
Caste and caste and caste, you say,

What caste, pray, has he who knows God?

5 — KANAKADAS

I had just arrived. My sister sat by me, talking to me about a thousand things — about my health, my studies, my future, about Mysore, about my younger sister — and I lay sipping the hot, hot coffee that seemed almost like nectar after a ten-mile cycle ride on one of those bare, dusty roads of Malkad. I half listened to her and half
10 drowsed away, feeling comfort and freedom after nine wild months in a city. And when I finished my coffee, I asked my sister to go and get another cup; for I really felt like being alone, and also I wanted some more of that invigorating drink. When my sister was gone, I lay on the mat, flat on my face with my hands stretched at my sides. It seemed to me I was carried away by a flood of some sort, caressing, feathery and
15 quiet. I slept. Suddenly, as if in a dream, I heard a door behind me creaking. But I did not move. The door did not open completely, and somebody seemed to be standing by the threshold afraid to come in. ‘Perhaps a neighbour,’ I said to myself vaguely, and in my drowsiness I muttered something, stretched out my hands, kicked my feet against the floor and slowly moved my head from one side to the other. The door
20 creaked a little again, and the figure seemed to recede. ‘Lost!’ I said to myself. Perhaps I had sent a neighbour away. I was a little pained. But some deeper instinct told me that the figure was still there. Outside the carts rumbled over the paved street, and some crows cawed across the roof. A few sunbeams stealing through the tiles fell upon my back. I felt happy.

25 Meanwhile my sister came in, bringing the coffee. ‘Ramu,’ she whispered, standing by me, ‘Ramu, my child, are you awake or asleep?’

‘Awake,’ I said, turning my head towards the door, which creaked once more and shut itself completely.

‘Sita,’ I whispered, ‘there was somebody at the door.’

30 ‘When?’ she demanded loudly.

‘Now! Only a moment ago.’

She went to the door and, opening it, looked towards the street. After a while she smiled and called, 'Javni! You monkey! Why don't you come in? Who do you think is here, Javni? My brother — my brother.' She smiled broadly, and a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

- 5 'Really, Mother!' said a timid voice. 'Really! I wanted to come in. But, seeing Ramappa fast asleep, I thought I'd better wait out here.' She spoke the peasant Kannada, drawling the vowels interminably.

'So,' I said to myself, 'she already knows my name.'

'Come in!' commanded my sister.

- 10 Javni slowly approached the threshold, but still stood outside, gazing as if I were a saint or the holy elephant.

'Don't be shy, come in,' commanded my sister again.

Javni entered and, walking as if in a temple, went and sat by a sack of rice.

- 15 My sister sat by me, proud and affectionate. I was everything to her — her strength and wealth. She touched my head and said, 'Rammu, Javni is our new servant.' I turned towards Javni. She seemed to hide her face.

She was past forty, a little wrinkled beneath the lips and with strange, rapturous eyes. Her hair was turning white, her breasts were fallen and her bare, broad forehead showed pain and widowhood. 'Come near, Javni,' I said.

- 20 'No, Ramappa,' she whispered.

'No, come along,' I insisted. She came forward a few steps and sat by the pillar,

'Oh, come nearer, Javni, and see what a beautiful brother I have,' cried Sita.

I was not flattered. Only my big, tap-like nose and my thick underlip seemed more monstrous than ever.

- 25 Javni crawled along till she was a few steps nearer.

'Oh! Come nearer, you monkey,' cried my sister again.

Javni advanced a few feet further and, turning her face towards the floor, sat like a bride beside the bridegroom.

‘He looks a prince, Javni!’ cried my sister.

I laughed and drank my coffee.

‘The whole town is mad about him,’ whispered Javni.

‘How do you know?’ asked Sita.

5 ‘How! I have been standing at the market-place, the whole afternoon, to see when Ramappa would come. You told me he looked like a prince. You said he rode a bicycle. And, when I saw him come by the pipal tree where-the-fisherman-Kodihanged-himself-the-other-day, I ran towards the town and I observed how people gazed and gazed at him. And they asked me who it was. ‘Of course, the Revenue Inspector’s
10 brother-in-law,’ I replied. ‘How beautiful he is!’ said fat Nanjundah of the coconut shop. ‘How like a prince he is!’ said the concubine Chowdy. ‘Oh, a very god!’ said my neighbour, barber Venka’s wife Kenchi.

‘Well, Ramu, so you see, the whole of Malkad is dazzled with your beauty,’ interrupted my sister. ‘Take care, my child. They say, in this town they practise
15 magic, and I have heard many a beautiful boy has been killed by jealousy.’

I laughed.

‘Don’t laugh, Ramappa. With these very eyes, with these very two eyes, I have seen the ghosts of more than a hundred young men and women — all killed by magic, by magic, Ramappa,’ assured Javni, for the first time looking towards me. ‘My learned
20 Ramappa, Ramappa, never go out after sunset; for there are spirits of all sorts walking in the dark. Especially never once go by the canal after the cows are come home. It is a haunted place, Ramappa.’

‘How do you know?’ I asked, curious.

‘How! With these very eyes, I have seen, Ramappa, I have seen it all. The potter’s
25 wife Rangi was unhappy. Poor thing! Poor thing! And one night she had such heavy, heavy sorrow, she ran and jumped into the canal. The other day, when I was coming home in the deadly dark with my little lamb, whom should I see but Rangi — Rangi in a white, broad sari, her hair all floating. She stood in front of me. I shivered and wept. She ran and stood by a tree, yelling in a strange voice! “Away! Away!” I cried.
30 Then suddenly I saw her standing on the bridge, and she jumped into the canal, moaning: “My girl is gone, my child is gone, and I am gone too!”’

My sister trembled. She had a horror of devils. ‘Why don’t you shut up, you donkey’s widow, and not pour out all your Vedantic knowledge?’

‘Pardon me, Mother, pardon me,’ she begged.

‘I have pardoned you again and again, and yet it is the same old story. Always the same Ramayana. Why don’t you fall into the well like Rangi and turn devil?’ My sister was furious.

- 5 Javni smiled and hid her face between her knees, timidly. ‘How beautiful your brother is!’ she murmured after a moment, ecstatic.

‘Did I not say he was like a prince? Who knows what incarnation of a god he may be? Who knows?’ my sister whispered, patting me, proudly, religiously.

‘Sita!’ I replied, and touched her lap with tenderness.

- 10 ‘Without Javni I could never have lived in this damned place!’ said my sister after a moment’s silence.

‘And without you, I could not have lived either, Mother!’ Her voice was so calm and rich that she seemed to sing.

- 15 ‘In this damned place everything is so difficult,’ cursed Sita. ‘He is always struggling with the collections. The villages are few, but placed at great distances from one another. Sometimes he has been away for more than a week, and I should have died of fright had not Javni been with me. And,’ she whispered, a little sadly, ‘Javni, I am sure, understands my fears, my beliefs. Men, Ramu, can never understand us.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

- 20 ‘Why? I cannot say. You are too practical and too irreligious. To us everything is mysterious. Our gods are not your gods, your gods not our gods. It is a simple affair.’ She seemed sadder still.

‘But yet, I have always tried to understand you,’ I managed to whisper.

‘Of course! Of course!’ cried my sister, reassured.

- 25 ‘Mother,’ muttered Javni, trembling, ‘Mother! Will you permit me to say one thing?’ She seemed to plead.

‘Yes!’ answered my sister.

‘Ramappa, your sister loves you,’ said Javni. ‘She loves you as though you were her own child. Oh! I wish I had seen her two children! They must have been angels!’

Perhaps they are in Heaven now — in Heaven! Children go to Heaven! But, Ramappa, what I wanted to say was this. Your sister loves you, talks of you all the time, and says, “If my brother did not live, I should have died long ago.”

‘How long have you been with Sita?’ I asked Javni, trying to change the subject.

- 5 ‘How long? How long have I been with this family? What do I know? But let me see. The harvest was over and we were husking the grains when they came.’

‘How did you happen to find her?’ I asked my sister.

- 10 ‘Why, Ramappa,’ cried Javni, proud for the first time, ‘there is nobody who can work for a Revenue Inspector’s family as I. You can go and ask everybody in the town, including every pariah if you like, and they will tell you, “Javni, she is good like a cow,” and they will also add that there is no one who can serve a big man like the Revenue Inspector as Javni — as I.’ She beat her breast with satisfaction.

‘So you are the most faithful servant among the servants here!’ I added a little awkwardly.

- 15 ‘Of course!’ she cried proudly, her hands folded upon her knees. ‘Of course!’

‘How many Revenue Inspectors have you served?’

- 20 ‘How many? Now let me see.’ Here she counted upon her fingers, one by one, remembering them by how many children they had, what sort of views they had, their caste, their native place, or even how good they had been in giving her two saris, a four-anna tip or a sack of rice.

‘Javni,’ I said, trying to be a little bit humorous, ‘suppose I came here one day, say after ten or fifteen or twenty years, and I am not a Revenue Inspector, and I ask you to serve me. Will you or will you not?’

She looked perplexed, laughed and turned towards my sister for help.

- 25 ‘Answer him!’ commanded my sister affectionately.

‘But Ramappa,’ she cried out, full of happiness, as if she had discovered a solution, ‘you cannot but be a big man like our Master, the Revenue Inspector. With your learning and your beauty you cannot be anything else. And, when you come here, of course I will be your servant.’

- 30 ‘But if I am not a Revenue Inspector,’ I insisted.

‘You must be — you must be!’ she cried, as if I were insulting myself.

‘All right, I shall be a Revenue Inspector in order to have you,’ I joked.

‘As if it were not enough that I should bleed myself to death in being one,’ added my brother-in-law, as he entered through the back door, dust-covered and breathless.

5 Javni rose up and ran away as if in holy fear. It was the Master.

‘She is a sweet thing,’ I said to my sister.

‘Almost a mother!’ she added, and smiled.

In the byre Javni was talking to the calf.

10 My brother-in-law was out touring two or three days in the week. On these days Javni usually came to sleep at our house, for my sister had a terror of being alone. And, since it had become a habit, Javni came as usual even when I was there. One evening, I cannot remember why, we had dined early, and unrolling our beds, we lay down when it was hardly sunset. Javni came, peeped from the window and called in a whisper, ‘Mother, Mother!’

15 ‘Come in, you monkey,’ answered my sister.

Javni opened the door and stepped in. She had a sheet in her hand, and, throwing it on the floor, she went straight into the byre where her food was usually kept. I could not bear that. Time and again I had quarrelled with my sister about it all. But she would not argue with me. ‘They are of the lower class, and you cannot ask them to sit
20 and eat with you,’ she would say.

‘Of course!’ I said. ‘After all, why not? Are they not like us, like any of us? Only the other day you said you loved her as if she were your elder sister or mother.’

‘Yes!’ she grunted angrily. ‘But affection does not ask you to be irreligious.’

‘And what, pray, is being irreligious?’ I continued, furious.

25 ‘Irreligious. Irreligious. Well, eating with a woman of a lower caste is irreligious. And, Ramu,’ she cried desperately, ‘I have enough of quarrelling all the time. In the name of our holy mother can’t you leave me alone!’ There, tears!

‘You are inhuman!’ I spat, disgusted.

‘Go and show your humanity!’ she grumbled, and, hiding her face beneath the blanket, she wept harder.

5 I was really much too ashamed and too angry to stay in my bed. I rose and went into the byre. Javni sat in the dark, swallowing mouthfuls of rice that sounded like a cow chewing the cud. She thought I had come to go into the garden, but I remained beside her, leaning against the wall. She stopped eating, and looked deeply embarrassed.

‘Javni,’ I said tenderly.

‘Ramappa!’ she answered, confused.

‘Why not light a lantern when you eat, Javni?’

10 ‘What use?’ she replied, and began to chew the cud.

‘But you cannot see what you are eating,’ I explained.

‘I cannot. But there is no necessity to see what you eat.’ She laughed as if amused.

‘But you must!’ I was angry.

15 ‘No, Ramappa. I know where my rice is, and I can feel where the pickle is, and that is enough.’

Just at that moment, the cow threw a heapful of dung, which splashed across the cobbled floor.

‘Suppose you come with me into the hall,’ I cried. I knew I could never convince her.

‘No, Ramappa. I am quite well here. I do not want to dirty the floor of the hall.’

20 ‘If it is dirty, I will clean it,’ I cried, exasperated.

25 She was silent. In the darkness I saw the shadow of Javni near me, thrown by the faint starlight that came from the garden door. In the corner the cow was breathing hard, and the calf was nibbling at the wisps of hay. It was a terrible moment. The whole misery of the world seemed to be weighing all about and above me. And yet — and yet — the suffering — one seemed to laugh at it all.

‘Javni,’ I said affectionately, ‘do you eat at home like this?’

‘Yes, Ramappa.’ Her tone was sad.

‘And why?’

‘The oil is too expensive, Ramappa.’

‘But surely you can buy it?’ I continued.

‘No, Ramappa. It costs an anna a bottle, and it lasts only a week.’

5 ‘But an anna is nothing,’ I said.

‘Nothing! Nothing!’ She spoke as if frightened. ‘Why, my learned Ramappa, it is what I earn in two days.’

‘In two days!’ I had rarely been more surprised.

‘Yes, Ramappa, I earn one rupee each month.’ She seemed content.

10 I heard an owl hoot somewhere, and far, far away, somewhere too far and too distant for my rude ears to hear, the world wept its silent suffering plaints. Had not the Lord said: ‘Whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come’? Oh, when will that day come, and when will the Conch of Knowledge blow?

15 I had nothing to say. My heart beat fast. And, closing my eyes, I sank into the primal flood, the moving fount of Being. Man, I love you.

Javni sat and ate. The mechanical mastication of the rice seemed to represent her life, her cycle of existence.

‘Javni,’ I inquired, breaking the silence, ‘what do you do with the one rupee?’

‘I never take it,’ she answered laughing.

20 ‘Why don’t you take it, Javni?’

‘Mother keeps it for me. Now and again she says I work well and adds an anna or two to my funds, and one day I shall have enough to buy a sari.’

‘And the rest?’ I asked.

‘The rest? Why, I will buy something for my brother’s child.’

25 ‘Is your brother poor, Javni?’

‘No. But, Ramappa, I love the child.’ She smiled.

‘Suppose I asked you to give it to me?’ I laughed, since I could not weep.

‘Oh, you will never ask me, Ramappa, never. But, Ramappa, if you should, I would give it to you.’ She laughed too, content and amused.

‘You are a wonderful thing!’ I murmured.

- 5 ‘At your feet, Ramappa!’ She had finished eating, and she went into the bathroom to wash her hands.

I walked out into the garden and stood looking at the sparkling heavens. There was companionship in their shining. The small and the great clustered together in the heart of the quiet limpid sky. God, knew they caste? Far away a cartman chanted
10 forth:

The night is dark;

Come to me, mother.

The night is quiet;

Come to me, friend.

- 15 *The winds sighed.*

On the nights when Javni came to sleep with us, we gossiped a great deal about village affairs. She had always news to tell us. One day it would be about the postman Subba’s wife, who had run away with the Mohammedan of the mango shop. On another day it would be about the miraculous cure of Sata Venkanna’s wife, Kanthi,
20 during her recent pilgrimage to the Biligiri temple. My sister always took an interest in those things, and Javni made it her affair to find out everything about everybody. She gossiped the whole evening till we both fell asleep. My sister usually lay by the window, I near the door, and Javni at our feet. She slept on a bare wattle-mat, with a cotton sheet for a cover, and she seemed never to suffer from cold. On one of these
25 nights when we were gossiping, I pleaded with Javni to tell me just a little about her own life. At first she waved aside my idea; but, after a moment, when my sister howled at her, she accepted it, still rather unhappily. I was all ears, but my sister was soon snoring comfortably.

Javni was born in the neighbouring village of Koteballi, where her father cultivated
30 the fields in the winter and washed clothes in the summer. Her mother had always work to do, since there were childbirths almost every day in one village or the other, and, being a hereditary midwife, she was always sent for. Javni had four sisters and

two brothers, of whom only her brother Bhima remained. She loved her parents, and they loved her too; and, when she was eighteen, she was duly married to a boy whom they had chosen from Malkad. The boy was good and affectionate, and he never once beat her. He too was a washerman, and ‘What do you think?’ said Javni proudly, ‘he
5 washed clothes for the Maharaja, when he came here.’

‘Really!’ I exclaimed.

And she continued. Her husband was, as I have said, a good man, and he really cared for her. He never made her work too much, and he always cooked for her when she fell sick. One day, however, as the gods decided it, a snake bit him while he was
10 washing clothes by the river, and, in spite of all the magic that the barber Subba applied, he died that very evening, crying to the last, ‘Javni, Javni, my Javni.’ (I should have expected her to weep here. But she continued without any exclamations or sighs.) Then came all the misfortunes one after the other, and yet she knew they were nothing, for, above all, she said, Goddess Talakamma moved and reigned.

15 Her husband belonged to a family of three brothers and two sisters. The elder brother was a wicked fellow, who played cards and got drunk two days out of three. The second was her husband, and the third was a haughty young fellow, who had already, it was known, made friends with the concubine Siddi, the former mistress of the priest Rangappa. He treated his wife as if she were an ox and once he actually beat
20 her till she was bleeding and unconscious. There were many children in the family, and since one of the sisters-in-law also lived in the same village, her children too came to play in the house. So Javni lived on happily, working at home as usual and doing her little to earn for the family funds.

She never knew, she said, how it all happened, but one day a policeman came,
25 frightened everybody, and took away her elder brother-in-law for some reason that nobody understood. The women were all terrified and everybody wept. The people in the town began to spit at them as they passed by, and left cattle to graze away all the crops in the fields to show their hatred and their revenge. Shame, poverty and quarrels, these followed one another. And because the elder brother-in-law was in
30 prison and the younger with his mistress, the women at home made her life miserable. “‘You dirty widow!” they would say and spit on me. I wept and sobbed and often wanted to go and fall into the river. But I knew Goddess Talakamma would be angry with me, and I stopped each time I wanted to kill myself. One day, however, my elder sister-in-law became so evil-mouthed that I ran away from the house. I did
35 not know to whom to go, since I knew nobody and my brother hated me — he always hated me. But anyway, Ramappa,’ she said, ‘anyway, a sister is a sister. You cannot deny that the same mother has suckled you both.’

‘Of course not!’ I said.

‘But he never treated me as you treat your sister.’

‘So, you are jealous, you ill-boding widow!’ swore my sister, waking up. She always thought people hated or envied her.

5 ‘No, Mother, no,’ Javni pleaded.

‘Go on!’ I said.

‘I went to my brother,’ she continued. ‘As soon as his wife saw me she swore and spat and took away her child that was playing on the verandah, saying it would be bewitched. After a moment my brother came out.

10 “‘Why have you come?’” he asked me.

“‘I am without a home,” I said.

“‘You dirty widow, how can you find a house to live in, when you carry misfortune wherever you set your foot?’”

‘I simply wept.

15 “‘Weep, weep!” he cried, “weep till your tears flood the Cauvery. But you will not get a morsel of rice from me. No, not a morsel!”

“‘No,” I said. “I do not want a morsel of rice. I want only a palm-width of shelter to put myself under.”

20 ‘He seemed less angry. He looked this side and that and roared: “Do you promise me never to quarrel with any one?”

“‘Yes!” I answered, still weeping.

25 “‘Then, for the peace of the spirit of my father, I will give you the little hut by the garden door. You can sit, weep, eat, shit — do what you like there,” he said. I trembled. In the meantime my sister-in-law came back. She frowned and thumped the floor, swearing at me and calling me a prostitute, a donkey, a witch. Ramappa, I never saw a woman like that. She makes my life a life of tears.’

‘How?’ I asked.

‘How! I cannot say. It is ten years or twenty since I set foot in their house. And every day I wake up with “donkey’s wife” or “prostitute” in my ears.’

‘But you don’t have anything to do with her?’ I said.

5 ‘I don’t. But the child sometimes comes to me because I love it and then my sister-in-law rushes out, roaring like a tigress, and says she will flay me to death if I touch the child again.’

‘You should not touch it,’ I said.

‘Of course I would not if I had my own child. But, Ramappa, that little boy loves me.’

‘And why don’t they want you to touch him?’

10 ‘Because they say I am a witch and an evil spirit.’ She wept.

‘Who says it?’

15 ‘They. Both of them say it. But still, Ramappa,’—here she suddenly turned gay — I always keep mangoes and cakes that Mother gives me and save them all for the little boy. So he runs away from his mother each time the door is open. He is such a sweet, sweet thing.’ She was happy.

‘How old is he?’ I asked.

‘Four.’

‘Is he their only child?’

‘No. They have four more — all grown up. One is already a boy as big as you.’

20 ‘And the others, do they love you?’

‘No. They all hate me, they all hate me — except that child.’

‘Why don’t you adopt a child?’

‘No, Ramappa. I have a lamb, and that is enough.’

‘You have a lamb too!’ I said, surprised.

25 ‘Yes, a lamb for the child to play with now, and, when the next Durga festival comes, I will offer it to Goddess Talakamma.’

‘Offer it to the Goddess! Why, Javni? Why not let it live?’

‘Don’t speak sacrilege, Ramappa. I owe a lamb every three years to the Goddess.’

‘And what does she give in return?’

5 ‘What do you say! What!’ She was angry. ‘All! Everything! Should I live if that Goddess did not protect me? Would that child come to me if the Goddess did not help me? Would Mother be so good to me if the Goddess did not bless me? Why, Ramappa, everything is hers. O Great Goddess Talakamma, give everybody good health and long life and all progeny! Protect me, Mother!’ She was praying.

‘What will she give me if I offer a lamb?’ I asked.

10 ‘Everything, Ramappa. You will grow learned; you will become a big man; you will marry a rich wife. Ramappa,’ she said, growing affectionate all of a sudden, ‘I have already been praying for you. When Mother said she had a brother, I said to the Goddess, “Goddess, keep that boy strong and virtuous and give him all the eight riches of Heaven and earth.”’

15 ‘Do you love me more or less than your brother’s child?’ I asked, to change the subject.

She was silent for a moment.

‘You don’t know?’ I said.

20 ‘No, Ramappa. I have been thinking. I offer the lamb to the Goddess for the sake of the child. I have not offered a lamb for you. So how can I say whom I love more?’

‘The child!’ I said.

‘No, no, I love you as much, Ramappa.’

‘Will you adopt me?’ No, I was not joking.

She broke into fits of laughter which woke up my sister.

25 ‘Oh, shut up!’ cried Sita.

‘Do you know Javni is going to adopt me?’

‘Adopt you! Why does she not go and fall into the river?’ she roared, and went to sleep again.

‘If you adopt me, Javni, I will work for you and give you food to eat.’

‘No, learned Ramappa. A Brahmin is not meant to work. You are the “chosen ones”.’

5 Chosen ones, indeed! ‘No, we are not!’ I murmured.

‘You are. You are. The sacred books are yours. The Vedas are yours. You are all, you are all, you are the twice-born. We are your servants, Ramappa — your slaves.’

‘I am not a Brahmin,’ I said half-jokingly, half-seriously.

‘You are. You are. You want to make fun of me.’

10 ‘No, Javni, suppose you adopt me?’

She laughed again.

‘If you do not adopt me, I shall die now and grow into a lamb in my next life and you will buy it. What will you do then?’

She did not say anything. It was too perplexing.

15 ‘Now,’ I said, feeling sleepy, ‘now, Javni, go to sleep and think again tomorrow morning whether you will adopt me or not.’

‘Adopt you! You are a god, Ramappa, a god! I cannot adopt you.’

I dozed away. Only in the stillness I heard Javni saying: ‘Goddess, Great Goddess, as I vowed, I will offer thee my lamb. Protect the child, protect Mother, protect her
20 brother, protect Master, O Goddess! Protect me!’

The Goddess stood silent, in the little temple by the Cauvery, amidst the whisper of the woods.

A July morning, two summers later. Our cart rumbled over the boulders of the street, and we were soon at the village square. Javni was running behind the cart, with tears
25 rolling down her cheeks. For one full week I had seen her weeping all the time, all the time dreading the day when we should leave her and she would see us no more. She was breathless. But she walked fast, keeping pace with the bullocks. I was with my sister in the back of the cart, and my brother-in-law sat in front, beside the cart-man.

My sister too was sad. In her heart she knew she was leaving a friend. Yes. Javni had been her friend, her only friend. Now and again they gazed at each other, and I could see Javni suddenly sobbing like a child.

‘Mother, Mother,’ she would say approaching the cart, ‘don’t forget me.’

5 ‘I will not. No, I assure you, I will not.’

Now my sister too was in tears. ‘Even if she should, I will not,’ I added. I myself should have wept, had I not been so civilized.

10 When we touched the river, it was already broad morning. Now, in the summer, there was so little water that the ferry was not plying and we were going to wade through. The cart-man said he would rest the bullocks for a moment, and I got out partly to breathe the fresh air and more to speak to Javni.

‘Don’t weep,’ I said to her.

15 ‘Ramappa, how can I help but weep? Shall I ever see again a family of gods like yours? Mother was kind to me, kind like a veritable goddess. You were so, so good to me, and Master—.’ Here she broke again into sobs.

‘No, Javni. In contact with a heart like yours, who will not bloom into a god?’

But she simply wept. My words meant nothing to her. She was nervous, and she trembled over and over again. ‘Mother, Mother,’ she would say between her sobs, ‘O Mother!’

20 The cart-man asked me to get in. I got into the cart with a heavy heart. I was leaving a most wonderful soul. I was in. The cart-man cried, ‘Hoy, hoyee!’ And the bulls stepped into the river.

25 Till we were on the other bank, I could see Javni sitting on a rock, and looking towards us. In my heart I seemed still to hear her sobs. A huge pipal rose behind her, and, across the blue waters of the river and the vast, vast sky above her, she seemed so small, just a spot in space, recedingly real. Who was she?