

Kahaniya

April, 1955
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APRIL, 1955

Kahaniya

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THE FIRST YEAR

With this issue *Kahaniya* completes its first year. It is a pleasant feeling, this passing of the first milestone in its career and we have decided to begin the second year by issuing an annual which will contain extra pages but will be priced the same as usual i.e., four annas. Readers are requested to make sure of their copies by placing an order in advance with their news agents.

Looking back we find that we have in the twelve issues given over one hundred and fifty stories. These include thir-

teen famous murder trials and three crime stories, eleven detective stories, nine folktales, seven ghost stories, twenty seven stories from

religion besides one serial story. This is an impressive record for the low subscription rate of three rupees a year. We hope in the coming year it will be possible for us to issue more pages which means more reading matter and more stories.

We wish to record here our deep debt of gratitude to the writers, advertisers and friends without whose cooperation and help it would have been difficult to make *Kahaniya* the success that it is to-day. It is our firm resolve to conduct this monthly in such a manner

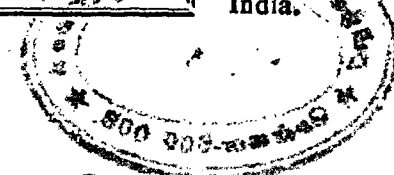
as to make it deserving of their support and also earn for it the goodwill of the ever growing circle of discriminating readers from all over India.

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All about a husband who leaves home
thinking that his wife is old-fashioned

A SERMON IN MARBLE*

(By K. Nagarajan)

It was domestic unhappiness—so, at any rate, he termed it—which drove Kodandaram from home. There were those who said it was sheer *ennui* and nothing more; evidently he was tired of the profitless existence of a provincial lawyer and craved for change. Anyway, one fine morning in May he packed his suit case—a doting father-in-law's wedding gift—and without a word to anybody started for the north of India. There was no particular reason why it should have been the north instead of the east or the west; it was just that it was far enough off to make his demonstration of disgust with the home and the family sufficiently convincing. A minor factor was Kanaka, an old college friend, now said to be happily and modernly employed in a Swadeshi drug-store in Delhi. Kanaka used to be a taking sort of girl and he vaguely hoped that something might 'turn up' in the way of prohibited romance.

Why he should have felt bored with existence at Kil-Kedaram was not clear to anybody. There he was, J. Kodandaram, M.A., B.L., as his name board announced (that M.A. gave him a pleasant sense of superiority to the mere B.L.) with a roof to his head and a refracted one at that—a

veil of excellent land and a wife not fit, by any means, to be the heroine of a modern novel but good looking and loving enough. True, Kodandaram wasn't a star in his profession; his clients you could count on your fingers and, as for his income, what he made hardly sufficed to keep him in socks and neckties. This he did not very much mind as there was no wolf to keep from the door and it gave him something to philosophise over, namely, the unreason which attends professional success. He had no children but this did not worry him; he had, as yet, no thoughts of the life hereafter and he found the present sufficiently absorbing.

It was, on the whole, a peptonised existence which he was leading and the story of domestic discord sounded a bit thin. His grouse was against his wife. She was old fashioned and would not play up to him, and all the cinemas in and out of Kil-Kedaram could not change her, such a stick in the mind was she. But the good people of Kil-Kedaram thought differently; they considered her a nice, sweet and thoroughly good girl, who lit up the home like the tall, burnished brass lamp one sets up before the family gods. But Kodandaram, I am sorry to say, saw only what was

A Sermon In Marble

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not there, the modernity, the lack of which seemed to him to make matrimony flat and flavourless. She was out and out unmodern, to the very edges of her sari which she could never bring herself to wear in the form of a skirt. And her name! Picchai! It made him blush. It meant 'Alms' and that was the way in which her parents, heirs to ages of superstition, had tried to make their peace with the destiny which had relentlessly struck down all her predecessors. Kodandaram bestowed another name on her. *Lilavati*, romantic, aromatic, regal. But 'Lilavati' made her blush, it was so uncommon, so theatrical. She hardly answered to the name but just sidled along, like one ashamed, meekly drawing the folds of her sari round her shoulders. There again, why eternally draw a veil over one's shoulders? And Picchai had beautifully rounded shoulders over which her cream-coloured skin glistened with life. She didn't fancy walking along the streets of Kil-Kedaram (so notoriously conservative and given to gossip) with her husband, and when she did, she trailed a few paces behind him. Modesty? Dash it all, he used to say, there's no modesty in hanging back like a dog instead of walking abreast like a wife and partner. And, latterly—she had taken to reading the *Santosha Vikatan* regularly and the *Santosha Vikatan* hardly helped to kick a woman into the middle of next week. Though she didn't shriek with delight reading it as her volatile friend and neighbour Janaki did

she enjoyed it in a quiet, unemonstrative way, which was the way in all things, including love of husband.

The last straw had been a trifle, the merest trifle. They were going to a wedding in town, a fashionable wedding, one certain to be reported in the newspapers. There was already a certain amount of strain and when Picchai appeared with her diamond-studded *bulak*, Kodandaram asked superiorly, "Is it absolutely necessary that you should wear that thing in your nose?"

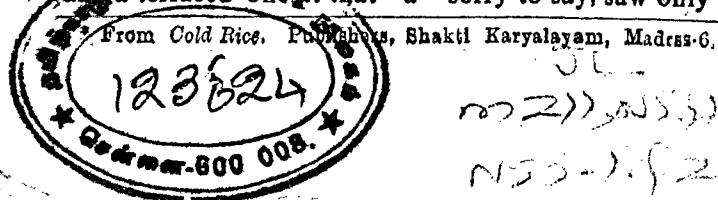
His sarcasm was lost on her. She just tossed her head and asked, "What is wrong with it?"

"It makes you look like your grandmother," he said icily.

"Let it. It must be nice," she answered composedly.

Answering back! The almighty male in him rose in offended dignity but he controlled himself. Picchai could be very firm in matters relating to dress and jewellery. Kodandaram didn't realise that in this, at any rate, she was up to the most advanced modern standard. And here he was, trying to suppress her individuality, not a very modern thing to do, as he realised with a start. But, that *bulak*, it made her look so 'dowdy'.

They went to the Patels in silence. Picchai went and joined the throng of women, while Kodandaram drank weak tea with a motley crowd, feeling quite fashionable and up-to-date. Picchai, retiring and shy, had been quite a success in her own way. "A pretty picture,"



the missionary's wife had remarked. The Collector's lady had asked to be introduced to her and had fingered her *bulak*, which sparkled in the electric light, and exclaimed, "Isn't it lovely? And it suits you down to the ground." Kodandaram who heard of it said that Mrs. Collector must have only been trying to be pleasant. No Englishwoman could like that kind of thing. He had not been within ten feet of an Englishwoman and yet he supposed that they did not care for pearls or diamonds.

They quarrelled over it that night, Kodandaram speaking out of pique and irritated by Picchai's tears which were really designed to appease. He moped the whole of the next day and then left for Madras without telling anybody. He caught the Grand Trunk Express for Delhi, travelling third class, dressed in khaki shorts, a Phillips Oppenheim novel in his hand, while his 'natty' suit-case was stowed away among the steel-trunks and cloth-bundles which blocked the passage. He was without remorse and felt on the edge of high adventure. However, he had not been twelve hours in the train before he realised that travelling across the blistering plains of Central India in May was not a joke. The food was abominable and the coffee, when he could get it, smelt of kerosene. On the second day, he thought longingly of the square-bricked floor of the dining-room at home where Picchai used to tempt him with spicy soups and chutneys. She did certainly look

after him and rivalled his dead mother in the way in which she provided home comforts. A good wife, but, no, he checked himself in time. After all, he reminded himself, man does not live by bread alone. But the reflection was only a temporary palliative. Soon he felt the needed sustenance cannot always be obtained from a Biblical question.

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Delhi in May was the depth of discomfort. Hot winds shrivelled up the skin. Kodandaram stayed with Ganapati Sasri, a middle-aged gentleman, tied to his office-stool between ten and six and to the cares of a large sized family after that. Kodandaram was thus left to his own devices and he lost no time in looking for Kanakamma. He ran her to earth in a third-rate drug-store near the Kashmir Gate and was somewhat taken aback by the decline in her appearance. But she seemed pleased to see him and stood talking to him over the counter in a salmon-coloured *sari* and very much abbreviated bodice while a shrunken-looking individual in a black cap kept shouting orders at her from the cash-desk. Kanakamma arranged to go to the pictures with him; she had always liked them and they were showing "A Night in Town" at the Regal and Kodandaram left promising to meet her there.

After the show, they strolled along the Chandni Chowk and ate sweets at Ganga Ram's and drank iced *sherbet* at a stall at the turning into the Chauri

Bazar. Kanaka laughingly cautioned Kodanda against venturing into that street alone and pointed to the painted courtesans who displayed themselves on the balconies above.

"What are those red and blue quilts spread there for?" asked Kodandaram.

"I presume to receive visitors on," she said engagingly. "How easy and unaffected! Kanaka was never a prude," said Kodandaram to himself.

During the rest of the week they explored Delhi. Kanaka knew her way about and took him to all the show places. At the Lal Kila, Kanaka reeled off the points of Shah Jahan's Palace with the mechanical enthusiasm of a tourists' guide. Old Delhi, Firozabad, Indraprasth were all visited and Kodandaram thought Kanaka a wonderful woman to go about with.

She got a Friday afternoon off and they made an excursion to the Kutb Minar. It was a sweltering day and by the time they had 'done' the Kutb, they were both tired out. On their way back they halted at Humayun's Tomb over whose architectural elegance Kanaka waxed eloquent.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she asked

"I don't think so at all. So much money wasted on the sepulchre of a man who was not much good while living."

"All that has nothing to do with the building. They all speak highly of it," said Kanaka.

"Anyhow it bores me. All palaces or tombs or mosques. I wonder if those Padshahs ever thought of the people. There does not seem to be any sign of a hospital or school or things of that kind," said Kodanda.

"There may have been such things in Akbar's time."

"What did Akbar build?" asked Kodanda, indolently.

"I don't remember," admitted Kanaka.

"Nor do I," said Kodandaram. Their history was hazy.

They were glad to be back in the car and they drove back in silence. The sight of Delhi city and the prospect of tea revived Kodandaram. They went into Ganga Ram's again and then Kodandaram dropped Kanaka at her 'flat' as she called it, at Paharganj.

"I am afraid you have not enjoyed your trip," said Kanaka.

"On the contrary, I have enjoyed every minute of it. With you for company it could not have been otherwise," replied Kodandaram now thoroughly revived.

"Flatterer," said Kanaka, arching her neck.

"Honour bright," replied Kodanda, drawing himself up.

After dinner they met again at Connaught Place. Kodanda was transported by the electric illuminations which seemed to him to turn it into a fairyland. A gentle breeze was blowing and they strolled along leisurely and dropped into Lillaram's. "What are you taking home for your wife?" asked Kanaka.

"I am sure I haven't thought

about it," replied Kodandaram, feeling guilty.

"Bad man. I shall select a nice *sari* or two for you to take home," she said, pleasantly.

Saris were taken down from the shelves for Kanaka's inspection. Kodanda looked on and after some time told her that not one of the *saris* shown would suit his wife.

"She is so old-fashioned, you know," he said, miserable at having to apologise for her. Then, as some suppressed sense of loyalty gave his conscience a twinge, he added, "I do not wish to inflict my tastes on her, you know."

"Quite right, too," Kanaka readily agreed. "She has a right to her own tastes."

"Hadn't she?" Kodanda supposed she had. Here was a new and yet unsuspected light on the question. But he was not in a mood to puzzle it out. The shop assistant waited for some custom to follow all the eager inspection which had been going on. Kanaka seemed to be taken up with a pale green *sari* bordered with silver lace.

"Do you like that?" asked Kodanda. Kanaka sensed what was coming and countered:

"But what is the use? Your wife you say does not care for this kind of thing."

"Now, tell me, do you like it?"

"I do, indeed. It is a lovely *sari*. Take it home and give it to your sister."

"I haven't one."

"Or a lady friend," she said, simpering.

"Right. Let's have it. My lady friend is here," he finished.

"I shouldn't dream of it, Kodanda. You are—"

Kodanda did not allow her to complete her sentence. Instead, he told the assistant to make up the bill and the parcel.

On coming outside Kanaka continued her pretty remonstrances.

"What will your wife say if she hears of this?" she asked.

"Let her say what she likes. I don't care," he replied loftily.

A bright moon was shining overhead, the traffic in Connaught Place had virtually ceased and all the illuminations seemed meant for them.

"You bad boy," said Kanaka, handing Kodandaram the parcel to carry. And Kodandaram thought he heard a sigh floating away on the night air. He turned to her, when she asked him:

"I am going to ask you a question. Will you promise to answer truly?"

"Fire away," he said, his eyes sparkling.

"Have you been happy loafing about with me all these days?"

"Happy is not the word for it. It has been heavenly. How can I thank you, Kanaka?"

She nestled closer to him while her hands sought his. "How can I thank you?" she whispered.

It was now Kodanda's turn. He asked her:

"Now tell me, have I been a tiresome person to go about with?"

"Tiresome? Don't be silly."

she said and slapped him on his cheek.

"Slap me again, Kanaka. It is nice to be silly, I find," he said gallantly.

"Say something silly and I shall slap you again," she said and held up her face to him. Kodanda completely lost his head. Before he realised what he was doing he had caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately on the lips. In an instant, he recovered himself, stepped back and, in a fever of anxiety lest he should have offended her, started to apologise.

"Don't, please," she interrupted. "But what will your wife say?"

"Oh, hang my wife. But are you angry, Kanaka? Will you forgive me?" After all, Kodanda was rooted in the proprieties.

"What's there to forgive, you silly boy?" she said playing with the edge of her *sari*.

Kodanda couldn't believe his ears. He looked her full in the face for a second and then gathering her in his arms, covered her face with kisses. Her hair came down and she drew back her head to put up her hair again. Kodanda had still a stray quail or two. He asked:

"It's delightful. Are you sure you don't mind?"

She shook her head.

With the morning came a depression of spirits. Somehow he felt amazingly below par and his thoughts went back with a curious insistence to his wife. How was she feeling at home,

he wondered. A spasm of guilt shot through his mind; he had failed his wife, a wife who had always given him of her best. He felt as though some sustaining fibre within him had snapped at some point, leaving him wrecked, miserable, ashamed of himself.

They were having a small celebration at his host's—the birthday of his grandson. It was a pretty, little affair, like the ones they used to have at home. Ganapati Sastri's daughter, a smiling, happy looking young lady of about seventeen, was a picture of joyous motherhood. She didn't romp about, her style of wearing her *sari* was strictly orthodox and though she did not wear a *bulak*, she wore a nose screw, a single, small diamond and all present voted her pretty. How much nicer was Picchai with her derided *bulak*!

He wasn't meeting Kanaka that day as she had work at her store but they were going to Agra the next day to see the Taj. That evening Kodanda went off by himself to collect curios to take home. He discovered by one of those lucky accidents to which some travellers are born, a curio shop in an obscure alley off Chandni Chowk. There were brassware and miniatures in stone of the Taj, the Lal Kila, the Kutb and other buildings. But the thing which enslaved his fancy was a painting on Mica of Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of the Emperor Shah Jahan. It was about six inches by four but the picture seemed to pulsate with life. It