl cried and cried in the covered hole, the goldsmith heard her. He went and had a look but saw nothing. Again he heard crying, and this time he saw a mound of dirt, where he dug and found the girl. He took her inside, washed her, dressed her and asked, "Who did this to you?" "Make me a wooden doll, and then I'll tell you," she said. So he made her a doll and gave it to her.

Meanwhile, her uncle was searching everywhere for her. Holding the doll in her arms, she sang this lullaby:

Isn't it true, little doll,
 that grandfather married grandmother
 and that mother and uncle were born?
 Isn't it true that grandmother died
 and grandfather married again?
 Arararoo, ariraroo.

Isn't it true, little doll, that stepmother
 tried to kill us and father left us in the forest
 instead of killing us?
 Isn't it true that we were left all alone
 and ran to this village?
 Arararoo, ariraroo.

Her uncle, who was searching for her, heard this song and hid as he listened to her sing again:

Isn't it true, little doll,
 that mother and uncle got some rice,
 and when she was cooking
 a sannyasi gave her a lemon?

Isn't it true that she ate it
 and got pregnant,
 that uncle earned money,
 and they lived together?
 Arararoo, ariraroo.

Isn't it true, little doll, that
 mother died and uncle raised me,
 and that a woman tricked and married him?

Isn't it true that
 she buried me in a goldsmith's yard,
 that he found and raised me?

Isn't it true that he gave you to me,
 my little wooden doll?
 Arararoo, ariraroo.

As soon as he heard this, the uncle burned that deceitful woman in the lime-kiln.
 That's the end of the story.

Sitalakshmi (stories 97-99)

98. THE SIXTEEN WOODEN BLOCKS

There was a raja. He married once and he married twice, but neither wife brought him a child. One day he mounted his horse, went hunting and saw a group of five or six children playing on a little hill. One of them, an Irula tribal girl, had a big stomach. "With that big stomach, she'll give birth to sixteen children!" they said. When the raja heard this, he went up to her and asked, "Who are you? Are your parents still alive?" "Yes, they are," she said. So he put her on his horse and rode off to her house.

Her parents had only one piece of clothing: if her father wore it and went outside, her mother had to stay inside unclothed; if her mother wore it, her father stayed inside. That's how poor they were. When the raja arrived and called out, the mother said, "My husband's gone out and I have no clothing. Wait till he returns." Taking off his own shawl, the raja threw it inside and said, "Wear this." She wrapped it around herself and came outside, and by this time, the husband had come back.

"I want to marry your daughter. Let her come away with me," said the raja. "Swami! That's not possible," said the father. "I mean, you're a raja and we're poor Irulas. How can you marry into our family?" "That doesn't matter; what matters is the girl. Here, take this money," said the raja and gave him a bag of gold. Then he brought the girl back to his house.

She lived with him for some time and got pregnant. At the time of the birth, it was also time for the raja to go on his hunt. Before he left, he told his other wives - remember he had married twice before - to ring a bell when the child was born so that he could return from hunting.

When he left, the other two wives told a carpenter to make sixteen wooden blocks; then they went to the midwife and gave her money to tell the mother that she must be blindfolded during delivery. And so, when the time for her delivery came, the midwife blindfolded the girl and she gave birth to sixteen children. The firstborn was a girl, the rest were boys.

But the other wives took them all, buried them near the rubbish heap and put the sixteen wooden blocks by her side. Then they took off her blindfold and rang the bell for the raja. When he arrived, they pointed to the blocks and said, "There's your young wife's children!" "What kind of a wife is that!" shouted the raja, who had her dressed in rags and locked in the cow-pen.

Meanwhile, the children were raised by the "Queen of the Rubbish Heap". One day, when the two wives went to dump their rubbish, they saw the children playing there. Back home, they lay down, complaining of bad headaches, and told the raja that the pain would cease only if the rubbish heap were completely destroyed. The raja ordered his men to dig up the rubbish heap and get rid of it.

Seeing this, the Queen of the Rubbish Heap took the children to a well and gave them to Ganga Devi. Ganga Devi raised them while they played in the well, but the two wives saw them when they went to draw water.

Then they told the raja that their terrible pains would cease only if he plugged up the well, so he did. Seeing this, Ganga Devi gave the children to Kali Devi, who raised them while they played in her temple. But when the two wives took a flour offering to the temple, they saw the children.

Again the wives went home and lay down, saying, "Our pains will go only if you destroy that Kali temple." And when the raja destroyed her temple, Kali put the children in the forest, where they played. Soon a tiger came prowling in their direction - a very hungry tiger. Siva and Parvati saw this and turned the sixteen children to stones; there they stood, like little stones, in the middle of the forest while the tiger came up, nosed around and left. Then Siva turned them back into children again.

Running out of the forest, they sat on a hill, where the sister, the oldest, said to her brothers, "Go to the old woman's house and when she asks who you are, say, 'We are hungry, granny. Please help us.' She'll do something for us." The fifteen brothers went to the old woman but they didn't follow their sister's advice. Instead, when she asked who they were, they said, "What's it to you, anyway?" So the old woman turned them into plants.

When her brothers didn't return, the sister began to cry and her tears rolled down hill, below a fort wall, and into a dry river. Riding nearby, a raja heard weeping near the fort wall and sent his minister to investigate. When the minister returned and said it was a girl crying, the raja took her home and married her.

She gave birth to a son, who grew up and went to school. But she didn't speak to anyone, not even to her son; she remained completely silent. At school they teased her son, "His mother's a mute! A stupid mute." One day, when he couldn't take it any longer, he got angry with his mother: "Why are you so silent! Why don't you speak to anyone? If you don't tell me, I'll cut my throat with this knife. The kids at school tease me and beat me because you don't speak. Tell me your story."

His mother told him what had happened and sent him back to the old woman's house where the fifteen plants stood. The boy squatted outside, and when the old woman asked who he was, he said, "Granny, my uncles came to see you and you turned them into plants. Now my mother cries all the time. Please help us." With a pot of water and a magic wand, she turned the fifteen plants back into boys.

When they came back, the sister told a carpenter to make fifteen wooden blocks; then she said to her brothers, "Take these blocks and go to the raja's town; clap them together and make a public announcement: 'Can the raja's wife give birth to wooden blocks?' A raja will come and invite you to a feast. Go, but do not eat the food served to you. Give it to a crow or a dog, and if they die, run back here." The brothers made the announcement and, as she said, the raja invited them to a feast. But since the two wives knew who they were, they mixed poison in the rice they served to them. The brothers then gave it to the crows and dogs, and the animals died.

Then their sister said, "Knock the blocks together again and make another announcement tomorrow. The raja will invite you a second time; tell him you'll eat only if that cowherd woman, the one locked up by the other two wives, cooks the rice." When they did as she said, the raja came and took them back for a meal, but they said they would eat only if the cowherd woman cooked their food. The raja called her, and they ate her cooking and played happily with the raja.

When the raja told the boys to fetch their sister, they went to her but she said, "Go back and tell the raja that your sister will come only if the fifty-six rajas of this world gather in his house. Tell him that." So the raja sent invitations to the fifty-six kingdoms, and the rajas all gathered at his palace.

In the middle of that assembly the sister stood up and spoke: "This raja had two wives, but neither had a child. My mother, an Irula, was playing with a group of children, when the raja overheard them say, 'She has a big stomach; she'll have sixteen babies.' Just because he heard that, did this imbecile raja have to steal my mother? Why did he have to marry her? And when she got pregnant, did he have to go hunting and leave her with his other wives?"

"Those wives had sixteen blocks made and bribed the midwife to say my mother should be blindfolded. We sixteen children were born, but they buried us in the rubbish heap. And when they rang the bell, this stupid raja came and thought the sixteen blocks were his children! What kind of a fool is that? When he imprisoned our mother in the cow-pen, the Queen of the Rubbish Heap raised us; then the raja's wives said that their disease would be cured only if the rubbish heap were removed - how could anyone believe that? But that numskull raja thought their pains would be cured so he had it removed!"

"Then the Queen of the Rubbish Heap gave us to Ganga Devi and she raised us. But when the two wives saw us again, they told that stupid raja that unless the well were destroyed, their pains wouldn't stop. He destroyed the well, and we were given to Kali Devi, who raised us. We played in the temple, but when the wives saw us there, they told the raja that they would be cured only if the temple were destroyed. So that dim-witted raja knocked the temple down. When Kali left us in the forest, a tiger came to eat us, but Parvati and Siva turned us into stones and then brought us back to life after the tiger left."

"Not knowing what to do, I told my brothers to go to an old woman but they spoke rudely to her and she turned them into plants. I sat down and cried, when this raja came and married me. I had a son, but I didn't tell him anything about all this. I cried and cried, thinking about my brothers, but I didn't speak. Then my son went to school and they teased him by calling his mother a mute. When he threatened to kill himself if I didn't reveal my story, I told him the truth and sent him to the old woman."

"After she revived my brothers, I told them to use wooden blocks to make a public announcement; then the raja came and invited them to eat, but those two wives put poison in their food. And what would have happened if they had eaten it? They'd be dead, wouldn't they! I sent them back again and told them to eat only what the cowherd woman cooked. When they asked me to come, I said I would come only if all you rajas came here." That's the end of the story.

Man in the audience: What happened to the raja's two wives?

Storyteller: They were burned in the lime-kiln, and the raja lived with his tribal wife.

Sitalakshmi (stories 97-99)

99. ROSE BUSH OVER THE GRAVE

A goatherd woman had no daughter, only two sons. Every day she went out to sell buttermilk and milk, so there was no one at home to cook meals; she only cooked now and then, whenever she got the time. One day a sannyasi came by, asking for food. "Oh!" she said in tears, "I've just now started to cook because I've been out selling milk; if I had a daughter to do some housework I could give you some rice." Then the sannyasi said, "Just give me five black pepper seeds." When she gave them to him, he said some mantras and told her to crush them, mix in water and drink it. As she was crushing the pepper seeds, one of them fell on the floor and became a girl, but the woman didn't see her. Later the girl climbed up a high palmyra tree and sat there.

From then on whenever the woman came back from selling milk, she found that the food was cooked and all the housework done! She thought that one of her neighbours must be doing the work, so she gave some of the food to the neighbours. Meanwhile the girl did the work and then sat silently on top of the tall palmyra tree.

One day, while the woman was out, a bangle-seller came by and the girl called to him and put on some bangles. At that moment, the woman came back from selling milk and the girl said, "That's my mother, there. Get the money from her," and climbed back up the tree. To the mother the bangle-seller said, "Your daughter bought some bangles and told me to get the money from you." "Daughter? I don't have a daughter." "Yes, you do. She just came down, took the bangles and climbed back up that tree. Look!" Looking up, the woman saw the girl, then she paid the man and kept the girl as her daughter.

A few days later, when the woman was preparing rice to take to her younger son ploughing in the fields, the girl said, "Let me take it to him." On the way, she came to a raging river and couldn't cross, so she called to a swordfish swimming there, "Brother fish, if you take me across, I'll give you a little rice on my way back." After the fish carried her across the river, she gave the food to her brother and he ate well. When she came to the river, she called to the fish again, "Take me across on your back, brother fish." But, because she had no food left and gave it nothing to eat, the fish cut her back with its sharp fin.

At home she said to her mother, "Amma, I took the rice to little brother, but he got mad because I was late and beat me here, on my back." That night the mother mixed poison in the rice she served to the brother - she wanted to kill him - and he ate it and died. When they buried him, over his grave a rose bush grew with many flowers.

Soon it was time to arrange a marriage for the daughter, but they couldn't find flowers anywhere. Finally, they went to the bush growing above the little brother's grave. The older brother went first and said:

Flowers, flowers, brother;
we need flowers for sister's wedding.
Flowers for her wedding garland.

And the rose bush answered:

My flowers will wilt in the hair of a murderess
who said her brother beat her;
My flowers will fade on the head of a she-devil;
My flowers will die in her hands.

He didn't give any flowers. Then the mother approached the bush and asked for flowers:

Flowers, flowers, brother;
we need flowers for sister's wedding.
Flowers for her wedding garland.
And the rose-bush answered:
My flowers will wilt
in the hair of a murderess
who said her brother beat her;
My flowers will fade
on the head of a she-devil;
My flowers will die
in her hands.

She didn't get any flowers either. Then their father went and asked for flowers with the same result. But, finally, they got the flowers and the wedding took place.

Sitalakshmi (stories 97-99)