

FELLOW-FEELING

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The Madras-Bangalore Express was due to start in a few minutes. Trolleys and barrows piled with trunks and beds rattled their way through the bustle. Fruit-sellers and *beedi* and-betel-sellers cried themselves hoarse. Latecomers pushed, shouted and perspired. The engine added to the general noise with the low monotonous hum of its boiler; the first bell rang, the guard looked at his watch. Mr Rajam Iyer arrived on the platform at a terrific pace, with a small roll of bedding under one arm and an absurd yellow trunk under the other. He ran to the first third-class compartment that caught his eye, peered in and, since the door could not be opened on account of the congestion inside, flung himself in through the window.

Fifteen minutes later Madras flashed past the train in window-framed patches of sun-scorched roofs and fields. At the next halt, Mandhakam, most of the passengers got down. Rajam Iyer found a seat and made himself comfortable opposite a sallow, meek passenger, who suddenly removed his coat, folded it and placed it under his head and lay down, shrinking himself to the area he had occupied while he was sitting. With his knees drawn up almost to his chin, he rolled himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer gave him an indulgent, compassionate look. He then fumbled for his glasses and pulled out of his pocket a small book, which set forth in clear Tamil the significance of the obscure *Sandbi* rites that every Brahmin worth the name performs thrice daily.

He was startled out of this pleasant languor by a series of growls coming from a passenger who had got in at the last stop. The newcomer, looking for a seat, had been irritated by the spectacle of the meek passenger asleep and had enforced the law of the third-class. He then encroached on most of the meek passenger's legitimate space and began to deliver hometruths which passed from impudence to impertinence and finally to ribaldry.

Rajam Iyer peered over his spectacles. There was a dangerous look in his eyes. He tried to return to his book, but could not. The bully's speech was gathering momentum.

'What is all this?' Rajam Iyer asked suddenly, in a hard tone.

'What is what?' growled back the newcomer, turning sharply on Rajam Iyer.

'Moderate your style a bit,' Rajam Iyer said firmly. 'You moderate yours first,' replied the other. A pause.

'My man,' Rajam Iyer began endearingly, 'this sort of thing will never do.'

The newcomer received this in silence. Rajam Iyer felt encouraged and drove home his moral: 'Just try and be more courteous, it is your duty.'

'You mind your business,' replied the newcomer.

Rajam Iyer shook his head disapprovingly and drawled out a 'No.' The newcomer stood looking out for some time and, as if expressing a brilliant truth that had just dawned on him, said, 'You are a Brahmin, I see. Learn, sir, that your days are over. Don't think you can bully us as you have been bullying us all these years.'

Rajam Iyer gave a short laugh and said, 'What has it to do with your beastly conduct to this gentleman?'

The newcomer assumed a tone of mock humility and said, 'Shall I take the dust from your feet, O Holy Brahmin? O Brahmin, Brahmin.' He continued in a singsong fashion: 'Your days are over, my dear sir, learn that. I should like to see you trying a bit of bossing on us.'

‘Whose master is who?’ asked Rajam Iyer philosophically.

The newcomer went on with on obvious relevance: ‘The cost of mutton has gone up out of all proportion. It is nearly double what it used to be.’

‘Is it?’ asked Rajam Iyer.

‘Yes, and why?’ continued the other. ‘Because Brahmins have begun to eat meat and they pay high prices to get it secretly.’ He then turned to the other passengers and added ‘And we non-Brahmins have to pay the same price, though we don’t care for secrecy.’

Rajam Iyer leaned back in his seat, reminding himself of a proverb which said that if you threw a stone into a gutter it would only spurt filth in your face.

The newcomer continued, ‘I have with my own eyes seen Brahmins carrying fish under their arms from the market,’ he said ‘Of course all wrapped in a towel. Ask them what it is, and they will tell you that it is plantain. Plantain that has life, I suppose! I once tickled a fellow under the arm and out came the biggest fish in the market. I am a leper if there is a lie in anything I say.’

Rajam Iyer had had enough of this. He ground his teeth ‘You are,’ he replied. ‘You are a rapid leper.’

‘Whom do you call a leper!’

‘No, I called you a *rabid* leper.’

‘What do you say?’ shouted the newcomer menacingly. ‘What do you say, you vile humbug?’

‘Shut up,’ Rajam Iyer cried.

‘You shut up.’

‘Do you know to whom you are talking?’

‘What do I care who the son of a mongrel is?’

‘I will thrash you with my slippers,’ said Rajam Iyer.

‘I will pulp you down with and old rotten sandal,’ came the reply.

‘I will kick you,’ said Rajam Iyer

‘Will you?’ howled the newcomer.

‘Come on, let us see.’

Both rose to their feet simultaneously.

There they stood facing each other on the floor of the compartment. Rajam Iyer was seized by a sense of inferiority. The newcomer stood nine clean inches over him. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the other passengers were waiting eagerly to see how the issue would be settled and were not in the least disposed to intervene.

‘Why do you stand as if your mouth was stopped with mud?’ asked the newcomer.

‘Shut up,’ Rajam Iyer snapped, trying not to be impressed by the size of the adversary.

‘Your honour said that you would kick me,’ said the newcomer, pretending to offer himself.

Rajam Iyer removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He rubbed his hands and

commanded suddenly, 'Stand still!' The newcomer was taken aback. He stood for a second baffled. Rajam Iyer gave him no time to think. With great force he swung his right arm and brought it near the other's cheek, but stopped it short without hitting him.

'Wait a minute, I think I had better give you a chance,' said Rajam Iyer.

'What chance?' asked the newcomer.

'It would be unfair if I did it without giving you a chance.'

'Did what? What will you do?'

'Oh, nothing very complicated,' replied Rajam Iyer, nonchalantly, 'nothing very complicated. I will slap your right cheek and at the same time tug your left ear, and your mouth, which is now under your nose, will suddenly find itself under your left ear, and, what is more, stay there. I assure you, you won't feel any pain.'

'What do you say?'

'And it will all be over before you say "Sri Rama".'

'I don't believe it,' said the newcomer.

'Well and good. Don't believe it,' said Rajam Iyer carelessly. 'I never do it except under extreme provocation. Have you heard of a thing called jujitsu? Well, this is a simple trick in jujitsu perhaps known to half a dozen persons in the whole of South India.'

'You said you would kick me,' said the newcomer.

'Well, isn't this worse?' asked Rajam Iyer. He drew a line on the newcomer's face between his left ear and mouth, muttering, 'I must admit you have a tolerably good face and round figure. But imagine yourself going about the streets with your mouth under your left ear . . .'

The newcomer stroked his chin thoughtfully. Rajam Iyer continued, 'I felt it my duty to explain the whole thing to you beforehand. I am not as hotheaded as you are. I have some consideration for your wife and children. It will take some time for the kids to recognise Papa when he returns home with his mouth under ... How many children have you?'

'Four.'

'And then think of it,' said Rajam Iyer. 'You will have to take your food under your left ear, and you will need the assistance of your wife to drink water. She will have to pour it in.'

The newcomer stood ruminating with knitted brow. 'Now prepare,' shouted Rajam Iyer, 'one blow on the right cheek. I will jerk your left ear, and your mouth ...'

The newcomer suddenly ran to the window and leaned far out of it. Rajam decided to leave the compartment at Jalarpet. But the moment the train stopped at Jalarpet station, the newcomer grabbed his bag and jumped out. He moved away at a furious pace and almost knocked down a coconut-seller and a person carrying a trayload of coloured toys. Rajam Iyer felt it would not be necessary for him to get out now. He leaned through the window and cried, 'Look here!' The newcomer turned.

'Shall I keep a seat for you?' asked Rajam Iyer.

'No, my ticket is for Jalarpet,' the newcomer answered and quickened his pace.

The train had left Jalarpet at least a mile behind. The meek passenger still sat shrunk in a corner of the seat. Rajam Iyer looked over his spectacles and said, 'Lie down if you like.' The meek passenger proceeded to roll himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer added, 'Did you hear that bully say that his ticket was for Jalarpet?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' he lied, 'he is in the fourth compartment from here. I saw him get into it just as the train started.'

Though the meek passenger was too grateful to doubt this statement, one or two other passengers looked at Rajam Iyer sceptically.