

She closes the Case

The Joint Collector had been shot dead by naxalite revolutionaries, after luring him to a midnight meeting. When the news spread the next morning, everyone rushed to the house of the much-liked young administrator, who had showed so much promise, not only through his energetic actions, but his open concern for the poor. That such a man, rare to find in high positions of government, should have been killed out of hand exposed the so-called revolutionaries to be what they really were, a bunch of unprincipled dacoits – or so said every right-thinking middle-class man on reading the ghastly news next morning.

Ramulamma was one of the crowd that rushed to the house of bereavement. Normally, she would have been stopped by one of the policemen on guard duty, chivvied and insulted, since she was only an old dalit midwife, and she would have spent a good ten minutes arguing at the top of her voice that she had been called to massage ‘Madam,’ who everyone knew was suffering from aches and pains, but no one would have let her through, though they all knew her, till the bearer came from the house of the ‘Chota Sahib,’ the junior administrator of the district, and gave her permission to enter through the back door on the kitchen verandah. But on the morn of the horrific crime, the sentries stood about in hang-dog fashion, ignoring and being ignored by the crowd of mourners. The servants had laid out several dozen chairs on the front lawn for everyone, and tea and biscuits were being served in a constant stream to the people gathered there. Ramulamma, as befitted her lowly station in life, went round to the back of the house, and without coming close to anyone sat on the edge of the group of village women, sitting on the kitchen verandah, and wailing in traditional sing-song style. Though some of the grief was formally expressed, almost all felt deeply about the death of the young man, for all had been touched by his quick kindness when appealed to, and his ready willingness to bend rules to help the poor. Few could remember a better officer.

The lamenting women each said how they were looking forward to his forthcoming marriage, which was to take place just a few weeks away, just after the great festival of Sivarathri. The older ones mourned why God had spared them instead; others beat their heads on the stone floor and wailed that they now could never bring up his sons. Mrs. Kowshikar, the dead man’s mother, had allowed the wailing to go on for half-an-hour, and then came out through the kitchen mesh-doors, her sallow cheeks streaming with tears, to request them to quieten down, the Collector Sahib and the Superintendent of Police were in the living room, with all the other sahibs, and they were discussing important matters. The voices dropped, but the lamentations went on, and in fact, none of the authorities would have wanted it ended, they themselves were in a state of shock.

The women could hear the mandal official, who had discovered the body, go over the incident for the umpteenth time, as if by re-telling the event somehow it would turn out not to have happened at all.

The Legend of Ramulamma

“Sir, Mr. Kowshikar was in a high mood, Sir. He was very confident. I begged him to take a couple of constables along, for he was going into the pitch-dark forest, I said, at least let someone drive away snakes. But, No! Sir! He was determined to go alone. He smiled at me, Sir! Put his hand on my shoulder, and said, ‘Don’t worry. They have asked me to meet them because they also want peace. I will bring them to the conference table, this stupid bloodshed has gone on long enough.’ I pleaded with him saying the message could be a hoax, but he smiled and said it came from a very trustworthy source. I should never have let him go, Sir, but he gave me a direct order. I hung about in my office till two in the morning, and when he did not return, we went out as a search party. And I myself found him, Sir, still smiling, Sir, lying on the forest floor, shot through the heart. Look at him, Sir, look at him! Still so peaceful!”

The women could hear the officer weep. The Superintendent of Police in charge of the district spoke briefly in English: “By God! I will hunt out the rascals and pistol everyone with my own hand!” Ramulamma had heard enough English in her long life to understand him, and wondered fleetingly what new calamities would descend on the heads of everyone. At that moment, the tall and aristocratic Surinder Reddy emerged silently from the kitchen, and regarded the women coldly, but not without compassion.

“What are you all crying about,” he asked peering into their faces. “It is I who am destroyed. I have lost my brother-in-law. My sister is widowed before marriage. She is ruined for life, and I have to live to see this day. Go home, all of you!” With that, disdainful further talk, he wiped his eyes and his flowing gray moustache with a silk handkerchief, and went back in.

The women sat silent for a bit. The sudden appearance of the most powerful man of their area had cowed their spirit, even as his form always had wherever seen, clad severely in spotless white cotton kurtha and dhoti. His wealth he displayed only through the glittering rings he wore on every finger, and his power by the short mahogany baton he carried restlessly in his hands. One by one they got up to leave, Ramulamma with the rest. As she went round the corner, she saw the small tight form of the grandmother standing by the bedroom window, gazing into nothingness. The old woman beckoned to her silently.

“Ramulamma, stay with me. The light of my house is extinguished forever. But I want every ceremony performed as it should be. My grandson is going to become one with his ancestors, and we must do everything to help him. What does my daughter-in-law know? She knows nothing, just modern nonsense.”

The poor young man had been ruled over by his mother and grandmother who had fought each other incessantly for his affections, alternately using the pretence of his interests to seize power over his household. It had been a standing joke of the district that the young woman he would one day make his wife would either be torn to pieces by the two harridans, or elevated to the status of a goddess as a pawn in their struggle for power. But the Reddy girl, people argued, born to the traditional knowledge of holding and enjoying power, would most probably keep both old women in their places.

Not that the announcement of the alliance was accepted without disbelief at first, for the Reddys had a high regard of their own consequence and their caste, but then times were a-changing, even for Surinder Reddy, and an alliance with a bright

The Legend of Ramulamma

young officer of the peerless 'IAS' service, who was a Brahmin to boot, most probably mollified the ageing aristocrat at long last into accepting his willful sister's choice. Surinder Reddy had doted upon the girl, even younger than his own son, and had sent her to far-off St. Stephen's College in Delhi, where, he should have known, she would form an attachment to a bright fellow student, whatever the caste. But the devilish revolutionaries had not only killed the boy but ruined her life for good.

Ramulamma looked into the tearless eyes of the matriarch, sunk deep in the parchment of her wizened face. She wet the old woman's hands with her tears. "Amma! God is with you! I am with you! All of us are with you, and he will live forever with God, you can rest assured. He is one with God."

"Yes, yes, I know," said the matriarch a little impatiently. "But he should have lived, lived, I tell you, to be Prime Minister! That girl brought death to my house! I warned him! Inter-caste marriages are wrong! Don't I know? What I have suffered in my life! Customs are different, beliefs are different – how can a dog and a horse pull a cart together? I don't want that Reddy fellow in my house, I don't want him to touch his body! He has killed him with this alliance!"

"Amma, what are you talking? What is all this nonsense?"

Mrs Kowshikar had come to the window, and pulled her mother-in-law back into the room with her screeching walker. Turning round, she put her head out of the window. "Ramulamma, pedda amma's heart is broken, as is mine! What a miserable woman I am, I cannot even cry at my son's death! I have to concern myself with everyone else! Old mad people, dalit dais, policemen! Ramulamma, go away now. Come back later, there is work for you to do."

As the midwife walked away she could hear the daughter-in-law's voice raised in anguish. "Amma, never talk about caste in this house! He was against all such stupidity, as was my husband his father, and your husband, Babu's grandfather, do you remember, do you remember now?"

The next few weeks marked a bizarre time for Ramulamma. Despite her lowly caste, she was a dai and a trusted person in the Kowshikar household, and she was around constantly packing boxes, clearing out unwanted stuff, putting away and taking out framed photographs of the dead boy, to be crooned over by them all, and conveying messages to friends and neighbours, when they could come around for a chat and a cup of tea. The government had said very kindly that the family could take its own time before moving to a house of their own, but the elder women decided that what had to be done one day had best be done as soon as possible. They could move back to Bangalore, where they had their ancestral home, but a couple of tenant families were there, apart from the Meteorological Office in the east wing, and ample notice would have to be given to get them all to move out. In the meantime, a smallish private house would be rented for a year, behind the new marketplace.

A crack team of the Special Armed Force of the police had encamped in town, and in swift order three young naxalites, and a girl were shot dead, and their limp bodies displayed as trophies in front of the District kutcherry. The dead girl had her olive drab jacket pulled well over her small left breast, with its dark, congealed bullet hole. She had been sixteen years old, and Ramulamma's cousin's daughter, when she

The Legend of Ramulamma

had been raped by three drunken constables. A month later, she had run away to the forest, and now Ramulamma was seeing her for the first time after that. After paying a few hundred rupees to constables she knew, Ramulamma collected the body, and cremated it. Since it had been a police case, the prothi demanded double his fees for saying the right prayers over the body, but then she was able to haggle him down a little by reminding him that dalit though she was, she was the most experienced dai in the district and the time of his brother's daughter was not far off.

Even as she still wept openly with the others for the murdered Kowshikar sahib, she thought also now and then, in the death of her heart, of her dead niece, whom she had brought into the world, and then sent away from it.

The matriarch sat in a stiff-backed chair, her walker in front like a shield.

“Ramulamma, I want all my grandson's books to be taken out of their shelves, dusted and put away in boxes. No one is left to read them, they have come to us from my father's day, who is left to know their value? None. That book in your hand was a present to my father on his becoming an advocate of the High Court. It was given to him by no less a person than Doctor Ferguson!”

Ramulamma had heard all those stories before, but some hurt inside her made her listen carefully even as she went on with her dusting and packing. Doctor Ferguson, whose statue still stood in front of the Methodist Church he had built under his direction supervision, well, he was a very great man, though a missionary, and he had adopted, and raised up Shri Kowshikar, the most famous advocate of his day, a friend and host to several of the Indian National Congress leaders, who had fought for and won independence for the country. Shri Kowshikar could have had any post he wanted in the cabinet of free India, but had politely declined to join that rat race. He had been a man of principle. His writing against caste, in support of women's rights, for fair wages, and democratic institutions proclaimed his fame far better than his aged, crippled, and ungrateful daughter ever could.

“Look at how that Reddy fellow has left his cigarette ash all over that shelf,” cried the old lady angrily. “My father never smoked. My husband smoked only occasionally, cigars from Cuba, they are not dirty like these cigarettes. He showed the true nature of his Reddy culture with his cigarettes. I was opposed to the marriage. A Brahmin marry a Reddy? Never! But he would not listen, he was an innocent boy seduced by that low-caste woman, and he had to pay for it with his life. Clean that shelf very, very carefully, Ramulamma, and bring some roses from the garden and put rose petals with all those documents when you pack them. They are the history of my illustrious family! What could that Reddy fellow understand? You know who is a true Brahmin? Not these fellows in temples who hardly know the Vedas. A person is a Brahmin only when he is truly learned. My father was the most learned man of his age. My husband came from a well-known family himself, but he was happy to take on the name of Kowshikar after he married me. He broke all conventions in honour of my father! Rajagopalachari, that Gandhi, all, all would bow down low when they took leave of my father!”

Despite the old lady's patent aversion, Mrs. Kowshikar leaned a lot on the help given to her by Surinder Reddy, who never failed to pay a daily visit. He was stoic in his grief. He had determined to send away his distraught sister to the Mataji Ashram,

The Legend of Ramulamma

to spend six months at least in prayer in the company of those holy women. His army of servants helped pack the furniture neatly and in silence. When he left the house after overseeing the work, he never failed to take leave of the old lady, though she never returned his salutation.

Ramulamma was told to accompany the Reddy girl, and attend on her, on the long way to the airport. The girl when she appeared that morning already looked like a widow. She wore no kumkum, no bangles, and had on a plain white Bengal sari with a thin colourless border. She sank without a word into a corner of the cushions at the back of her brother's Mercedes, and after some hesitation, Ramulamma sat on the edge of the cushions beside her. The clerk who would put the girl on the plane sat in front, fussing with all the papers, and they drove off at high speed on the two-hundred kilometre journey.

The girl was silent for most of the ride, staring into empty space, or letting the tears trickle down silently. Once when she complained of a headache, Ramulamma massaged her temples tenderly, and then she leaned her head on the older woman's shoulder and began to talk disjointedly, of meeting young Kowshikar at college, of not liking the shape of his nose at first, she said with a sad giggle, then coming to admire him, love him to distraction, forcing him to acknowledge his love for her in turn, confronting her brother like a tigress, and all for nothing.

They stopped for tea at a wayside Punjabi dhaba. While it was being made, the girl sat on a granite boulder, and looked at Ramulamma through untidy ringlets she tried to brush back. "I never cared about all this caste, and who can marry whom, you know that, don't you?" she asked. "Why is it important to be a Brahmin, or not to be a Brahmin, or a Reddy or a dalit? That old grandmother of his never liked me, or the idea of our marriage. You know the whole truth, don't you?"

Ramulamma sat down beside the girl, and took her in her own arms, enveloping that slim form with her large arms, and pressing her wet cheeks against the girl's. "Yes, I know everything, and it does not matter, now or ever," she whispered. "That old lady never knew her own mind. One day caste did not matter at all, another day, all that mattered was caste. The great Ferguson Sahib adopted her father, and made him into a great man, and they both worked against caste, mocked caste Brahmins and all, but she, his own daughter, was always torn apart by caste. Once she was very ill, delirious, we thought that week we had lost her, and her grandson never left her bedside, he was truly great, he loved her so, and in that fever she would only babble about caste. I felt sorry for her, still do. But who am I to say? I know who I am, and I have never felt sorry, except once, when I was a child and saw my friend Manjula clean a latrine, because her mother was sick. I was spared that because I was born into the Asadhi caste of Malas. I was once beaten when I shared a roti with Manjula."

Ramulamma was not allowed to go inside the airport; but the Reddy girl turned and gave her a sweet sad smile before she disappeared beyond the barrier, and that was the last she saw of her.

One evening at the fair price shop, after she had collected her subsidized rice quota, Ramulamma lingered to have a word with Gopalrao the dealer. He was a fat man with a limp moustache, who perspired all the time, even in winter, and who had been complaining to his customers over the last six years that he would be closing his shop soon because of mounting losses. Which poor man could afford to do public

The Legend of Ramulamma

service, with both government and the public pinching into his livelihood? Ramulamma chirped in sympathy whenever he complained but saw to it that he never cheated her.

“Gopal bhai, the ‘elder brothers’ should never have killed Kowshikar sahib,” said Ramulamma, sitting down with him on the stone floor in front of his shop, after he had brought down the steel shutter and locked it into place. She brought out some paans from a fold in her sari, and offered him two, saying she had made them specially for him. “He was good for poor people, people like you and me. They have done a very bad thing, and my niece has paid with her life for their wrong-doing, though, poor thing, she was born to be tortured and killed. What else can a poor girl hope for in this life?”

Gopalrao chewed the paan with relish, and bundling it into a corner of his cheek, looked nervously about. “Some people, you know how people talk when they come to my shop,” he said hoarsely, “they say the annalu had nothing to do with it. It was a private quarrel – who knows with these big people? But the annalu are hurting, the police have found a good excuse to kill poor boys – and your niece, she never saw one day’s happiness in this world, but God knows everything, mark my words!”

Ramulamma mulled over his words as she walked back to her hut slowly in the gathering dark. Gopalrao was a fool, everyone knew that, but somehow he had very large ears that captured all the gossip that was whispered around. His few confidantes, like herself, were made privy to that knowledge, most of it harmless, unless it got to the ears of an enraged husband. On occasion he knew of important matters almost before anyone else. Some people even suspected him of being a police informer, but she knew he did not have the courage. So, if the ‘elder brothers’ had not killed Kowshikar sahib, who had? Her mind carefully turned over Gopalrao’s hoarse whispers, and for a moment she wondered darkly about the deeds of the police, before dismissing her suspicions even as they were being formulated. True, the police cared nothing for civilian authority, especially as personified by young pro-poor officers like Kowshikar sahib, but they wouldn’t have killed him deliberately to get at a few naxalite boys. No, that was out of the question, but there was no getting round the fact that a mystery now enveloped that shooting.

The stress of eking out a living, selling some herbal medicine for stomach ailments, added to two difficult deliveries in the neighbourhood that kept her awake over several consecutive nights, almost drove the mystery of Kowshikar’s shooting out of her head. Then, at last, one night, when she was dropping off to sleep, someone came unceremoniously into her hut, and started shaking her shoulder. She got up groggily, her every limb trembling with exhaustion. It was Ratnamma.

“Ramulamma! Ramulamma! You must save my boy. They have taken him to the thana, and will kill by morning and dump his body in the bushes. He is not a naxalite. Yes, he is, he is, I warned him,” continued Ratnamma amidst sobs, “I warned him how it would all end, but he got cheated all the time by the big men, after he had worked all day long moving bags of grain. He still had to go to bed hungry most days, so one day he ran away, and came back one night a month later and said ‘Amma, I am a Naxalite now, I shall bring justice to people!’ I wept, how I wept, and I have prayed to all the Gods to save my son, and now they have caught him. He never carried any arms, Ramulamma, you know that,” said Ratnamma, her voice cracking with pain and tears. “He was just a servant to them, they gave him something to eat. Now the police will

The Legend of Ramulamma

kill him. They are already torturing him, my poor boy! You know the Sub-Inspector Sahib! Save my son!”

After telling Ratnamma to lie down on her own bed, since weeping did not help anybody anyway, Ramulamma, washed her face from the bucket of water she kept in her hut, slipped her wet feet into her chappals, and wrapping her sari tightly round her body against the early morning cold, set off for the police station. A pink dawn had broken over the low eastern hills when she passed the building, an incurious constable hawking and spitting loudly from the station verandah. Through those raucous sounds she could hear the tired moans of a man in pain. She went on to the sub-inspector's quarters set well back from the police station, and surrounded by a little garden, with some vegetables at the back and a patch of marigolds in front. The sub-inspector, who had slept on a cot in the front verandah, was sitting up on it, wearing a white singlet that bulged over his tummy and a many-coloured check lungi tucked underneath.

“Arre, you 305, you son of an ass, I told you, get me a hot cup of tea five minutes ago, where have you died? Chai! Chai! Chai!” The sub-inspector was clearly in very good humour. A constable came running up carrying a tray, a teapot, a cracked cup and a plate of biscuits.

“Ramulamma! You have come too late to earn anything! If you had come last night, I just might have...but look at your breasts now, just bags to keep some religious offerings!” He laughed good-naturedly at his own joke, and took a noisy sip of hot tea between clenched stained teeth.

Ramulamma sat down at his feet and ceremoniously put her head on his bare feet. He looked at her indulgently.

“Sirrr, you know, Sir, why I have come, I have come to save the life of a boy you have in there,” she said in a keening voice that it was good to employ at such occasions. “He is innocent, Sir, I swear on your head, just foolish. If you give him some food, Sir, he will do what you want.” She looked pleadingly up into his face. The sub-inspector was enjoying this hugely. He stretched a leg forward and pinched her thigh between the nails of two toes.

“You whores think you can get around a man, don't you, even when you have lost your beauty, just for old times sake?” He laughed to himself and drank more tea noisily. “Do you remember how much money I have given you in the past? All my mamul money from all the trucks that go past the station, you and the other whores. How you used to circle the station like cats. But those days are gone. I am here to do my duty, so get lost.” He got up to go inside his small house. In desperation she caught hold of the edge of his lungi.

“Sirrr, every year brings out new girls. I shall bring Gauri to you, you will like her.” He must be stopped from leaving her; every minute counted. He turned and looked at her with interest.

“You know what I like?” He bunched his fists high on his chest. “Bring her tonight, no, I am exhausted with office work. Bring her on Sunday, I shall prepare myself with three plates of biryani.”

The Legend of Ramulamma

“Sir, let that boy go, he knows nothing, he will be loyal to you.”

The sub-inspector sat down and clapped his hands. The constable came running back with a fresh pot of tea. The sub-inspector held out his cup solemnly and the constable filled it very carefully. Sipping his tea, the sub-inspector looked at Ramulamma carefully for a few minutes.

“What do you whores know about loyalty?” he asked thrusting his face close to hers. “You whores nurture these naxalite scum, don’t I know it? Will you weep if they kill me tomorrow? You will spread your legs to the next SI. Why did you kill Kowshikar, heh? That fool thought he was some sort of saviour for you scum, well he died a dog’s death. You know how much money our Reddy Dorra spent pandering to that fellow’s whims, just because his sister was besotted! All you women are whores, every one! Reddy Dorra even risked his own life, sending word to these naxalite rascals, so that his brother-in-law might make a big name for himself as a peacemaker. What happened? Joint Collector Kowshikar got shot by his friends, and you want me to spare one of these rascally dogs!”

Ramulamma fell at his feet again, and in a careful rambling tone, tried to tickle his credulity and his lust. If he let the boy live, he single-handed could unravel what the whole Intelligence Department had failed to do; he would have his own man in the naxalite group. She lied freely, for if she got the boy to live that day, she could get him to take the next bus to Bombay and disappear, maybe for good, or at least for five years.

When she was done, the sub-inspector was sunk in thought.

You go home, I will see what I can do,” he said at last. “But next Sunday bring that girl round as you promised, or my constables will break all the pots in your huts. And remember, I will half her fucking pay for every year she is over fifteen!” With a laugh, he heaved himself inside his house, and Ramulamma walked back not knowing if she had saved a life. The police station was very silent by then.

Three days later the local newspaper carried a police story that a dangerous naxalite had been eliminated after a gunfight that had lasted all night, and Ratnamma with her sari end stuffed into her mouth was left staring at the one and only picture of her son, lying in an untidy heap behind a bush. After the wailing, a collection was made to help Ratnamma get her son’s body from the police for a proper cremation. Neither Ramulamma nor the sub-inspector tried to look at each other during the proceedings.

Next weekend, someone from her village was going over to Rajnaik Thanda to buy a cow. Since there was a belief that she could help in the bargaining, Ramulamma was requested to go along. That evening at the Thanda, after the deal was struck, more or less satisfactorily for both parties, large pots of local toddy were brought out in celebration. Ramulamma, after a sip or two, went away beyond a little hill, perhaps to answer the calls of nature. Two young men in half-sleeve shirts and trousers were sitting by the small white-washed stone mound of some forgotten local Muslim pir. Ramulamma sat down beside them under the Gul Mohar tree, and as they talked, its red and gold leaves fell all over them.

The Legend of Ramulamma

On Sivarathri day, the great Surinder Reddy announced that since his sister had decided to stay in the ashram indefinitely, he would distribute her saris to the poor, and melting some gold make a donation to the temple as well. All afternoon long he lay back in his armchair placed like a throne on his high verandah, while his assistants brought out the saris and gave them to the poor women who lined up to receive them. Every woman, one by one, with hands folded, and the gifted sari tucked to her breast, went up and touched his feet, while he sat like a stone, hardly caring to notice their obeisance. Then sweets were distributed in huge brass plates to all the assembled men. At last, the great Reddy got up languidly and made his way to the temple for the evening puja and the proper gratitude of the temple priests for his munificent gift. It was quite dark when he returned to his armchair, and sank tiredly into it. He was about to clap his hands to summon servants when a voice broke in from the dark.

“Pedda Reddy Dorra, may you live for a thousand years! You have blest the whole village on this sacred day!”

The deep verandah was lit only by a single bulb placed high on a cross rafter of the ceiling. He peered uncertainly into the night, and made out Ramulamma’s dim figure squatting in the dust beyond the verandah.

“Ramulamma! Did you not get your sari? Well, there are always more, I can get you two, yes, take two!”

“No, great Dorra! I do not want saris. If I could ask anything, I would ask Yamaraja for the life of Kowshikar Sahib, for the sake of your widowed sister!”

“No one can gainsay their Karma, no one. What has been laid down from time immemorial must be respected. There can be no change,” said Surinder Reddy in a deep voice. “You are a dai. You have given birth to life and you have seen life die. You know that.”

“Yes, Pedda Dorra garu! The fruits of Karma roll from generation to generation. That great Englishman, Ferguson Dorra, what did he know of Karma? He mocked caste; he adopted a pariah boy, called him a Brahmin, married him into a Brahmin family, made him a great Advocate, but did his caste Karma leave him? No! It killed his great-grandson, extinguishing the light of his house!”

There was silence for several minutes, except for the cicadas chirping in the night. “How did you harijan woman find this out?” asked Surinder Reddy softly. “Yes, you were always in and out of that house. That old woman must have babbled out the truth in a weak moment, chee, how despicable!”

“No, she never did, but she was delirious once and spoke of it to her beloved grandson. I am after all of her blood, and it was my Karma to hear it. But to him, it meant nothing, he laughed it away, and it meant nothing to your sister, even as you pretended it meant nothing to you!”

“Caste means nothing to me!” cried Surinder Reddy angrily. “Have I not just distributed my poor sister’s saris amongst you trash, given my money to you? I care nothing for caste, I tell you. But to have your impure blood run in the veins of my

The Legend of Ramulamma

nephews, that is intolerable! I thought my sister would be equally revolted when I found out the truth, going through Ferguson's papers, but she – she – women have no sense of honour!"

"Was there no other way, Pedda Dorra Garu?" she asked softly from the night.

"None, none that was left me," said Surinder Redy grimly. "Did you think I liked killing that boy? I have been sad since then. I cannot taste salt in my food any more."

"But everyone blamed the annalu for killing a good man," she persisted. "And they have died like flies. They will exact retribution. They too have a sense of honour."

He looked down at her from his lofty height with a hint of humour in his eyes. "And you, you who have swept my courtyard, you will take me to their court?" He laughed softly, his handsome head thrown back.

"No, you are too great a man for a harijan woman like me to take anywhere," she said simply. "But I have brought their court to you."

A single shot rang out, the bullet taking him in the chin, and he died choking on his own blood as he laughed.