

Kanyashulkam

A Comedy Play in seven Acts

Telugu Original: Sri Gurajaada Apparao

First published: 1897

English translation: K. Nagarajan
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Foreword

Gurajada Apparao was a social reformer and a leading light of modern Telugu literature (late 19th century – early 20th century). *Kanyaskulkam* (which means reverse dowry, the amount given by groom to 'buy' a bride) is considered a landmark in modern Telugu literature and is also a major landmark in terms of targeting towards bringing about progressive changes in society that was mired in very retrogressive customs, such as child marriages, ostracization and poor treatment of young widows etc. This book is written in the form of a play, with characters similar to those found in the Indian society at that time. It's hilarious and serious at once and is highly enjoyable in the idiomatic Telugu of Sri Apparao.

This translation is a humble attempt to make this wonderful work available to non-Telugu reading audience. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed translating it.

Disclaimer: Since it's very difficult to find English equivalents to idioms, phrases and particular way of speaking in the dialect of the original, the translation will not give the same feel as the Telugu original. But since this is in the form of a play, one can get the feel to some extent and enjoy reading it.

Note: Sentences in *italics* are in English in the original itself, reproduced without change to retain originality. Also, some words in *italics* are transliterated words from the original, just to give a flavour of the original language.

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K. Nagarajan

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Bengaluru

Roles

1. **Agnihotravadhanlu** – a resident of Krishnarayapuram agraharam
2. **Venkamma** – his wife
3. **Buchchamma** – his first daughter; widow
4. **Subbamma** – second daughter
5. **Venkatesam** – son
6. **Karataka shastri** – brother-in-law (wife's brother) of Agnihotravadhanlu. Comedian in the Sanskrit drama company of Vijayanagaram.
7. **Lubdhavadhanlu** – resident of Ramachandrapuram agraharam
8. **Meenakshi** – his daughter; widow
9. **Ramappantulu** – village accountant ('karanam') of Ramachandrapuram
10. **Girisam** – Lubdhavadhanlu's mother's sister's son. Venkatesam's tuition master.
11. **Soujanya Rao pantulu** – lawyer/vakil
12. **Bheemaroo pantulu** – pleader
13. **Naidu** – private vakil/lawyer
14. **Priest Gavarayya** – local doctor, occultist
15. **Madhuravani** – prostitute (apparently a very cultured, educated and principled one)

Others: deputy collector, head constable, Poli Setty, ascetic (bairagi), shop-keeper, village munsif, tehsildar, yogini, Lubdhavadhanlu's servant, Asiri, Manavallaiah, Veeresha.

Act 1
Location 1: 'Bonkula¹ Dibba' in
Vijayanagaram
(Girisam enters)

Girisam: Ah, it's already evening. A month ago, I borrowed twenty rupees from the mess woman to buy groceries, but spent it on the dance girl. That resulted in a major fight with the mess woman today morning. Got so angry that I felt like breaking her head. But, as poor Richard said, we can't win in this world unless we have patience. Anyway, how many times has she not, in the past, kept quiet when I swiped her money. Only thing is, this time she got wind of the dance girl; some jealous fellow must have informed her. After today morning's debacle, it looks like she wouldn't give me food anymore. Our tricks wouldn't work in this village anymore – lot of unpaid loans all around. Some time or the other, they would give me a sound beating for writing a love letter to Venkata panthulu's daughter-in-law.

Can love be controlled by advice?

Will our mothers obey Cupid?

It's advisable to pack up from here soon. But I just don't feel like giving up Madhuravani.

It's women that seduce all mankind.

She is dreaming that I will get a great job and rule the world. Poor creature!

Who is that coming this way? Looks like my dear

1 'Bonkula Dibba' roughly translates to mound of lies, which is a real place in Vijayanagaram, A.P state

student Venkateshwarlu. They would have declared Christmas holidays today. Looks like he has failed in the exams. If I console him a bit and, on pretext of teaching him lessons, if I run away to his village, most of my problems would be resolved.

(Venkatesam enters)

What *my dear Shakespeare*? Why is your face crest-fallen?

Venka: You don't talk to me from now onwards. My teacher told me not to talk to you. He said I failed in the exams because of going around with you.

Girisam: Nonsense. I have been suspecting from the beginning that your teacher doesn't like me. So, he failed you. Otherwise, you and failure don't go together! You know how enmity formed between me and your teacher? All his teachings are full of lies and wrong things. I revealed it in newspapers. Since then he has been jealous of me.

Venka: The only thing I learnt from you is how to smoke cigar. Whenever I ask you to teach a lesson, you just keep talking gossip. Have you ever taught me even a single lesson?

Girisam: *Damn it!* Such words anger me. This is gross ingratitude. Talking to me itself is education. Coming to that, which teacher has the command over language like you? How many lectures have I not delivered to you about widow marriage and nauch girls² issue? No student of mine has become useless. When I was studying at Pune Deccan College, all the professors were stunned by my three-hour non-stop lecture on 'The eleven causes of the degeneration of India!' Our fellows are just idiots, you see. Instead of thanking me for teaching you how to

2 'nauch girls' means dance girls

smoke a cigar, you are finding fault with me? I am surprised that you still haven't realized the pleasure of smoking a cigar. Isn't it because of smoking cigars that white bosses³ have become so great? Have you ever seen an English man who doesn't smoke a cigar? It's because of smoking cigars that he invented steam engine and such great inventions. Otherwise, would it be possible for him? I already told you what the scientist said – the bird king brought elixir ('armutham') and it overflowed and a drop fell on earth and from that the cigar tree was born! Fellow who doesn't smoke cigar will be born as a male buffao! It's stated in the fourth chapter of Brihannarayaneeyam. Let that be. I am getting very angry with your teacher for failing a brilliant student like you. When I catch him alone, I will give him a thorough thrashing. During holidays will you be here or go to village?

Venka: I have holidays for a month, but if my father gets to know that I failed, he will thrash me.

Girisam: I will give you an idea to overcome that danger. Will you promise that you will do as I say?

Venka: (holding Girisam's feet) When did I disobey your order? My father is very short-tempered. If he gets to know that I haven't passed the exams, he will break my bones (wipes tears).

Girisam: That's tyranny. If it's the Bengali boy, do you know what he would do? Whether it's father or grand-father, he would just beat them up. Are any other boys of your students studying in this village?

Venka: None.

Girisam: Then I will give you an idea. Listen. I will come along

3 'white bosses' = the British rulers

with you to your village and tell your family that you passed the exams. Tell them that I came to teach you there. At the end of the vacation, I will get you admitted into the town school in a higher class/grade.

Venka: I will be saved if you come with me. Last time itself my mother asked me to bring you along.

Girisam: Alright. But I will incur losses in many business affairs here. Munsif said if I tutor his children during the holidays, he would pay me fifty rupees. But I wouldn't care about any loss when it comes to you. But I have one fear. Your people are very barbarious. Not sure if they will treat me well. You will have to give your mother a strong recommendation about me. Write a list of new books to be purchased. Without some money in hand, it would be difficult to arrange for cigars. Take out a notebook and write down. 1. Royal reader 2. Manuel grammar 3. Ghosh geometry 4. Bose algebra 5. Srinivas Iyer arithmetic 6. History of Nala 7. Rajasekhara charithram 8. Shepherd general English 9. Venkata Subbarao Made easy. How many books in total?

Venka: Nine.

Girisam: Add one more, with that it will be ten – Kuppyswamayyar Made Difficult. That's enough. If you folks ask you to speak English, just reel out all the words that you read in these books and still remember. Do you have any copper coins? I have some currency notes, but I can't change them. Go buy and bring Kashi sweet for 10 anas. I will not eat any dinner tonight. Go to the market, arrange for a vehicle and load my traveling trunk onto it and bring it near the steps. I will take care of some important affairs here and come and meet you, however late at night it may be. Go at once, my good boy! If you listen to me

and do as I say, I will make you as great as Surendranath Benarji. Don't let even a bird know that I am coming with you. Take care (venkatesam leaves).

Girisam: Well, this matter got fixed. Tonight I shouldn't leave without giving a parting whistle to Madhuravani.

(sings with tune)

Your sight is my light

If I don't see you

Quite a wretched sight

Moon-less night

(an attender enters.)

Attender: Sir, I am Potigara panthulu's servant. The loan you took from him needs to be urgently repaid. He asked me to collect it from you immediately and bring it.

Girisam: (pretending not to have heard, starts singing some song in a care-free way)

Attender: I was told you didn't return the loan despite having sent many messengers before. But I am not like them, sir.

Girisam: This is the way to 'ayya koneru' (a temple tank)!

Attender: What a deaf guy I got!

Girisam: The trader's shop? It's in Kapsa bazaar, not here

Attender: (putting his mouth close to Girisam's ear) Will you return Potigarappantulu's money or not?

Girisam: you can stay in Radhari's bungalow.

Attender: My master had ordered me to collect the money right here and now, the amount you and your prostitute borrowed from him a year ago.

Girisam: Oh, it's you! I thought it was someone else. Talk

slowly, talk slowly. If you come to the mess woman's house tomorrow morning at eight, I will clear the loan completely, down to the last paisa. Doesn't your master care about friendship?

Attender: Empty words wouldn't work. He asked me to grab the money from your pocket and bring it.

Girisam: I am a gentleman. How can you rush me like this? See how this cigar is burning. The English bosses call it Havana cigar. Come tomorrow, I will give you two of them.

Attender: Ok, what about the loan money?

Girisam: I told you, right? Tomorrow morning. If not, the harijan's son is a chandala.

Attender: He is that anyway, isn't he?

Girisam: If you don't believe me, I promise with Gayathri manthra and the sacred thread as the witnesses.

Attender: Yes, sir. If you don't pay tomorrow morning, I will lose my reputation.

Girisam: Ah! You losing your reputation is same as me losing my reputation. Don't worry. (attender leaves.) Ah! This sacred thread had come to use for the first time in these many days. As the theosophist said, our ancestors have created these customs with a purpose in mind. We will not realize its wisdom unless we experience it ourselves. I am almost dead by the time I got rid of this devil.

'Sheeghrabudhdhe palayanam' (scoot immediately). Unless I leave this village early morning tomorrow, I will lose my name and reputation. Now, let's go to Madhuravani's house. 'Make hay while the sun shines', they said.

2nd Place – Room in Madhuravani's house

(Ramappanthulu will be sitting on a chair; Madhuravani will be standing in front of him.)

Rama: (takes out a cigar, bites it) Give me a match stick, my girl.

Madhuravani (as she lights a match and lights up the cigar with it, Ramappanthulu pinches her cheek. Madhuravani, without the cigar having lit, but the match stick having burnt out, feigns anger and stands away) both men and women should have morals. I told you not to touch me, right?

Rama: When it's all finalized to 'keep' you and I am going to take you with me to my village today or tomorrow, what's this 'loyalty' (paathivrathyam) that you are feigning towards some loafer?

Madhura: You have such cheap attitude towards prostitutes? Don't you think prostitutes should have morals? Until I call up my 'panthulu', and inform him that we have parted our ways, please consider me to be woman of another man. He might be of vedic culture or Christian culture, or he might have 'kept' the mess woman as his 'keep', but he fed me and took care of me all these days, right? You may be very romantic and may have stolen my heart, but I have to be loyal to him, right?

Rama: You are mouthing big words! That fellow has the wherewithal to keep the mess woman? It's the other way round – it's she who is taking care of him and feeding him :-)

Madhura: Please don't speak so unfairly. He is so well read, he is so famous! Today or tomorrow he will land a great job.

Rama: Hahaha! What a stupid belief! You are born wrongly as a prostitute. You keep calling him 'Girisam garu, Girisam garu'. Who do you think he is? He is my villager Lubdhavadhanlu's mother's sister's son, not some great guy. We used to call him

Girra. You think he will land a great job by just reading up some elementary stuff? God has written in his fate only one job. You know what it is? Being a servant in the mess woman's house.

Madhura: Shall I ask him the same thing?

Rama: Sure. If you want, tell him that I said these words.

Madhura: But why am I bothered about his personal traits? He is my master. I don't see his faults.

Rama: Then, when are you going to divorce him?

Madhura: If you give me right away the two hundred rupees that you promised to give me to clear the loans here, I will break up with him right away.

Rama: Fine, take this (takes out notes from pocket and gives her. As Madhuravani receives them, he grabs her. Madhuravani angrily pulls back her hand from him, throws down the notes and stands apart).

Madura: It's difficult to spend time with you. If you don't stand by your word, how can I believe you?

Rama: (picks up the notes) I am sorry. My fault. (gives the notes to her hand) Count them and see if the amount is right.

Madhura: If I don't believe you even that much, I wouldn't be coming with you at all. Though you are so romantic, you failed to sense my feelings, right? Keep your money with you. I am not that money-minded. (offers to give back the money)

Rama: No! No! Wanted to check out your true nature, nothing else. This Girisam fellow is a cheap local fellow and you are thinking very highly of him.

Madhura: If you speak ill of him in front of me, you can leave right now. (opens the door with one hand and shows the way out with the other). Oh there, Girisam garu himself is coming.

You say that to himself.

Rama: Are you joking?

Girisam: (standing at the door) My dear

Rama: (to himself) Oh no, this son of a donkey comes at a very wrong time. Would he beat me up?

What's the way out? Let's hide under the cot (crawls under it).

(Girisam enters.)

Girisam: Well, my dear empress (about to tap her on the shoulder.)

Madhura: (slips out) Don't touch me.

Girisam: (with shock) What is wrong with you?

Madhura: This is the last ugly manifestation ('aakharu vikaram')

Girisam: (to himself) How did she come to know that I am going to scoot from here? Looks like prostitutes have the devil of paranormal hearing under their control (to her) If you have become untouchable (due to periods), go take bath quickly and come back.

Madhu: What's the hurry? I will take head bath later.

Rama: (to himself) Shabash! What a moralistic woman! Weaved a clever plan so that this bugger can't touch her!

Girisam: We the English people don't have such 'untouchability' customs. Come here (goes close to her)

Madhu: (looking at the floor) Stay there. May be you follow Christianity. But I haven't become one yet, right? For the first time I heard some one say that word.

Rama: (to himself) Would she say I said that?

Girisam: You heard some one say that? Who? Who has the

guts to come here? And who has the guts to spread umours about me like that? And how come you have the guts to relay such non-sense to me? Come on!

Rama: (to himself) looks like he will beat up. Got trapped unknowingly.

Madhu: Why should men only tell? Didn't god give voice to women too?

Girisam: (to himself) looks like that bitch mess woman seems to have said it (aloud) A woman? Well, god gave voice to women and told them to live with its help. Why would any decent, respectful woman come to your house?

Madhu: If respectful men can come, why not respectful women? First please sit down. Later on you can get angry with me. Have a cigar. Match box is over there.

Girisam: Though you don't let me touch you, am I not fortunate to have you light up the cigar for me? Today I came with lot of enthu, but you punctured it.

Madhu: Why so much enthu?

Girisam: See, I have the appointment order from Hyderabad Nizam. Our nastham navab Sadaradalat Vasarallikhan Issahan Jung Bahadur sir recommended me for a 1000-rupee salaried musayib job. That means I will always be in the court of Badshah saab.

Rama: (to himself) What are these tall claims of his??

Girisam: Though I got such a good news, you don't let me come close? Would you come with me to Hyderabad?

Madhu: (shaking her head) Why me? Take that mess woman.

Girisam: (with shock) Would that mess woman create some dirty problems?

Madhu: You should know.

Girisam: Your stupidity makes me laugh. You believe anything that anyone says about me? You think I can't figure out who is telling you all these horrible lies about me? If needed, I will cross the seven oceans and grab by the neck and shoot holes all over him. If not, my name is not Girisam at all! Watch out!

Madhu: Not need to cross the seven oceans. That man will say it right in front of you again.

Rama: (to himself) God! Looks like this bitch will expose me! What to do??

Girisam: (to himself) Thank God! So, there is no impact by that mess woman. (Aloud) If such horrible words reach her ear, that chaste house-wife will feel very bad. And you will earn that sin. What a chaste woman she is!

Madhu: For the first time I am hearing a widow being described as a 'chaste woman loyal to her husband'.

Girisam: It ... no, no though she doesn't have husband, she can't be called a widow.

Madhu: Yeah, when you are there, how can she be a widow?

Girisam: Nonsense (let's regale her) Listen. The truth about her is this – when she was still in her cradle, they tried to tie her up with some old hag. Right on the marriage platform he kicked the bucket. So, they got into a major ethical debate as to whether he died before 'marrying' her or after. Some said he tied the 'thali' around her neck and some said he didn't. The girl's father filed a case against the heirs of the bridegroom. The priest took bribe from those heirs and gave witness that the bridegroom didn't tie the 'thali'. With that the case got dismissed. After that no one came forward to marry her.

Madhu: But then you don't have issue with that, do you?

Girisam: What is this strange talk? I am not able to get head or tail of it. Well, romance is getting into bitter experience! If you say anything for fun, it's pleasure for me. But if you say it seriously, then see what I will do. Tell who that joker who is shooting off his mouth like this.

Madhu: Rama

Rama: (to himself) God, she revealed my name!

Madhu: Rama! Rama! Why should anyone tell me, when the whole world is standing on rooftop and screaming? (from the street, one hears the urgent call 'open the door', 'open the door')

Girisam: (with shock) No, no, don't open the door. She is a crazy bitch. She eats people alive.

Madhu: The door is open.

Girisam: Then go bolt it!

Madhu: See, she is pushing herself in.

Girisam: Throw her out, throw her out.

Madhu: Going by her sensuous style of walking, it looks like it's your 'pathivratha'⁴

Girisam: Let's hide under the cot (hides under the cot)
(to himself) the clever bitch has hidden her patron her. I thought she is a good woman. Am tempted to catch her hair and give one kick, but this is not the time. Anyway, I am leaving, so why get into this rut? (whispers to Ramappantulu⁵ who is also hiding under the cot) Gentleman, who are you?

Rama: It's me Ramappanthulu, my boy.

Girisam: Oh, you? Why are you hiding under the cot for such a trivial reason? If you had asked me, I would have done

4 Woman loyal to her husband

5 Pantulu means brahmin

'kanyadanam'⁶ of twenty bitches like this one to you.

Rama: (to himself) God, I am saved (aloud) You are the one who 'kept' her? If I had known, I wouldn't have come here at all.

Girisam: Can't hear. Come closer. (Ramappantulu moves forward. Girisam moves away towards the wall.)

Girisam: Brother, don't ever trust this bitch. She can hide another twenty like this.

Rama: Boy, she snatched two hundred rupees from me.

Girisam: Have you made arrangements to say good-bye to that money?

Rama: That's it, you say?

Girisam: Then what?

(Madhuravani and the mess-woman⁷ with a hidden broom, would enter)

Madhu: Can't you understand when I say that the person you are looking for is not here?

Poota: When the people on the street say he entered your house, why will I believe what you say? How does it matter to me whether he is here or not? Just hand over the twenty rupees that he gave you.

Madhu: Ask whoever you gave it to.

Poota: If I find him, I will beat him up with this broom. Where did you hide him?

Madhu: Why do I have to hide him? I am not the wife of any

6 Giving a maiden in marriage to a groom

7 pootakoollamma

man, nor am I the widow of one. A man who visits my house comes in royally, in public view. (signals with her eye to say 'under the cot'.)

Poota: May be he is hiding under the cot (bends down and looks under the cot) Your reputation is anyway gone to dogs, come out now (reverses the broom and hits Ramappantulu.)

Rama: Oh, God! Why are you hitting me, you bitch? (comes out from under the cot and caresses his bruised back.)

Madhu: Why did you hit him? How can you come to my house and create a racket?

Poota: Then why did he hide under the cot?

Madhu: What's your problem? That's part of romance.

Poota: Here, the broom romance.

Rama: (again feeling his back) You are saved because you are a woman, otherwise I would have killed you. Why did you hit me instead of your 'bed' husband? Oh, that's why he pushed me to the front and he moved towards the wall.

Poota: That bugger is also there under the cot? Hey you dog, come out!

Girisam: Come under the cot. Will beat the madness out of you.

Poota: You think I am scared of you? Let me see how your bitch will stop me. (the mess woman 'Pootakoollamma' crawls under the cot from one end. From the other end, Girisam slips out, hits Ramappantulu on his head and runs towards the backyard.)

Rama: God, I am dying! (holding his head with both hands) Madhuravani, what is this atrocity? Send for the constable.

Madhu: Why do you want to lose your name and reputation in public? In a day or two, you yourself can take revenge on him.

(Madhuravani hugs him and kisses his head) What a shameful act! A real man should stand in front of you and fight you. So unmanly act his is! Don't worry. You will get a chance to deflate his ego.

Rama: When there is a constable salaried by the government, why should we take that trouble? If I don't make this joker go round and round the courts, my name is not Ramappantulu at all! Watch out.

Madhu: (kisses Ramappantulu) Keep quiet. (points under the cot and gestures to keep mouth shut) It's shame on that man who hit you and ran away like a coward. The shame is not yours.

Rama: But pain is whose? Why is that bitch not coming out from under the cot? Snatch her broom.

Poota: Am waiting, as I heard the slap. So much for your 'manliness'. (comes out from under the cot.)

(All exit)

Act 2

Location 1: House of Agnihothravadhanlu in Krishnarapuram agraharam

(Agnihothravadhanlu will be making sacred threads. Karataka Shastri will be getting non-existent lice extracted and crushed by his disciple. Venkamma will be cutting vegetables.)

Venkamma: The boy wrote letter that he got Christmas holidays since yesterday. I just can't wait to see him. Should be coming home any moment now.

Agnihothravadhanlu: Why this unwanted crying? I told you

not to admit him into English school. All the fertile farm land is being dissolved to pay his fees. He failed the exams last year, right? I don't know how well he has written the exams this year. I told you that this English school education wouldn't work out for us, but you didn't listen to me. My elder brother, after great struggle, sent his son to Parvathipuram for English education and within three days he was hit by an unknown fever and he died. The very thought of sending his son to English school gave a deadly fever to Buchchabbi.

Venkamma: You always keep talking extremely pessimistically. You are worried about money. Didn't Nemani's son, who till recently used to play marbles right in front of our eyes, get Munsif's job?

Agni: Our fellow wouldn't get educated, but in another four years, all our land will evaporate like camphor. After that, we have to hit the streets with a begging bowl. If he had quietly stayed at home, I would have taught him a thing or two. Despite my objections, you sent him to this English education school.

Venkamma: If our boy gets munsif or constable posting, he will be able to buy back all these agraharam lands. You are hesitating to spend just about a hundred rupees per year. You want him also spend his life making sacred threads like you? If it's too much of a burden, I will sell the land my parents gave me as part of my marriage and get him educated.

Karataka Shastri: Why should you sell your land? He has fattened himself feasting on our wealth. Let him spend.

Agni: How dare your bad-mouth me? If you say this again, I will not keep quiet.

(Girisam and Venkatesam enter.)

Venkamma: Oh my sweet boy! You have come! (hugs

Venkatesam.)

Agni: You idiot, did you pass at least this time? (Venkatesam gets shocked and stares.)

Girisam: He has passed, sir. First class. I worked hard to teach him and make him pass.

Agni: Who is this bugger?

Girisam: *Damn it! Tell man.*

Agni: Tree⁸? How dare he calls me tree? I will break his teeth!

Venkatesam: (trembling, looks at his mother) Ma, he is my teacher.

Karataka: If a gentleman visits our house, is this the way to talk to him, baava⁹? He talked to the boy in English and why do you feel guilty as if you committed some crime? (the cart fellow unloads the luggage.)

Girisam: (to Karataka Shastri) Agnihothravadhanlu is your brother-in-law, is it? You may not know me, but the deputy collector used to praise you a lot, you know.

Karata: Yeah, I remember seeing your face. The deputy collector is a very good man.

Girisam: He used to say that he hasn't come across anyone who has such a command over several languages, who could fluently speak Sanskrit and who is a great court comedian to boot. Who else other than him can appreciate poetry? He gives a whole ear for my poetry. He even got me appointment with the king.

Agni: (angrily) All these empty talks are of no use for me. Looks like he is planning to pitch tent here. No way he can be

8 'man' sounded like 'maanu' to him which means 'tree' in Telugu

9 Baava = sister's husband

given even a single meal here.

Venkamma: Don't bother about his words. His way of talking is rather odd. Courtesy you, if our boy learns at least little bit, we will forever be grateful to you.

Girisam: No problem, mother. Your boy begged me to come with him for holidays to teach him lessons. Otherwise, do you think I came here because I get poor food at the munsif's house in the town?

Venkamma: Because of these studies he is living away from home, going through such hardships. We miss him so much. We never hesitate to spend money on him. We gave birth him, but you are like his father and mother. It's all on you to take care of him and educate him.

Girisam: Do you need to give me such a long spiel to convince me? You can ask your boy about my character. I was selected by munsif and the deputy collector. It would be rather boastful if I talk about myself, but if you keep him under my tutelage for another three years, I will make him pass the police service exam.

Agni: Three years! How much would it cost for this year's books, my child?

Venka: Fifteen rupees.

Agni: I wouldn't give even a paise. Looks like these two are teaming up and gobbling up all that money. I learned vedas without spending a single paise on books. All this looks like some money-making business.

Karata: (with a smile) What you said is worth a million, baava!

Girisam: (To Karataka Shastri) *This is barbarous.* You see, how they are treating a gentleman. It's not right for me to be here. I will take leave.

Venkamma: Please! This is what I am always afraid of whenever someone visits our house. Please don't give credence to his words and go away. Please stay.

Karata: Agnihothradhanlu! You are hesitating so much just to get a bit of education for the boy. What did you do with the fifteen hundred rupees you got by selling Buchchamma?

Girisam: Selling girls! *Damn it!*

Agni: Every Tom Dick and Harry wants to lecture me. Is she a basket of vegetables to sell? If I had not taken that money, what would have been her fate, as her husband is dead now?

Karata: Is it his fault that he kicked the bucket? You tied up you daughter to a fellow who was about to kick the bucket anyway.

Girisam: Oh, you are Nulaka Agnihothradhanlu? In Rajamahendravaram my folks used to say there isn't anyone like you.

Agni: You are from Rajamahendravaram? Why didn't you say that first? Is Ramavadhanlu fine?

Girisam: He is fine. He is my maternal uncle.

Agni: Oh, really? Why didn't you mention it earlier?

Girisam: My uncle would always refer you whenever there is a discussion about this country's affairs.

Agni: We are close friends. You see, I am a bit short-tempered. Without knowing who you are, I said some inappropriate words. Don't give much importance to them.

Girisam: That's ok. Elders like you can chide youngsters like me and that's anyway part of our tradition, isn't it?

Karata: (to himself) After so long, we got some one who is a match to our Agnihothra.

Agni: What is your name, by the way?

Girisam: Girisam.

Agni: You see, Girisam garu¹⁰! Our Karataka Shastri is rather mixed-up. Doesn't know what is good and what is bad. Our son-in-law died but that has got us lot of benefits, you see? Didn't we file a suit for the land that she is eligible for? Please read me the order passed on the petition that I filed recently. (goes into the room, brings a paper and gives it to Girisam.)

Girisam: (looks at the paper) looks like some dim-wit clerk wrote it, can't even write properly.

Agni: Our vakil (lawyer) read it out fluently?

Girisam: You think I can't read? I can read better. For a scholar like me who gives lectures, this is nothing. I am just wondering about the brilliance of the fellow who wrote it. Do you want me to translate it as-is, in a lucid way?

Agni: That would be great! (to himself) without shelling out a paise, I will get all papers translated by him.

Girisam: If you have any more papers written in English, just dump them on me. I will translate all of them.

Agni: Alright.

Venkamma: Can you and our boy converse in English just once?

Girisam: Ok amma.

*My dear Venkatesam
Twinkle Twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are!*

Venka: *There is a white man in the tent.*

Girisam: *The boy stood on the burning deck.*

10 Garu/Gaaru is a suffix to denote respectful address

Whence all but he had fled.

Venka: *Upon the same base and on the same side of it the sides of a trapezium are equal to one another.*

Girisam: *Of man's first disobedience and the fruit of that mango tree, sing, Venkatesam, my very good boy.*

Venka: *Nouns ending in 'f' or 'fe' change their 'f' or 'fe' into 'ves'.*

Agni: What do these lines mean?

Girisam: We are discussing the sequence in which your boy should study during these holidays.

Karata: Recite a Telugu poem, my boy.

Venka: 'Pogachuttaku satimoniki...'¹¹

Karata: Well done!

Girisam: *Damn it!* Don't read that. (softly) read "Nala Damayanthi"

Venka: 'Naladamayanthuliddaru manah prabhavaanala dahyamaanulai salipiri deergha vaasara nishal'¹²

Karata: Ok, what is the meaning of 'manah prabhavanaalam'?

Venka: (stares at the ceiling and keep mum.)

Girisam: How will small children know the meaning of such tough poems?

Agni: Ok, why don't *you* tell the meaning of the poem?

Girisam: Nowadays, they just make the children mug up the Telugu poems in English schools. They

don't bother much about Telugu. All the time they keep harping on geography, arithmetic, algebra etc. and threaten the children into studying only those subjects.

11 It's about cigar

12 Original Telugu poem transliterated in English

Karata: (to himself) wonderful training. If we don't pack him off soon, we will be duped.

Agni: You will tell later?

Girisam: Of course. A student like your boy will not have even a minute of leisure time.

Agni: Yeah, studying should be like that. Not wasting time on playing marbles. He can learn anything if he doesn't waste his time.

Girisam: All these wasteful activities don't pass muster with me. Once he picks up the book, it should get stuck to his fingers. That's how I make him study.

Agni: If you do like that, our boy will pass all exams. For our boy, we even got a way to get him married without spending any money.

Venkamma: By nature you are hot-tempered, but don't you have affection for our child? When he got pox while at town, didn't you ask him take leave from school and come over? Can we shirk away from educating him and getting him married?

Karata: You will get your son married without spending any money? You thought it's like selling daughters? Unless you shell out at least fifteen hundred rupees, no body will give him a bride.

Agni: You see how I will get my son married without spending money. You know Lubdhavadhanlu in Ramachandrapuram agraharam?

Karata: No.

Agni: He is a lakhier. He came over to ask for our Subbi for eighteen hundred rupees. They will take care of expenses of both sides (bride and groom) and will perform the marriage on

a grand scale, they said. With that money, I will get our boy Venka married.

Karata: How old is the groom?

Agni: How does it matter? Forty five years.

Girisam: Lubdhavadhanlu is my mother's elder sister's son, sir. I will be glad to have a relationship with you. But he is past sixty years of age. Whatever the age, kanyashulkam, that is selling girls, *damn it!* It's not at all acceptable. Should not be done. When I was in Pune, I gave a non-stop lecture for four hours. If we sit down and discuss leisurely, I will convince you that it's not right.

Karata: Baava, if you accept this alliance, I will set your house on fire!

Agni: Every freeloader foists himself on my house like a bandicoot and gives me free advice. What non-sense? I have accepted the alliance. Now go jump wherever.

Venkamma: Without asking me?

Agni: Consulting women? Nonsense. If I don't get this alliance done, you will see my angriest form. (gets up and leaves.)

Karata: What mentality.

Venkamma: Annayya¹³! If he goes ahead with this alliance, I will jump into some well, for sure. We are already burdened with our elder daughter; she is like a burning stove on our chest. He has become elderly, but still thoughtlessly got this ill-fated alliance. If you want to see me alive and well, please get this alliance cancelled.

Karata: What an impossible job you have give me! He is pig-headed. As we oppose more and more, he becomes even more stubborn. On what basis can I give you any assurance?

13 Elder brother

Not able to get any ideas.

Girisam: Amma, why do you worry so much? When Lubdhavadhanlu is at leisure, I can sit down with him for an hour and convince him that it's brutal to take money and get a young girl married to an old man.

Venkamma: Please, I will fall at your feet. Would you please go and change your brother's mind? I will forever be indebted to you.

Girisam: Amma, what can I say? He is very stubborn. He jumps at the very opportunity of getting a girl. If he loses this alliance, he wouldn't get a girl. He wouldn't give up on his own.

Karata: Got an idea. Come with me (he, his disciple and Venkamma exit.)

Girisam: *My dear Shakespeare!* Your father is a volcano, I say. No one in your family knows the knack to bring him under control. You see what I will do today. Take out that lecture Sri Veeresalingam pantulu wrote. To lecture him, I need to sharpen my sword.

Venkatesam: Leave aside your lecture. I am glad that I got saved today, escaping my father's wrath. If you hadn't come, my father would have beaten me up and skinned me for having failed the exams.

Girisam: Escaping from such dangers is cleverness. If we encounter a difficulty, we should come up with a plan that can't be defeated/scuttled even by god. What do you think a politician is, then? Had our country been independent by now, I would have been a divan like Gladson. What, my dear fellow! Looks like your father is not going to give money for books. We got only half a bundle of cigars from town. What to do now?

Venka: If father doesn't give, I will ask mother and get money from her.

Girisam: You see how your brain is blossoming? If you get trained like this, you will also become a big politician.

(Buchchamma enters.)

Buchchamma: Brother, mother is asking you to go and wash your feet.

Girisam: (to himself) How beautiful! Quite unexpected.

Buchchamma: Sir, do you eat 'chaldi-pannam'¹⁴?

Girisam: Not the slightest objection. Please serve, I will come. In the morning itself, on the way I completed my morning sun salutation and chants.

(Buchchamma leaves.)

Girisam: Is this your sister? Looks like she is widowed.

Venka: Yes, she is my sister. She doesn't apply hair oil.

Girisam: So, leaving the hair not oiled means 'widow'. But that's all non-sense. I have been giving you lectures about widow marriages all these days, but you haven't told me about your sister? How come? There is an unfortunate beautiful young widow in your house itself! What a bad state! *My heart melts*. If I were the father, I would have conducted widow marriage and earned permanent fame. (to himself) What a beauty! Never seen such perfect beauty. I thought I would get bored in the village, but there is opportunity for a big *campaign* and it's my luck.

Venka: My father will get even me married.

Girisam: Today you narrowly missed one big marriage. If you escape without any beatings before the end of these holidays, you are good for something. Coming to real

14 A kind of rice pudding

marriage, after all this education, would you tie the 'thali' around the neck of some unknown girl selected by your father? If you don't marry a young, beautiful widow, *I should be ashamed!*

Act 2

Location 2: Temple

(The disciple's entry: sitting in the mantap in the flower garden.)

Disciple: If one picks up the books once in six months, old and new shlokas¹⁵ look alike. If I am asked to find a new shloka, is it possible for me? Only a fortune-teller can answer it. Or else, I will randomly open the book to some page and read the shloka on that page.

“mrugaah priyaaLudruma manjareeNaam”

Vaguely remember reading it before. Means deer running, right? What a great statement by the poet! Who cares whether deer are running or not? Dogs are also running; foxes are running; even cats are running. Not a single useful word in this book. Does Kalidas know adding up numbers and calculating interest? That's the greatness of the white people! Ask Girisam sir where any town is or where any hill is! Would answer then and there.

“priyaamukham kimpurushas chumba”

The idiot, instead of kissing her, caught her nose? So funny!

(Karataka Shastri enters from behind the disciple without being seen by him.)

“varNa prakarshe sathi karnikaaram |
dhumotirnim dhathayaasmacEtah” |

Feels like I read this also before. The poet doesn't like that flower, it seems. So what if he doesn't like the flower? My teacher doesn't like *dondakai koora*, but his wife cooks it

15 Sanskrit hymns/verses

everyday because she has it growing in her backyard. If this is the pathetic state of likes and dislikes of living people, who cares about the likes and dislikes of the dead? I will stop this education here and learn a few English words from Girisam sir. That Venkatesam is so arrogant that he knows a handful of English words.

Karata: What are you saying, my boy?

Disciple: My personal ramblings

Karata: Am I not your teacher? Can't you share with me?

Disciple: Why not? You have the patience to make me mug up mile-long Sanskrit and Hindustani verses and make me enact them in plays, but you don't have interest in teaching me a shloka at least once in a few days, do you? If you ask me to open the book once in six months when I come to this agraharam from town, and ask me to read, how will I learn Sanskrit?

Karata: You see from now onwards. I will teach you four shlokas every day. Read a new one.

Disciple: "Astruttarasyaam dishicdevataatma
Himaalayo vaamanagaadhiraajah" ||

Karata: Why did you come to the beginning?

Disciple: Both beginning and the ending look the same.

Karata: (laughs) Ok, leave it. We will read from the beginning itself.

Disciple: What is the benefit even if I read it? It's all a lie, it seems.

Karata: Who told you?

Disciple: Girisam sir

Karata: What did he say?

Disciple: Himalayam is a slave of two oceans. It's not like a ruler. Showed it to me on the map.

Karata: To hell with Himalayam. Close that book and listen to me.

Disciple: Yes, sir (closes the book.)

Karata: What is the purpose of studies? To earn a living, right?

Disciple: Yes.

Karata: Who needs your Sanskrit education?

Disciple: Only beggars.

Karata: Well said. You want to study English?

Disciple: Where is the patron, though?

Karata: I will teach you.

Disciple: really?

Karata: Yes, but under one condition.

Disciple: What is it, sir?

Karata: I got one big official task. You should execute it for me.

Disciple: Am I capable?

Karata: Only you can do it. No one else can. This is what it is – for ten days, you should become a girl.

Disciple: I left my dictionary in town.

Karata: That's not needed. If we comb your hair and wrap a saree around you, you will look like one 12-year old maiden. I will take you and get you married to Lubdhavadhanlu. Go around in their house cleverly for a couple of days, and then remove your cover-up dress, escape from there and come back here. For the real marriage date, we still have lot of time.

Disciple: This is nothing for me.

Karata: Don't under-estimate. If you overdo, they will become

suspicious. If you get caught, you will lose your head.

Disciple: You need not fear.

Karata: If you execute this successfully, I will give my daughter in marriage and keep you at home.

Disciple: Promise thus.

Karata: See, I am making the promise on this book.

Disciple: I lost faith in this book. Shall I ask Girisam sir and get one English book?

Karata: Earth promise!

Disciple: If you break your promise, what will earth do? It's okay, your word is enough for me.

Place 3: Street Opposite Agnihotravadhanlu's house

(Girisam and Venkatesam enter)

Venka: Did you give a lecture on kanyashulkam last night?

Girisam: Just a lecture? It was a blast. You father's history is Myravana's story. And your uncle Karataka Shastri looks like a scoundrel.

Venka: What happened? What happened?

Girisam: Listen. The whole day, he kept on bugging me to start the lecture at dinner time. He even promised to support me once I start the subject. But looking at your father's disposition, I couldn't get even a word out. By the time curd rice was served (the last course), I felt it's becoming too late, so gathered courage and started my lecture. Didn't even finish couple of introductory lines and a few English words slipped in. That's it. Your father flared up saying, "Our brahminism is getting ruined because of this English education. As if it's god's

language, you speak English even at meal time. All our sandhyavandanam and customs are gone". I hesitated a bit, thinking it's like throwing pearls a swine, and then looked at your Uncle. What do you think he was doing? He turned the other way and was laughing his head off! Forget the lecture, even the morsel I ate didn't go down. Tut! After such an insult, I thought it would be best to leave this place.

Venka: You are going to leave, is it?

Girisam: Not at all. Listen till the end. I pocketed your father.

Venka: You said you will lecture my father and get the marriage cancelled?

Girisam: Even God can't stop the marriage. Even if De Mastaneen and Surendranath Banerjee come and tell your father, he wouldn't cancel the marriage. Lectures are only in cities, but they are useless in villages. If I give lecture in a city like Pune, ten thousand people will come to listen. Come to the case of towns, even if beat drums all over, paste notices all over, waylay people and drag them along, I wouldn't get an audience of even fifty people. Village people are unfit for lectures. You remember what happened to that vehicle driver whom I lectured for two hours about national congress? He asked me when congress people will transfer his village head constable! No use of lectures in villages. I shouldn't even utter the word 'lecture' in front of your father.

Venka: Then how did you pocket him?

Girisam: That's the trick of politics, my boy! Listen to what happened after that. After shouting at me, he showed all that anger on curd rice and started stuffing himself. Your eldest sister came over, stood at the door frame and said, "Father, if you want to get my brother married, take my money, but don't destroy my younger sister's life by marrying her off to

Lubdhavadhanlu". That ticked him off so badly that he lost his cool, didn't even do the customary rites at the end of the meal, took his meal leaf and dumped it on her head!

When your uncle Karataka Shastri tried to stop me, he emptied the chembu¹⁶ of water on his head! He got angry, took his disciple and went off to his village.

Venka: So, you call this as pocketing my father?

Girisam: Patience! Listen till the end. I was happy that that scoundrel Karataka Shastri went off, but I started worrying about your sister. If I were her husband, I would have shot your father with a revolver then and there. Your mother started crying, sitting in a corner. So then I went, lit up the water-boiling wood oven, heated up the water and asked your sister to take bath. After that I thought I will go and sit on the platform in front of the house and relax with a cigar. But your father also came and sat off there and didn't even let me light up my cigar and, with all repentance for what happened, kept me awake the whole night with his chit-chat. All in all, I became friends with him.

Venka: How did you make friends with him??

Girisam: By striking him with a great political weapon.

Venka: What is that weapon?

Girisam: Saying whatever the other person says is all fine. That's the weapon of 'enchantment'¹⁷ isn't it?

Venka: Instead of lecturing my father into submission, you started nodding to his words?

Girisam: If you can't measure straight, you will at least get a few grains if you measure upside down. If you think deeply,

16 A curvy brass or bronze vessel with a narrow neck and slightly wider mouth, for keeping drinking water

17 Weapon of enchantment/mesmerism = 'sammohanaastram'

infant/child marriage itself is fine/okay/acceptable.

Venka: All these days you used to tell me it's wrong?

Girisam: One can't become a politician unless one keeps changing opinions now and then. Have you heard of the new argument that occurred to me? Young widows don't happen unless child marriages happen. Unless there are young widows, we don't have an opportunity for widow marriage reforms, right? While widow marriage is the highlight of civilization, if there are no child marriages, civilization will halt, right? It can't progress further. So, infant and child marriages should be done. This is a new *discovery*. Number two, I will argue that getting girl children married to old men is also good.

Venka: You mean to say getting Buchchi married to Lubdhavadhanlu is good? Mother is saying she will jump into the well if that happens, isn't she?

Girisam: They said, "*feminines are fools*". If that really happens, there will be many who will be elated. Jumping into well or pit is all non-sense. If your father gets a 20g gold ornament done for your mother, she will forget about jumping into wells. Leave that and listen to my argument.

Venka: What is that, sir?

Girisam: Is marriage auspicious or not? Is it good or bad? Tell me.

Venka: Of course it's good.

Girisam: *Very good!* If marriage is good, since they said "Adhikasya Adhikam phalam"¹⁸ if a young girl is married off to an old man and if that fellow dies, then if we get her married to another old man and he dies and so on, then she gets a thousand from one fellow, another thousand from

18 It means, the more the better and more result

another fellow and so on, fleecing *kanyashulkam* from each, and finally marries a clever fellow like me, wouldn't that be heady? We will then be fully happy - attaining happiness in this world as well as the other world. Understood?

Venka: You are saying even *kanyashulkam* is good?

Girisam: Then what? The English fellow said, '*never do by half measures*'. Do clean shave, but never Tirupati kshavaram.¹⁹

With this weapon, I got your father into my control. The English fellow said 'think'. Unless you think deeply, you will not get ideas. And if you think deeply, there are no marriages in this world with *kanyashulkam*. Do you know that?

Venka: How is that, sir?

Girisam: Ah, that's the way to ask. Is it *Kanyashulkam* only if money is received? If they demand and take gold and silver, isn't that equivalent of *kanyashulkam*? All these big pundits are doing like that, aren't they?

Venka: Yes.

Girisam: How about the English? What extravagance! They just empty their coffers altogether, splurging on clothes, jewels etc. and they extract quite a bit of properties in the name of marriage settlement. When I put forth this argument, your father was extremely happy. Now listen to the biggest justification for Lubdhavadhanlu's marriage.

Venka: What is that, sir?

Girisam: He is old and mad about gold. In an year or two, he will *kick the bucket*. With that, your sister will become a *rich widow*. After your grow up, get *widow marriage* done for her

¹⁹ 'In the south Indian pilgrim center of Tirupati, barbers are notorious for shaving one customer partly, leaving him and going to shave another customer's head, thus leaving the first one in a 'neither here nor there' state.

and earn long-lasting fame. What do you say?

Venka: Yes.

Girisam: Another great news. If this marriage happens, you and I will become related to each other.

Venka: I like that anyway.

Girisam: Last night, your father said he will get you educated upto High Court lawyer course. For our current needs, I broached the subject of purchasing books, but he said he will give money for books after returning from the marriage. Meanwhile, if I can't get some cigars, I will stop breathing, you see. Have you organized at least a few copper coins for cigars?

Venka: No. Since morning, my mom has been breathing fire. So, from the tobacco bundle that my father had kept to make snuff powder, I stole a small bundle and brought it.

Girisam: *That is politics!* Why didn't you tell me till now? Let's roll up some cigars and sit in this temple mantap and smoke them.

Venka: Is it ok to smoke inside temple?

Girisam: If you smoke a cigar, you should indeed smoke in temple. In front of this cigar smoke, the smoke of incense sticks and that of sambrani is nothing! Give me that tobacco bundle! (takes it and smells it) Aha! What tobacco, man! Really there is spark in country life. Best tobacco, best buffalo curd, best ghee! That's why poets rave about "country life".

Venka: Aren't you also a poet?

Girisam: Of course! I am also a poet, but unlike in foreign countries, we don't have beautiful Chevrolet cars and love-making here. There are enough grass girls but *very dirty smell!* There aren't any maidens in this country, my boy. Only widows available for love-making. No other go.

Venka: You said you will tell me the poetry you wrote on widows but still you haven't told.

Girisam: If I give it as soon as you ask, its value will go down. Well, it will take you another two years to understand its essence. But still, as a special case, I will teach it to you. Take out your notebook and write it down.

(Girisam starts smoking his cigar and in between puffs, he dictates pieces of it and Venkatesam write it down)

THE WIDOW

*She leaves her bed at A.M four.
And sweeps the dust from off the floor.
And heaps it all behind the door.
The widow!*

*Of wood, rous size she makes the cake,
And takes much pains to boil and bake,
And eats it all without mistake.
The Widow!*

*Through fasts and feasts she keeps her health,
And pie on pie, she stores by stealth,
Till all the town talk of her wealth.
The widow!*

*And now and then she takes a mate,
And lets the hair grow on her pate,
And cares a hang what people prate.
The widow!*

*I love the widow... however she be,
Married again..... or single free,
Bathing and praying,
Of frisking and praying,
A model of saintliness,
Or model of comeliness,
What were the earth,
But for her birth?
The widow!*

When I published it in *The reformer*, Tennyson read it and went wild with jealousy. (completes smoking his cigar) let's go home, it's getting very late.

(as they take a few steps, Agnihothradhanlu meets them.)

Agni: Sir – Hanumanlu garu – what's your name?

Girisam: They call me Girisam.

Agni: Girisam garu, as discussed last night, do you think we will win our case?

Girisam: If not, I will chop off my ear and leave from here. Our ancestors said, “Yatho dharmastho jayah”²⁰ and so justice is on your side. In the case of Buchchamma, we have a powerful judgement passed by Jabalpur high court to support us. Recently my elder uncle won a similar case.

Agni: What's making it impossible is that we had to file this case in Kakinada. I sent our Karataka Shastri and he got one useless lawyer to fight our case. He keeps asking for more

20 Where there is dharma, there is justice

money all the time, but doesn't give us any details about the case. Is it close by to keep visiting every day?

Girisam: If you order me, I will go by steamer to Kakinada and get the matter set right. My elder uncle is one of the best lawyers in Kakinada. He has never lost a case he has taken up.

Agni: If you go, it's same as me going there. Whatever the fee, we will give the case to your uncle. What do you say?

Girisam: How can I take fees from you? If you just take care of my travel expenses, I will get the case done without fees.

Agni: I know you will say that. After the case is won, let's give him a suitable gift.

Girisam: Either way it's fine sir.

(Buchchamma enters.)

Buchchamma: Father, mother is asking you to come for bath.

Agni: Okay (as Buchchamma leaves, Girisam gives her a side-long glance.)

After dinner, I will give you the papers. Go through them at leisure and thoroughly. The munsif took bribe and canceled the case we filed against our eastern neighbour Ramavadhanlu regarding the compound wall. We appealed to the higher court, but our vakil took bribe from the other party and ruined our case. If I have the support of someone like you, I can teach that fellow a good lesson. If the eastern wall is his, then the western wall should be ours, isn't it? You tell me what is just. See how he flared up on that case. He challenges me to raise a criminal case on it.

(Buchchamma enters again.)

Buchcha: Father, mother is asking you to take bath.

Agni: You stupid idiot! When I am discussing serious matters with important people, what is this butting in like this?

Girisam: We should certainly file criminal case. Shall we file it under Criminal Procedure code section 171 or 172?

Agni: Can't we file under both?

Girisam: Well, both are applicable. Anyway, since I have seen the walls, I can give a solid witness too. This wall clearly seems to be yours.

Agni: No doubt about that. I have been too lax about it all these days. Come and see the backyard wall too. I squeezed that fellow and won the case, but I had to sell off the land at Sirapuram for that. If we win the case against Ramavadhanlu, then I will not have any worry about that.

(All exit.)

Act 3

Location 1: The front room in Ramappantulu's house in Ramachandrapuram agraharam

(Madhuravani enters.)

Madhura: This Ramappantulu's story seems to be 'rosy and pinky outside, hollow inside'. It seems all his lands are mortgaged. Can't get loans anymore. Somehow dragging on through profiteering by creating rift between one resident and another. Should soon grab whatever money I can and vacate this village. (sings) got cheated unknowingly, got cheated unknowingly (Ramappantulu enters as she is singing.)

Rama: What is it about being 'cheated'? Sing the next line.

Madhura: What else? I trusted and got cheated.

Rama: Why are you saying that? I didn't cheat you, did I? As agreed, I gave you two hundred rupees when in town itself, didn't I? I gave you monthly salary before the month itself. So, where is cheating in this?

Madhura: What a strange talk? You are talking as if money is everything for me. Actually I don't care about money at all. If I had known that all your lands are mortgaged, would I have taken two hundred rupees from you? If you don't reduce your expenses and take care of your family, I wouldn't agree. What would bring me name and fame is the fact that you have taken care of your home 'keeping' so-and-so prostitute as your keep. This is our family custom, whether you believe it or not.

Rama: That my lands are all mortgaged is a white lie. I don't

know who told you that, but I am living like a king.

Madhura: Since you looked like a king to my eyes, I left home, put my honour and life in your hands and came along with you. Please don't cheat me. That would be sinful.

Rama: You think I am cheater?

Madhura: Then why did you arrange that marriage for Lubdhavadhanlu? You think I don't know? Why does that old man need marriage now? This is all for your own benefit.

Rama: Ha Ha! Is this what your suspicion is? As my beard is greying over a bit, would you call me also as 'old man'?

Madhura: Just as dark bark is grace and strength for trees, salt-and-pepper hair brings grace to men.

Rama: That's very clever of you! Give me a kiss (Ramappantulu attempts to kiss her.)

Madhura: (blocks with her hands and turns her face away) Isn't there appropriate time for everything? Unless you get Lubdhavadhanlu's marriage cancelled, I wouldn't let you kiss me.

Rama: Once everything is arranged and ready, how can I stop it? (tries to kiss her forcibly.)

Madhura: You are being crude and rough because you have the strength?

Rama: My strength is nothing now. You should have seen it when I was young – if I hit the main pillar, all the bells hanging at the top would ring! After I fell sick, I became very weak.

Madhura: You are weak? Look at my hand, how it's turned red! You are rough and crude!

Rama: Hm, for you even my current strength seems to be too much.

Madhura: If you don't stop this marriage, I will not talk to you.

Rama: It seems some fellow said, “marriage is fixed, tie the pounding stone around my head!” For the last two years, I have used all my wit to get that old hag ready for this marriage. How can I cancel it?

Madhura: What clever ploy did you employ?

Rama: That's the way to ask. Now you will get to know my clever ways. Lubdhavadhanlu is a very miserly fellow. Probably his parents predicted how his nature is going to be and they named him thus. I tempted him with the prediction that if he marries, he will get loads of money.

Madhura: How did you do such a miracle? If he marries, he will have to spend money, how can he get it?

Rama: That is worldly-wisdom, you see. Making the impossible possible and the possible impossible. What do you think our local sidhdhanthi²¹ did once I pumped him a bit? He seriously perused the horoscope of Lubdhavadhanlu and said very soon he has the prospects of getting married! He also said due to that marriage, he has the prospects of getting wealth. With that the old fellow got pulled in opposite directions – the hope that marriage will bring money, and the other that marriage will actually make him incur lot of expenses. By then the panda also arrived. I prepared him also. When we showed the old man's horoscope to the panda to get his doubts cleared, you know what he said? “You have both the prospects of marriage and wealth coming together. But you are old. Who will give you bride? How will you get married? When such impossible prospects come together in one's horoscope, instead of some great good, great harm would occur. That is, either you will die or you will suffer severe financial loss. Do rituals to cool down the planets and give

21 A kind of astrologer

a grand feast to brahmins. Even if you have any illness, that will all be cleared out. Find an auspicious day and start doing surya namaskarams²²". With that his chest puffed up and started making efforts for marriage. This is the story.

Madhura: What a fantastic fiction!

Rama: There is still more. How is the horoscope of the daughter of Agnihothradhanlu of Krishna Rayapuram? Awesome. Apparently the house she steps into (through marriage) would prosper ten-fold. And she has the Midas touch.

Madhura: is it true or is that also your fiction?

Rama: That one is not my creative story. Agnihothradhanlu himself has created false stories about the horoscope. This is quite usual among us brahmins. Not a single horoscope sent for alliance would be true.

Madhura: What cheating!

Rama: That is worldly-wisdom.

Madhura: What's the difference between the two, I wonder.

Rama: Cheating where one trusted is cheating, cheating where one is not trusted is worldly-wisdom.

Madhura: Why don't you say, if you do it's worldly wisdom but if someone else does it's cheating? What is the meaning of 'lie'?

Rama: What did you say? It's a lie? It's all god's creation – that being worldly wise is one's professional duty. And what kind of worldly profession is that? Telling a lie that appears like truth and attracts wealth. Forget it, you can't understand such intricacies.

Madhura: Yeah, how can I understand such intricacies? Just tell me how wealth is being attracted by this marriage?

Rama: (to himself) To hell with this woman, what cross-

examination? (aloud) I have decided mejuvani²³ with you and so you get some money, right? Isn't that attracting wealth?

Rama: What a strange man you are, panthulu garu! (hits him with a roll of betel leaves) You dreamed two years ago that I am going to come, and then you moved heaven and hell to

make this marriage happen? You want me to believe that? I understood how attracting wealth is done. You turn the bride to your side, take control of her and through her, suck all the money and wealth from the old man. Though I belong to the era of truth, I can imagine at least this much. Otherwise, why are you so adamant that you will not and can not get this marriage cancelled? I don't believe that anything is beyond your brains.

Rama: That's true, but do you think I do everything to make/attract money? I am doing this only to save that old man.

Madhura: "Strange, stranger and strangest" - thus goes the title of a story. Your deeds are all like that.

Rama: Please tell me that story. I love stories.

Madhura: Story-telling during day-time? First you tell me this strange story.

Rama: That's not for sharing. Won't tell.

Madhura: If you don't tell, I don't agree.

Rama: What will you do if you don't agree?

Madhura: You ask me what I will do? I will hit you with my plaited hair. This is the weapon mentioned in the scriptures to deal with lusty customers.

Rama: I am not afraid of being hit. Keep aside your scriptures and stop rough romance. If you insist I will tell you. But you shouldn't listen to such things. It's just that Lubdhavadhanlu's widowed daughter Meenakshi's behavior is not good. Once in

23 Feast and/or entertainment by prostitutes or temple servants (female)

a few days, she will do something that will create an emergency situation. Police fellows will threaten them and

keep extracting money from them. The old fellow would rather die than spend money. They say she is even ruining the family with her extravagant spending. If this marriage happens, her games will all end.

Madhura: You are passing judgement over Meenakshi's behavior? Well, once you cast your eyes on a woman, how can her behavior be good?

Rama: See, see! I know you will make such comments and that's why I refused to tell you.

Madhura: I don't know all these knotty problems. Get the marriage cancelled, that's all.

Rama: In this marriage, I will arrange for your mejuvani and get you some earnings. Just shut up and be quiet.

Madhura: (with her finger on her nose) I, doing mejuvani in front of Lubdhavadhanlu! Aaaanh!

Rama: it's in his name, but I am the head of the court there, am I not?

(head constable enters, smoking cigar, and sits on a chair.)

Head: Ramappantulu, you smooth-talked and cheated inspector himself, it seems?

Rama: (whispers in head constable's ear) address me with respect as 'garu'!

Head: I have always addressed you like that, why differently now? Non-sense!

Rama: How could you barge into a place where there are women?

Head: You are saying women! That means you are also one?

Ha ha ha!

Rama: This is no time for poking fun.

Head: I didn't come here for fun. Apparently, you used inspector's name and extracted twenty five rupees from Rami Naidu. 'We don't know how many people he fleeced like this; just grab him by his pig-tail, wherever he is, and drag him to the station', said the inspector and went off to Palem.

Rama: I and inspector studied in the same school. So, he can pull my pig-tail and I can do the same. But what you said about Rami Naidu is a white lie. You go ahead. I will arrange for a horse and come to the station.

Head: How can I come with you? I have lots of work. I will send the constable with you.

Rama: (in head constable's ear) In my own home, don't address me in the singular, please.

Head: That's what your problem is? Okay. (leaves.)

Rama: (to himself) Again singular, bad fellow! (aloud) Who's there²⁴?

Servant: At your service, sir.

Rama: Ask for the horse to be made ready.

Servant: Yes, sir. (leaves.)

Rama: Do you see, Madhuravani? Wherever I am, it rains money. When this inspector fellow came to this taluk, I got him five thousand rupees. That's my power. Now close the front door and practise music. Nothing like education. (crosses threshold, takes a few steps and comes back) You took out your veena already? Very good. There are lot of bad people in this village. They claim to be my friends or relatives. But don't let them in. Bolt the door.

24 This is a particular way of summoning one's servant

(exits.)

Location 2 – Bed room in Ramappantulu's house

(Madhuravani will be sitting on the carpet and playing veena. Completes that and)

Madhura: It's true that there is nothing like education. Except one thing – what is that? Money. Education that can't bring money is the cause of poverty. If sage Narada comes to this village and sings, people wouldn't give him even a paisa. So, let's keep this veena aside. Head constable made a gesture before leaving. He is not going to give anything, but in case of any emergency, he can come to our rescue.

(some one knocks the front door.)

Looks like he has come. (goes up to the door) Who is that? Relatives (outside the door, Karataka Shastri and his disciple in maiden's disguise are seen.)

Karata: Those who come to help in case of an emergency are the true relatives. We are not your relatives, but you could become our relatives.

Madhura: Are you borrowers?

Karata: (to himself) I think I heard this voice somewhere.
(aloud) Yes, I came to repay some loan.

Madhura: Repay with what?

Karata: (to himself) This is not the prostitute Madhuravani, is she? Can someone else have the same voice? (aloud) What other currency do we have to repay loan?

Madhura: What could that be?

Karata: What else? Gold!

Madhura: If you are neither relatives nor have you borrowed from our pantulu, you can come in. (opens door.)

Karata: (to himself) Oh, it is Madhuravani!

Madhura: (with a finger on her nose) Oh, what a surprise!

Karata: What is surprising?

Madhura: Your getup.

Karata: *Udara nimittam bahukruthavesham*, that is, to feed the stomach, one needs to put up different shows. Anyway this is god-given.

Madhura: You are trying to keep secrets from ME? Who is this girl?

Karata: My daughter.

Madhura: All your drama crashed and you resorted to day-time disguises? Anyway you are born rich. Why all this trouble?

Karata: Courtesy your kindness, nothing has happened to my god-given status. I came to see you.

Madhura: Grateful that finally you thought of seeing this poor woman.

Karata: Is there another person like you? Isn't it a great pleasure to see you? You think I didn't come to see you all these days because I didn't like to? After I came to know that deputy collector's son took you, I didn't dare come to see you, fearing that the father would chop my head off. I was praying all these for his transfer, so that I could come and see our Madhuravani. When did you come here?

Madhura: Within two months after the deputy collector sent off his son to Chennapatnam²⁵ for studies, he sent money through Girisam. Then till a couple of days ago, Girisam kept me, but it used to be a struggle for money. Fearing that the deputy collector would suspect that everyone who comes to my house would be his son's friend, anyone and everyone who has

25 Chennai/Madras

some decent reputation stopped coming to my house. I came to this village to be here till Sanjeeva Rao's mischief fades in memory.

Karata: (with his finger on his nose²⁶) Girisam has kept you? He has settled in our home, ostensibly to teach my nephew. We have to show him the door soon.

Madhura: Every fellow who comes to me is bad? Just now you accused the deputy collector of being the cause for your not being able to come and see me. How is your justification any better than his? Your wife should have thrown you out for having come to see me. One rule for yourself and another rule for others, is it?

Karata: Though it hasn't happened in deed, I have been receiving that respect in conversations, so far.

Madhura: (smiles) If this housewife is seen by our pantulu, her secret would come out in the open.

Karata: She is still a maiden, don't make her a lady yet! I brought her to you to arrange for her marriage.

Madhura: To our pantulu?

Karata: Once he has you, the most beautiful in all the three worlds, why will he think of marriage?

Madhura: Then marry her to who? To me? Then, yes! I will dress up like a man and sit on the marriage seat. How can I get such a wonderful wife like this? And isn't it a great privilege to be the son-in-law of the world-famous Karataka Shastri? You thought my shoulders would puff up if you praise that I am the most beautiful? In front of this girl, those like me are like fire flies in front of a torch. What a woman appreciates, is real beauty! Men's eyes are biased. So, give me my wife and beat it. (holds disciple's hand and pulls.)

26 A gesture to indicate disbelief

Disciple: Father, see how she is grabbing me?

Madhura: (bursts out laughing) Bravo! Is it the way of gentlemen? What will neighbours say if wife doesn't come if husband calls?

Disciple: Looks like she will hit me, father! Let's go home!

Madhura: What a show of innocence! I will marry you later, till then kiss me (kisses disciple)

Karata: You are spoiling an innocent girl.

Madhura: He can teach a hundred people like me and spoil them. Whose disciple is this fellow? This maiden's mouth is smelling of cigar.

Karata: Oh, maybe that's why cigars are frequently disappearing from my tin. Madhuravani! God has led me to you. Luckily I came when pantulu is not there. Before he comes back, please listen to my words and save us from the risk we got into.

Madhura: What problem have you got? Of what help could I be?

Karata: A problem like never before. Listen. In this village there is an old man called Lubdhavadhanlu, who is Girisam's elder maternal aunt's son. My brother-in-law has agreed to give him my niece in marriage. My sister took an oath that she will jump into the well and commit suicide if this marriage happens. Please come up with some idea and save her.

Madhura: If you sell this girl for less money, Lubdhavadhanlu will jump and marry. Why, even I will buy.

Karata: You are clever enough to take the cue and take off from there. Do I need to explain?

Madhura: What excuse can we give to cancel the marriage that is already fixed?

Karata: Is anything impossible for your brains? Is there anything that money can't achieve?

Madhura: Nothing may be impossible for the brain, but money can achieve anything. In this marriage, can our pantulu get some money?

Karata: if you agree for my alliance, I myself will give you twenty rupees.

Madhura: Let that be. On stage, any amount of humour will be okay, but if you make practical jokes in real life, have you thought of what its consequences could be?

Karata: What is your issue in this? And what is mine? I will wash off this disguise and go my way. My disciple will throw this saree at you and run away. Then you can wonder about it with the neighbouring women. Make a recommendation to your pantulu and think hard about making this happen.

Madhura: It's not possible for our pantulu alone.

Karata: Then tell me who else I should go and beg for help.

Madhura: After discussing with our pantulu, secretly meet my friend and Avadhanlu's daughter Meenakshi, without her father's knowledge, and tell her that you will give her coupe of gold coins. Later meet sidhdhanthi and lure him also similarly. Sidhdhanthi is the key to this plan. I will run the show from behind the scene, with my presence of mind.

Karata: How can I not obey your word? Pleasing you is my duty.

Madhura: I feel sad to hear that word from you. As I am a prostitute by profession, I do extract money where I need to, but that doesn't mean I am heartless. If your sister is in danger, how can I be money-minded? I will save you from any danger from any side. But let's tell part of the truth to the head constable. He is going to come soon. I will talk to him. You sit

there.

Karata: Is he our man? He won't set our house on fire, right?

Madhura: He is our slave. (exits)

Karata: Let's sit, come.

Disciple: What is my name, sir?

Karata: Looks like you are going to blow it up! Subbi! Subbi!
The moment you saw Madhuravani, you lost your mind or what?

Disciple: No, no, it's just that I am trying to get used to her smile.

Karata: If you remember 'sabbu'¹²⁷, you can remember Subbi.
(Ramappantulu gets off the horse at a distance and comes walking.)

Rama: (speaks to Karataka Shastri softly) Did anybody go in?

Karata: (loudly) Some two or three people came, but your wife didn't let them in.

Rama: Who are you? And why did you come?

Karata: I am from the banks of River Krishna. My name is Guntur Shastri. I got a serious business with you. So I am here.

Servant in the street: Inspector sir asked me to tie up the horse under the banyan tree till he comes. Please pay my dues quickly.

(Madhuravani enters.)

Rama: Who has come?

Madhura: Who else would come? Your *naastulu* it seems...he got himself hooked to you

Servant: Money, sir

Rama: (to Madhuravani) Where is the money I gave you the other day? I will return it in the evening. I have to first get rid of

this devil.

Madhura: I sent it off to the town. If I keep it here, how will my mother live there?

Rama: All lies!

Madhura: (takes out the key bunch from her waist and throws at Ramappantulu.) Check for yourself.

Rama: (caresses his shoulder feelingly) Not good to be arrogant! You thought it wouldn't hurt me if you throw them at me?

Madhura: If you speak ill of me, why can't I throw keys at you?

Servant: Listen! Shall I go and tell the inspector sir that you didn't pay?

Madhura: (takes off the gold chain from her neck) mortgage this and get the money you need.

Rama: (to himself) What a worthy person! Shouldn't suspect unnecessarily.

Karata: Pantulu garu! How much do you need to pay?

Rama: Twenty five

Karata: I will pay. (takes out that amount and gives it to servant)

Rama: Money keeps flowing in for those with a 'rich' horoscope. What is the business you came for?

Karata: This is my daughter, sir. You should get her married and get the honour of having done such a good deed.

Rama: To perform marriage ceremony, I am not a Vedic priest. I don't even know the *mantras* to recite. (takes out a cigar from his pocket) What do you say, Madhuravani? Match box.

Madhura: (hands out a match stick to him, angrily casts glances alternately at Ramappantulu and the disciple)

Karata: Sir, how does it matter who chants mantras, a vedic brahmin or anyone else? These days the mantras don't have

the power they used to have earlier. For worthy men like you, mantras will dance to your tunes.

Rama: Madhuram! What do you say? Shall I marry this girl myself?

Madhura: (gives strong, hot looks at Ramappantulu and the disciple, then exits.)

Rama: For beautiful women, even getting angry is part of romance, shastrulu garu!

Karata: How could vedic brahmins like me have such experiences? If our wives get angry, brooms fly. For us romance is limited to reading in books, never experienced. Only Lord Krishna can have such romantic escapades with Radhika – he tells her to crush him with her embrace and kiss him so hard that his lips start bleeding!

Rama: (stares at the door through which Madhuravani exited and says) Don't tell Madhuravani such stupid poems. Softies like me can't take rough romance.

Karata: Isn't she your wife? She is more dignified than a housewife. How lucky you are!

Rama: Choice. It's all in the choosing. What business do you have with me?

Karata: I heard you are very pal-ly with Lubdhavadhanlu. Apparently he wouldn't disobey your word?

Rama: Does that bastard have friendship with anyone at all? He has friendship only with money. But since he doesn't have practical knowledge about dealing with others, and since he is scared of courts, he can't survive without my advice.

Not just that fellow, any new civil magistrate anywhere in this taluk can't survive without Ramappantulu.

Karata: Sir, I came here precisely because of your reputation to be able to stop any disaster with your power. My aunt's son has passed B.A & B.L. He is working as deputy collector. He is

not only of no use to his relatives, but he has so arrogantly perched himself on a high pedestal that if we send any fruits/vegetables to his house, he wouldn't eat his meal until they are returned! Only you are worthy of giving and taking; jobs of ordinary mortals like me are worth no more than lumps of mud.

Rama: As this English education is becoming dominant, not just brahmins, but even low-caste fellows are able to get jobs. However educated you are, you vedic brahmins are very clever. Our worldly-wisdom is in-born, but yours is acquired. You people can't take bribes, but pretend that you are honest. Do you know that?

Karata: If we are capable, why will I be in this trouble? If our fellow tells ten parties, I will at least get some money and get out of this problem.

Rama: What exactly is your problem?

Karata: Got a huge loan problem. If, by the next full moon, I don't pay the fees for a case, I will lose the case altogether. So, I decided to give this girl in marriage to Venkata Deekshitulu of Nallabilli for sixteen hundred rupees. But when I went there, they said they don't have money and will be able to give a month after marriage. So, I gave it up and came to see you as I heard that Lubdhavadhanlu is looking for an alliance. If you can arrange this marriage, I will pay you ten gold coins²⁸. Please help.

Rama: I don't get into small business of just a few tens of rupees.

Karata: I will pay commensurate with your help, sir. My loan is around sixteen hundred rupees. Anything beyond that is yours, sir.

Rama: 'If, but' kind of business doesn't pass muster with me.

28 Rough equivalent of ten *varahaalu*

Since he has agreed for Agnihothravadhanlu's alliance for eighteen hundreds, unless you come down to half of it, that miser wouldn't agree for your alliance. With that how can you clear your loan and also pay me? Whatever it is, that transaction is over and too late now. If you had come ten days ago, I would have arranged it. I got all the details of that alliance. But Poli Setty snatched it from me. Even to get Madhuravani's dance performance arranged, it turned out to be a herculian task. Keep it aside. I will give you another idea. Do you have minor sons?

Karata: My younger one is three years past minority.

Rama: Then what's the problem? Let's argue that he is a minor.

Karata: How do we get witness, sir?

Rama: Oh, you seem to be very naive! I have handled more such dealings than the number of hair strands on my head! We got gazette order passed for witnesses that are on par with other commissions.

Karata: But I have the horoscope, What to do?

Rama: If it's paper, finish with a match stick! If it's on palm leaf, throw it into the wood oven. It's just a five-minute job to get a new horoscope done. I have plenty of unused palm leaves in my attick. Thirty-year old papers are there. Different kinds of inks are there. Pay me a fee of one hundred rupees and I will run the show.

Karata: I have already given you all the money I brought for my travel expenses. I don't have even a paise left, even to get my head shaved. Even to run around the courts, I need some money, right? But how can I run around the courts when I have this girl like a millstone around my neck? I can't believe that there is anything that is impossible for your brains to achieve. Please arrange this alliance and first take one tenth of

whatever I get out of this marriage towards your fees and kindly give me the rest. After I hand over this girl to the in-laws, I will be at your service till this affair is done with.

Rama: One-tenth is too low. Our deal is always 50-50.

Karata: If I give you half the amount, how will I clear the loans, sir?

Rama: Wouldn't I run the show with you having to bother about clearing the loans? You are talking as if you already got money in your hands. Do you realize what a difficult task I have to turn the tide in our favour?

Karata: If you speak like that, what can I say, sir? Isn't it right that I content myself with whatever I earn selling my blood and flesh? Due to the urgency and the fact that this girl is rather going out of hand, I am rushing this in a hurry. If I had some time, I could sell her for more than two thousand rupees, sir.

Rama: I already told you that there are no if's and but's, right? How about one-fifth?

Karata: Why are you desiring this sinful money, sir?

Rama: There is nothing like sinful money. Once it comes to me, it becomes sacred. It's for paying others, not for myself.

Karata: Then it's okay.

Rama: Now you watch my capabilities! Madhuram! Madhuram! Get me paper, pen and ink bottle. Not the usual ink bottle but the big one in the alcove.

Madhura: Once you laid your eyes on someone sweeter²⁹ than me, why do you need me?

Rama: Women are very suspicious. Heard that? That's some charm!

Karata: You got a true diamond!

Rama: Diamond no doubt, but since she is used to town life-

²⁹ *Madhuram* has several meanings in Sanskrit. One of them is 'sweet'.

style, she gets very bored unless she talks to ten people.

Karata: It's good to give at least that much freedom, sir. We shouldn't treat them like servants or slaves.

Rama: What will she do if we treat her like a servant?

Karata: If it's someone like her with self-esteem, she will jump into a well.

Rama: Is that so, sir?

Karata: Any doubts? A woman with sensitive heart should be treated and used like a jasmine flower.

Rama: How do you know?

Karata: Just bookish knowledge. If the hero refuses, heroine will hang herself with the vines in her garden. That's how it's written in the poems of great poets, sir.

Rama: Tell her firmly that she shouldn't talk to the head constable. It's okay if she talks to anyone else. You are like her father, aren't you?

Karata: Uh! Do I have such good fortune? If I had such a daughter, I would have sold her for four or five thousand rupees and cleared all my loans. If I had tried to sell in all possible places, even this girl would have fetched two or three thousand rupees. Since her mother stubbornly wanted to marry her to her nephew, I got into this trouble. That's why I came off with this girl, without telling anyone, hoping that I can get her married in this country of yours.

Rama: You will not find my help deficient.

Karata: Then it's as good as accomplished!

Rama: Come here and show me your hand, my girl.

(disciple pretends to be afraid and takes a step back.)

Karata: Show, my girl. No need to be afraid. (Karataka Shastri pushes the disciple towards Ramappantulu. He would look at the disciple's palm. Disciple pretends to pull back his hand. Madhuravani would carry paper, pen and ink

bottle and stand behind Ramappantulu.)

Rama: Aha! What a line of wealth! Prospects of having children is also very good.

Madhura: Once you hold a girl's hand³⁰, what can it be but good?

(throws the ink from the ink bottle on Ramappantulu's face and leaves in a huff.)

³⁰ The phrase *holding a girl's hand* has the meaning of accepting that girl as one's bride (marrying her)

Location 3 –
Agnihotravadhanlu's house in
Krishnarayapuram Agraharam

(Girisam stands in front of the main door and starts softly singing a romantic song)

“Not able to withstand the flower arrows of
Cupid

Oh my sweet heart, what do I do?”

What non-sense? Would any one believe these esoteric things? The truth is this – he sharpens the arrow to a fine point, tips it with a diamond, dips it in poison and shoots it at her with a special mantra. That's why no wounds would be outwardly visible, and like police lockup beatings, would hurt inside and stir up desires. But looking at this widow beauty, not able to think what to do. She doesn't look like someone who can be easily won over and taken. Old ideas are not being of any use. All my experience and romantic antics are being worthless. Never seen such simplicity before. She doesn't know any love signals – Rama Rama – at all. If I speak wittily, she just puts a blank face. *I am dreadfully in love with her.* After seeing her, town love affairs and dancing girls seem very loathsome. *Positively abhorrent* – their leud, double-meaning talks, cheating... damn it! Isn't it all insincerity? I fell into Madhuravani's spell and continued to be under that spell all these days! Can Madhuravani be compared with this girl at all? That is tinted glass piece. This is pure diamond! If any idiot disagrees, I will pull off his pig tail. We shouldn't spoil this opportunity. So, we should find a new path and new honest path. What is that? We should play some trick and elope with her from here. And then marry her, a widow, and become

famous and also get an enjoyable life. "Two birds in one shot!" If we marry a widow, we should marry a young, beautiful widow like this girl. What's the point in marrying a widow with two or three children, ready to elope with a muslim or other fellows? That would be hell! And marrying that mess woman can't be considered as widow marriage at all. That's bitch marriage! But this Buchchamma? She is a sacred widow with gilt letters! "*To marry a widow, or not to marry, that is the question!*" Same dilemma as Shakespeare found himself in! A clever fellow like me shouldn't do things in a hurry. Should weigh all the pros and cons and then decide. Let's see the credits and debits. Debit - If I marry a widow, my folks wouldn't care for me anymore. Credit - what care do they have for me now, anyway? So, balance is a big zero! Next account: debit – the world will boycott me. Credit – I will get hold of the most valuable thing in this world and I will boycott the world. So, what is the credit balance? Negative advantage, having nothing to do with a pauper world – positive advantage – possessing all its wealth! Next account – debit – people would say "this fellow's wife was/is a widow". Is this really debit account? We should consult the audit department and get the doubt cleared. Till then, the opinion of Sri Sri Girisam is this – what is 'widow'? It's just a name. If a widow is dressed up well, is there anyone in this world who can tell whether she is a widow or a pious lady (whose husband is alive)? None! So, is there something called widow? It's only in the mouths and minds of those who point fingers and poke fun. For this, the credit is this – no one will cast their eyes on her because widow marrying again is considered inauspicious. Then, pure credit without debit - Number four – Sri Girisam's fame will reach the sky! News of Sri Girisam's widow marriage will be splashed across all newspapers. Credit number five – widow

marriage association will give some remuneration. Buchchamma also has some money. Debit – unless I file a case, father-in-law Avadhanlu will not give even a paise out of it.

So, after weighing all pros and cons, we should marry this widow. But what is the way? Should build a bridge and reach the other shore. (looks up and thinks) Ever since I boldly ventured and pulled out and saved Venkamma from drowning in the well, the whole world is praising me as Truth personified³¹. Every now and then my mind is straying from that path of truth, but do I not measure up? Girisam sir would even give his life for friendship! So, even if we love Buchchamma, until it goes out of hand, nobody will find fault. At night, if I tell her Arabian Nights stories, Kashi majili stories and those of Madana Kamaraju, she will sit beside me and listen with interest. So now, I have pumped love stories into her head. It's time to talk about widow marriage and preach her that it's good. If the dice roll in our favour, let's go to Ramavaram and do widow marriage! *Let me begin the campaign at once.* (peeps through the key-hole) She is stitching leaf-plates in the verandah. First let's try some music. (croons some romantic song) Buchchamma vadina³² garu! Please open the door (Buchchamma opens the door) Vadina... well...! What is Venkatesam doing?

Buchchamma: He is playing marbles in the backyard.

Girisam: His education is getting spoiled once he comes to this village. In the down, I wouldn't let him move from his study desk. Once...will you please call him? I will teach him one lesson.

31 Compared to *Satya Harischandra*

32 Elder brother's wife or wife's elder sister

(Buchchamma goes to fetch her younger brother.)

Ah, what a problem! Once she is in front of me, I am starting to tremble. Instead of saying one thing, I am saying something else. Now I got her alone! So, would it be the best time to tell her what I have in my heart? But I asked to fetch that monkey. Let me lecture him a bit. (Buchchamma and Venkatesam enter.) What my *brother-in-law Venkatesam*, you stopped your studies altogether? If you stay here for a month, you will forget even what you have learned till now. Get your text books. (Venkatesam brings text book.) Get to the lesson titled 'God's works'. *Read on, my good boy.*

Venkatesam: (hesitantly) *There is not an object in creation which does not serve some useful purpose.*

Girisam: Stop there! What does *creation* mean?

Venkatesam: Creation means – means – cows.

Girisam: Non-sense! Whatever intelligence is there, is gone with education. Are you saying *cows* because they are in front of you now? Think again and answer.

Venkatesam: For which word did you ask the meaning, sir?

Girisam: *Creation.*

Venkatesam: Oh that one! Creation means world. When I saw the cows, I felt depressed that I would be able to eat curd from these cows' milk only for another month. That's why.

Girisam: *One thing at a time.* Now you think of the lesson. One can lecture for an hour about the word creation. How is the world? "Kasidhdhakaara bhoogola" said Manu in his scripture. What is 'kasidhdha'?

Venkatesam: Orange.

Girisam: *Very good.* Do you know the poem for it given in 'Amara nighantuvu³³¹'?

Venkatesam: Don't know. Tell me, I will write it down.

Girisam: (recites a poem that compares woman's breasts with oranges and apples and then) What objects are there in the world?

Venkatesam: cows

Girisam: *Damn non-sense!* Only cows all the time? Think well and answer – what else?

Venkatesam: Buffaloes.

Girisam: *That will not do.* Think again and answer.

Venkatesam: Then I don't know.

Girisam: *Widows* – you don't know the answer for such a simple question. The most important objects in the world are *widows*. One can give a big lecture about that. There is a bad custom in our country. A man can re-marry if his wife dies. But a woman can't re-marry if her husband dies, however young she is. Isn't it injustice?

Venkatesam: Certainly it's injustice.

Buchchamma: Girisam garu, isn't it sin for widows to re-marry?

Girisam: Aha! I feel sad about your ancient era thinking. It's stated in Parashara's scripture that widows must re-marry. It's stated in vedas also. In Rajamahendravaram, scholars have theorized all this. In ancient times, widows used to re-marry. Venkatesam, read out that poem in Nala-Damayanthi story wherein Damayanthi followed the custom of second marriage.

Venkatesam: I don't know that poem.

Girisam: What a grave mistake to forget such an important poem! Take out your notebook and write down - “All the kings in the world came running for Damayanthi's second wedding” - you see! Not only are all the scriptures agreeing that widow marriage is fine, but they are even stating that it's a crime if widows do not re-marry.

About this, even Shankaracharya published a journal.

Buchchamma: But then, why are all our people saying widows shouldn't re-marry?

Girisam: That's all for getting the domestic drudgery done by them. That's all, nothing else. They make them get up well before dawn and make them work till late in the night, don't they? They don't let them eat more than one meal a day, do they? Even if they are beautiful like heavenly girls, they don't let them wear good clothes, do they? No jewels either. They remove their beautiful long curly hair. They even remove their vermilion. (addressing Venkatesam) For example, if your sister has vermilion, even Lord Shiva would fall for her beauty, wouldn't he? Oh, my heart bleeds when I see her sad state.

Alright! What other objects are there in this world?

Venkatesam: Chegodeelu³⁴

Girisam: *Damn non-sense!* All the time you keep thinking of only food! *Bachelors*, unmarried men are also there. What are they supposed to do?

Venkatesam: Reading vedas, fetching grass for the cows.

Girisam: *Non-sense!* That's for those students studying under your father. The real duty of a bachelor is, as laid down, marrying widows. What else is there in *creation*?

Venkatesam: I don't know.

Girisam: In Ramavaram, there is a widow marriage institution wherein they give a monthly allowance of one hundred rupees to each widow who has re-married. So far, five thousand widows have re-married through that institution and become accepted. *Alright!* The word *creation* is discussed and done. Tell the meaning of the full sentence.

Venkatesam: If you tell once, I will repeat after you.

Girisam: *Alright!* God created every object in this world to serve a purpose. What is the purpose of 'chegodeelu'?

Venkatesam: To eat.

Girisam: *That's right.* Why did he create cows?

Venkatesam: To give milk?

Girisam: *Perfectly right!* Why did he create women?

34 A spicy small eat

Venkatesam: To cook.

Girisam: *Non-sense!* To marry and produce children. So, widows, by not marrying and producing children, are going against god's word and committing a sin.

(Agnihotravadhanlu enters.)

Agni: What Girisam garu, you are teaching my son?

Girisam: For the past one hour, sir.

Agni: Go ahead, let me also listen.

Girisam: *My dear boy, god made creation.* Who made creation?

Venkatesam: God.

Girisam: *Father is next to god.* Who is important after god? *Your father.*

Venkatesam: Father.

Agni: Overall, your English education seems to have content similar to our education, except that it's in a different language.

Girisam: In the world created by god, what objects are there? Say courts.

Venkatesam: Widows.

Girisam: Say courts.

Agni: What is this? You say there are widows in the world. Is this what is written in your English books?

Girisam: 'Vedhval'³⁵ is a Latin word, sir. It means 'courts'. (addressing Venkatesam) Why do we have courts?

Venkatesam: To file lawsuits.

Girisam: *That is correct* – You see sir, I am teaching your boy even about courts and lawsuits.

Agni: So, have you comprehensively studied the papers of our case?

Girisam: There is problem to win the case. Just for you to know, I am translating the entire set of case papers into Telugu. For your sake, I will go through any hardship, go to Amalapuram and win your case. Otherwise, don't call me by

35 Girisam distorts the Telugu word to escape Agnihotravadhanlu's ire

name.

Agni: I am trusting you fully in this case. Doesn't matter how much money is to be spent, but we should win the case. I can't take away my attention from the marriage related works, you see. That Karataka Shastri got angry with me and went off. Doesn't look like he will come back anytime soon.

Girisam: You need not get up from your seat. I will organize everything. Just watch.

(All exit.)

Location 3 – Backyard and Venkatesam sitting on the guava tree and eating guava

(Buchchamma will be drawing water from the well overhung by the branches of the guava tree.)

Buchchamma: Brother, is Girisam a great person?

Venkatesam: Not just some great person. He is as great as Surendranath Benarji.

Buchchamma: Who is that?

Venkatesam: He is greater than all.

Buchchamma: Then, how come Girisam sir doesn't have a job?

Venkatesam: *Non-sense!* You are a woman and you don't know anything. You are thinking that it's great to have a job. You know what it means to have a job? Being in a job is being a servant.

Buchchamma: Means what?

Venkatesam: Servant? It means naukar³⁶. For example, the fellow Asiri who tends our buffaloes is a servant. Anki who sweeps and swabs our house is a servant. These are servants. You think munsif, police constable and the white men's servants are all great because they are getting fat pay? Greats like Surendranath Benarji and Girisam wouldn't be servants under anyone, not even God. You know what the collector says? If a police fellow goes to see him, he asks him to stand! But if Girisam sir goes to see him, he offers a chair to sit. When the Hyderabad navab offered him a job with a salary of one thousand rupees, he just rejected it saying he doesn't need his job.

³⁶ Naukar in Telugu means servant.

Buchchamma: Is he married?

Venkatesam: No.

Buchchamma: Brother, he keeps saying widows should marry, but then why didn't he marry a widow so far?

Venkatesam: (to himself) You can't understand, how much ever I tell you. (aloud) Apparently he has postponed his marriage and haven't taken up a job, to repair this world. Do you understand now?

Buchchamma: How does he propose to repair the world?

Venkatesam: By teaching boys like me. (coolly) By teaching cigar-smoking (aloud) Driving all the prostitutes out of the country. Doing diwan³⁷ job is another one. Now you understand?

Buchchamma: You said he won't take up a job? Diwan under which king?

Venkatesam: Which king? - you are a woman. Why do you want all this information?

Buchchamma: You will also repair the world?

Venkatesam: Oh, yes!

Buchchamma: Then, you will also marry a widow?

Venkatesam: If father doesn't kick me, yes. But if they shave off her head, I don't want.

(Girisam enters.)

Girisam: Vadina, when you stand under this tree, you look like the goddess of the forest. (looks up straight at her.)

Buchchamma: You heard that? My younger brother will marry a widow, it seems.

Girisam: If your dear brother and my dear disciple Venkatesam marries a widow, wouldn't all of us put him up on a high pedestal?

Buchchamma: Being his teacher, why don't you first do that?

37 Minister of a navab or a king

Girisam: You asked the right question. Listen. I am answering this question because it would be wrong for me not to, after you asked me that question. Otherwise, I shouldn't be uttering these words. You see, I shouldn't be beating my own drums, right? That's one thing and there is another thing that's more dangerous. You see, vadina! - elders like uncle and aunty³⁸ who have, from the beginning, got the wrong opinion that widow marriage is sinful, wouldn't get it even if we explain all scriptures and reformations to them. If we even broach this subject with them, they will pick up the stick. Uncle studied only vedas but I have read all scriptures and scholarly works also. I am an expert on our scriptures. You know what the ancient scholars who wrote the scriptures said? "Listen to a good word even if it's said by a child". But are our elders following what is said in the scriptures? Not at all. If we point out what is said in the scriptures, what will they do? Take a stick and beat us. But don't worry about me. My body is tough like steel. If they hit me, the stick will break but nothing will happen to me. What about my dear student? Since your bodies are delicate, your bones will break. So, let's keep these discussions and viewpoints to ourselves. What do you say?

Buchchamma: Yes.

Girisam: Not enough if you just say yes. Unless you say that you will not tell these things to anyone, how can I share what I have in my heart?

Buchchamma: Ok, will not tell anyone.

Girisam: Promise?

Buchchamma: Promise what?

Girisam: That my head will blow up if you tell anyone.

Buchchamma: Aha! Not like that! May your head be safe. I will take an oath that if I tell any one, MY head will blow up.

Girisam: Will I agree to that? If anyone comes to cause you harm, will I not save you by putting my own life on the line?

38 Referring to Buchchamma's parents

Buchchamma: I know you are capable thus. Didn't you save my mother like that?

Girisam: Since you yourself said that, now listen. If I were married and had children, do you think I would have dared to jump into the well to pull out your mom? I decided to dedicate my life to serve the world and so remained a bachelor till now. True. If a well-wisher like you asks me to marry, it's difficult to reject that suggestion. But give me an honest answer to one question. Which is great – helping one or all?

Buchchamma: I think helping all.

Girisam: Ok, stick to that word. Isn't it better to serve all in the world than get married and serve just the wife and children? Wouldn't I go to heaven if I serve the world?

Buchchamma: How will you serve the world?

Girisam: That's the way to ask. *Social reform*. Let me explain it with a simili. If the world is going down the wrong path, correcting it and making the world go along the right path is social reform.

Buchchamma: What is that wrong path?

Girisam: The path of customs that our elders are currently following is like the path that is slushy, slippery and full of pot-holes. We have to divert the vehicle from that path onto a well-laid highway. That vehicle has two wheels. One is widow marriage and the other is eliminating prostitutes. These are the only two royal paths.

Buchchamma: I am not able to understand what our elders' bad customs are.

Girisam: Ok, then listen. One is marrying small girls to old men. Selling children for money. Do you agree or not?

Buchchamma: I do.

Girisam: If those old men kick the bucket, those innocent children become widows. Because of eating food that is tasty with salt and tamerind, once they attain youth, if they are not able to control their desires, is it their fault? Or is it the fault of

the stupid elders who propound that “widow marriage is wrong, widow marriage is wrong”, but then marry small children to old men for money? Why are you keeping quiet?

Buchchamma: I don't know.

Girisam: Yeah, what can you say? Good people like you would only curse their parents only within their heart but not say it aloud, will they? If I ask your father, “Uncle, when all the scriptures are propounding that you should marry your daughter to a young man who is handsome, has good character and is obedient, why do you want to marry her off to an old man, succumbing to your greed for money? When scriptures are dictating that widow marriage should be done, why are you not doing it?”, what will happen? I will be thrown out. So, I am keeping my mouth shut. Then the next question. Isn't it good to kill off prostitutes?

Buchchamma: You will kill them, is it?

Girisam: No need. Just as “No need to ask them to leave, if you smoke them”, if we don't invite them for marriages, not go to their houses, not keep them, scold those who do the above things wherever we see them, then after a while they will just disappear. Otherwise you see, for our Venkatesam's marriage, they will arrange song and dance by them. I know. Uncle will do everything that shouldn't be done/is not right. Wouldn't do what is right. Isn't bringing those prostitutes to Venkatesam's marriage asking for trouble? Those prostitute girls will be very attractive, so my dear student may dislike his young new wife and may go after those prostitutes and 'keep' them. That will spell the doom for his marriage. What do you say?

Buchchamma: Yes, that's true.

Girisam: So, to make widow marriages happen and to drive out prostitutes, I have taken this oath. So I am teaching these good ideals to many young boys like your brother. Since I am an expert, I pull out and save those that have fallen into wells. I also work at national congress, but unless I give a long spiel,

you wouldn't be able to understand what I do there. I am serving this world in many ways.

Buchchamma: Can't you do all these things even if you marry?

Girisam: How? You thought world means a small pit? The world is divided into five continents namely Asia, Europe, Africa, America and Australia. In America, people walk upside down. Now it's day-time here, right? It is night now in America. There is another country called *North Pole*. There it is day-time for six months at a stretch, with no night. Then it will be night for six months. Do you know how it will be there? The sea there is frozen into ice and people ride sleds drawn by reindeer. Only if I go to all these countries and help them, can I be said to be helping/serving the world, right? If I have wife and children, how can I leave them and go? But I can't brush aside your word that I should marry. Living for the world is noble. But if one gets a woman more valuable than the whole world, then one should certainly marry. Until I came to this village, I haven't come across such a beautifully sculpted woman. I can't say directly, but such a woman is there in this village. I am trying hard to divert my heart from her as she is beyond my reach, but I am not able to control my heart. Don't know what god will do! Those with experience said family is an ocean of sorrow and if you fall into that, you can't serve the world. That's what I am telling my heart to divert it from this marriage. You see, vadina! Let's say, just for argument sake, we marry. Then we need money to run the family. When I am a bachelor, I will eat wherever I get food and sleep wherever I could. But that's not possible after marriage, right? Suppose, we don't care about uncle's stupidity and run away to Ramavaram and get married there following traditional customs, we will get a monthly widow marriage allowance of hundred rupees. In a few months I will get a job. About a month ago, Hyderabad navab offered me a big job. I just

refused arrogantly, saying I will not work under someone. If I had known that you will advice me to get married, I wouldn't have let that job pass.

Buchchamma: But my brother says you wouldn't do any job?

Girisam: Yes, as long as I am a bachelor and serving the world, I said I wouldn't marry. But now if I get a woman as valuable as a pure diamond, how can I not marry? Suppose the value of the world is that of silver. If world is silver, a beauty with golden hue like you would be worth a statue of gold, wouldn't you agree? Is gold more valuable or silver?

Buchchamma: Gold.

Girisam: So, if I get a beautiful golden sculpture like you, I have to cast aside the world and marry, right? Just for discussion, let's say we get married. To run the family, we need a lot of money and we can't get lot of money without a job, right?

Buchchamma: Yes.

Girisam: You may ask why we need so much money. Let me explain. We need a house, right?

Buchchamma: Yes.

Girisam: I can't live in anything but a big, multi-storeyed house, a bungalow. I feel suffocated in such small houses as this. We should have a garden all around that bungalow – mango, guava, banana and so on. Our Venkatesam will always be on those trees like a monkey, eating fruits.

Venkatesam: I myself will pluck the fruits of all those trees.

Girisam: Of course you will. So, by the time we set up our home, we will have children. We need to take care of them, right? When I am sitting at the table and writing, they will come and pull my hand asking for this and that. And you will be dressed in full glory of our tradition and sitting there and what will the children do? Come and hug you from either side and ask you for this and that. We need to make things for them, get nice silk clothes stitched. At one point in time, navab will

ask me to bring my children and show them to him. We can't send our children dressed up like Venkatesam, right? Then we need to get them into a good school and get them educated. These are all family obligations, right? If I get trapped in this, how can I do social service? Oh, forgot to tell you – our Venkatesam will stay with us and continue his studies.

Buchchamma: Then mother and father need not incur any expenses for his studies. They will not fight about his studies.

Girisam: That's right.

Venkatesam: I want a small horse cart.

Girisam: Why a separate vehicle for you? You can share our children's horse cart itself, looking after them and making sure they don't fall out of the cart.

Venkatesam: You are going to marry sister or what?

Girisam: I said that just for discussion sake. Are you out of your mind?

Buchchamma: That is all, isn't it?

Girisam: if you say that, how am I going to have my luck? If you or I propose this, your parents will kick us out. If Venkatesam as much as suggests that, he will be belted solid.

Venkatesam: Oh god! (caresses his back) I wouldn't utter a word about that topic!

Buchchamma: Our family friend Rambhotlu's Achchamma is ready to marry you if you agree.

Girisam: If I really decide to marry, why will I marry some Achchamma or Pichchamma? Only if a beautiful, virtuous woman like you asks me to marry, I will marry her. I don't want or need any Achchamma or Pichchamma – they will be millstone around my neck and I will lose my bachelorhood and will have to give up my social service also.

Venkatesam: A good fruit fell down. Please take it.

Girisam: (picks up the fallen guava fruit) Aha, what a wonderful colour! Vadina, it's of same hue as you. Please take it.

Buchchamma: Put it in the pot. Brother, come down and lift this pot for me.

Girisam: No need for him. I will lift it for you. (lifts) Aha! How sensuous! (Buchchamma leaves.)

My dear student, throw down couple of fruits.

Venkatesam: Father is coming, from the other side! What's the way out?

Girisam: Hide behind a bunch of thick leaves. I will start drawing water.

(Agnihotravadhanlu enters.)

Agni: Girisam sir, why are you drawing water? That Asiri fellow will come and do it. An English-educated gentleman like you shouldn't do such hard work.

Girisam: There is nothing greater than work in the world, sir. I feel bored if I don't do any work and sit idly. Watering the plants is good for them and it's good exercise for me too. The British ladies sit in their backyard and stitch clothes to give to the poor. The English don't like laziness. Shakespeare, one of their greatest poets, propounded, "Dignity of labour". That means, collector is not great, judge is not great. The one who does hard labour is great. That's why these English gentlemen do gardening to get appreciated. But, uncle³⁹, they don't do any work that is not profitable. They will be going from one village to another. On the way, they feel thirsty. There will be nice fruits on the road-side trees. If they don't know how to climb a tree, they have to die of thirst, right? So, they learn how to climb a tree. When he is inspecting agency area, suddenly a big tiger may cross his path. So, he will quickly climb a tree and save himself. So, along with studies, they learn climbing trees

39 Here, what Girisam actually means is father-in-law (mama garu in Telugu), very cleverly pushing his case and trying to form relationship with this family, as he is eyeing the young beautiful widow Buchchamma.

also.

Agni: The English men's training is all weird. Is Venkatesam writing or reading?

Girisam: Till now I taught him and just now I told him to go play, climbing trees.

Agni: Are you out of your mind? What if he breaks his hands or legs?

Girisam: If tomorrow he gets the post of Gunapuram tahsildar and when he is inspecting the forest and suddenly if a tiger comes his way, you want him to die because he couldn't climb a tree?

Agni: Would my boy really get tahsildar posting?

Girisam: Why not? If our boy doesn't learn mounting horses and climbing trees, the English lords would say, "You are only fit for desk work, don't dream of tahsildar post".

Agni: Okay, then. Let him climb small trees but not big trees.

Girisam: That's why I asked him to climb guava tree, you see, sir?

Agni: (To Venkatesam) You, monkey!

Girisam: You see, you are scolding him. If you want him to study English education, their way of training is inevitable. If you scold him like this, he will get scared and fall down. If you don't like him doing such things, take him out of English education and teach him vedas.

Agni: I forgot that and scolded him. Sorry. These English men's way is very weird.

Girisam: I am surprised to hear learned people like you say that. Because of their good behavior, god has given them this wealthy empire. We forgot our own scriptures. But these white stole all that and by doing things as specified in *our* scriptures, they have conquered our kingdom. You are well-read and you are knowledgeable, so you tell me, what were disciples doing while at the teachers/gurus learning centers? Go to the forests and get dry twigs. Now, what are you, who is so

knowledgeable, saying? If my son goes out, he will get sunburns. If he climbs guava tree, he will fall and break his legs. Your own disciples are climbing the gigantic banyan tree and getting the leaves, right? The white men are cracking the secrets of our scriptures and benefiting from it. We are letting our own scriptures gather dust and we are ruining ourselves.

Agni: You know a lot of things. All the things that these white men are putting to use here are actually from our scriptures. Apparently all these railways and such are already given in our vedas, it seems. You have a sharp mind. The supporting explanations you wrote for our case are very good.

Girisam: Could have been better. Some papers of the record are missing; either the lawyer held them back or you threw them away, I am not able to understand.

Agni: I didn't throw them away. Me not knowing English is becoming very problematic.

Girisam: Had you known English, would you not have become like Bhashyam Iyengar? I will water these plants and then search for the missing papers. Please go ahead.

Agni: How well you take care of and do family chores! If my boy also becomes worthy like you, then I don't need anyone else. (To Venkatesam) When you get down, be careful. They said, "think of any harm first and then good." (leaves.)

Venkatesam: Father had gone into the house.

Girisam: Now get down at leisure.

Venka: (jumps down) You saved me (tries to go away)

Girisam: Wait, wait. Give me those fruits hidden in your clothes.

Venka: You want to take away all? That's injustice!

Girisam: As they say, with one injustice, all sins will be washed away. Are you going to eat all of them? No, right? If you do, you will get *stomack ache*. If you get stomach ache, your mother will pry open your mouth and pour a bottle of castor oil straight into your throat.

Venka: I don't drink castor oil.

Girisam: Then you don't eat all of them (leaves the bucket and rope and takes the fruits from Venkatesam and starts counting them.)

Venka: (puts a sad face) you are snatching away all the big ones!

Girisam: Big fruits for elders, small ones for small children. All this while you were biting fruits like parrot on the tree, isn't that enough? (takes four big fruits and pats Venkatesam on the back) *My dear brother-in-law*, Now you can climb trees as you wish. English fellow said we should study *nature*. When you climb the guava tree, study the differences between ripe and raw ones and pluck only the ripe ones. From that, give four fruits as gurudakshina⁴⁰. Otherwise your stomach will bloat. *Run along!* (Venkatesam leaps and runs away.) Looks like the dice are rolling my way. How wonderful!

(recites/hums some poem and exits.)

40 fees to the teacher

Act 4

Location 1: Portico of Ramappantulu's house

(Ramappantulu will be sitting in his chair and Madhuravani will be rolling betel leaves and giving to him)

Rama: If I had studied English in my childhood, now I would have been thundering my cases in front of judges. In my horoscope, Brihaspati is there in the position of 'gift of gab'. That's why even though I don't know English, my life is bright.

Madhura: When a dog that learnt to speak was sent for hunting, it talked back to the hunter, it seems.

Rama: You are comparing me to a dog?

Madhura: I said that just in jest. Why are you taking it seriously? If not with you, do you expect me to speak in jest with the villagers?

Rama: If you have fun with all the people in the village, wouldn't I come to know?

Madhura: That's why whether to call as dog or pig or something else, you are the only one to call thus. I have the right to call you whatever I like. And is there any need for you to tell me about your clever talk? Didn't I fall into your trap because of falling for your glib talk?

Rama: If I knew English, wouldn't the English women be after me?

Madhura: Aren't we Telugu women enough for your looks? That reminds me. When Girisam sir speaks, it would be exactly like the English men speak, it seems.

Rama: What do you know? He is a bogus fellow. If someone speaks like the way he speaks in court, he will be beaten with

chappals.

Madhura: Only you should know all that. By the way, Girisam is Lubdhavadhanlu's younger cousin brother it seems. Why didn't you tell me?

Rama: Why is your heart being drawn towards that fellow? Why is it your business whether it's true or not?

Madhura: Thoughtless talk, thoughtless talk...

Rama: You mean I am brainless?

Madhura: Why you? I am referring to myself.

Rama: Why?

Madhura: Because that's what is written on my forehead.

Rama: What is written?

Madhura: Worry.

Rama: Why worry?

Madhura: If he is Lubdhavadhanlu's brother, he will come for the marriage. And he might pick a fight with you and raise his hand on you. That's my worry.

Rama: Good you reminded me. Lubdhavadhanlu wouldn't invite any relatives so as to save on expenses.

Madhura: Girisam sir will come even if he is not invited.

Rama: Did you ask him to come, by any chance?

Madhura: You may not have morals, but do you think I don't?

Rama: But then how did you know he will come?

Madhura: it seems he got himself into the job of teaching the bride's brother and he is doing all the preparations for the marriage. So, I think he will certainly come.

Rama: What to do then??

Madhura: You are asking me for ideas?

Rama: What if the marriage gets derailed?

Madhura: How?

Rama: Let me tell you one technique by which the marriage could go bust.

Madhura: Oh, then you kept up your word to Madhuram?

Rama: If not, what would be the fate of Ramappa?

Madhura: That deserves a kiss (gives him a kiss.)

Rama: But Madhuram, let's be pessimistic and expect the worse. What if he really comes? What to do?

Madhura: You are asking me, a woman?

Rama: Woman's brain is sharp. If it's court affairs, I can counter any strategy with mine and win over cases. But when it comes to physical combat, my hands and legs would freeze.

Madhura: For the four days of the marriage, lock yourself up in the house.

Rama: Didn't I say women have sharp brains? You have given me a very good idea.

Madhura: But another fear is gripping me now. What if, at night, he locks you up from outside and sets the house on fire?

Rama: We are dead! Yes, he is capable of that. What to do now?

Madhura: If I show you the way out, what is the prize?

Rama: I would say, "You are the goddess personified who saved my life".

Madhura: (with a finger on her nose) No, no. It's wrong to say such things.

Rama: If you give me a good suggestion, I will give you some money.

Madhura: Did I ask for money? I just asked for praise/appreciation. How could saving you, which is as good as saving myself, be considered helping someone else?

Rama: Even if I give the money with appreciation?

Madhura: Isn't it wrong? Just because I am a prostitute, do you think I don't have compassion?

Rama: Okay, okay, it's my fault. Agreed. Now tell me.

Madhura: For cooking the marriage feast, get that mess

woman.

Rama: What an idea! Let me kiss you (tries to kiss her but stops) But if that Girisam fellow sees her, he will probably kick me and that woman together.

Madhura: You need not fear that. The moment he sees that woman, he will run. She has a bad mouth.

Rama: Yeah, not just her mouth, hand too. Anyway what do you know about her hand. In any case you have given a very good idea. Let me give you a kiss (kisses her.)

(as he is kissing her, Lubdhavadhanlu enters with a paper in hand.)

Lubdha: What is this indecent behaviour in public!

Rama: (is stung and looks back) Uncle, please pardon us youngsters! Anyway, who can question me even if i kiss 'my' Madhuravani' on the street?

Madhura: Why don't you climb on top of a garbage pile and kiss? There should be a limit to indecency too. Respects to baava garu⁴¹. Please come. (brings a chair)

Rama: If he is father-in-law for me, how come he is elder brother-in-law for you?

Madhura: For our community, all are baava's. How come he is father-in-law for you? (to Lubdhavadhanlu) Why don't you please sit? For some reason, baava garu seems to be angry. After marriage, let me see if you will kiss sister behind closed door. By the way, your son-in-law hasn't grown out of his childishness.

Rama: When I am a free-bird, how else would I be? Uncle, are you angry?

Lubdha: I don't want marriage or any such crap.

Rama: (whisper's in Madhuravani's ear) You see, my strategy is

41 She is addressing Lubdhavadhanlu as if he is her husband's elder brother or her maternal uncle's son

already working (loudly, addressing Lubdhavadhanlu) Uh, oh, why do you say that? Once it's fixed, what is the point in you complaining?

Lubdha: What is your loss? I am not cribbing. I don't want this marriage. That's all.

Madhura: (in Ramappantulu's ear) What's that letter?

Rama: (in Madhuravani's ear) I wrote a fake letter in the name of Agnihothravadhanlu.

Madhura: (in Ramappantulu's ear) What did you write?

Rama: (in Madhuravani's ear) That we don't want your alliance because you are an old man.

Madhura: Okay, I will reveal it.

Rama: (in Madhuravani's ear) Are you out of your mind? Because you begged me to get this marriage cancelled, I came up this plan. Shut up and be quiet.

Madhura: (in Lubdhavadhanlu's ear) Pantulu garu is trying to saddle you with this marriage. Don't agree.

Rama: (to Madhuravani) What is this non-sense! (to Lubdhavadhanlu) Elders said, "Stree budhdhih praLayaantakh⁴²". Don't believe her words. No one can beat her in fabricating things.

Lubdha: (vigorously shaking the letter in his hand) This is all your conspiracy.

Rama: (gives a sharp look to Madhuravani, then says to Lubdhavadhanlu) You may be angry but you should not resort to addressing me in singular .

Lubdha: This is all your creation. Read this.

Rama: (doesn't take the letter, pulls back the chair) What do I know about that letter?

Lubdha: You are the one who did it. If not you, who else will

42 That means that woman's mind and its ways lead to disasters

know?

Rama: See, again you are addressing me in singular. Are you being aggressive with me because I am speaking softly? If you again say I created this letter, it will lead to dire consequences.

What do you think of Ramappantulu's power?

Lubdha: You -

Rama: Again.

Lubdha: Whether it's your creation or some one else's, it's my mistake. Why should I bother about the mediator idiots. I will go and directly ask Agnihothravadhanlu himself.

Rama: Words are coming very thick and fast. Watch out!
(Lubdhavadhanlu leaves.) Is he calling me an idiot?

Madhura: You are desiring to add me also to that?

Rama: So, you have considered only me an idiot, is it?

Madhura: When I am around, how will you be an idiot?

Rama: You made me an idiot. What more are you planning for me?

Madhura: Such awful words!

Rama: Why did you tell that idiot that I faked that letter?

Madhura: Promise, I didn't tell him.

Rama: Then, how did he know?

Madhura: Why are you so anxious?

Rama: Now, if that fellow goes and shows it to Agnihothravadhanlu, he will immediately file a forgery case against me, would he not? What's the way out now?

Madhura: Plan backfired? Okay, then I will turn the wheel around (hurriedly goes out to the street)

Rama: Where is she running away? She gave away the secret. Shouldn't tell others if we do something by stealth. What to do now? Run and grab the letter from that fellow's hand? What if that donkey bites me? Will go and fall at Meenakshi's feet.

(Madhuravani enters, with the letter in one hand and with the other hand leading Lubdhavadhanlu in.)

Madhura: (To Ramappantulu) Enough of your worthy deeds. He thought you were his trustworthy friend and came to ask you for advice. Instead, you took off on a tangent about singular and plural and such non-sense. Baava garu, please sit in the chair (makes him sit in the chair) (to Ramappantulu) Read this letter at leisure and figure out for yourself what it is. (gives the letter to Ramappantulu.)

Rama: (takes the letter and tells himself) Saved! (looks at the letter) What? It's not my letter at all! Got scared looking at my own shadow. (aloud) Uncle, If you start off with scoldings as you come in, anyone will get a bit angry. If you calmly, and with respect, ask me, wouldn't I do whatever help you want?

Lubdha: Then you write to him not to ask for a grand ceremony. If he wants, tell him he has to bear the expenses.

Madhura: (unties Lubdhavadhanlu's pig-tail, dusts it, and) What dust! Because there is no one to care for. (brings scented hair oil and comb from the alcove and starts oiling and combing his hair.)

Rama: (turns the letter and reads the end) "servant and younger brother Girisam" - this fellow?

Madhura: Read it aloud.

Rama: Oh, I should read it aloud the moment I say it's 'your' Girisam?

Madhura: Ok, then read it for yourself and enjoy.

Lubdha: Why did you say "your Girisam"?

Rama: That's a different story.

Lubdha: Ok, read ahead.

Rama: (reads)

"Your servant and younger brother Girisam, writes with a hundred salutations. Having heard that you have decided to

get married, at least in this old age, I became very very happy.”

Lubdha: Idiot, says I am old? Didn't I turn fifty just the other day.

Madhura: (keeps away the comb, ties up his hair) you look old because there is nobody to look after you. Otherwise, who can say you are old?

Rama: (reads on) “Your woud-be wife is my dear student Venkatesam's sister and so I am very glad about it. I am staying in Agnihothravadhanlu's house and getting all the marriage preparations done. He is treating me as his own son. He is very good and kind, but just as the moon has a blemish, he is a bit short-tempered and a bit greedy about money.

(to himself) fellow is showing off his linguistic prowess!

“When he gets angry, it's advisale to be out of his sight, to save one's bones. Otherwise it's okay. When I say 'greed for money', actually it doesn't apply to him nor you. Some mischief monger of your village had circulated a rumour that you are very wealthy, that you will do the marriage on a grand scale. So, they are planning to get all the villagers in fifty carts and come over there to attend the marriage. In addition, they intend to request the Divan and get an elephant, three camels and seven horses. Also a gold-plated palanquin. I would be very happy to see you go around in that palanquin as part of the marriage procession. But well-wishers like me are being concerned that this is all wasteful expenditure. “Ox's wound is crow's feast. What does Ramappantulu lose in all this?”

Scoundrel! Why is he raising my name?

“There is a great secret in this. This Ramappantulu is a jackal in solving knotty problems. And a big ass when it comes to brains.”

How dare! I am going to file a defamation suit against him right away!

(Madhuravani couldn't control her laughter and bursts out laughing.)

Madhura: (after her laughter subsides) No, no! Promise!

Rama: What promise? You will be glad if I die, is it?

Madhura: (puts a finger on her nose, goes near Ramappantulu and hugs his head and kisses his head) What a bad word to say?

Rama: Then why are you laughing?

Madhura: loti-loti-loti-..

Rama: What is that 'loti'?

Madhura: 'lottipitta' – camel.

Rama: Yeah, camel. So?

Madhura: (controls herself) Why?

Rama: How do I know?

Madhura: Going by the letter, looks like you asked for it?

Rama: For me? For what?

Madhura: (again bursts out laughing) To mount it and go around in the marriage procession.

Rama: Me? Climbing it?

Madhura: Why not? You climb on one camel, baava garu on another one and that Poli setty on another one and you all go around the farm fields. We will all watch that grand scene and enjoy. (controls her laughter and addresses Lubdhavadhanlu) baava garu, forgive me. Those instigating words in the letter made me laugh.

Rama: Just bad? Donkey!

Lubdha: Looks like you asked them to get a big donkey. It's written in the letter.

Rama: No, no. There is no mention of donkey anywhere in the letter.

Lubdha: It's there. I read it. Why did you ask for a donkey to be brought onto my head?

Rama: Are you out of your mind? I am saying there is no mention of donkey at all.

(Madhuravani again starts laughing) You also lost your mind? Why are you laughing? At me? Or at Avadhanlu?

Madhura: Why-that-doubt? - there is a saying?

Rama: What is that saying?

Madhura: The donkey said, it seems – I am for singing - my elder sister is for beauty -

Rama: That means?

Madhura: Donkey – camel – for marriage. Heard this after a long time.

Rama: So?

Madhura: That made me laugh. Don't you feel like laughing? Why are you quarelling like this?

Rama: I am going to file a damage suit against him immediately.

Madhura: (To Lubdhavadhanlu) Baava, why are you unfairly doubting our Pantulu? He really considers you as your elder brother. There is a reason for Girisam garu to write insinuations against Pantulu garu. It's not something that can be shared with you. But when the friendship between the two of you is about to go sour, I have to say it. Your Girisam garu used to teach me English when kept me for a few days. Because he was saddened by the fact that Pantulu garu snatched me from him, he wrote all those things. They are all just lies. Don't believe.

Rama: Does he think he can write casually and get away with it? No way. He will realize it after I file damage suit.

Madhura: Baava, think about another thing. What will Pantulu garu do with elephants, camels and donkeys? (laughs)

Rama: Can't you understand what I am saying? Didn't I tell you there is no mention of any donkeys in the letter?

Madhura: Okay, leave it. Why do you get angry? If there aren't any donkeys, the story will be very different. What will our Pantulu gain if all these foist themselves on you and eat off of your kitchen? If there are other business transactions, Poli Setty may gain from them.

Lubdha: Well said. This is certainly Poli Setty's handiwork.

Rama: You thought he will organize the marriage with least expenses and gave the job to him. Now suffer.

Madhura: It's not too late even now. If you send the bride here, we will get the marriage ceremony done here, at an expense of just ten rupees. Write a letter to your father-in-law, asking them not to come.

Lubdha: Excellent idea. Uncle, Madhuram is very clever.

Rama: You see, you shouldn't address her as 'Madhuram', 'Gidhuram' etc. You should call her as 'Madhuravani'.

Lubdha: Mistake, agreed, But what if they send only the bride?

Madhura: What's the problem? Just marry her, that all.

Lubdha: I won't marry this bride, even at the cost of my life. If you read the letter till end, you will come to know all the improprieties.

Madhura: What are you thinking about, instead of reading ahead?

Rama: I am not going to step back from filing defamation suit against that Girisam fellow. What is the point in reading further? This letter is like his lousy face.

Lubdha: You think that fellow hasn't damaged my reputation? Anyway read ahead.

Rama: (reads) "Has all good characteristics. But somewhat receding hairline. Our people consider that as foreteller of widowhood. But that's just a *superstition*. Well-read and knowledgeable people like us shouldn't believe it. There is an

antidote for it – remove those offending hair strands and apply powder. After that such hair wouldn't grow. Meanwhile, if widowhood does happen, since her head will be shaven every now and then, this problem would cease to trouble us.

Condition two – suppose widowhood happens and my sister-in-law chooses to grow her hair, what can you do? What can I do?”

Madhura: Enough, enough! Stop there. What a mischievous person Girisam is!

Rama: Have you understood his true nature at least now? (reads) “Nowadays there is lot of talk about widow re-marriage. You are aware of it. If you go to heaven and are enjoying the pleasures of the world of Indra, she may get ideas of getting married again. Let it be clear to you that I wouldn't be able to stop it. Why? Because, if I confront her, she would counter me thus: “When your elder brother is enjoying the company of Rambha in the heavens, what about me?” What should I say? Will have no answer to it.

Madhura: Enough. Stop it!

Rama: You think I will stop and resume reading as per your wish? (reads)

“Condition four – All aspects are good. You should accept this alliance and get married. Your mother-in-law is Arundhathi⁴³ personified. Just between us – she doesn't like this alliance at all. She is telling her neighbours that, at the time of the marriage, she will jump into the well in your house. But don't worry. For those four hours, we will tie up her hands and legs. After you tie the thread around the bride's neck, let her jump into the well. How does it matter to us? To avoid trouble with the police, we have to give them something and bind them into inaction. I am writing all these matters as your

43 Wife of one of the seven great sages of Hindu mythology.

well-wisher. People here shouldn't know. Oh, forgot to mention one thing. The girl's horoscope is excellent, it seems. That fabrication also is by Rama..."

Madhura: Rama?

Rama: Women shouldn't hear such things.

Lubdha: Is he saying that that was also cooked up by you? Is that it?

Rama: Neither control nor goodness for this fellow's mouth. Only defamation suit will serve him right.

Lubdha: My fear is, wouldn't there be at least some truth in it? Poli Setty also told me that mother-in-law doesn't like it. A thousand salutations to this alliance. I don't want it.

Madhura: Well said. Write a letter to your father-in-law that you do want this alliance at all. Shall I bring pen and paper?

Lubdha: (addressing Ramappantulu) Uncle, without further hesitation, write out a letter that we don't want this alliance. (gets up and says something secretly in Madhuravani's ear. She in turn says something in his ear.)

Rama: What is this in-the-face whispering?

From outside, postman shouts, "Is Lubdhavadhanlu here? There is a letter for him". (Madhuravani goes out and receives the letter, brings it in and gives it to Lubdhavadhanlu. He in turn gives it to Ramappantulu.)

Lubdha: I didn't bring my spectacles. Please read it for me.

Rama: (first reads to himself) Wow! Problem solved. This is from your father-in-law himself.

Lubdha: What? That he wouldn't bring elephants and camels?

Rama: No. He doesn't want your alliance at all.

Lubdha: What?? Why? He doesn't want? Or, I don't want? Don't I match his status?

Madhura: Just a minute ago, you said you don't want this marriage. Now you are angry that it's cancelled?

Lubdha: Read out what more he has to say.

Rama: Apparently someone told him that you are a miser.

Lubdha: I am miserly? Which miser will shell out eighteen hundred rupees in one go? Has Agnihothradhanlu ever seen that much money in his life? Am I a miser if I run my family expenses prudently? How does it matter what kind of fellow I am, once I have thrown his money at his face?

Madhura: What a wonderful person you are! You are golden!

Rama: Also, it seems someone told him that you are very old and have tuberculosis.

Lubhha: I am old? Damn that fellow! I have become old by just turning fifty? Yeah, once in a while I cough a bit (coughs). But once I have given that much money and bought the bride, why should he bother about me or her? Once he takes the money, he has to give the bride, even if to a dead body. Why are you silent?

Rama: Yeah, that's true. Though you are old...

Lubdha: Again the same statement? Looks like you created all this crap.

Rama: To create all these crappy problems, isn't your brother Girisam there itself?

Lubdha: How did he land there, to be my Satan?

Madhura: Strange are the ways of men! Till now, you were adamant that you don't want this marriage. Now, you are regretting that it got cancelled. Do you really desire marriage?

Lubdha: If it's there, it's there; if it's not there, it's not there. But I can't tolerate these abuses.

Madhura: Then what will you do?

Rama: What will he do? He will file a damage case.

Lubdha: No filing of case, please.

Rama: Ok, in that case, if you get an alliance that is cheaper and more traditional than this, then it would be like a tight

slap with a chappal for Agnihotravadhanlu.

Lubdha: How to get a cheaper alliance?

Madhura: Listen to me - drop this marriage altogether.

Lubdha: Why? You also think I am old? What?

Madhura: You are old? Who said that?

Lubdha: I wish that Agnihotravadhanlu had at least as much intelligence as you do.

Madhura: Oh, has your eye sight weakened? Have your teeth loosened? Look at your biceps! They are like steel rods.

Rama: (looks at his own biceps) Uncle has got such strong biceps because he digs pits in his backyard. My arms, though thin, are like steel rods.

Madhura: (measures Lubdhavadhanlu's chest with the end of her saree) What a broad chest!

Rama: What is all this?

Madhura: Letter. Read it aloud, instead of reading it to yourself.

Rama: You think you can order me around? We will read it for ourselves. This is not for women. You go away.

Madhura: No, I won't move.

Rama: I will lift you bodily and dump you in the backyard.

Madhura: (goes behind Lubdhavadhanlu's chair, holds his arms tightly) Like Markangeya hugged Lord Shiva, I will hug baava garu. Let me see how you will take me away from here.

Lubdha: (to himself) What delicate and smooth hands! And what a fragrance from from her! (aloud) 'Baaladapi shubhaashitam'¹⁴⁴, they said. Let her be here. She is sharp and will find out the truth.

Rama: Okay, then listen (reads on) "There is a strong rumour that you have been socially boycotted because your daughter's behaviour is not good."

144 It means 'children's words are pure/good' in Sanskrit

Lubdha: (keeps quiet for a while) YOU caused this disaster.

Madhura: Our Pantulu garu?

Lubdha: Who else?

Madhura: (keeps quiet for a while) Come, I will come to your house and take care of you for a while. Forget marriage.

Lubdha: (seems pleased) But I am poor man, I can't pay you. Only pantulu can afford a valuable object like you.

Madhura: I don't need money. Will you feed me?

Lubdha: Surely! No deficiency there!

Madhura: Then let's go. Ignore this pantulu's deceptive words and drop the marriage idea. Stay at home comfortably.

Rama: (looks at Madhuravani sharply) Do you remember that you haven't eaten till now? Go.

Madhura: (sarcastically) Your very act is filling my stomach (angrily goes into the house).

Lubdha: Heard her? Though she is a prostitute, she is very intelligent. If our women have her brains, we will be much better off.

Rama: Yeah, intelligent, but uncontrollable anger. If she gets some funny suspicion, she loses control. You see uncle, tradition-abiding people like you shouldn't touch prostitutes. If she childishly puts her face to your face, you should say, "Girl, stay away a bit". She has only one bad habit. She has to talk to others/strangers/outside, otherwise she can't pass time. She got that bad habit due to town life-style.

Lubdha: She is young. She is like my daughter. If she touches me out of her child-like nature, don't take it wrongly.

Rama: What do you lose? Okay, leave that. See this. Right in front of me who kept her, she praises another fellow's biceps and chest!? Would it not make me angry?

Lubdha: My mistake. Forgive me. (hits his own cheeks.)

Rama: That's not of any use. Should slap that character. Looks like she likes you. Give her a piece of your mind.

Lubdha: Liking me? Is it even possible?

Rama: She said she will come to your house? Okay, take her.
(while the above dialogues are being said, Madhuravani enters, wearing a silk saree.)

Madhura: Yeah, yeah, he certainly will take me, if I have become a burden for you. If I serve that great man, I will have a better life in the other world.

Lubdha: He said it in jest, will he let go of you? I am not suitable for you, not at all.

Rama: Say that!

Madhura: Even if he said it for fun, I am taking it seriously. Donkeys eat grass, not humans.

Rama: See, again she is saying donkey! (Madhuravani turns the other way to hide her face breaking into laughter, crosses into the inner room and bursts out laughing.)

Lubdha: She also has devotion and fear towards you.

Rama: She does, but when she gets angry, she doesn't care a bit and doesn't even care if others are present.

Lubdha: I think it's better if I drop the marriage proposal. What is your advice?

Rama: My advice? Do you care? Madhuravani has already declared that you shouldn't marry, right? Listening to her and praising her brains, you are behaving like that. Elders said "stree budhhi pralayaantakam"⁴⁵.

Lubdha: I came to ask for your advice because you are my well-wisher. Am I saying 'no' to the marriage because Madhuravani said so? No. Anyway, the marriage got cancelled. I am feeling happy that the expenses are saved.

Rama: I have to start all over again. Irrespective of it, there are going to be expenses. If you get married and have children, your family will multiply. If you kick the bucket without marriage, who is going to enjoy all your hard-earned money?

Lubdha: You are talking as if I have a lot of money. What do I have?

45 It means 'women's way of thinking causes disasters' in Sanskrit

Rama: Whatever you have. Who is going to do the rituals to send you to the other world?

Lubdha: Then, why didn't you marry?

Rama: I spent off all my inherited wealth. Then about after-life – I belong to 'shakteya' sect and I practise yoga. So, I have nothing to do with 'karma'. Just to satisfy the society, I do the annual rites. After that, you may ask why I have kept a prostitute. As the elders said, 'fulfilling physical desires is the path to salvation'⁴⁶. But your case is different. One day, when you are sleeping, that Meenakshi will steal all your money and elope with her sleeping partner. After that, the goddess of poverty will marry you.

Lubdha: Then what do you suggest I do?

Rama: Make a fresh effort and get married. Fear of your wife will put an end to Meenakshi's games. And your wife also will be under control because of Meenakshi. What do you say?

Lubdha: That's true.

Rama: May be true. But you have to be very careful. I have to keep reminding you about the issues. Have you neglected the fact that, as per your horoscope, if you don't marry, there is a chance that you will die?

Lubdha: I haven't forgotten or neglected it. But, after struggling for so long, I got an alliance for eighteen hundred rupees and I lost it. That's my worry. Can I get an alliance cheaply? Not at all.

Rama: Yesterday one brahmin came from Guntur. Is he still around or gone back?

Lubdha: For alliance?

Rama: Yes. What a stupid thing I have done! When he asked me if I know any alliance, I said no. Did I dream that this alliance of yours will break? He is from a good traditional family. If we accept that alliance, it would be like a tight slap to Agnihotravadhanlu.

46 The Telugu saying is 'kaami gaanivaadu moksha-kaami gaadu'

Lubdha: What is the bargain?

Rama: Very cheap. That's what I am regretting now. He is from Guntur. People there don't yet know what levels people in the rest of the country have stooped to in this kind of bargains. So, he fixed an alliance in Nandipilli village for twelve hundred rupees. But they said they will pay in instalments. But this man has loans to clear soon and if he doesn't he will have to face law suits. So, he started going around looking for anyone who will take his girl for twelve hundred rupees immediately. Some asked for one thousand but he refused.

Lubdha: We will add another hundred?

Rama: He should be there, right? To add hundred or fifty or whatever?

Lubdha: Will you please find out where he is staying? I will be very grateful to you.

Rama: To hell with money. Keep that aside. What a wonderful girl with all the good traits! What signs of wealth! And clear lines of children in her palm! And what a sculpted figure!

(Madhuravani enters.)

Madhura: What's the planet position?

Rama: Planet position? As per Avadhanlu's horoscope, his marriage will certainly happen this year.

Madhura: I don't believe your word. (goes up to Avadhanlu, puts her face close to his) Is it true?

Lubdha: Everybody says it's true.

Madhura: What does the astrologer say?

Lubdha: Every astrologer who read my horoscope is saying the same thing. Till now nothing that my horoscope predicted has gone right.

Madhura: Your fate. But don't fall prey to Pantulu's sweet talk and marry that ill-fated girl.

Rama: Why did you come here in the middle of your meal, as if some disaster has happened?

Madhura: I came for the silver bowl.

Rama: Okay, take. (Madhuravani leaves.)

Lubdha: What is this? She is asking me not to marry?

Rama: Don't get disturbed. Stay calm and speak calmly. Have you ever seen a prostitute encouraging anyone to get married? She has cast her eyes on you.

Lubdha: On me? Anyone who hears it will laugh it off.

Rama: If you give up marriage, she will come into your house and install herself there. Are you so deaf that you can't hear what she is saying so loud as a bell? If you get into any affair with her, then that will lead to serious consequences between you and me. Watch out.

Lubdha: I? Never! She is like my daughter. Leave that, can you find out if that Guntur shastri is still around?

Rama: They are staying in the opposite house itself. Let me just check if Madhuravani has finished her meal and then I will go. (goes inside, comes out and goes out of the house.)

Lubdha: (to himself) He is thinking that I will snatch away Madhuravani. Ha ha! (inhales snuff power) Only a prostitute can sense the difference between people. Like Pantulu, if I also grow mustache and dye my hair, youth will come back. How fortunate would I be if this cheap alliance is settled!

(Ramappantulu enters, ushering in the disciple in girl's disguise; stretches that boy's palm towards Lubdhavadhanlu and)

Rama: Uncle, did you see the powerful wealth line running across her palm? And see the childline! Did you see the necklace lines?

Lubdha: No need to inspect so closely. Enough.

(while the above conversation is going on, Madhuravani comes in from behind and empties a mug of water on Ramappantulu's head.)

Rama: What is this non-sense?

Madhura: holy bath. (presses the disciple's chin) you

shameless bitch!

(Madhuravani exits.)

Rama: She just loses control if she gets angry. It's better to take this girl and run from here, otherwise she will come chasing with a broom!

(holds disciple's arm and goes out.)

Lubdha: She can walk. Leave her hand.

Rama: Oh oh! Because she is your would-be wife?

(All three exit.)

Lubdha: It is your opinion that I should marry this girl?

Rama: Don't bother about my opinion. You should feel good and comfortable. See if the girl is healthy, well-built and good-looking.

Lubdha: How does beauty matter for housewives?

(Astrologer hurriedly enters and)

Astro: (to Avadhanlu) Who is this girl, uncle⁴⁷?

(Lubdhavadhanlu doesn't reply; turns towards

Ramappantulu, nods his head to indicate he should respond instead)

Rama: Our folks only⁴⁸.

Astro: (gives a slow and thorough head-to-toe look) Wow! What wonderful and powerful signs of wealth this girl has got!

Rama: What sir?

Astro: What wide eyes, what wonderful ears and curly hair! Show your palm, my dear! (looks at her hand) Don't know which lucky man has married this girl, but...

Rama: She is not married yet, sir.

Astro: If you want to marry, you will not get another girl who has better desirable attributes. Here is the wealth line and here is the child line. Pantulu garu, order for big treasure chests. Please turn your hand, my dear. One, two, three children. (to

47 Please note that uncle (mama) is a generic way of addressing elderly and/or respected men

48 Pardon my usage of Indian English :-)

Avadhanlu) Snuff please (drags/sniffs some of it) Poli Setty's daughter is about to deliver. I have to go and write the horoscope. I will come again.

Rama: Just a moment. (talks to Astrologer secretly.) Astrologer takes out the almanac from under his arm, reads it, has a few words with Pantulu, tucks the almanac under his arm and leaves in a hurry.)

Lubdha: What does he say?

Rama: He is thinking that it's me who is going to marry this girl. He said the upcoming thirteenth day of this fortnight is an auspicious day for the marriage.

Lubdha: But on that day, there is no auspicious time for marriage?

Rama: Our elders said, "do good deeds at the earliest"⁴⁹. You need not be that particular about second marriage. If the star alignment is good, that's enough. Here comes your father-in-law.

Lubdha: See if you can bargain.

(Karataka Shastri enters.)

Karata: Did you pour on your head the sacred water from river Ganga, Pantulu garu? Where are you taking my girl?

Rama: Can I have a word with you? (both talk secretly)

Rama: (takes Avadhanlu aside) says he will agree to fourteen hundred. Apparently someone offered thirteen hundred.

Lubdha: Is this how you help me? Okay, at least get it done for twelve hundred.

Rama: See, I am getting bad name when I go out of my way to help you! - acting pricey when they are making the offer. What to do? (again talks to Karataka Shastri privately, comes back and addresses Avadhanlu) Made him agree to that amount with great difficulty. He is acting stiff; says he wouldn't budge, unless you buy ornaments and other stuff for her.

Lubdha: I can't.

49 That is 'Shubhastya sheeghrām' in Sanskrit.

Rama: Be quiet. Say okay. Just for that moment, I will get Madhuravani's waist band and decorate the girl with it and then take it back.

Lubdha: Okay, you take care of that.

Rama: Okay, I will take care. But what about marriage expenses? We will bear t expenses, but will keep the affair simple and make it look grand. Don't call Poli Setty to provide supplies. Who will go to Pedapalem and invite the elders?

Lubdha: Who else do I have? Only you have to go and invite.

Rama: I need to be well-dressed when I go to invite them. I will pull out my best party clothes and put them out for airing.

(All exit.)

Act 4

Location 2: House of Lubdhavadhanlu

Lubdha: Yes. What you said makes sense. In holy places, they do conduct marriages on a single night.

Karata: Even big officials nowadays are conducting marriages like this. When we have Lord Rama and Lord Hanuman established here, who can say this is not a holy place?

Lubdha: That's true, but so far, no body has conducted single-night marriages here. What will they say if we do?

Karata: Once it's agreed that this is a holy place, how does it matter what others say?

Lubdha: Okay, then we will inform the marriage priest.

Karata: What is this, uncle? You are still thinking as in ancient times. That priest and Poli Setty are trying to make some money out of this marriage. Will they agree to single-night marriage? Don't tell them until the mangala-sutram is tied.

Lubdha: What if the marriage priest makes a ruckus if we don't tell him?

Karata: What is your fear? Is he your master? If he creates any problem, I will beat him up.

Lubdha: Not you, but if I give a few rupees to the astrologer, he will take up that responsibility. In front of him, the marriage priest doesn't have the guts to open his mouth.

Karata: When we have an antidote for something as dangerous as a snake bite, wouldn't we have one for that marriage priest?

(Both exit.)

Location 3: Backyard of Lubdhavadhanlu's house

(Karataka Shastri and Meenakshi enter.)

Meenakshi: Wouldn't I take care of your child as my own?

Karata: Born to me, right? That's why I am very worried about her and stressing again and again. You are her mother and father from now onwards (pretends to cry.)

Meena: Don't worry, grandpa. I will make sure she is well taken care of.

Karata: I gave a ring with a tiger insignia to my child and asked her to give it to you. Please take it.

Meena: She will give. What's the hurry, grandpa? Whether it's with me or with her, it's same.

(Astrologer enters.)

Astro: All the time busy cutting vegetables and preparing meals, but not bothered about making the preparations for the marriage! My disciple is sleeping like a log.

Meena: When the marriage time is still several hours away, what is the hurry for that, Achchanna uncle?

Astro: Brains went out the window with education, it seems. Auspicious time is at the fourth 'ghadia'⁵⁰ of the night.

Meena: My father is always like this. He doesn't trust the women and tell them such important information. Father! Father!

(Lubdhavadhanlu enters.)

Lubdha: Why are you shouting like that?

Meena: Achchanna uncle says the auspicious time is at the fourth ghadia of tonight.

Lubdha: What? I thought it's in the morning at the fourth

50 60 'ghadias' are 24 hours

ghadia? But now what are you saying?

Astro: May be you thought it's 33rd ghadia of the day? Stop your insanities and get ready and take the holy bath. I have already called all the brahmins from the village.

Lubdha: I will die! So cold! But Ramappantulu also thought it's at the fourth ghadia in the morning! I think he himself will come and invite the elders of Peddapalem to come in the morning at the fourth ghadia.

Astro: (to Meenakshi) Amma, get the bride bathed.

Meena: Will do it in a minute.

Astro: Women are better. They will take care of arranging the materials required for the marriage.

Lubdha: What if the marriage is solemnized without pantulu?-

Astro: Who is getting married, you or pantulu? Without further hesitation, finish your bath and come.

(All exit.)

Location 3: On the raised platform of the portico of Lubdhavadhanlu's house, wearing turmeric-coloured clothes, Lubdhavadhanlu and the disciple disguised as bride and a few brahmins will be sitting.

(Ramappantulu enters with Tasha Marpa, a few guards and servants and sits down on the platform.)

Rama: Whew! You know what troubles I went through! (to the servants) The palanquin carriers and the band musicians were quite agitated by the time I reached the village. My legs are aching like hell! This bloody Peddapalem is so far off! (turns around and looks) What is this turmeric-coloured attire and sitting along with the bride? You have already got yourself decked up as groom? The older you grow, the more romantic you seem to have become!

Lubdha: They were very worried that you were not there for the muhurtham time.

Rama: (gets shocked) What? What marriage time?

Priest Gavarayya: We all felt bad that you were not there at the time of the actual marriage ceremony. We thought you were held up with some urgent affairs and so couldn't make it. Without you, the marriage gathering lost its charm.

Rama: Don't blabber. How did you tie the knot before time?

Priest Gavarayya: After consulting all the scriptures and making the calculations, he let the groom tie the knot at the correct time, sir.

Rama: But it's not the fourth 'ghadia' in the morning yet,

right?

Priest: Wasn't it the fourth 'ghadia' at night?

Rama: But the astrologer said it's in the morning?

Priest: Who can change the almanac, sir? He probably would have told you that it's early in the morning at the fourth 'ghadia' and probably you didn't pay much attention to it.

Rama: Almanac in this stupid village? Looks like the astrologer can get away with anything here. (addressing the astrologer) What a treachery?

Priest: The astrologer felt very bad that you couldn't come. Avadhanlu was also very upset, thinking that you couldn't come due to some unavoidable circumstances. He felt comforted only after hearing the tasha marpha⁵¹.

Lubdha: It's true, mama.

Priest: Then Madhuravani? She was shell-shocked and stood like a gold statue in the marriage shamiyana. Refused to sing even when the entire group of brahmins begged her to.

Kondhibhotlu: She kept chatting with the head constable all the time... couldn't she sing at least one song when all were begging her to.

Another brahmin: You dumbbo, how will she sing without pantulu garu being in the court?

Priest: What do you think she was talking to the head constable about? "Pantulu garu went with all marriage materials. What if he met with some accident? He still hasn't arrived even though it's marriage time. Please send your jawans and ask them to search for him".

Kondibhotlu: This Gavarayya is pulling a fast one on you. While those two were bursting out laughing, he is telling us stories that she was worried about pantulu.

Rama: Vaidikam! Vaidikam! Instead of doing your job, why are

⁵¹ Tasha marpa = local music band

you gossiping about everything else in the world?

Priest: Keep quiet, Kondibhotlu. Don't you know to be discreet when elders are around?

Rama: Where was your elderliness earlier? You are the one who instigated all this in the first place. Where is he? What is his name?

Priest: Who, sir?

Rama: That Guntur shastri.

Priest: Which Guntur shastri?

Lubdha: He? Well, he came... then he went back to his village.

Rama: What is this stupid talk? When his daughter is getting married, how can he go away?

Lubdha: Marriage is over, right?

Rama: Really stupid! Okay, you finished the knot-tying ceremony within minutes, but the entire marriage lasts for five days, right?

Priest: it's single-night marriage, isn't it, sir? So, they finished it with the main homam⁵² and the final homam.

Rama: (shell-shocked, addresses Lubdhavadhanlu) You traitor!

Priest: Sir, sir, please cool down! (to Avadhanlu) Fall at his feet (to Pantulu) Don't tell us about all the good and bad deeds you got done. Sidhdhanthi⁵³ and his father-in-law discussed various scriptures and fixed the single-night marriage with just a 10-minute window for the auspicious time to tie the knot.

Rama: What conspiracy! You haven't paid him yet, right?

Lubdha: He got his payment and left in a hurry, saying if his payment is not given there will be a court case. Said he will come again after a week.

Rama: How dare you finalize this transaction in my absence, after choosing me as the mediator? Do you know how much

52 Sacred fire as part of religious rituals

53 The astrologer

advance I have paid him? Already you joined hands with your father-in-law and decided to pull the wool over my eyes?

Lubdha: What to do? Only as per your decision, he said unless he is paid off, he will not open the sacred thread and give it to me.

Rama: What disaster will happen if you don't tie the know before I come? I think he has plotted something big and that's why he took his payment and ran off before I came. What is his name?

Priest: His name ... well ... Avadhanlu garu will tell.

Lubdha: I don't know.

Rama: You stupid! Can't you see he is a crook?

Lubdha: It was you who brought him and said he is a good and trustworthy man. That's why I trusted him.

Rama: Who cares whether you trust him or not? Put down there the one hundred rupees that I forwarded to him for marriage expenses.

Lubdha: Don't ask me. Go ask him.

Rama: Okay, I won't talk to you anymore. And I won't stay in your house one more minute. (gets up) Listen, everyone. This Guntur shastri is a pucca thief. Otherwise, how could he take the money this stupid Avadhanlu gave and disappear, without even telling his name? He also took the money I gave and ran away. Going by his behavior, it looks as if he sold off some second-marriage girl or some non-brahmin girl and made off with the money. So, hey bariki! And hey barber! Go to head constable and get two jawans here. I will send them after that cheat.

(as he is saying the above words, the astrologer enters and catches him by his arm and makes him stand there and not leave.)

Astro: Where are you going? Stay back for a minute.

Rama: What is this restriction of yours?

Astro: You want the name of that Guntur shastri?

Rama: What is that name?

Astro: Peri Rama Shastri. How does it matter what his name is?

Rama: That fellow owes me some money.

Astro: He doesn't owe you one paisa. I know that truth.

Rama: Are you colluding with him against me?

Astro: How can I do that against tough-handed vaidikas? Tell me the value of all the jewellery that Avadhanlu gave.

Rama: Who are you to ask about that? Oh! Are you going to kick me?

Astro: On an auspicious occasion like this, if I call the bride a widow, will any body spare me?

Rama: Not widow. She is a lady with a live husband. Now, leave my hand.

(Lubdhavadhanlu moves a bit away from the disciple.)

Astro: When you are angry, you should't forget your social behaviour. You are the lord and we are under your shelter. Let me tell you something that will benefit you. Come this way.

Rama: If you talk to me respectfully, you will not find another man better than me.

Astro: Avadhanlu garu, you also please come here.

(Avadhanlu, astrologer and Ramappantulu have a secret talk among themselves.)

Rama: (with enthusiasm) Astrologer, give me some snuff powder. Niyogi will abide by the word. Brahmin cooks! Have all the special preparations been sent to my house? Kondibhotlu! Come here.

(Kondibhotlu comes.)

Kondi: What's your order?

Rama: Come with me till my house.

Kondi: As you say.

Rama: In my backyard, we have very good jack fruits. I will give you two. Go get them. Your father likes them very much.

Kondi: As you say.

Rama: What was special fun in the marriage?

Kondi: Nothing.

Rama: Why didn't Madhuravani sing?

Kondi: She did.

Rama: Aah!?

Kondi: No, she didn't.

Rama: Say that. May be she was chatting with the head constable all the time.

Kondi: Not a word, sir.

Rama: But then, just a while ago, why did you say she talked? And even burst out laughing?

Kondi: That..that...that.. Lingannagari Kambhotlu asked me to say like that.

Rama: I will teach him a lesson. He wants to fool around with me? But you don't side with him. I have known you from your childhood. You are honest.

Kondi: Yes, sir. I always tell the truth.

Rama: Okay, you didn't tell me the truth about the head constable. What about Madhuravani? Who all did she talk to? Tell the truth.

Kondi: Aa..you want me to tell the truth?

Rama: I am asking you because you are an honest man, right?

Kondi: Then, - she chatted with everyone.

Rama: Everyone means, who all?

Kondi: Who all? We left the marriage aside and gathered around Madhuavani. She talked to Bhukta garu. And then...

Rama: Who else?

Kondi: The marriage priest stopped chanting the mantras and

had a private talk with Madhuravani, that too in her ear.

Kondi: Then... with head constable.

Rama: You vermin! You said she didn't talk to the head constable?

Kondi: Yes, she didn't.

Rama: scoundrel! Did she talk, did she not?

Kondi: God, save me!

Rama: I get very angry if someone tell lies. Tell the truth, on promise. If you lie, your head will blow up.

Kondi: No.

Rama: Promise?

Kondi: Promise.

Rama: See, now you told the truth. You are still very young; even if some one instigates you, you shouldn't tell lies about women. Understood?

Kondi: Madhuravani is a very good person.

Rama: Everybody in the village thinks so?

Kondi: Yes.

(In front of Ramappantulu's house)

Rama: I will knock the door. You do one small surprise act.

Kondi: Yes, sir.

Rama: Take this beda⁵⁴. Behind our backyard compound wall, stay for about 10 or fifteen minutes. Along that path if head constable or anyone else comes along, grab them by the arm and shout. I will come. Otherwise, run. (Kondibhotlu leaves.) Door. Door. (to himself) Doesn't open the door easily. That raises some doubts. Did this fellow tell the truth, or told lies? Instead of coming to the marriage AFTER I sent word from Palem, why did she run to the marriage? Why is she not opening the door? (Madhuravani opens the door.) What were you doing all this while?

54 Beda is a coin worth 2 annas; 16 annas is one rupee.

Madhura: From tomorrow onwards, I will write down what all I do from morning till night. Now come in.

(Both exit.)

(Kondibhotlu enters and)

Kondi: Pantulu garu! Pantuly garu!

(Ramappantulu and Madhuravani enter.)

Rama: (to Madhuravani) You go in (to Kondibhotlu) What?

Kondi: Well...I didn't catch.

Rama: (with a sharp look) Why not?

Kondi: How can I catch the unmentionable?

Madhura: Why catch something that is unmentionable?

Kondi: Pantulu asked me to catch anyone who passes by the backyard path.

Madhura: What strange happenings! Looks like this brahmin has gone mad!

Rama: (stands behind Madhuravani and gestures to Kondibhotlu to go away) You believe that chatterbox vaidika boy's ramblings?

(goes inside.)

As soon as Ramappantulu goes inside, Madhuravani closes the portico back door from the other side, gestures Kondibhotlu to come in and kisses him.

Madhura: (leisurely) You saved me!

Kondibhotlu: Madhuravani, here – the 'beda' coin that pantulu gave. And the quarter that head constable sir gave. And the silver snuff box (gives them.)

Madhura: (receives them) You are a good man. From today onwards we are friends. Okay?

(kisses him once more) Go now.

(Kondibhotlu in one leap reaches the street and starts jumping around.)

(Kambhotlu enters and)

Kam: Why are you jumping around like this?

Kondi: She kissed me!

Kam: Stop your stupid show-off! She kissed this monkey face?

Kondi: You are stupid! From today, she and I are friends!

(All exit.)

Location 3: Krishnarayapuram Agraharam

(In Agnihotravadhanlu's backyard, Girisam will be getting a shamiyana put up by the workers.)

(Venkatesam enters.)

Girisam: What brother-in-law? Why is your left cheek red?

Venka: Father blasted my left cheek.

Girisam: What did you do?

Venkatesam: That I didn't do sandhyavandanam⁵⁵.

Girisam: Couldn't you pretend as if you were doing it/did it?

Venka: Thought he wouldn't see.

Girisam: 'Thought so' is useless, my brother-in-law. If you are doing drama, it should be thorough and fool-proof and shouldn't depend on whether someone is watching or not. That would be the safe bet. Don't you see how long I do crane-meditation⁵⁶ everyday?

Venka: What do you meditate about?

Girisam: What do I meditate about? About when this conservative brahmin will finish his pooja. And when I can get my meal.

Girisam: Shouldn't you chant mantras and meditate about god? If you meditate for your food, isn't it sinful?

Girisam: *Ignorance!* You don't know anything about religious matters. After this marriage, I will give you training about religion. I studied all the religions, extracted their essence and have formulated a new religion. I will go to America and propagate it with all glory. For now, I will clarify your doubt. What did you say? Meditating about food, right? What do

55 Morning/evening ritual to propitiate the sun god

56 A simili or metaphor – cranes and egrets are known to stand on one leg in the shallow waters of a village tank with half-closed eyes, waiting for any fish to come close. It looks as if they 'meditating', hence this idiom. 'konga japam' is the original Telugu idiom.

upanishads say? “Annam parabrahmam”. That means, 'food is god; Learn that, your dim-wit!' it says. What do the white men say in English? “Father, give us our daily bread”. So, what should we say? “Father, give us rice and dal.” What is said in our 'chamakam⁵⁷? “Shyamakaashchame”. You can add whatever food item in your request.

Venka: Buffalo curd chamei. Chegodi chamei.

Girisam: Well done! That's *originality*. Unless you ask, even mother wouldn't give you food. You think god will give, either? Whenever you want something, make a list of them and chant 'chamaka paaraayanam.”

Venka: Then, from tomorrow onwards, I will do chamaka paaraayanam⁵⁸.

Girisam: Not loudly. Otherwise, you father, because of lack of education and not knowing the reason, will think you are spoiling it and beat you up and do another paaraayanam.

Venka: The other day, you stole tobacco bundle from bugatha's house, right? Didn't god get angry with you that you committed a sin?

Girisam: When I was young, my uncle also used to be angry like your father. Would twist my ears and make me read all those upanishads. Oh, can't recollect its name, but in that, the disciple would be asking questions like you and the teacher would be answering them like me. That's really great. If any one writes our question-answer session on palm leaves, it would become 'tobacopanishad' and become famous two hundred years from now! What sin with tobacco? That too, stealing it from those stupid fellows who use it for making snuff powder rather than burning it as cigar? Believe that stealing tobacco should be considered as great help to the

57 Some scripture

58 It means reading or reciting something.

world.

Venka: How is it helping the world?

Girisam: How? Like this: if we smoke a cigar like this, the smoke will go up and become a cloud and bring in rain. But if we stuff our nose with snuff, we will only sneeze and cause a mini rain within our house and our house becomes dirty. So, We should steal all the tobacco from the houses of those who make snuff powder out of it. In case god says, "Girisam garu, you have committed a sin by stealing tobacco" I will lecture him and scare him.

What will I lecture him? "Oh God! Did you create my heart as independent or dependent? If as independent, I did whatever I felt like doing. Who are you to ask? If you create such problems as this, I will form a small national congress in heaven. Or, did you create me as dependent? Then you yourself made me commit that sin. So, the punishment is for you. *Therefore*, go to hell. Before you return from there, I will wield power in heaven for six ghadias and fix some defects in creation."

Venka: What defects?

Girisam: Defects galore! I will make you agree. #1 – creating a misfit like your teacher. Do you agree or not?

Venka: Yes.

Girisam: Widowing a *beautiful young girl* like your sister. Yes or no?

Venka: Yes.

Girisam: Millions of defects in creation like this. Then how much do you think is wasteful creation? *For instance*, how many oceans are there?

Venka: Seven.

Girisam: Seven useless ones. We have milk ocean, then curd

ocean and also ghee ocean. When we have milk ocean, why do we need the other two? This is creation from creation, which is stupid. God dumped the not-useful-to-any-one salt ocean on us and kept the other useful ones – milk, curd etc. - beyond anyone's reach. If god gives me diwan-giri for one year, I will get milk ocean to Bheemuni patnam, drinking water ocean to Visakapatnam and sugarcane juice ocean to Kalingapatnam. I will make the *eastern ghats* as tobacco forest. If I give this lecture, do you know what the god will say? Seems an impossible fellow to deal with. And got a trick or two up his sleeve more than the other fellow who asked “are you old Yama or new Yama”. So, he will assign a twin-horse cart to me and order his messengers to show all the palaces in the heaven and let me choose whichever I like. I will say, I will get bored if you don't let my student Venkatesam also come along with me. Then he will bring you by an aeroplane. We both can have fun in heaven. For today, this is enough of lecturing on religion. Go and play monkey-cat game in the garden. But, by the time your father comes back in the evening, sit in front of the lamp with a book and meditate for sour pound rice. I will make it yummy with asaphotida and get it for you. *Run away.*

(Buchchamma enters.)

Buchchamma: Those palm leaves are falling into this grinding stone. Can you please pull it aside?

Girisam: Sure.

(Girisam moves the grinding stone outside, from under the palm-leaf thatch. Buchchamma washes it and starts grinding black gram/urad dal in it.)

Girisam: (sings) “Bhaja govindam, Bhaja govindam, govindam bhaja moodhamathe” - why are crying vadina?

Buchchamma: Nothing.

Girisam: My heart melts seeing your moist eyes.

Buchchamma: This is nothing for you – you men are like kings. Our problems affect only us.

Girisam: What a pitiless statement! When you are in such deep sorrow, what purpose does this life of mine serve? I will do anything for you! Even ready to give my life! You want proof? See this (picks up vegetable cutting board with embedded knife)

Buchchamma: (takes back the knife-board) You couldn't get this marriage cancelled for my younger sister, right?

Girisam: That alone is impossible for me.

Buchchamma: Then I got nothing to do with you. See how enthusiastically you are getting all this marriage preparations done? If my father couldn't think, did it not occur at least to you that this alliance is wrong for my sister? Even you don't have that much pity on her? May be you are happy that Lubdhavadhanlu is your elder brother.

Girisam: I am happy? What a cruel word to say! Only God knows how much I am crying in my heart that this marriage is happening. To get this marriage cancelled, I wrote a two-page letter to my brother scolding him for his decision. He didn't pay heed to it. What could I do? Even remembering him is sinful. If I sit idle, your father may think ill of me; also, if I do some work here, some day your father may take pity on you and you may see good days. That's why I am doing hundred workers' work alone. Otherwise, if you're heartless towards this faithful and trusted servant, I will go back to my place tonight itself.

Buchchamma: No, no, don't go.

Girisam: Even if I want to go, what is the way? I keep regretting all the time that I couldn't get this marriage scrapped; that I couldn't help this wonderful golden doll Buchchamma become a married lady again. So, whenever

those feelings become strong, I decide to go back, but I am unable to put even one foot forward. "I keep making noise that I will go, but how can I live without seeing my Buchamma? Even if she doesn't show any mercy on me, let me be here and be happy at least by seeing her everyday". So, that's why I am staying back.

Buchamma: My little brother said, if you tell Lubdhavadhanlu, he will give up this marriage?

Girisam: Nobody in this world can brush aside my word. That's why your brother Venkatesam would have said that. But your father and my elder brother are beyond this world. They wouldn't listen even to the Creator. This man is very short-tempered. That one is absolute miser. You think my elder brother is marrying your sister to be happy? He will make your sister as happy as your late husband did. That means, they sell humans like mere animals in the market. Those that sold have to do drudgery in their buyer's house for the rest of their lives. My brother is doing the same thing. Doesn't listen even if I give him a thorough dress-down. When we already have all these problems, I am facing another fear. Will you get angry if I say what it is?

Buchamma: No. Whatever you say, I will not get angry.

Girisam: Great. If you give me just that much encouragement, what more can I ask for? The residents of Ramachandrapuram are very bad people. After my brother dies, they wouldn't let your sister live in peace. She will also become like Meenakshi.

Buchamma: What does she lack now?

Girisam: What to say? If I say anything, it will be like washing dirty linen in the public. Anyway, why hide it from you? Apparently, after her husband died, every year she gets pregnant and that becomes a big ruckus. In that village, there is one bad/evil niyogi brahmin called Ramappantulu. He has

kept one prostitute. And he has destroyed many families. He is the one who handles all affairs of my brother. The moment he dies, an enormous amount of money will land in your sister's hands. And she will get lot of freedom too. Nobody will be there to question whatever she does. So, what is there to stop her from downfall? "Am I not within boundaries?", you may ask. But then, you didn't get any property of your late husband, nor did you ever step into his house.

Buchamma: Yes.

Girisam: You are safe under your parents' protection. No outsider can step into your house. But how long can it last? Your parents can't protect you forever, right? After they pass on, you will also get freedom. Who will know how your heart will be at any time? After you take a mis-step and something untoward happens, what will you think? "That day, if I had listened to Girisam and married him, today I would have been a well-to-do housewife with caring husband and children and I wouldn't be in this miserable situation" and regret your past decision. Where will I be then? In the heaven waiting for you. After this marriage, I and Venkatesam will go back to town. I will give up food and sleep. But how long can I survive without food and sleep? Late at night, I will be sitting in the easy chair in my room, looking at my reflection in the mirror and pour out my woes to myself thus: "This handsome face, stylish moustache, beautiful eyes – all this is waste, isn't it? Who is there to see and enjoy? After my Buchamma has refused to marry me, what is the use of this life?" and swiftly get up, pull out the pistol from my table drawer and shoot myself through the heart.

Buchamma: Please don't do that. If you say that, I feel like crying.

Girisam: Immediately gods will send the aeroplane and take

me to heaven. Do you think I will be happy that I went to heaven, vadina? The beautiful Rambha, decked up with wonderful ornaments, will hesitantly approach me and say, "Oh my dear Girisam! I have never seen such a wonderful man! Please come and be my master", and pull me towards her. What would I say? "Chee! I am anti-naach. If a prostitute touches I consider it as un-pious. Unless I wash my hand with Pears soap, it will not be cleansed. You are Rambha? You are not worth even the toe nail of my Buchchamma. *Go away, damn dirty goose!*". Similarly, I will kick out all other apsarasa⁵⁹. Then I will wear saffron dress and sit under the Kalpavruksha tree and keep chanting your name and be in lotus posture for several years. After that, my penance will succeed and you will enter like the moon into my garden. I will jump and hug you! At that time, your first, old husband, wearing stained dhoti and sniffing snuff powder, will come and block me, saying, "Buchchamma is my wife". I will say, "Idiot! You are unfit for Buchchamma. Here, take your money and beat it!" and kick him out. Then we both will live in heaven happily for ever.

Buchchamma: You will make me laugh, when I am crying.

Girisam: If you marry me, we can be happy as long as we live. Will I let you grind idli/dosa dough like this? We will have so many servants! Big house, garden, horse carts! Will I even let you walk? I will treat you like a delicate flower. Think of how happy you will be then.

Buchchamma: Will I ever have such joy in this life of mine?

Girisam: When I am saying that I will be your slave and take care of you and make you happy, you are kicking out that opportunity and turning my life also into ashes! What can I do?

59 Heavenly maidens

Buchchamma: What is missing in your life? You can lead a royal life.

Girisam: If you marry me, I will really become a king. Any word that comes from your mouth is great. It shouldn't go waste. Come away with me.

Buchchamma: Oh god, no! I can't come with you.

Girisam: If you don't come with me, you know what will happen? I will commit suicide and you will be rid of the nuisance.

Buchchamma: No, no. Don't speak like that.

Girisam: What is wrong if I say what I am going to do? If not me, don't you have some pity even for your younger sister?

Buchchamma: What? Why do you say that?

Girisam: Do you really have pity on your sister?

Buchchamma: Yeah, I think so.

Girisam: If so, the tool to get this marriage cancelled is right in your hands!

Buchchamma: In my hands?

Girisam: certainly.

Buchchamma: You speak very mysteriously.

Girisam: My life has become laughing stock for you, because I ignored all the women in this world and loved you, right?

Buchchamma: On your word – please do say like that.

Girisam: Okay – at least you have given me at least that much assurance. Promise to me onething. If the tool to get this marriage of your sister cancelled is in your hands, will you do it or not?

Buchchamma: Will I not?

Girisam: I don't know if you will or not. Only if you make a promise that you will do, I will tell you that idea.

Buchchamma: What should I promise?

Girisam: Promise, with me as the witness.

Buchchamma: Yes, I do.

Girisam: Then, listen. I wanted to tell you this secretly when you are alone. Luckily, today your father gone out of town, your mother is also not there and I got this opportunity. Listen carefully. This is the only idea to get your sister's marriage dropped. That is, without thinking of any consequences, elope with me and marry me. Otherwise, this marriage for your sister is inevitable.

Buchchamma: (with a shy smile) If I elope with you, how will my sister's marriage stop? All strange talks!

Girisam: I will make you agree with what I am saying. Listen – when we are traveling for the marriage, on the second night, I will bribe your cart driver and divert it to Anakapalli road.

From there, my friends will take you through a relay of carts till Ramavaram. In Ramavaram, we will get married and be living happily. Then, what happens to your people? The next day morning, they wouldn't see your cart and will get very anxious and start screaming for help. Your sister's marriage will stop then and there itself. Couple of days later they will get to know that we got married. After seeing the problems that occurred due to him getting you married to an old man, he wouldn't do the same for your sister. Even if by chance he tries to do that, after hearing about our act, my elder brother will reject the alliance. This is my theory. Right or wrong?

Buchchamma: May be right.

Girisam: Then, do you agree?

Buchchamma: Agree to what?

Girisam: To run away with me.

Buchchamma: Oh, no! Not even if I lose my life.

Girisam: If you don't, your sister's marriage is inevitable, my life sacrifice is also inevitable.

Buchchamma: Don't say like that.

Girisam: Even if I don't say, will my death not happen? I can't live without you. That itself is like death. If you promise with me as witness and you break it, that is another death.

Buchchamma: If you die because of me, I will also die. Please don't die.

Girisam: Is it in my control? There, your brother is coming. We can't have any more private talk about our issues. You want me to live or die?

Buchchamma: Live for a thousand years.

Girisam: Then, sure you are coming with me?

Buchchamma: Will do what you ask me to.

(Venkatesam enters with a grass-hopper that he just caught.)

Venka: Here, I got a golla-bhama⁶⁰.

Girisam: You see, vadina! Your brother is a small boy but he is already catching 'golla-bhamas'.

Buchchamma: (smiles) Grass-hopper?

Girisam: (to Buchchamma) After these many days, got Midatham-bhotlu in hand. (to Venkatesam) Give it to me. See, catching this is education. It's called *natural history*.

Venka: Akka⁶¹! Give me some dough to eat!

Buchchamma: If mom sees, she will kick us.

Venka: Don't worry, she wouldn't see. (takes a bit of the dough in hand, licks it and leaps away.)

(curtains down.)

60 In Telugu, one species of grass-hopper is called 'golla bhama' which actually means a girl who sells milk and butter milk.

61 'akka' means elder sister

Act 5

Location 1: Bedroom of Lubdhavadhanlu

(Lubdhavadhanlu will be sleeping on his bed. Suddenly he starts screaming, flailing his hands and legs, gets up and starts shivering.)

Lubdha: Hei Asiri! Ammi⁶²! He has killed me. Rama naama taarakam⁶³! Rama naama taarakam! Rama naama taarakam! This is certainly second-marriage bitch. Her husband has become a ghost and is choking me to death. What to do? Rama naama taarakam!

(from the other side of the door)

Asiri: What is that sir! What is it?

(knocks the door)

Meenakshi: What is it father? Please open the door.

Lubdha: (to himself) My legs are not moving. Hands are shaking. (opens the door. To Asiri) Idiot, you don't come in.

Asiri: I came because you called me. (exits.)

(Meenakshi and disciple enter.)

Lubdha: (to Meenakshi) Ask that bitch to stand outside.

Meena: (to disciple) You go to our room (disciple exits) What is it father?

Lubdha: I will not live anymore.

Meena: What have you got, father? Stomach pain or leg pain?

Lubdha: Neither. How will any fellow who marries a widow survive?

Meena: What horrible words, father! Who is sowing such unfounded doubts in your mind?

62 Referring to his daughter

63 Remembering god Rama, when scared and/or in danger

Lubdha: What doubt? It's true, true, true. The whole village is saying it.

Meena: It must be the handiwork of Ramappantulu. He is the one who creates such rumours. He chats up anyone and everyone he comes across and creates scope for them to think of all kinds of baseless rumours. No wonder the whole village thinks so. Don't say such things to such a wonderful girl and scare her further. She is already crying that her father had already gone back.

Lubdha: Scoundrel! He saddled me with a second marriage widow and disappeared. I wouldn't survive. I will die for sure.

Meena: Don't keep repeating 'second marriage widow' as if it's something auspicious. If you yourself are saying it and spreading it among people, why will they not believe. Don't say such things and be quiet.

Lubdha: How I can be quiet? He is not even from our village or country. He just disappeared without even telling his name. If his daughter wasn't widowed earlier, why should he run away without even telling his name?

Meena: It seems he told the priest his name?

Lubdha: Non-sense. Different name every hour.

Meena: For him also, wouldn't it be difficult to remember the name of a strange, new person? When our girl is in our house, why do we need his name anymore?

Lubdha: If this widowed wife is in our house, I will die for sure.

Meena: Don't shout like a madman. Please be quiet.

Otherwise, neighbours will have a laugh at your expense. Your father-in-law is such a learned scholar and a gentleman! Don't have such unfounded and unwanted suspicions. The maid servant gets very worried.

Lubdha: You wretched girl! Has he bribed you? Otherwise, why are you backing him? Maybe you want me to die.

Meena: Have you lost your mind? In a day or two, he will surely come and give us a thorough dress-down for such words.

Lubdha: He is a no-address fellow. You think he is going to come back? No way and my death is certain.

Meena: Why do you blow your top as if you are dying right now? Even if it's a second-marriage girl, you should be quiet and not kick up a racket, okay? There are so many who have married girls who were married earlier and they are all fine, right? This girl is a good girl and you are lucky to have got her. Just be quiet.

Lubdha: Luck, my foot! What has gone wrong with you? Are you also part of this conspiracy of getting me married to this once-widowed girl? (cursing self) Oh, idiot! What happened to your wisdom, education and scholarship of vedas? (to self) I will not survive. (Meenakshi laughs.)

Lubdha: You are laughing, you unchaste bitch! You and your step-mother will kill me, go to Rajamahendravaram and undergo widow-marriage. I know. What that Girisam fellow said is true. I should have listened to him. All my wealth will go to those wretched fellows who would perform my last rites. You go away. I will go to bed. (lies down) God! Looks like he will come again!

Meena: Who, father?

Lubdha: Why do you want to know? You get out. That fellow will again choke me. Your wish will be fulfilled.

Meena: I feel like crying if you speak like that. Who is that fellow who will choke you?

Lubdha: Then make your bed here on the floor and sleep here.

Meena: Okay. Tell me who is going to choke?

Lubdha: Who else – that bitch's first husband. Before you came, he sat on my chest and started choking. I thought I died.

Meena: Really? - I think it was in your dreams, father.

Lubdha: What dream? Really my throat was choked.

Meena: How do you know it was the first husband?

Lubdha: That fellow himself! "Idiot! You married my wife. I will kill you", he said.

Meena: How does he look like?

Lubdha: Carbon copy of Girisam fellow.

Meena: I think it's just a dream, father. If you kept thinking of it when you went to bed, may be he came in your dreams.

Lubdha: Who will worry if I die?

Meena: Shall I go and ask that girl?

Lubdha: No, no. Don't hurry.

Meena: You are scolding me and you are scared that her dead husband will kill you. Instead of having such suspicions, why don't we go and ask her directly? We will get to know the truth.

Lubdha: Will she tell you the truth?

Meena: She will tell me. She is an old-style honest girl. She attends to me so much.

Lubdha: You are spoiling her.

Meena: These are the kind of words I dislike. I think you got scared and that's why you are having such nightmares. That is all, but don't blabber about second marriage, third marriage and so on. I will call priest Gavarayya. He will chant some mantras and give you sacred ash. Apply that and go to sleep.

Lubdha: You will destroy me! If that fellow comes, what shall I tell him? Instead, ask that girl herself, please.

Meena: I wouldn't, father. When you are speaking so ill of her, how can I? I will not talk to her anymore.

Lubdha: Please, please, I beg you.

(Meenakshi exits.)

What to do? Shall I chant veda mantras? But all these have no effect on those ghosts. Shall I chant 'shapara' mantras? But they say, they could backfire. What to do? I will just chant the name of Lord Rama – 'Ramanamatarakam'. (chants for a while). If this widow is in this house, I wouldn't survive. (again chants 'Ramanamatarakam'). Where is my 'rudrakshamaala'?

(As he bends and searches for it under the cot and fetches it, Meenakshi enters.)

Meena: Father, what you said is true.

Lubdha: Really? (from the cot, collapses on the floor)

Meena: (lifts him) Father! Father! Why did you fall? What happened?

Lubdha: Nothing. Is it true? Is it true?

Meena: Yeah. Apparently that dead husband appeared for her also and said, "How dare you married again? I am going to kill him".

Lubdha: Oh, god! May that Ramappantulu's house go to dogs! How did I fall for his sweet talk and got trapped into this wretched marriage? May he go to hell! How does that dead husband look like, it seems?

Meena: He appears for her every day, it seems. He is tall, with moustache and curly hair and is fair-complexioned.

Lubdha: He is the one! What is the way out now?

Meena: I will send for priest Gavarayya.

Lubdha: No, no. Listen to me. If he comes, he will loot me.

Meena: Let him. Is your wealth more important than your life?

Lubdha: When I am saying I don't want, you're not paying heed to me, you see. Make your bedding next to my cot and sleep here. Get the 'Bhagavatham' book that you keep reading. I will keep it under my pillow and sleep.

(Meenakshi leaves.)

Unless this widow bitch is thrown out of this house, I can't be rid of that ghost. You educated idiot! This not some ordinary ghost, must be the great demon⁶⁴! I will appeal to that demon himself! "Oh first husband of my wife! No, no. Not my wife. Pardon me. You are the real husband – not me. I wouldn't touch her – I will not get any house work done by her. Save me! Don't choke and kill me; You committed some sin and that's why you have become a great demon. Now, if you kill me, it would be your biggest sin and you will not be reborn to wash it off! Please leave me alone! Go and choke your father-in-law! Choke that Ramappantulu! Or (sudden screams and crying is heard) Oh, god! Looks like he has come again! (disciple comes in crying and hugs Lubdhavadhanlu. Meenakshi tries to hit the disciple with a broom; disciple escapes and Lubdhavadhanlu gets hit.)

Meena: You bitch! Drop my mohar⁶⁵ right there! Where is my key, you bitch!

Lubdha: Why did you hit me? (to disciple) Leave me, don't touch me! (to Meenakshi) If the dirty, not-sacred body touches me, I will die. Get me out of her embrace (Meenakshi grabs the disciple by the arm and pulls away. Disciple bites Meenakshi's hand and runs away.)

Meena: Damn that bitch! She bit my hand and it's bleeding! I will kill her.

Lubdha: What a terrible thing that bitch has done! Show your hand (wipes the blood with a cloth) You mentioned that seal. Where did you get it from?

Meena: Her father fellow gave it to her to give to me. Fooled by her faked obedience, I gave even my jewels to her and asked her to keep along with that seal. Now she said she kept

64 Brahma rakshi

65 Seal, in the form of a ring in this context

it in the clothes trunk and locked it, but the key is lost. Bitch! I will break her head if she does not give me the key.

Lubdha: Don't raise your hand on her. In your mad rage you may even beat her up to death.

Meena: If she dies, I will pull her out onto the street. See how badly that bitch has bit me. It's still bleeding. They say there is no antidote to human bite.

Lubdha: Apply vermillion.

Meena: First I will break her head into pieces and then apply that. (Meenakshi leaves.)

Lubdha: The doubt is cleared – either that fellow will choke me and kill or this bitch will bite and kill. Either way, death is certain. Why the hell did I bring onto myself this marriage of death! If we kick her out, I can get rid of that dead husband fellow also. That's it! Where shall I drive her out to? Will put her in a cart and send off to the town. But – if she doesn't find her father there, she will again come back here, with the ghost in tow. What to do? What to do? - Shall ask Ramappantulu for suggestion? I think that's a good idea. I will send off this bitch to the same fellow who saddled me with her. He will keep this bitch also, along with that prostitute. If needed, I will her give away with an offering of ten rupees.

(Meenakshi enters.)

Meena: Can't find her anywhere.

Lubdha: Did she fall into the well, by any chance?

Meena: Maybe, I don't know.

Lubdha: Run and get Gavarayya. You didn't beat her up, right?

Meena: How, when I can't even find her?

Lubdha: Oh, god! What is this new problem now?

(Both exit.)

Location 2: Inner room of Ramappantulu's house

(Bhukta, Poli Setty, astrologer and Madhuravani will be playing cards. Priest Gavarayya will be watching.)

Poli: What wretched hand have you dealt me! You are always like this.

Bhukta: Did I see and give? Blame your goddess of ill-fortune.

Poli: Gavavarayya, don't distract me. Go away.

Gava: Okay, I will go sit next to our Madhuravani.

Bhukta: I think you have dealt me the wrong card. Just check.

Poli: Hey, you brahmin fellow! You are deliberately dealing me the wrong card. I will teach you a lesson if you deal me wrong cards.

Bhukta: You said you didn't get good cards?

Poli: Can't you deal me four aces in the second round?

Bhukta: (while dealing for Poli Setty) Here, I am dealing four aces for you. Enjoy!

Poli: If you deal with your iron hand, I get only bad cards, not good ones.

Bhukta: So be it!

Poli: Don't utter such words! However bad you may be, since you are a brahmin, it will have effect. (checks his cards) Damn! Bad cards!

Astrologer: One, two.

Poli: There, if you say like that, I wouldn't agree. Say, one at a time.

Astrologer: Then, one.

Poli: One.

Madhura: One.

Bhukta: One.

(Astrologer falls into deep thought.)

Poli: What are you thinking? Take that card and win.

Astrologer: Will take it because you say so.

Poli: Wait! Put the money here and then take that card. You can't play odd cards, borrow on them and then refuse to pay up, remember?

Astro: (plays his cards on the stack and) Setty's pony tail is pecking up?

Poli: You will kick me or what?

Astro: Not simple kicks.

Poli: You spoiled my game, you brahmin fellow!

Bhukta: First you cribbed⁶⁶ that you didn't get good cards, now you are cribbing that I spoiled your game?

Poli: If I don't win this hand, see what I will do ...

Astro: Hey, setty! Will you shut up or not?

Poli: When the white man's flag is flying, how dare you try to show your power? If you take so long to take the next card, how can we play the next game?

Astro: If you open your mouth again, I will shuffle all the cards.
(Poli Setty gestures that he wouldn't talk. Astrologer plays.)

[TBD: translating the intricacies of the card game they were playing]

(As they were playing seriously, the front door is knocked.)

Madhura: Pantulu!

Poli: You said he won't come today?

Madhura: I thought he wouldn't come. He has come now. What to do?

Astro: Cancel the game. (drops his cards.)

Poli: To win this hand? No, I wouldn't agree. Madhuroni, play

66 'cribbing' is colloquial for complaining'

the game and then open the door.

Madhura: (keeps her cards on the floor, gets up and with low voice) Jump over the backyard wall and run away.

Bhuka: Will escape through the side gate.

Poli: I can't squeeze through it! What to do?

Bhukta: We will escape through the side exit. You climb into the attick.

Poli: Climb me up into the attick and then go. What if I can't?

Astro: Your bad luck.

(goes to the backyard.)

Poli: Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Keep your cards with yourselves. Don't cancel the game.

(again the front door is knocked.)

Poli: Lord Narasimha, only you can...

(Madhuravani angrily gestures to him to keep quiet.)

(Astrologer enters.)

Astro: Side door is locked. Looks like Pantulu locked it up.

Poli: Lord Narasimha, only you can...

Madhura: (addressing Poli Setty) Shh! (low voice) Stay quiet in this room. After he goes to sleep, I will come back, open the door and let you go out.

(Madhuravani puts out the lamps, goes out and closes the door of this inner room and bolts it)

(front door is again knocked.)

Madhura: What is this silly behaviour? (goes close to the front door) Who is it?

Man outside the door: Why this long?

Madhura: Was sleeping.

Man: Cards! Cards! Cards! I will abandon you. I know about you now.

Madhura: If you go away on your own, leaving me alone at night in this isolated house, will I not be scared? So, I publicly

called four people and was playing cards with them. Is it wrong? It's very foggy. Come in (unbolts the door and) come in. You play my game. I will go to sleep.

Man: Can anyone trust a prostitute? I got something to give you happily. Your act has put me off.

Madhura: However well-behaved I am, you have no consideration for me in your heart. From today onwards, wherever you go, I will come along with you.

Madhura: What magic! How did you imitate Pantulu's voice? You deceived even me? (holds that man's arm) come into the room (takes her into the room) Which god gave you such beautiful eyes? (kisses) Tell me what all surprise acts you did in their house.

Disciple: Will tell if your promise that you won't kiss me.

Madhura: I am not good enough for you?

Disciple: If you kiss me, it's dirty.

Madhura: True. Your elders don't have the wisdom that you have. You scared me unnecessarily. What's the punishment for it? Shall I bite your cheek?

Disciple: If you have milk and sugar, give me.

Madhura: I will feed you later. First I will dress you up as 'dasari'. Go to a new agrapharam and meet your teacher.

(Curtains down.)

(In the dark room, Poli Setty, Bhukta and astrologer will be there; from the other side of the screen, disciple, with the voice of Ramappantulu, "You have hidden someone in this room")

Madhura: Rama! Rama! Nobody is there.

(Poli Setty climbs the ladder. Bhukta also starts climbing. After four steps, both fall down.)

Poli: You killed me, ye brahmin fellow!

Bhukta: You fell on me and are suffocating me, you say I am

killing you? Will you get up or shall I bite you?

Disciple: (with Ramappantulu's voice) See, some one is talking in that room, you bitch! Sounds like that setty fellow's voice. Let me lock up the room and I will go and get the entire village.

Madhura: Why lock? No need. This is ghost house. Ghosts are fighting with each other.

(Madhuravani opens the room, strikes a match. Disciple moves aside.)

Madhura: What is up with this Poli Setty? Not getting up at all? Shall I sing wake-up songs?

Bhukta: Where is Ramappantulu?

Madhura: No Ramappantulu, Geemappantulu. Don't worry. It was just the house servant.

Bhukta: But we heard him speak?

Madhura: That was me, imitating him.

Poli: "Lord Narasimha, .your holy.." (gets up) "name..." Every body has his cards?

(All sit down to play again.)

Astro: I mixed up the cards.

Poli: Terrible! Terrible! I thought I can win because I got spade ace! Terrible! Terrible! Madhuroni unnecessarily scared me. I fell from the attick and broke my waist.

Bhukta: I got crushed under you. What's wrong with you?

Poli: Mix the cards.

Astro: I won't. My turn is over. You do.

Poli: What is over?

(Ramappantulu knocks the front door.)

Rama: Lakshmi! Lakshmi!

Madhura: This time it IS Pantulu.

Poli: What to do?

Madhu: Jump over the wall and run away.

Poli: I can't jump!

Madhura: I will lock you up in this room.

Poli: Don't put out the lamp. I get scared.

Astro: The glass pieces on top of the wall will hurt. How to go over the wall?

Bhukta: My legs are stiff...can't jump over the wall.

Madhura: (put out the lamp) Be like this in this room itself.

Poli: "Narasimha - "

Madhu: Chup!

Poli: I am dead!

Madhura: (bolts the inner room, unbolts the front door and opens it slightly) Where did you hide that fake girl?

Rama: What fake girl?

Madhura: So innocent you are! Where did you hide Lubdhavadhanlu's fake wife, after spiriting her out of their house? Isn't it the business you were involved in, the whole night?

Rama: I can't understand what you are saying. Stealing her? Hiding her?

Madhura: You hid her or didn't hide her. How does it matter to me?

Rama: That reminds me.

Madhura: So strange! You forgot me, you forgot my article also. Forgot and gave to that fake girl. You stole her from their house and hid her somewhere and now in the middle of the night come here like a gentleman.

Rama: That girl is missing?

Madhura: What drama! Why can't you see? She is where you kept her.

Rama: Did Meenakshi kick her out? Will be dead if she kicked her out snatching that jewel?

Madhura: What drama! You die or live, but without that

'object' of mine, I won't let you step in.

(closes the door.)

Rama: I come home after a tiring four-mile journey by horse cart and what a jolt! Did I ever dream that Meenakshi will let that fake girl live in their house? To hell with that girl. Will be lucky if I get back that object. If I go back, what if he picks up a stick to beat me up, saying I am responsible for this marriage?

(exits.)

Location 3: Portico of Lubdhavadhanlu's house

(Lubdhavadhanlu will be pacing up and down the portico)

If she is not found, what does it mean? Did she fall into the well? Police fellows will loot me. If not in the well, where is she? Must have run away to Ramappantulu's house. That's what it must be – what a beautiful girl! But What an ill-luck! Suddenly the bright light turned dark! Was excited that in a few days she will become mature – or, has she already matured? No doubt about it. Otherwise, how can such a well-grown girl be not mature? I wonder how many times she married like this and sent the respective husbands to heaven? You idiot! Have you gone blind? How did you marry a girl who has attained puberty? Your future is finished. You have joined all those idiots in Rajamahendravaram who have married widows! What is the absolution for this? None! Even if there is any, Shankaracharya will ask me for a heavy fee. And all the brahmins will loot my wealth in the name of cleansing my sins. Better than that is the police. If I give twenty five rupees to the head constable and then go to Kashi and take a dip in the Ganga river, all my sins will be washed away. I will stay there myself. God has taught me a good lesson. Otherwise, why should an old man like me think of marriage at this age? This Ramappantulu has ruined my life in all ways.

(Ramappantulu enters)

Rama: What mama, you are saying something about me?

Lubdha: No, nothing.

Rama: Why are you pacing up and down in your portico so late in the night?

Lubdha: Nothing – not getting sleep.

Rama: Mama garu, That Madhuravani is now stubbornly demanding for that necklace. Please pardon me and make arrangements to return it to me.

Lubdha: What necklace?

Rama: The one that was given to your wife.

Lubdha: No, I didn't put any such jewel to her.

Rama: Didn't I borrow it because you asked for it?

Lubdha: No, I didn't ask for it.

Rama: Oh, then you are going to swipe it? Isn't it on your wife's neck right now?

Lubdha: Who is my wife? She died long ago.

Rama: Isn't the girl that you married the other day your wife?

Lubdha: What?! That second-marriage widow? Non-sense!

Rama: Second-marriage widow? Who said that?

Lubdha: You yourself said that.

Rama: I just said that casually, in passing. That is not true.

Lubdha: No, you said that quite seriously. This is all conspiracy done by you and that Guntur shastri. Now, I got to know that truth. I am sure she went straight to your house. Like Madhuravani, you keep her also. But don't come anywhere near me anymore.

Rama: What is this non-sense talk when I am asking for my necklace?

Lubdha: Your fake girl and your necklace are in your house itself. Go check.

Rama: These tricks are not going to work with me. I will extract my necklace from you.

(Meenakshi with wet Bhagavatham book, Asiri with a stick in hand, turmeric-smearred pot onhead, priest Gavarayya in wet clothes and a bottle in hand, enter.)

Priest: Hreem! Hreem! Hreem! Omkara Bhairavi!

(Ramappantulu pretends to be afraid.)

Meenakshi: We didn't find her anywhere, father. She dropped this book into the well.

(Lubdhavadhanlu pretends to be afraid.)

Rama: Who is not found?

Meena: My stepmother – Gavarayya descended into the well and searched fully. Didn't find her. Nothing else was found in the well.

(Lubdhavadhanlu's fear comes down.)

Father, priest Gavarayya has trapped the great demon in this bottle.

(Ramappantulu stands away from the bottle.)

Rama: What is this demon business?

Lubdha: One demon came and scared my daughter.

Meena: No, not me. It throttled my father's neck.

Rama: Gavarayya garu, what do you think has happened to that girl?

Gavara: Her husband took her away.

Meena: To where? You said he is in this bottle, right?

Gavara: (thinks a while – smiles) That girl is also in this bottle itself

Meena: How did a human girl get into the bottle??

Gavara: You are so innocent! You think it's a human girl? It's a ghost of seduction⁶⁷. That is why, whenever I come to your house, she will go far away and I used to wonder why.

Meena: If you put both in the same bottle, they may procreate baby ghosts?

Gavara: Pantulu garu, please check and tell me if it has the weight of two people or not.

Rama: God, no! Don't even bring it near me.

Gavara: Asirigaa, you hold it.

67 'Kamini pishachi' is the word in Telugu

Asiri: Am I afraid? May Paidithalli⁶⁸ live long and well – (holds the bottle) God! How heavy it is!

Gavara: Put down the bottle and the pot near the tulasi plant.

Lubdha: I beg you, please don't keep that bottle in my house. Keep it in your house.

Gavara: If my children open it, thinking it's honey bottle, those ghosts will again come and stay in your house.

Lubdha: Then, bury that bottle.

Gavara: You think it's that simple? There is a long procedure to do it. Fire sarifice, religious meal for the brahmin, ...

Lubdha: Basically, loot my house!

Gavara: What can I do if you think like that? I will open the bottle and go off.

Lubdha: Why open it? I will pay you whatever I can. Just leave it there unopened.

Gavara: Are you trying to out-smart me? Bury it after I leave? If that bottle is buried without proper procedure, will I not go to hell? Let me open it right away.

Lubdha: Don't, don't. Do that shanthi procedure tomorrow. I will pay up.

Gavara: if so, I will keep it with me the whole night and sleep in your backyard. You sleep peacefully.

(leaves.)

Rama: Mama, can I have a word with you?
(both go to the side and have a brief talk.)

Rama: What about my necklace, mama?

Lubdha: It's in your house itself.

Rama: You are saying your wife has come to my house, but she hasn't. Nor is my necklace there.

Lubdha: Then I don't know what happened to it.

Rama: Beware. Return my necklace to me. Or else, you will see

my not-so-nice side.

Lubdha: I don't know all that necklace, gicklace.

Rama: If not you, who else will know? Gavarayya said your wife has become a ghost. Maybe you and Meenakshi got together and killed her.

Lubdha: You scoundrel! (makes to hit him with a stick)

Rama: You stole my necklace, right? I will teach you a lesson. Just wait. (exits.)

Lubdha: (to himself) What happened to the necklace? (aloud)
Child!

Meena: What is it, father?

Lubdha: What did she do to the necklace?

Meena: How will I know? May be she hid it in the trunk? Or may be it's on her person.

Lubdha: If it's on her person, why does a ghost need it?

Meeha: Why? She is still greedy about it, right? So, she would have kept it on.

Lubdha: Did Gavarayya search the well thoroughly?

Meena: He searched for an hour.

Lubdha: Did you see?

Meena: Yes.

Lubdha: May be she went off to Ramappantulu's house itself?

Meena: Gavarayya trapped her in the bottle, right? How can she go?

Lubdha: I don't know. I am totally confused now. Come let's go to sleep. This is our fate.

(both exit.)

Location 4: Garden behind the arrack shop in Ramachandrapuram Agraharam

(In this garden, the mantap in front of Kali temple. In the temple, in front of Kali statue, a big seat with three bottles full of arrack⁶⁹; around it, lot of glasses and on it, lot of garlands of flowers. In the mantap, to one side, an ascetic wearing tiger skin and leaning on his yoga staff; a yogini will be supplying arrack to everyone. Village munsif Soma Naidu will be smoking pipe. Sathani Manavallaiah, Jangam Veeresam and shop keeper Ramadas will be sitting afar.)

Munsif: Was sky born first? Or the earth?

Manavallaiah: Hammer first or car?

Munsif: Naamaalu⁷⁰ first or pattevardhanam⁷¹ first? Hey namala fellow? What's your answer to my challenge? Is the earth the mud for the sky, or is the sky the lid for the earth?

Mana: Sky is nothing.

Munsif: Nothing? It's nothing for the blind. You mean the white man is stupid? Why does he keep on looking at the sky through the pipe⁷²?

Mana: How will mlechchas⁷³ know the secrets of our ancient scriptures?

Munsif: You think it's as simple as eating sweet rice⁷⁴? What do you know about the white man's greatness? There is as much difference between the white man and you as the difference between the white man's arrack and our Andhra

69 A version of Indian country liquor

70 The vertical lime paste lines that Vaishnavites (devotees of Lord Vishnu) wear on their foreheads

71 Thick wide lime paste that men wear on their forehead

72 Referring to telescope

73 Referring to foreigners

74 Sweet pongal

liquor.

Mana: In mathematics, sky means zero – zero means nothing.

Veeresa: In the scriptures, didn't they mention sky and earth? If there is earth, how can sky be missing?

Munsif: Veeresa made a very profound statement.

Veeresa: They say “sky got holed”. If there is no sky, how can it get holed?

Munsif: Well said, Veeresa. Why is the namam fellow⁷⁵ not talking?

(Veeresa blows the conch.)

Head Constable: (to shop keeper) What is this commotion?

Munsif: Veeresa won, so will he not blow his conch?

Shop keeper: If guruji's penance/meditation is disturbed, will he not curse us?

Ascetic (bairaagi): (opens his eyes and) Shiva-brahmam!
Shiva-brahmam! Shivoham!

Veeresa: You see, my friend! He said “Shiva Brahmam”.

Ascetic: Rama brahmam! Rama brahmam! Ramoham!

Munsif: Second word cancels the first word. Ramanuja!
Ramanuja!

Veeresa: Chiva chivaa! chiva chivaa⁷⁶!

Shop keeper: Why do you argue? Your Shiva is true. There, in that bottle he is glowing. And Rama is also true, glowing in the other bottle. Didn't you hear the philosophy?

“Like the lamp glowing in the glass bottle
Wisdom glows
And within the selves of the Wise
Listen, O Lord of the world”

Ascetic: True. True.

Shop keeper: Guriiji! You know everything! Our body is like a

75 Referring to Manavallaiah

76 'chiva' is Shiva and this long string of invocations is uttered by the Shiva devotees when they hear something untoward

glass bottle and what is inside is the great soul⁷⁷! What is inside the glass bottle is the essence of food that we eat. And unless it's fed to the great soul, it will not glow. What are your thoughts?

Ascetic: How did you get to know this great secret, my brother?

Shop keeper: By the grace of great people like you, guruji! (looks around at others) See friends, I also say the same thing all the time, right?

Ascetic: What is elixir? It is this liquor itself. Isn't it for this that gods and demons fought with each other long ago?

Veeresa: Chiva chivaa! chiva chivaa!

Mana: Ramanuja! Ramanuja!

Munsif: Stop quarelling and listen to his wise words, you idiots!

Head: Guru, please make another round of that elixir and give it to this disciple of yours.

Ascetic: Okay.

Munsif: Guru! You make gold and you build monastery in Haridwar. But you ask us for money. Why?

Ascetic: If we use the gold that we make, our heads will blow up into pieces.

Head: You keep quiet, mama⁷⁸! That is a different secret. Guruji! It's quite cold in Haridwar, right?

Ascetic: That's for ordinary mortals. For ascetics/Sidhdhas like us, there is no heat, cold, sorrow, happiness. Everything is same.

Head: Aha! How lucky these sidhdhas are!

Munsif: Guru! When did you start from Haridwar?

Ascetic: Two days ago. Worshipped at Prayag day before yesterday, at Jagannadh yesterday morning. While traveling by the sky route, my travel abruptly stopped at the garden of your

77 Referring to God

78 Referring to munsif

village deity/goddess. Wondering why, I used my divine vision and discovered that a yantram⁷⁹ buried some thirty feet right under the statue of the deity. Then I came down to earth, worshipped the goddess and was about to proceed on my way, but this devotee stopped me.

Shop keeper: I can identify sidhdhas when I see them, guruji...

Munsif: Yeah, yeah. You identify tipsters very easily. Our village deity is the mother of the whole universe. Very kind.

Ascetic: Brahmoham! Brahmoham!

Head: Aha! The power of yoga! The brahmins who take holy bath and do penance can't attain such sidhdha powers!

Ascetic: Isn't there lot of difference between appearance and wisdom, my brother? Didn't my grand father say, "What is the use of following a tradition without a clean conscience"?

Head: Guruji, was Vemana your grandfather?

Ascetic: Yes. It's six hundred years since he attained heaven.

Head: What is your age, guruji?

Ascetic: Brother, how can something that has no beginning and end have age? I am as old as the god.

Munsif: What valuable words!

(Veerasa blows the conch.)

Head: (snatches the conch, keeps it aside) Don't drink too much, brother.

Shop keeper: Too much? If we don't drink till we lose ourselves, how can it be considered at all?

Didn't Vemana say, "Unless you drink until you lose yourself and fall down, you are not considered drunk"?⁸⁰

Ascetic: Two hundred and fifty years ago, under the rule of Alangir Badusha in Kashi, one seth invited all ascetics like me. In the middle of river Ganga, on boats, he filled gold bowls with arrack from the casks and served us. By mid-night, all casks were empty. All fell down.

79 A construct used by tantrics

80 This is just the summary of the Vemana poem quoted here in the original

Head: What a surprise!

Ascetic: Only I and one Nepali brahmin remained standing. “Bring more, bring more. Or else shall I curse you?” said the brahmin. Where will the seth get arrack from? He fell at our feet. We relented and recited a mantra and filled a bowl with the water from Ganga and it became arrack. Like that, the brahmin drank one thousand fills and burped! There are greats even among brahmins. For one who can find it, isn't the entire Ganga attack?

Munsif: Ramadas is a master to fill Ganga with arrack.

(Havaladar Achchanna enters.)

Shop keeper: Guru, this is Havaladar Achchanna, very learned and wise. He is munsif's nephew.

Havaladar: Ram! Ram!

Ascetic: Ram! Ram!

Hava: (to yogini) Girl, get me hookah (to Head) bhair, got any news about the whereabouts of the Guntur shastri?

Head: No, brother.

Shop keeper: Ramappantulu says – bride is a second-marriage girl, and he sold her, got hold of the money and ...

Head: Let's not bother about such rumours.

Munsif: Police are not bothered, brahmins are not bothered and if that old brahmin marries a widow, should the whole world keep quiet?

Head: When the fellow who gave the money and the one who married are not worried, why should we worry, mama?

Anyway, where is brahminism these days? Everywhere we see children being sold to old men, isn't it?

Hava: This is the era of Kali, right? However bad they may be, brahmins are still respectable for us.

Head: Anna, people are great in their own right – only wisdom and moral conduct matter, and not caste, isn't it? What did Vemana say?

Munsif: What did he say? Ask polieman for morality and satan

for wisdom.

Head: Mama, please don't poke fun at me. In all the taluks I served, I saw so many immoral pregnancies, you know? If you ask me, widows marrying again is better. Isn't our superintendent happily married to a lady who was married earlier and had children?

Munsif: His opinion is – isn't a cow with calf a better offer? That's why if that old brahmin fellow marries a widowed girl, why don't you advise your karnam⁸¹ friend to marry that old man's widowed daughter?

Hava: Why should we be concerned, mama? Government, gods, brahmins – they have their vedas and shastras. We have nothing to do with them. We should have our bhakti/devotion. (to head constable) brother, are white men and black men same? For the white, Christ had laid down one system. For muslims, saigambar had laid down one system. For the black, Rama had laid down another system. What did god tell the white man – marry a widow. What did Rama tell the Telugu man – don't marry a widow. I had been to many countries and seen many customs. But god and moral conduct are the same everywhere.

Munsif: Did Rama tell widows to do forbidden things? Didn't we have one hundred marriages in our system earlier?

Hava: O girl, fill the pipe and bring it here.

Munsif: The vaishnavite (namam fellow) is taking that girl aside and kissing her.

Yogini: (shyly pulls back her hand) Guruji is giving me private initiation/instruction.

Munsif: What could that be? To fly along with him with the speed of the wind?

Shop: Why are you uttering such uncharitable things about her? Our yogini is a good, faithful devotee.

Munsif: I ask for pardon. O girl, why don't you whisper that

81 Village accountant

instruction in my year? (yogini puts the liquor glass in front of havaldar.)

Munsif: The girl lost her mind with that fellow's 'instruction'.

Ascetic: Doesn't havaldarji take the elixir⁸²?

Hava: (smiles) Sojar⁸³ fellow got ruined by drinking and sepoy⁸⁴ by NOT drinking.

Munsif: Aren't you already drawing pension? Why do you need to serve, my dear son-in-law?

Hava: Once in company⁸⁵ service, forever in company service. If tomorrow we have to fight Russia, wouldn't I keep

aside this pension and go to war, with the gun on my shoulder?

Munsif: The Russian fellow's ship walks under-water, right? How are you going to shoot it with your gun?

Hava: Just as the British attacked Russia and beat them up earlier. Long live our queen.

Shop: Isn't the British queen the incarnation of goddess Kali?

Hava: Kali, Geeli, I don't know - Rama's incarnation.

Shop: Guru, havaldarji sings spiritual songs very well. (to yogini) amma, please bring my tambura and give it to bhai.

Munsif: This time, Veeresa is giving spiritual instruction⁸⁶.

Shop: What is this, bhai? Poking fun when great people are around?

Munsif: You say I am poking fun when I say the truth? How come nobody is giving me 'updesam'? Veeresa's instruction is working powerfully; wouldn't leave the hand (yogini, with great difficulty, frees her hand from his grip, brings the tambura and gives it.)

Shop: Those are all great secrets of wisdom. What is 'brahmanandam', the height of joy? Bellyful of arrack, noseful of tobacco smoke and a young girl in the bed, isn't it?

82 Referring to the local liquor that others are drinking

83 Local corruption of 'soldier'

84 Also means 'soldier'. Notice the satire and pun.

85 Referring to East India Company Ltd.

86 Referring to 'upadesam' (preaching) given by a guru to disciple

Munsif: Hear! Hear! Great words of wisdom!

Hava: Ignoramous! If the portrait of Rama were not put on the head of Kali, would the Company soldier set foot here at all?

Head: Brother, please sing a keerthan⁸⁷.

(Havaladar sings.)

“Where are you going? Why don't you say anything?
Why...”

(Manavallaiah takes out Veerese's conch and blows it.)

Hava: (stops singing, puts the tambura down) Gadda!

Head: (snatches back the conch) Will throw it into the fire.

Why do you do that?

Shop: Doesn't listen.

Head: If he doesn't listen, don't let him come to your shop. If there is a quarrel or racket, don't I get a bad name?

Shop: I snatched and hid away ten such conches. But he still keeps bringing another one. What to do? If I don't let him come to my shop, I lose business.

Munsif: Give a solid song. Its essence should go straight into the head.

Shop: (takes out the tambura and starts singing.)

[to be translated]

(While he is singing, Ramappantulu enters, gestures to yogini. Yogini goes and talk to him, comes back and tells a secret in head constable's ear.)

Munsif: The girls is giving spiritual initiation to Head.

Yogini: (puts her mouth near munsif's ear and pinches his ear)

Munsif: Oh, dear! So long since you gave me initiation!

(head constable goes to Ramappantulu, both move to one side and have a chat.)

Head: There are no strangers here. If bavaji is here, what is the problem?

Rama: I am not bothered about strangers. I have a disaster on hand. I need your help -

87 Devotional song or poem

Head: Will money work?

Rama: If you can, then yes.

Head: Tell me, what is the problem?

Rama: The girl who married Lubdhavadhanlu took Maduravani's necklace and ran away.

Head: I wonder why she ran away?

Rama: Because Meenakshi beat her up. Searched everywhere but couldn't find her. First send your jawans for searching.

Head: During this night, how can even my jawans search and catch? You thought police jawan has ten legs and ten eyes?

Rama: To hell with that girl! Doesn't matter if you catch her or not. Just get me my necklace, please.

Head: What are you saying? You say that girl ran away with your necklace. So, how can I get it?

Rama: When I ask the old man, he says she ran away with it; but actually he has hidded it in his trunk.

Head: So, what do you want me to do?

Rama: If you threaten him that it's a murder case, he will give back my necklace. You will also get suitable reward.

Head: Is it – but as you say, if that girl has run away with your necklace -

Rama: Ok leave it – just get me its worth in rupees.

Head: Will he give?

Rama: Then why do you think I am asking for your help?

Head: I don't think he will give. But I will try. To file a case, we need at least two, three witnesses, don't we?

Rama: What about these in this mandir?

Head: Veeresa and Manavallaiah are in the other world. If you ask havaldar to tell a lie, he will kick you. Munsif Naidu can't come walking that far. So, that leaves us with only Ramda, right?

Rama: Doesn't the ascetic speak?

Head: You think he is some beggar in the robes of an ascetic? He is a highly accomplished ascetic. Even if you give him as

much gold as his weight, he wouldn't tell a lie.

Rama: No need for the witness to speak; just standing there is enough.

(constable goes and brings shop keeper and the ascetic.)

Ascetic: When it comes to speaking as witness, people like me are the right choice. We can see what has happened when and where through divine vision and tell. So, we will also come. If we get something, we can contribute it to the monastery in Hariswar.

Rama: To hell with what happened. Some imagination is required here. If you say yes to what head constable tells the old man is true, that will suffice.

Ascetic: Stupidity! What is truth? What is untruth? We the ascetics make true untrue, and untrue true. Let's go.

(All exit.)

Location 5: Temple's entrance

(Head constable and Ramappantulu will be talking. Another constable and the ascetic will be standing to one side.)

Head: Brother, will I lose my job?

Rama: If you scare the accused little bit, will you lose your job? Isn't it part of your job? If you talk like this and slip out, what should I do?

Head: (throws away the paper pieces he has been crushing) Bhai, is Lubdhavadhanlu a kid or a hill monkey, to get scared easily? If there is a chance for this being a murder case, will I let go of this opportunity? As a policeman, what a boost would it give me for my career advancement? Have I not dragged these people into a pit in the middle of the night? If I say murder case, people will laugh at me. Most probably that girl must be hiding in some neighbour's house, fearing Meenakshi's beating. Or may be she is in your house, as the old man says.

Rama: I promise, she didn't come to my house. How can you so casually say she may be in some neighbour's house and leave it at that. I asked you to send for a search party and you didn't do that. If those neighbours swipe my necklace while that girl is sleeping, what about my fate after that? Madhuravani will throw me out if I don't take back her necklace. Will throw me out means she will cry and suck the life out of me. Are you listening?

Head: Then, shall I give you my suggestion?

Rama: Okay, tell.

Head: Till he gives your necklace, sit on Lubdhavadhanlu's house.

Rama: Is this a suggestion at all? Why, I will go home and peacefully sleep.

Head: Poor you. Madhuravani will eat you alive.

Rama: You are taking pity on me? If the old hag doesn't return my necklace tomorrow, I will file a civil case against him. He conceded to you about the necklace, right? So, I will enlist you as the witness.

Head: Oh, this is your master plan, is it? I am a police officer and if I go around giving witnesses for all sundry cases, will I keep my job? If you want, file an FIR with me that Lubdhavadhanlu stole your necklace. I will file the case and then you see the fun after that.

Rama: Once he has conceded to you about my necklace, let me see how you can tell a lie in the witness box.

Head: Pantulu, don't lecture me. That fellow said he doesn't know anything about your necklace. If you want, I will state just that.

Rama: Is this the help you promised me?

Head: Why are you getting worked up unnecessarily? Blame me if you don't see your necklace in your house tomorrow.

Rama: What should I tell Madhuravani now?

Head: What do you want me to do, then?

Rama: Come to Lubdhavadhanlu's house again. Both will eat his head off.

Head: All over again – you made me lose sleep the whole night without achieving anything. I can't come again. I told you to go and sit on his house, right? Listen to me and do that. That is my best advice. That bloody miser just gave twelve rupees for all the four of us put together. By the time I extracted even that amount from him, I was nearly dead. I will give away my share of three rupees to you.

Rama: Why to me?

Head: If you don't want, let's give it away to guruji.

Rama: I have some small expenses. Please give it to me anyway (takes it)

Head: Guruji, here is my token offering⁸⁸ to you.

Ascetic: Cash or kind, everything goes to the monastery.

Head: (to shop keeper and constable) three to you, three to you – (dusts off his hands) I am left with only the travails of running around.

Shop: (takes the ascetic aside) Just today first quality brandy has arrived from Chennai. Please have it and then leave for Kashi.

Head: Guruji Ram! Ram! Pantulu, go and catch that old fellow. Bhai, I have to go to the station. (to the jawan) Come with me, man (Head constable and jawan go in one direction and shop keeper and the ascetic go in the other direction.)

Rama: He dumps three rupees in my hand for my lost necklace! (laughs dejectedly) Will teach him a lesson. (picks up the paper pieces head constable threw away.) Will write anonymous letters one each to inspector and tahsildar.

Scoundrel, looks like he may go to Madhuravani. If I go, that mad bitch wouldn't open the door; will have to sleep on the bench outside. If I go to Lubdhavadhanlu's house, he will chase me with a stick. Shall I sleep in this temple? - what if some

88 In the original, he metaphorically offers a leaf of tulsi

snake or other poisonous creature bites me? Damn! I will leave this bitch – where did that girl go? If luckily she is hiding in some neighbour's house and I can find her, then shouldn't let go of the necklace – what if she died? - no, she wouldn't have – didn't jump into the well. Gavaraiah and Kamaiah had thoroughly searched. Suppose she is second marriage bride and her father had come with a cart and took her and ran away? Then the necklace would also be gone with them, right? - if I can catch hold of Meenakshi, could get some clues. How do I get to see her? Probably the old man himself will open the door if I go there? (crosses the door and stands in front of Lubdhavadhanlu's house and) Am ravenously hungry; If I can get to Meenakshi, she may give me some food? - who is it smoking cigar under that peepal tree? (takes four steps forward and) Asiri, you?

Asiri: Yes, sir (throws away the cigar.)

Rama: You seem to be very cool?

Asiri: What cool, sir? - this lady had stopped looking after me. Where are those magnanimous masters of yore?

Rama: Asiri, if you don't ask, will even your mother give you food?

Asiri: That prostitute lady is a bad woman, sir.

Rama: Oh, come on! It's been a long time since I have given you any money. Here, take this one rupee.

Asiri: Thank you and my respects to you, sir!

Rama: You were about to say something about Madhuravani?

Asiri: She is a bad woman, sir.

Rama: Who will go to her, Asiri, who?

Asiri: She will beat up any one who goes to her.

Rama: You said she is bad?

Asiri: Isn't she? The other day, when the head constable went to see her, didn't she get angry with him?

Rama: You said the truth. Does she ever get angry with you?

Asiri: Would she even care about people like me? If brahmins

come, she will scold them.

Rama: You always tell the truth.

Asiri: Of course! If I tell lies, will God pardon me?

Rama: What is your master doing?

Asiri: Sleeping.

Rama: I will give you one more rupee – will you go and ask Meenakshi to come to the portico?

Asiri: Is it within my capacity, sir? She is sleeping in her father's bedroom.

Rama: If you just snap your fingers, she will come, wherever she is. You think I don't know?

Asiri: Okay, sir. Give. I will try. (Ramappantulu gives him one rupee. Both enter the house.)

Location 6: Passage in Lubdhavadhanlu's house

(Door is ajar.)

(Meenakshi brings oil lamp and puts it in the alcove in the wall.

Ramappantulu reduces the flame and kisses Meenakshi.)

Meenakshi: Lost your way and came here?

Rama: All these days, was stupid and forgot the way.

Meena: How did Madhuravani let you come?

Rama: To hell with her. I will leave her. I am ravenously hungry. Do you have some food?

Meena: What do I have – just a coconut piece and soaked moong dal. Do you want?

Rama: Whatever. Just bring it.

(Meenakshi brings those eats in a bowl and gives to him. He will be eating.)

Meena: Will you leave Madhuravani?

Rama: Definite.

Meena: Heard about constable?

Rama: Yeah.

Meena: Who told you?

Rama: Asiri.

Meena: Our Asiri?

Rama: Yes, your Asiri himself.

(Asiri opens the front door little bit and peeps in.)

Asiri: Are you eating what was kept for the ghost?

Rama: What? This was kept for the ghost?

Meena: (to Asiri) Shut up, idiot!

Rama: Do you feel good about giving me what was kept for the ghost?

(goes out to the street, tries to vomit and comes back.)

Couldn't vomit. What's the way out now?

Meena: I say it's what is kept for the ghost and you still don't believe me?

Rama: Then why did you give it in this bowl?

Meena: Is the ghost really going to come and eat it?

Rama: Women are horrible people!

Meena: What did Asiri tell you about Madhuravani?

Asiri: Shall I take what you threw away?

Rama: Take it and go.

(Asiri takes it and goes.)

Meena: He is more gutsy than you are.

Rama: That filthy bastard will eat anything. We brahmins are pious, right?

Meena: Piety means, only yours and mine!

Rama: Why do you say that?

Meena: I am a widow and you are romantic. Who else can be more pious than us?

Rama: Today I came here precisely to erase that blemish.

Rama: If we get married, then where is unholiness?

Meena: What??

Rama: Let's marry?

Meena: Really?

Rama: Why, you want me to take an oath?

Meena: Put out that lamp.

Rama: Let me first read what's in these paper pieces and then put it out. (takes out the paper pieces from his pocket, reads and then) Son of a gun, took out the note about his loan and cheated me. Will teach him a lesson.

Meena: Who?

Rama: That's a different story.

Meena: What did Asiri tell you about constable?

Rama: That Madhuravani set the dog onto head constable.

Meena: Why?

Rama: Because he tried to barge into the house when I was not there.

Meena: Oh, stupid! Hey, Asiri?

Asiri: What, amma garu/madam?

Meena: Idiot, tell the truth now. Didn't you tell me that whenever pantulu is not at home constable is with Madhuravani?

Asiri: (scratches his head) Yeah, I said.

Rama: Liar! Didn't you say she set the dog on him?

Asiri: Servant should keep his mouth shut, isn't it sir? If Madhuravani asks me, how can I mention you?

Meena: (to Pantulu) You think I will be afraid even if you reveal our affair?

Rama: (to Asiri) You scoundrel! Don't ever mention about the two of us to anyone. Didn't I give you one rupee?

Meena: Why did you give him one rupee?

Asiri: I am a family man with children, that's why. (goes out.)

Rama: Dirty bitch is cheating me.

Meena: You said you were aware of it?

Rama: Didn't know that she would cheat this badly.

Meena: Once a woman goes off track of being honest, where is the end to it? And anyway, it's very stupid of you to expect a prostitute to have any morals and honesty.

Rama: Not just simple stupidity. Absolute stupidity. I feel like breaking her head into pieces. You know how much I have spent on her?

Meena: When are you going to kick her out?

Rama: Tomorrow itself! What an innocent face the bitch has put up!

Meena: When are we eloping?

Rama: Where?

Meena: Have you lost your mind? To Rajamendram, where else?

Rama: Yeah. Tomorrow I will chuck her out. Day after, we will run away. But will you bring your belongings with you or leave them to the old man?

Meena: All I have is my belongings. How can I leave them? But the key to my trunk is with my father, what to do?

Rama: What do you think of me? See, with this tiny steel rod in this ring, I can open any lock of your choice. But where is my necklace?

Meena: What was adorned on that girl? At night she used to put it in my clothes trunk.

Rama: I beg you, please open that trunk and check once. Tomorrow I will return it to Madhuravani and kick her out.

Menna: That girl threw away the key to my clothes trunk.

Rama: Don't worry, I will open it with this tiny steel rod.

Meena: Will you open my belongings trunk too?

Rama: Nah.

Meena: Didn't you promise that you will marry me?

Rama: With the lamp off, how can I unlock the trunk?

Meena: Match stick is there.

Rama: In that case, here, I promise that I will marry you, by

putting out this lamp. (blows out the lamp and hugs and lifts her.)

Rama: I will take you away to Rajamahendravaram like this.

(Lubdhavadhanlu comes in the dark and hits Ramappantulu on his legs with a stick. Meenakshi falls down.)

Lubdha: You stealthy scoundrel!

Rama: I am dead! (runs limping to the street.)

Lubdha: You also go, you bitch! (pushes Meenakshi and bolts the door.)

Rama: Hey, Asiri! He has beaten me to death! My leg is broken!

Asiri: (calmly) What else will happen if you eat ghost's food, sir? (aloud) What else will the old man do if you barge into his house at a very wrong time?

Rama: (to Meenakshi) You go into the house.

Meena: I won't step into that house again. Let my belongings go. Come, let's go to Rajamendram.

Rama: Whenever you wish, is it?

Meena: You marry me whenever you feel like, but since you took me away from my house, I am yours now. Let's go.

Rama: It's like a mad fellow declaring I am not mad any more! I beg you, please go home for now.

Meena: For the rest of my life, I will not step into that house again.

Rama: Asiri, she will be alone. Look after her and as soon as the old fellow opens the door, take her inside – (he runs, Meenakshi goes chasing him.)

(In front of Ramappantulu's house)

Rama: (knocks the door.) Quickly, quickly open the door!

Madhura: (from the other side of the door) Why such a hurry?

Rama: That leopard is chasing me!

Madhura: As soon as I can see the leopard, I will open the

door.

Rama: How can you see if you keep the door closed? Before you open the door, it will eat me alive.

Madhura: Where is my necklace?

Rama: Why are you so hung up about it? I can shower a hundred necklaces any moment.

Madhura: You keep your hundred necklaces. But give me mine and then only step into the house.

Rama: Lubdhavadhanlu said he will not give it till tomorrow morning.

Madhura: No issues, you come tomorrow morning then.

Rama: What if the leopard leaps onto me before that?

Madhura: Is it male or female?

Rama: Cat playing with the mouse! God!

(Meenakshi enters and grabs him by the arm.)

Meena: You put out the lamp and made the promise. If you break it, your head will blow into pieces.

Rama: Go, you bitch!

Meena: Am I not your would-be wife? Where can I go?

Madhura: What is this would-be business?

Meena: He said he will leave you, take me to Rajamendram and marry me – that too, made the promise after putting out the lamp – how can he break it?

Madhura: Is this the leopard?

Rama: You bitch! Leave my hand – when did I say I will marry you? Are you dreaming?

(As he frees himself from her grip, she falls down.)

Madhura: What manliness! To show your muscle power on a helpless woman! Don't lie. Keep up your promise. What is the problem? What does she lack? Is she not good looking? Is she of low caste? Anyway you spoiled her life. You better marry her and correct yourself. I will open the door only if you marry her and come with her.

Meena: When pantulu hugged and lifted me, my father

happened to see us; he kicked out both of us. He (pantulu) said anyway you are going around with the head constable so he will kick you out and then marry me. Since he eloped with me, how can he not marry me?

Madhura: Certainly he should marry you – will you keep quiet otherwise? You will file a case – anyway pantulu garu enjoys law suits.

Rama: Madhuravani, you have lost your mind! Are you the master of my house? Open the door!

Madhura: Stand there. I will light camphor and give you 'managa harathi'⁸⁹ (from behind the door, goes inside.)

Rama: (peeps through the crack in the door and kisses Meenakshi) What a terrible thing you have done! You revealed our secret to her! We should secretly elope without letting anyone know, right? Otherwise it will become a big ruckus.

Meena: Anyway, it will be known to all at sometime, right?

Rama: For now, listen to me and go home.

Meena: I will not go to my house anymore. This is my house. Madhuravani will open the door. Let's go in.

Rama: Then, be here. I will come back (walks along the street a few steps and stops) Looks like that stubborn bitch will really bring the camphor plate! Even if she doesn't open the door, Meenakshi will come searching for me. It's almost dawn. Let me go to the village tank and attend to my morning ablutions. And then think of what to do next. If I escape for a couple of days, all this commotion will settle down. Looks like she hasn't opened the door? Who the hell is she to not let me into my own house? What? (at a distance, disciple in the guise of mendicant will be playing tambura and singing.)

charanam: “You say it's your house!

But where is your house?”

Rama: This house is not mine?

Disc: “To the north of the village, in the cemetery, there is a

89 Welcoming with a lit camphor in a brass plate.

house of firewood!”

Rama: In the burial ground?

Disc: **Pallavi: “However long you live, what empire will you gain?**

Just a myth for a few days!”

Anupallavi: “About life of three days, you are overjoyed |

Can't see what is your future” |

Rama: What is this inauspicious song?

Disc: “Sticks are your relatives | Firewood your family Who is your mother?”

Rama: Relatives? I have one elder sister. She has never visited my home. And who is the master of my house? The prostitute on that side of the door! And a chaste widow on this side of the door! Both together are not letting me into my own house

Disc: “Four will carry you | And another ten will follow you |”

Rama: Non-sense song. Let's move ahead. (briskly walks ahead a few steps and stops)

Looks like he is coming the same way – he is again singing!

Song: (continues in the same philosophical tone exemplifying the ephemeral nature of life)

Rama: Non-sensical song!

Disc: Pantulu garu! How come you are here?

Rama: If I don't run, he will catch me! (runs.)

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## Act 6

### Location 1: Ramachandrapuram Agraharam

(Into the garden on the banks of the village tank, carts of the marriage party would enter. On one side of the bank Agnihothravadhanlu and on another Ramappantulu will be brushing their teeth.)

**Agni:** Lower the carts. Sayebu, there is enough fodder and water for the elephant. And the village tank is very convenient for bathing. Who is it on the bank?

**Rama:** (to himself) Oh, forgot. Today is the marriage day, right? (aloud) My name is Ramappantulu, sir!

**Agni:** Did Lubdhavadhanlu send you?

**Rama:** For what, sir?

**Agni:** Didn't he send anyone to welcome us? My name is Agnihothravadhanlu.

**Rama:** Oh, you are Agnihothravadhanlu? What did you come here for?

**Agni:** You don't know about the marriage or what?

**Rama:** Whose marriage, sir?

**Agni:** You are not from this village? We are giving our daughter to Lubdhavadhanlu in marriage.

**Rama:** His marriage is already over!?

**Agni:** You are just saying it for fun, I know. But seriously, how are the marriage preparations coming up?

**Rama:** I think you are making fun. It's ten days since the marriage got over. Apparently you wrote him that you don't want his alliance. So, he married the daughter of some Guntur shastri by paying twelve hundred rupees.

**Agni:** Brother – don't make fun. It's not right. Would you be my brother-in-law by relation?

**Rama:** What are you talking? I never tell lies. Is it right on your part not to believe my words?

**Agni:** Promise?

**Rama:** On goddess Gayathri.

**Agni:** Oh, no! What is this disaster? Come, let's go and break that scoundrel's bones.

**Rama:** I will not come. Because I recommended not to accept that Guntur alliance, he stopped talking to me. You go – I will sit here until you come back.

**Agni:** I don't know the way to that donkey's house, what to do?

(disciple sings as he climbs the bund of the village tank.)

**“Who are you? Who are your people? Body and the elusive soul got linked somehow!”**

(Ramappantulu stops and appears to be afraid.)

**Agni:** Why are you looking like that?

**Rama:** That's the song sung while carrying a dead body.

**Disciple: “Know that one dies every day”**

**Rama:** (to the disciple) Shut up. (to Agni) Brother, do you have a penny?

**Disc:** She asked me to fetch you.

**Rama:** Oh, no! I am dead! She will come or what?

**Disc:** She asked you to come, let the necklace go; doesn't matter;

**Rama:** I am saved.

**Agni:** Why did you say both – that you are dead and you are saved?

**Rama:** That's a different story.

**Disc:** Leopard cub's father came and took her home, it seems.

**Agni:** Leopards and tigers come into this village?

**Rama:** Good riddance (to the disciple) Here, take this rupee  
(disciple receives it) Your slave, sir!

(sings) **“Let the rains of Chitta and Swati come together”**

**Agni:** What is this non-sensical song? Will you shut up or not?  
Isn't one rupee not enough for you, stupid kid?

**Disc:** Will you not show your kindness on me?

**Agni:** No – now, who will show me the way?

**Rama:** (to disciple) You know Lubdhavadhanlu's house, right?

**Disc:** Yes, I know.

**Rama:** Avadhanlu sir will give you one penny – show him the house.

**Disc:** Wouldn't show unless he pays in advance.

**Agni:** Here – take!

(After disciple leading the way and Avadhanlu following him, walk a few steps, disciple starts singing) [something satirical about cat and mouse]

**Agni:** Mouse, you stupid!

**Disc:** Not mouse, cat.

(sings) [something that implies mice ploughing a field, which is not possible]

**Agni:** What??

**Disc:** “Two goat cubs got married and went around”

**Agni:** What is this stupid song?

**Disc:** [another non-sense line]

**Agni:** I will kick you if you sing again.

**Disc:** Then I wouldn't show you the house.

**Agni:** Stop singing – (raises hand to hit him)

**Disc:** (escapes and while running away) [sings another non-sense line]

(exits)

**Agni:** Scoundrel! Let him die! Now, which way is it to the house? This way or that way?

(curtains down)

## Location 2: Garden on the banks of the village tank

(Agnihothravadhanlu, Ramappantulu, Venkamma and others)

**Agni:** Have hit that donkey real hard. I have spent a fortune on elephants and horses. Now says wouldn't pay a penny even for travel expenses.

**Venkamma:** Our misfortune. For all my prayers, here is the result. I insisted that we don't go for this alliance. Did you listen to me? I have been afraid all the time. When we left, a cat crossed our path, which is a bad omen.

**Agni:** Idiot! Shut up! What do women know? Brother, is there a scope to file a criminal case? We have a family teacher. He knows the inside information about this case. We can ask him for advice.

**Rama:** You are an expert in court affairs. Why do you need others' advice? Since I am from this place, I said I can be witness for you, but do you really think these teachers and such are capable of giving us advice? Since these fellows learnt a few English words they can do some translation but for strategizing, warriors like you are the only suitable ones. And a agnosist like me should execute it. You ask if there is scope for criminal case – don't you know? Not just criminal case, I will easily extract three to four thousand through civil case also.

**Agni:** That's what I also thought.

**Rama:** Done, then. No need for advice from anyone. Let's immediately go and file it. Bring some money for expenses.

**Agni:** I don't have a single penny. What to do? Believing that

this donkey fellow give me money, I didn't bring any.

**Rama:** By the time you go home and get the money, it will be too late. Should hit the iron when it's hot. What's your thought?

**Agni:** Until and unless this is resolved, I am not returning home. Let's mortgage some jewels of my daughter in this village.

**Rama:** Then bring it. We will mortgage it with Poli Setty. Anyway we need to turn him to our favour. When you hit Lubdhavadhanlu, setty was there. So, when you file a case against him, he will certainly bring setty as witness. We have to separate setty from this – what do you say?

**Agni:** Your advice is very good. That's what I am also fearing.

**Rama:** See, is everyone capable of giving advice? That too, if you ask these English-educated teachers for advice, they would advise you against filing cases in the first place. Would say don't bring fake witnesses. What's their problem? How can we win cases without dirty tricks?

**Agni:** But our teacher is intelligent and clever – there is nothing he doesn't know when it comes to court affairs. I haven't seen such an intelligent teacher. If you meet him, you will also say the same thing.

**Rama:** Maybe, but is he good enough to give you advice? By the way, just for your ears – isn't that Girisam you are referring to as your family teacher? Isn't that fellow Lubdhavadhanlu's younger aunt's son? That fellow, giving you advice in court cases?

**Agni:** Yes, yes!

**Rama:** I am an independent agnostic person. Pay heed to my words. Send off the children with that teacher of yours as escort. We should put up the case before that Lubdhavadhanlu does so. Where is that item you said you will pawn?

**Agni:** Call the child here.

**Venka:** Where is she? May be she got tired and is sleeping in the cart. Call her.

**Agni:** Will we get fat compensation for the damages?

**Rama:** Fabulous amount!

**One fellow:** Ammi's cart is not to be seen anywhere. May be it fell behind.

**Venkamma:** There is our boy. My son, didn't you sit in akka<sup>90</sup>'s cart?

**Venkatesam:** No, I got onto the elephant and came.

**Agni:** Dirty fellow, where is that teacher?

**Venkamma:** Not to be seen anywhere.

**Agni:** Has the horse come? Where is the horse driver?

**Venkatesam:** Horse driver said -

**Agni:** Tell, what did he say?

**Venkatesam:** Master – night -

**Agni:** Why are you stuttering?

**Venkatesam:** Got off the horse and got into the cart, it seems.

**Venkamma:** Oh, no! Did he elope with her, by any chance?

**People nearby:** Oh! Oh!

**Venkamma:** Disaster! What to do?

(collapses into sitting position.)

**Agni:** (trembling with anger) That teacher fellow eloped with that widowed bitch? What about all the jewels? What about the court papers?

**Venka:** I put my books also in akka's trunk.

**Agni:** You stupid fellow! You are the one who got him into our house. I would kill him if I can get even a bit of a hint about where he is.

**Rama:** (comes closer) You said your teacher is a very good fellow? What did he take and run away?

**Agni:** What a question to ask? He eloped with my widowed daughter! This scoundrel's English education brought this disaster onto me. (as he catches Venkatesam's hair and is about to beat him up, curtains should be brought down.)

### Location 3: Street in front of Madhuravani's house in Visakhapatnam

(Ramappantulu and Agnihothravadhanlu enter.)

**Agni:** All the money I borrowed from Poli Setty is over. You always keep taking money from me for expenses. Now I don't have a penny with me.

**Rama:** Can you get any work done without spending money? Mortgage your bracelet somewhere.

**Agni:** Is there anyone in this village that we know?

**Rama:** Come, we will mortgage it with Madhuravani.

**Agni:** As the saying goes, "take holy dips and then sneak into brothels", you want me to enter that prostitute's house?

**Rama:** Otherwise how do you expect to win cases? Do you think she is like other prostitutes? She is like a dignified housewife. But if you don't like to come, give it to me. I will mortgage it and bring the money.

**Agni:** Not that way. I will also come.

**Rama:** Here, give me the bracelet.

**Agni:** This is my grandfather's. I don't like it one bit to give it away. You are making me spend money like water. It seems the lawyer you arranged is not suitable and he doesn't even know English.

**Rama:** There is no lawyer better than him in this whole district. He is very dear to the collector. I thought you were very determined and steadfast in your endeavours. But you don't show the same enthusiasm that you had at the

beginning. If you don't like spending money, then let's give up this case. Allow me to take leave of you.

**Agni:** (thinks) Okay, mortgage it. (and calmly takes off his bracelet and give it to Ramappantulu.)

**Rama:** (wears it on his arm) I am working so much on your case; so far you haven't paid me even a penny, did you?

**Agni:** That means you are going to run away with my bracelet?

**Rama:** I arranged such a powerful lawyer for you! And he is working so hard. Here he comes.

(Naidu enters.)

**Rama:** (to himself) Why is he coming from the backyard of Madhuravani's house? Has he also gotten habituated to her? We have to take him out of this case.

**Naidu:** What Pantulanna? You haven't gotten me the rest of the fee yet?

**Agni:** Bhukta garu said the defence that you wrote is not strong enough.

**Naidu:** Who said that? Will pull out their eyes. Pantulanna garu, see this allegation. My defence writing prowess is so good, even for high court, petitioners take my defence write-ups. This crappy case doesn't count for me at all. If my party follows diligently what I say, there is no scope for losing the case. Listen to this defence.

(takes out the bundle of files from under his arm, opens it and takes out a paper from it and reads.)

“All the statements made by the complainant are false and none of them is true.” See, with this one statement, the entire case of the opposite party will fall flat.

“The complainant has baselessly filed a case against me with mal-intentions because he doesn't like me. There is no truth in the case.”

**Rama:** Leave aside defence. Avadhanlu garu says he has no

money.

**Naidu:** How can the case work be done and taken forward without money?

**Rama:** Let me tell you something. Please come aside.  
(Ramappantulu and Naidu have a private talk.)

**Rama:** Lawyer garu, he is not happy with your vakalat. Howmuch ever I told him, he didn't listen to me and given the case to Bheema Rao garu; apparently someone had wrongly impressed on him that you don't know English, you don't know law etc. etc.

**Naidu:** If I, who had impressed Sallet Sir, don't know law, these idiots know law, is it? Is it enough if they can mouth couple of English words? That too, our deputy collector gets angry if it's an English lawyer. Moreover, if it's brahmin lawyer. Make everyone understand this.

**Rama:** You think I am jobless? I went to great lengths to make him understand. But this mad fellow doesn't understand.

**Naidu:** How can you disrespect me like this? Wait, I will go to the collector's office and reveal the real worth of this brahmin fellow.

(Curtains down.)

## Location 4: Place where Lubdhavadhanlu is staying

**Lubdhavadhanlu:** (enters) What a terrible state I landed in! No one in the world is as unfortunate as I am. I should have gone to Kashi as soon as Saturn entered that particular house in my horoscope. Did a stupid thing. If it's written in my fate, how could I escape anyway. Sowjanya Rao pantulu is god. Because such people are there, we are still getting rains. As he declared, when all the fault is mine, what's the point in

blaming fate? Though I had so much money, I got greedy and sold my daughter to that old man who promptly kicked the bucket. So, if she strays away from the path of morality, is it her fault? I am idiot, otherwise, what is this stupid idea of marriage for me at this old age? And I trusted that cheater Ramappantulu despite knowing his true colours. And that fake bride ran away. And that crazy episode of missing necklace. And the inspector charges me with murder? This is all kaliyug. Sowjanya Rao pantulu seems to be the only honest man. And all these police and lawyers are all thugs – if he can wield his power and save us, I will give up all this and go away to Kashi. What strange times! They have built a monastery for widows, it seems. Never heard of such things. I will ask my daughter to go and see that monastery. If she likes it, I will give her all the money she needs to live there. Otherwise she will live with me in Kashi.

(Ramappantulu enters.)

**Lubdha:** No use arguing with me about that necklace.

**Rama:** I didn't come here to talk about it, mama. That's Madhuravani's, don't you know? She and you can deal with it as you wish. Doesn't matter to me. To hell with that necklace. I came here to do you a great help. My heart bleeds looking at your miserable state.

**Lubdha:** Oh, lord! Leave me alone. And a thousand respects to you. I am going to become a sanyasi<sup>91</sup>.

[chants Rama's name praying for salvation]

**Rama:** Rama! Rama! How could you say that! It's my duty to bear whatever you say when you are at risk and distressed, and still do your work for you. Please listen to what I say. No time for dilly-dallying. I have got the entire affair organized and come here. With two pouches, the murder case will clear away

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91 One who has renounced all worldly things

like morning fog. Couldn't get it done with just one inspector.

Have to bribe deputy collector also. You said you don't have money, so I have made arrangements for that also. On promissory note, you can borrow any amount now and pay later.

**Lubdha:** I wouldn't pay even a penny as interest. [resumes chanting Rama song]

**Rama:** Listen to me. With great difficulty, I brought it to this final stage. The inspector made the deputy collector to believe that you bribed the tehsildar to cancel the murder case. On collector's advice, inspector worked hard and made witnesses also ready. If it's proven, just imagine what will happen.

**Lubdha:** Why are you bothered about what happens to me?

**Rama:** Deputy collector is brahmin hater – so, tehsildar's head will first roll. Then you and Meenakshi will be sent to the gallows. Because of my friendship with the inspector, I made him to agree to this arrangement. So, listen to me and escape from this danger.

**Lubdha:** Will you leave me alone and get on? [again starts singing Rama song]

**Rama:** I have never seen such a cruel fellow as you. You anyway are old. What about young Meenakshi? You are okay if your own daughter is sent to the gallows, but you want your money? My heart bleeds at the very thought.

(Sowjanya Rao pantulu enters.)

**Rama:** You are justice personified. But due to misplaced compassion for Lubdhavadhanlu, you have taken up his case. It's a bogus case. Not an iota of truth in it. If you order, I will get a strong defence arranged.

**Sowjanya Rao:** I know about you. Get out.

**Rama:** You are a worthy and great person, but still addressing

me in singular...

**Sowjanya:** I said go out.

(Ramappantulu exits.)

**Sowjanya:** Why did you let this scoundrel come again?

**Lubdha:** I ask him to leave, but he doesn't, sir.

**Sow:** Why did he come?

**Lubdha:** To persuade me to give bribes to inspector and deputy collector.

**Sow:** Deputy collector doesn't take bribes. He is a good friend of mine. I know. If you give bribes, I will not work on your case.

**Lubdha:** If I stray from your instructions, beat me with your chappal. You are god-send for me. I trust you to save me from this danger. I put my life in your hands.

**Sow:** I fully believe that you haven't committed any crime. I am working hard to find the truth but I am not able to trace that Guntur Shastri. I wrote a letter to Guntur based on the information you gave. But I got reply that there is no one who fits that description.

**Lubdha:** I wonder what that mystery is. If, with your kindness, I come out safe from this danger, I will submit all my money to you and go away to Kashi.

**Sow:** I already told you I don't need your money. If you listen to my words and at least now come to understand that it's not right for old men like you to marry again and kanyashulkam is wrong, then it would be good. you can put up your widowed daughter in the widow mutt (monastery) in Rajamahendravaram and make some contribution to the sabha there that would be very useful to their campaign to eradicate such socially wrong practices.

**Lubdha:** As you wish and as you instruct. Got my senses and will not commit such blunders again.

**Sow:** Does that Guntur shastri have western accent?  
Remember and tell me.

**Lubdha:** (thinks for a while and) No sir.

**Sow:** Think again and tell me.

**Lubdha:** No sir.

(Curtains down.)

## Location 5: In Visakhapatnam

(Karataka Shastri and his disciple enter at the other end of the street in front of Madhuravani's temporary house)

**Karata:** Looks like this disaster visited upon us because you didn't throw that necklace on them but came off with it.

**Disciple:** Is it wrong to return Madharavani's necklace to her, sir?

**Karata:** Isn't it wrong? Did she admit that you returned it to her? No, instead she is squeezing the life out of Ramappantulu for it. Unable to withstand that pain, he came up with this strategy of murder case. If that comes true and Lubdhavadhanlu is hanged, then I will be burdened forever with the sin of killing a brahmin. If you had left that necklace in their house, I wouldn't have this problem now.

**Disciple:** How can anyone remember that necklace or anything else when that bloody widow is slapping the hell out of me? I bit her hand, opened the trunk took the ring and jumped over the compound wall. You are faulting me for

bringing back that necklace, whereas you came off with the entire kanyashulkam amount of twelve hundred rupees! Is that fair? Did we manage to retain that necklace? No, as soon as she saw it, she snatched it away.

**Karata:** I have a good sense of humour, but with this murder case, all that went out of the window. So, no more fun. Be serious. I thought of returning that money to Lubdhavadhanlu sometime in future, anyway. But I didn't intend to steal it. If we can convince Madhuravani again and let her lend that necklace, then we can send that along with the money to Lubdhavadhanlu. That will prove that no murder happened. And I will also be saved from the sin of killing a brahmin.

**Disciple:** Why can't your relatives/friends tell Sowjanya Rao pantulu the truth?

**Karata:** That will be the end. If we tell him the truth, he will tell the same in the court. Then, the noose, instead of Lubdhavadhanlu's neck, will be around ours.

**Disciple:** You are saying 'ours'?

**Karata:** Just slip of tongue. Leave that. Is it true that Ramappantulu went to his village?

**Disciple:** True.

**Karata:** If we are sighted by him...

**Disciple:** What will happen?

**Karata:** Nothing. If Madhuravani agrees to lend her necklace to us, I will offer ten litres of ghee to be poured into the sacred fire in the Anjaneya temple.

**Disciple:** I don't like the idea of ghee, which should go into our stomachs, getting wasted like that.

**Karata:** Stop your jokes. It will backfire.

(Both exit.)

## Location 6: A room in Madhuravani's temporary stay

(Madhuravani will be sitting in a chair. Karataka Shastri and disciple enter. Madhuravani gets up.)

**Madhuravani:** A thousand salutations to the teacher. And a small kiss to the disciple (kisses the disciple.)

**Karata:** May you be blessed, please don't spoil my son-in-law.

**Madhura:** Who is son-in-law?

**Karata:** I will do kanyadanam<sup>92</sup> of my daughter to this boy.

**Madhura:** Marriage after coming out of jail? Or, marriage before that?

**Disciple:** What jail?

**Karata:** She is just joking.

**Madhura:** Poor boy, explain the real situation to him. Could at least go and see his folks.

**Disciple:** (To Karataka Shastri) You cooked my goose!

**Madhura:** Total disaster for you.

**Karata:** Please stop making fun. Otherwise youngsters will lose respect for elders.

**Disciple:** What crime did I commit? I did as my teacher told me to. Good or bad, it's all his.

**Madhura:** I don't know who did what. But the head constable is searching for you and as soon as he catches you, he intends to put you behind bars. I know this for sure.

**Disciple:** Is this the marriage you said you will do for me?

**Karata:** If anything untoward happens, I will protect your life with mine.

**Madhura:** If that happens, it will hit both of you at the same time. If ever, I don't think anyone other than me can save both of you, that too, if I take pity on you.

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<sup>92</sup> Literally means 'donating the maiden' to a boy in marriage

**Disciple:** For guruji, it doesn't matter. He is elderly and he can manage the situation. What about me? I am an innocent kid. If you save me, protecting me with your life, you will forever be remembered for your greatness.

**Madhura:** Will you leave your teacher and become my disciple?

**Disciple:** Here, right now I will do it (blows his cheeks and hits them, releasing the wind, and then tells his guruji) Done with your apprenticeship by today. I will never again play a girl's role.

**Karata:** Not even in plays?

**Disciple:** No more plays for me.

**Madhura:** Do you know what all you have to do as my student?

**Disciple:** Drawing water, cooking, washing clothes. Will do all that but since I am a brahmin, I will not massage your legs, okay?

**Madhura:** (laughs out loud) Is that what you used to do for your guruji?

**Disciple:** Forgot to mention – I will also scratch your back, if you ask me to.

**Madhura:** (smiles) Really?

**Disciple:** I will do whatever menial task you ask me to.

**Madhura:** You should kiss me whenever I ask you to.

**Disciple:** Will do.

**Karata:** He is a small boy – why are you spoiling him? That apprenticeship – I will do it on behalf of both of us. If you can, please block this danger from happening.

**Madhura:** “Student became teacher, teacher became student” If you want to become my student, then you have to pay school fees.

**Karata:** Cat playing with mouse?

**Madhura:** You, mouse?

**Karaka:** Yes.

**Madhura:** You are not mouse, but bandicoot. Your disciple is mouse.

**Karata:** Okay, save at least him.

**Madhura:** That's what I am thinking about.

**Karata:** If two brains come together, a solution will emerge. If you share your thoughts, I will share mine and then we can see what can be done.

**Madhura:** Tell me your idea first.

**Karata:** Nothing. I will send by registered post the twelve hundred rupees and the necklace to Lubdhavadhanlu in the name of Guntur Shastri. With that, Sowjanya Rao pantulu will figure out that the murder case is not true. After that, it's left to god!

**Madhura:** How will you get the necklace?

**Karata:** If you kindly give it.

**Madhura:** (with her index finger on her nose) Surprise! You brahmins are capable of anything.

**Karata:** Why do you say that?

**Madhura:** How will I ever see my necklace again?

**Karata:** Sowjanya Rao pantulu will return your article to you. He is a very honest person.

**Madhura:** Is he such a good person?

**Karata:** Why doubt that?

**Madhura:** How good is he?

**Karata:** You will not come across such a good person in the whole world.

**Madhura:** I wish to see him. Will you take me?

**Karata:** What will happen to my respect if I do that? He doesn't see prostitutes.

**Madhura:** Anti-naach, maybe.

**Karata:** Some of the English-educated people got this hang-up! But then, even in that, there are variations based on place and time.

**Madhura:** What's Sowjanya Rao's type? What is Girisam's type?

**Karata:** What a comparison! It's like comparing a dog with an cow. If that fellow is a dog, he (Sowjanya Rao) is a cow. That's the vast difference between them. Sowjanya Rao pantulu is, by thought, word and deed anti-naach. Even if by mistake I say 'prostitute' in his presence, he would say, "out of context!". It's rare to find such a gem of a person. Others are anti-naach as per their individual capacity. Most of them are glib talkers. And Girisam tops that list. Some are anti-naach during daytime and pro-naach at night. Some are anti-naach in their village and pro-naach in other villages; Some are pro-naach as long as they are strong and virile and then anti-naach after that; some are pro-naach as long as they are alive and anti-naach after they are dead; Some fortunate fellows are pro-naach after death also – that is, they will do religious rituals and buy tickets to enjoy physical pleasures in the other world also. Dim-witted fellows like me are anti-naach whenever unavailable.

**Madhura:** No need to expound on your capabilities! Leave that aside. As per head constable, Sowjanya Rao pantulu is going all out to save Lubdhavadhanlu. I wonder what the reason is.

**Karata:** Same as why fish swim and birds fly.

**Madhura:** Helping others is his second nature?

**Karata:** Then what?

**Madhura:** Why don't you learn that swimming and flying?

**Karata:** I don't understand what you mean by that.

**Madhura:** In this case, why don't you tell the truth to Sowjanya Rao pantulu garu and – you also do some

worldly good?

**Karata:** You have given a wonderful suggestion (sarcastic)! One shouldn't do what's is not meant to be done by one. If I tell him the truth, he will say, "Shastri garu, you have committed a crime and I really feel bad for you. But I can't help it" and hand me over to the police, to be put in jail. Till I come out of jail, he will, out of pity on me, send some ten or twenty rupees per month to my wife. Precisely to escape from such eventuality I came up with this idea.

**Madhura:** Okay, if it reaches him, Sowjanya Rao pantulu will return my necklace to me. But if Lubdhavadhanlu takes his twelve hundred AND my necklace and locks them up in his trunk and keeps mum?

**Karata:** I will pay you its price.

**Madhura:** But if you land in the jail, who will pay me for my necklace? So, till you get my necklace back to me, mortgage your student with me.

**Karata:** Okay.

**Disciple:** What do you lose? But what about my marriage?

**Karata:** Is that tongue or ...?

**Disciple:** What if you go to jail?

**Madhura:** As is the guru, so is the student!

**Karata:** If such an eventuality happens, I will talk to my wife and make the necessary arrangement and then go to jail.

**Disciple:** Who knows? You made some big promise...

**Karata:** Madhuravani, will you please take the trouble to bring your necklace?

**Madhura:** What's the hurry?

**Karata:** If head constable or Ramappantulu comes, I am finished!

**Madhura:** I will rescue you.

**Karata:** Not that you are not capable of it...

(Madhuravani goes in.)

**Karata:** (to disciple) Don't do everything that she asks you to; use your discretion and tell me if there is something odd.

**Disciple:** My decision is to do whatever I am asked to do by whoever I am working for or am under. What discretion was there when you asked me to get disguised as a girl and undergo a fake marriage?

**Karata:** Even the greatest will sometimes fall. Be careful.

(Madhuravani enters with the necklace)

**Madhura:** What if the mortgaged object runs away? It's not a dog to tie up with a chain, right?

**Karata:** How can a creature that has fallen into your net escape? No metal chain is as strong as that.

**Madhura:** If pearl-bearing shells fall into the net, that will be useful but if snails fall into it, it's just dead weight.

**Karata:** Always money-minded! Don't have things like friendship, love, romance?

**Madhura:** Friendship is only with people like you; that's why I am giving to your care my hard-earned necklace. If my mother comes to know of it, will she let me live? Coming to love – if there is life, love will enhance it. Shop-keeper's desire for sweets and prostitute's love should be kept locked up only in the heart. For people of my profession whose livelihood is based on our short-lived youth, all love is directed towards only one thing.

**Karata:** Where?

**Madhura:** Gold. After my youth loses its lustre, isn't it my gold that has to fill in? When I am giving away that gold to you, where is the scope for friendship here?

**Karata:** Your friendship needs no introduction! And your youth and beauty will last forever, like that of heavenly maidens.

**Madhura:** If not for my mother's constant and firm teachings, I

would have fallen for the false praise of scholars like you long ago and ended up in a ditch like the other prostitutes in the village.

**Karata:** What a clever woman your mother is! Because of her training, you are well-educated and a well-groomed beauty.

**Madhura:** Instead of that, if I had been born in a land-lord family and working in the farm with my husband tending to the crops and vegetables, I probably would have had people who would take care of me for all my life.

**Karata:** What a poor word to say! If there hadn't been a crown-jewel prostitute called Madhuravani in this Kalinga kingdom, what a deficiency it would have been in god's creation!

**Madhura:** Leave aside deficiency in god's creation. Given the current problems you are tangled up in, it would have certainly caused some deficiency for you.

**Karata:** You still haven't told us what your plan is to rescue us.

**Madhura:** You still haven't agreed to take me to Sowjanya Rao pantulu garu.

**Karata:** He will take a stick and chase both of us out of his house.

**Madhura:** Is he angry person?

**Karata:** He doesn't know what anger is.

**Madhura:** Then what are you afraid of?

**Karata:** We can get beaten by bad people, but getting scolded by good people is difficult.

**Madhura:** I learned one new thing today. Madhuravani, crown-jewel of all prostitutes is only good enough to loaf around with dogs like Girisam garu, but doesn't deserve even to see good men like Sowjanya Rao pantulu. So, once Girisam garu stepped into her house, he has lost the qualification to step into your sister's house, according to you. But great

scholars like you, when there is an urgent need, will search heaven and hell and come to her house to get work done. So, is deputy collector also a dog?

**Karata:** He doesn't take bribes, but slave to women. Since he is a high official, let's call him 'foreign pedigree dog'. Have you trapped him in your net?

**Madhura:** What if I did?

**Karata:** That means I am saved! If we have his cooperation, the case will melt away like fog. Got it! Is this your great idea?

**Madhura:** He is sending messages through Naidu.

**Karata:** Go, go, go! What are you still thinking? What can I say about your luck and mine?

**Madhura:** I don't want to go.

**Karata:** God save me! He is the only one who can save me now.

**Madhura:** From now onwards, I have decided to be away from street dogs and pedigree dogs.

**Karata:** I called him pedigree dog just for fun, but do you know how romantic he is? He has a generous hand! And doesn't he equal head constable at least?

**Madhura:** Just because I have come to the village leaving the town, have I become cheap in your eyes? I used head constable as a servant and no more! For those four days he bunked his office duty and did my duty. Would you even have crossed that village boundary without his help? This whole world is full of selfish people!

**Karata:** Pardon my crime! I felt hurt when you said you wouldn't see the collector and so talked like that. Have I not seen you ruling that entire village like a queen?

**Madhura:** It's strange that you feel hurt when I say I wouldn't see the collector! Maybe Sowjanya Rao pantulu will feel happy if he hears this.

**Karata:** Will cut my throat.

**Madhura:** Will see.

**Karata:** Will you court the sin of killing a brahmin?

**Madhura:** Ha, brahmins! Anyway, as Poli Setty said, all said and done, you are a brahmin, right? So, take this; (gives her necklace) Should I say goodbye to it?

**Karata:** Don't you trust me? Will it not come back with full respects? I shouldn't say it in front of you, but there is none like you, except for a bit of eccentricity!

**Madhura:** Isn't it that eccentricity that's helping you now?

**Karata:** What help? If you once see the deputy collector and save me ...

**Madhura:** Stop it and leave now (gestures with her hand to him to leave)

(as Karataka Shastri and his student are leaving) Shastri garu!

(Karataka Shastri re-enters.)

**Madhura:** Are you going to give your girl (daughter) to Mahesam in marriage?

**Karata:** Yes.

**Madhura:** Then, will you confirm one thing to me?

**Karata:** Yes, I will.

**Madhura:** From now on, don't spoil him by making him act in plays, go to widows' houses and such.

**Karata:** Will not – don't I also need him? (draws snuff powder and) What you said is the preaching of a true teacher<sup>93</sup>, Madhuravani!

**Madhura:** Brahmins preach a lot but practice very less, is that correct?

**Karata:** Yes.

**Madhura:** Brahmins think they can pull wool over god's eyes,

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93 'guroopadesam' is the Telugu word

right?

**Karata:** Why have you gotten into scoldings now?

**Madhura:** Can you bribe Chitragupta, the accountant of Lord Yama? I guess you can send Madhuravani to him and get him to wipe out all your sins, I guess?

**Karata:** Madhuravani, I have some urgent work – will take leave now and come tomorrow.

**Madhura:** (collapses on her chair, unable to contain her laughter, then controls herself) Wait a minute, sir. Student! (disciple enters) Here, sing that song that you sang when you were outside Ramappantulu's house in Ramachandrapuram, while I and Meenakshi were on either side of the main door, the parrot song that you sang early morning like a heavenly voice? Now you sing that song and teach a lesson to your (future) father-in-law. He is trying to save himself while an old brahmin is about to be hanged.

**Disciple:** (sings) Red-beaked parrot,...

**Madhura:** (pretends to hit him with a stick) If you don't do what you are told to do, jail is waiting for you.

(disciple sings, “however long one lives”. After singing two stanzas)

**Karata:** I have a very urgent work, Madhuravani! I will come later (to himself, while leaving) She has beaten me black and blue. Let's take a break.

## Location 6: Office room in Sowjanya Rao pantulu's house

(Sowjanya Rao pantulu and Agnihothravadhanlu enter.)

**Agni:** Aha! All my maternal aunts were sold, sir. All of them died before their respective husbands. Even my father's maternal aunts were sold, it seems. Now because of this

stupid English education, that idiot eloped with my widowed daughter, but otherwise didn't all the widows in the past live great lives?

**Sow:** If you marry small children to old men, what else other than widowhood would visit upon them? Think about it.

**Agni:** That will happen whether we sell our girl children to young men or old men. It all depends on their fate.

**Sow:** You are educated. Have you abdicated your effort and responsibility in any other matter, putting it on fate? No you didn't. Did you leave the case to fate and not assign a lawyer? Isn't it abuse of our scriptures to sell our young girl children? Is it fair to marry off small children to old men, for the greed for money, and then leave it to 'fate'? Tell me.

**Agni:** Now, aren't men among you educated people taking thousands of rupees as dowry? As Girisam said – let that fellow go to hell – aren't you people demanding a lot of gold as dowry to be given along with the bride? Isn't that also kanyashulkam?

**Sow:** Did I say that practice is right? By the way, why did you say, “As Girisam said”?

**Agni:** Don't mention that scoundrel's name in my presence.

**Sow:** Let that be. At least marry your second daughter to a suitable bridegroom. What makes you think she will be happy if you marry her off to an old man? Tell me.

**Agni:** Why are you bothered about it? Oh, now I know. Did I interfere in your family matters? Why are you poking your nose into my family matters?

**Sow:** Don't be hasty, Avadhanlu garu! Think far ahead – I advised you keeping in mind your child's welfare and not for my benefit, right? You have seen what has happened to your first daughter. At least now, give up your efforts to marry off your second one to an old man.

**Agni:** Why do you talk as if my burden of taking care of my daughter is yours? Why?

**Sow:** Don't consider me as an outsider. Take me into your circle of friends. Please listen to my advice – find a boy born in a respected family and get your second daughter married to him. Coming to your first daughter, if you admit her to the widows' home, they will educate her. Isn't her welfare your wish, as her father? A share of her property is with you. My friend Ramayya pantulu, who is my friend and the president of widow remarriage society, wrote to me about that. It would be better if you give away that property to her, without causing problems.

**Agni:** What is this non-sense? Who is he? Who are you? Who is she? And my child eloping with that fellow? Tomorrow itself I will perform final rites for her.

**Sow:** Though you are talking like this because you are angry now, later once you cool down, you will find compassion for her. If you are kind enough now itself, I can help you.

**Agni:** What kindness? Am I not crying my heart out? No way I will give any portion of the property. If she comes home without marrying that fellow, I will let her in.

**Sow:** That's not going to happen.

**Agni:** This will not happen either.

**Sow:** If you don't give her her share of the property, that will lead to a case and you will unnecessarily incur lot of expenses.

**Agni:** I am an old hand from the agraharam – these threats about court cases wouldn't scare me.

**Sow:** Please, if you listen to me and give that share of property to her and give up the idea of filing a case against Girisam, I will get the case filed by Lubdhavadhanlu cancelled. If you don't have any pity for your own child, at least think of your own gains.

**Agni:** You are supporting that idiot who eloped with my widowed daughter. What kind of gentleman are you? You think I will give up the case? If I ever see him, I will kill him. When I got a call from a big pleader ( means lawyer), I was under the wrong impression that I will get a suitable advice. But what do I see? Highly respected people like you recommending widow remarriage? What bad times have befallen us!

**Sow:** On behalf of Lubdhavadhanlu I will have to run the case against you. I went out of my way this far, only to avoid unnecessary expenditure, punishment and loss of respect. Looks like you don't see goodness. I will do my best to ensure that you get the strongest punishment. I myself will file a case regarding your daughter's property share.

**Agni:** May your house be ruined!

**Sow:** Whatever you say will not make me angry. Go home and think. If you need my help, come back.

**Agni:** (to himself, while leaving) Seems to be a mad fellow!  
(Curtains down.)

## Act 7

### Location 1: A street in Visakhapatnam

(Bairagi (ascetic) followed by ten shudras, enter)

**Ramanna:** Where are you coming from, guruji?

**Ascetic:** From Kashi!

**Ramanna:** How many days ago?

**Ascetic:** After accepting the morning sacred water, my son.

**Ramanna:** How did you come so soon, guruji?

**Ascetic:** Held breath and came by the sky route, my son.

**Buchchanna:** Don't know yogis have special powers? The other day the same yogi appeared at Uppaaka and Simhachalam at the same time.

**Lachchanna:** Hasn't the white man made the letter go by wire all over the country?

**Ascetic:** Illiterates! Illiterates!

**Ramanna:** Shut up. What do you know, idiot!

**Ascetic:** In this village, on the rocky banks of the theertham<sup>94</sup>, two miles under-ground, there is a bronze Shiva temple built by Dharmaraju<sup>95</sup>. Tonight I will worship that god and tomorrow go away to Rameshwaram. Where can I stay?

**Ramanna:** There aren't any mutts<sup>96</sup> in this village, guruji. But why do you worry when all of us are here to take care of you? Please tell us Kashi news.

**Ascetic:** Four days ago, in Lord Vishweshvara's temple, a gold plate inscription fell from the sky. None of the brahmins could understand that script. We read it. Written in Sidhdha language, it has one sutra to make gold and another that has the secret to long life.

**Ramanna:** What a wonder! By the way, what will you have for

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94 A place of worship near a waterbody, such as a river or lake

95 Eldest of the Pandavas in Mahabharath

96 monastery

your meal?

**Ascetic:** Milk, sugar and bananas. Like this, we will have fruit diet for a fortnight. For another fortnight, we will eat air.

**Ramanna:** In a minute, we will ready your fruit diet. You should kindly come to our Rama temple.

**Ascetic:** What is special about this place?

**Lachchanna:** Nothing – in Ramachandrapuram agraharam, the old fellow killed his wife, it seems. If anyone gives false witness for him, they and tehsildar will be punished, it seems.

**Ascetic:** This village seems to be full of sin – we will not stay here.

**Ramanna:** Lachchanna is a stupid fellow – don't believe what he says. If pious people like you go away, how will we attain salvation? They are not from this village.

**Buchchanna:** Here comes the shop-keeper of that village.

**Ascetic:** Drinking seems to be rampant in this village. We don't talk to drunkards – before that shop-keeper comes, let's escape into this side street, come. (shop-keeper comes running, catches the ascetic by his loincloth.)

**Shop-keeper:** You better spit out my money and then move from here!

**Ascetic:** What is this non-sense? This fellow is pitch-drunk and blabbering – didn't I already tell you about this village? It's full of sin. Didn't Vemana say, “don't make friendship with drunkards”?

**Ramanna:** (to shop-keeper) Are you out of your mind? Pay your respects to him and ask him for mercy.

**Shop-keeper:** Guru, giru nothing doing – is this fellow guru? He drank all the arrack in my shop and ran away without paying.

**Ramanna:** Are you out of your mind? How can he drink all the arrack in your shop? Didn't he arrive from Kashi just now?

**Shop-keeper:** (sarcastically) He came by sky route, didn't he?  
(to ascetic) Pay and then move from here.

**Ascetic:** Why do you quarrel with soft-natured ascetics like me, brother? You must have mistaken me for someone else. There is a dasari<sup>97</sup> who goes around disguised as me. When last time we went on a country-wide tour, I spotted him and scolded him. If you are so stingy about money, get me some copper. I will convert it to gold and give it to you. Spend part of it on good deeds and you take the rest. Otherwise, your head will blow up into pieces.

**Ramanna:** What a stupid thing you have done, brother? You think someone who makes gold really cares about money? Fall at his feet and ask for mercy.

**Shop-keeper:** You shut up. Is it your money?

(Head constable enters.)

**Head:** Oh, guruji! Getting you is like getting god himself for me. Now I am saved. I have to discuss some urgent matters. Please come.

**Ascetic:** Brothers – you stay back. (Except shop keeper, all others move back.)

**Shop keeper:** You first pay my dues and then only talk.

**Ascetic:** Is it fair on your part to damage my reputation in public? How can I reveal the secrets of yoga in the presence of illiterates?

**Shop keeper:** I don't know about your yoga secrets and your tricks won't pass muster with me. Everyone is an expert in these yoga tricks.

**Ascetic:** Stupid fellow! Do you think we ascetics are greedy for money? We don't give to anyone nor do we take from anyone.

**Head:** Brothers, I will give your money, but don't talk stupidly.

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97 A different kind of ascetic who goes around singing devotional songs and poems

If he gets angry, we will all be burnt to ashes. You stay away (to ascetic) Murder case has become a noose around my neck now. That night, without any case having been filed, we scared that old man to make some quick bucks, remember? After that, the tehsildar came and threatened us and extracted ten bucks from me. Ramappantulu, saying that his necklace has disappeared, filed complaints with inspector and police superintendent. And now, he is alleging that I and tehsildar are being negligent when actually a murder has happened.

**Ascetic:** Why do you fear, when we are here?

**Head:** That's why I said you are my god-send, didn't I?

**Ascetic:** I will make your enemies not able to speak. Write down their names and give to me. You used to say inspector like you, didn't you?

**Head:** Do these people in high positions have any mercy or consideration, guruji? How much ever we feed them, the moment they find some scope for promotion or such thing, they will cut our throats with a blunt knife. My inspector is eyeing the superintendent position. There is strong enmity between him and the tehsildar. I am being caught in the cross-fire.

**Ascetic:** Just watch. By tomorrow the fortunes will change and tables will turn.

**Head:** Your mercy, guruji. There is a great lawyer called Sowjanya Rao pantulu. He is helping me a lot. He gave an idea to get the case annuled but we are struggling to make it happen.

**Ascetic:** What is that idea?

**Head:** The father of the girl who ran away – that Guntur shastri – if we can catch him, the case will become null and void. But he is nowhere to be seen.

**Ascetic:** Nothing to it. Tonight, I will make the special *anjanam*<sup>98</sup> and find out.

**Head:** I will be saved if you do that. That boy – I mean girl – can you find out where she is now?

**Ascetic:** That also will be known in the *anjanam*

**Head:** Will you be able to find out if it's male or female?

**Ascetic:** how will a girl become a boy, brother?

**Head:** (to himself) Wonder what danger I will get into if I reveal it (aloud) I am going mad because of these problems, guruji. Come, let's go home.

**Ascetic:** Let me teach these disciples and come. You go ahead.

**Head:** I will not leave your feet until this task is done – If it's done successfully, I will offer one hundred rupees to the mutt you are building in Haridwar.

(All exit.)

## Location 2: Deputy Collector's office

(Deputy collector, lawyers and attenders et. al. will be present.)

**Bhima Rao:** I have another case in munsif court. I will submit an application and take your leave.

**Deputy Collector:** Why should lawyers, who can't wait till the court hears their case, take up cases at all? You think this court runs at your beck and call?

**Bhima:** Yes, yes. Your predecessors used to be like that.

**Collector:** Take care of your office work and wait till you are called.

**Agnihothravadhanlu:** (to Ramappantulu) What is this? He getting angry with our new vakil?

**Rama:** (to Agnihothravadhanlu) The nature of these officials is

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98 Supposed to give super-natural visual powers to the ascetic to be able to see things in time and place that others can't see

such that they get angry with those they want to favour. You say you know about courts. Is this all your experience?

**Agni:** (loudly) Yeah, Yeah I know.

**Collector:** Who is talking there?

**Naidu:** If you pardon, I will explain. He is resident of Krishna Rayapuram agraharam. Malaka Agnihothradhanlu. A very worthy brahmin. He is the one who bargained to do kanyadanam of his daughter for one thousand eight hundred rupees and then gave him a thorough beating to his would-be son-in-law. That's why Lubdhavadhanlu filed a writ petition in your honour's court. The accused in that case is also the same gentleman! In Mallavaram, he found an aged brahmin and did kanyadanam of his first daughter and by the time he completed the rituals in the marriage, there itself his lifespan came to an end and he took off on his heavenly journey. He brought in a writ petition to claim the lands that are due for that girl. Like this, he frequently patronizes pleaders by creating work for govt. officers like you. It is for filing a case on his behalf that Bhima Rao pantulu garu came to the court today. (gives a sarcastic smile and sits down.)

**Collector:** Wonderful! (to the clerk) Ask Bhima Rao pantulu to submit the prior application. (clerk receives it and files it.)

**Collector:** (receives the papers) What is the nature of the case?

**Bhima:** Sure, sir. The teacher who teaches this gentleman's son has abducted his widowed daughter along with all her ornaments and properties.

**Agni:** Also files and court case documents, sir.

**Collector:** What? Ha, ha, ha! (laughs and stamps the floor with his boots) What fun! (looks at the petition) What were you doing all these days?

**Bhima:** On the third day after the incident itself, when the

munsif court lawyer Venkata Rao pantulu filed the chargesheet, that tehsildar asked about the nature of the case. When Venkata Rao pantulu said it's 'abduction' case, since the tehsildar doesn't know English, he said he had never heard of such a type of case. Then when they explained the case in Telugu, he said such a crime doesn't happen within his jurisdiction and refused to accept the petition saying that it should be filed in the taluk under which the exact place of abduction comes. He is the same tehsildar who cancelled the murder case filed against Lundhavadhanlu.

**Naidu:** So what if he doesn't know English? He is so knowledgeable and has impressed so many European officials in the past! Bhima Rao pantulu garu says that tehsildar cancelled the murder case against Lubdhavadhanlu. When the case is still under enquiry, for saying that he cancelled the case, the tehsildar can file defamation suit against Bhima Rao pantulu garu.

**Collector:** (looking at Bhima Rao) Is there a proof to show that the girl is below 16 years of age?

**Bhima:** Horoscope is there, sir.

**Naidu:** The court should take and file that horoscope.

**Bhima:** I object to him talking in this case, your honour.

**Naidu:** I am also one of the lawyers in this case (files the affidavit)

**Bhima:** (to Agnihothravadhanlu) Did you engage him also in this case?

**Agni:** Initially, Ramappantulu gave the case to him.

**Bhima:** (to Agnihothravadhanlu) Then suffer  
(Agnihothravadhanlu looks stunned.)

**Collector:** File the horoscope.

(Bhima Rao pantulu files it.)

**Naidu:** Regarding this horoscope, I would like to submit to the

court an important piece of information. It's prepared by a brahmin who is as great as sage Vishwamitra. Ramappantulu who is standing in that corner has in-depth knowledge about this horoscope.

**Bhima:** I am the appointed lawyer for this case. I have to do the hearing of the case. If Naidu garu does it, I will strongly object to it.

**Naidu:** Since the days of officer Smalet, I have been practicing law in the agency court. Since I have taken the fees, I will represent my party and put forth my view of the case, but wouldn't stand dumb, like some of those who learnt English.

**Collector:** (to Agnihothradhanlu) In which year was your daughter born?

**Agni:** Angeerasa.

**Collector:** But it says Bhava in the horoscope? You destroyed the reputation of brahmins altogether! Not only did you let your sense go to dogs and sell your daughter, you have even done forgery? In no other community does one find such hypocrisy as in brahmin community. As if it's not enough that you brought your daughter to this state due to your bad ways, now you want to file abduction case too? I will make you pay heavily for it. (to the clerk) Put up notices on the case.

**Clerk:** (reads the charge-sheet) Sir, the family name of the accused is not mentioned.

**Naidu:** (gets up) This petition is totally incoherent. This is how the papers will be, that are submitted by English lawyers.

**Bhima:** (to the clerk, secretly) Didn't you fill in future dates? (aloud) It's unfair for the court to be quiet when Naidu garu is scolding me like this.

**Collector:** Naidu didn't say anything disrespectful about you, did he?

**Bhima:** (to himself) It was stupid of me to come here.

**Clerk:** (to Bhima Rao pantulu) What are the family name and place of residence, sir?

**Bhima:** (to Agnihotravadhanlu) What are they?

**Agni:** His name is Girisam. I don't know anything more about him.

**Collector:** Wonderful! Some one abducted the daughter of Avadhanlu garu, so whoever knows his name and place of residence should inform the court – put this up in the gazette and ask the crier to announce it. Why didn't you give a notice to the police? Without place of residence and other details, case can't be admitted. It's tiffin time, we will adjourn for now  
(gets up and leaves).

**Agni:** (to Bhima Rao pantulu) What is this, sir? The case has turned the wrong way?

(Bhima Rao pantulu doesn't speak.)

**Agni:** Sir, I am talking to you.

**Bhima:** For the fees you have paid, work is done. Unless you pay fees again, I will not speak.

**Agni:** What work, non-sense? When the collector was scolding, you just kept quiet.

**Bhima:** Attender! Throw this man out, so that he doesn't come anywhere near me again.

**Agni:** Oh, great! Where is Ramappantulu?

**Naidu:** (comes quietly from behind) As soon as forgery was mentioned, he slipped out. By now he would be half-way to his village.

**Agni:** Oh, god!

**Naidu:** Done with English lawyer? With forgery charges, you will also be a guest to the jail.

**Agni:** May a chicken be roasted in your house!

**Naidu:** That's done everyday.

(Curtains down)

## Location 3: Office room of Soujanya Rao Pantulu

(Soujanya Rao pantulu and Poli Setty enter.)

**Sou:** You see, Poli Setty garu, nowadays, it's only settys that have reverence for god and brahmins. Lubdhavadhanlu is old and is a brahmin. If you save him, it will do you a lot of good.

**Poli:** Sir, is there any objection to your wish?

**Sou:** If you don't give witness and save him from this danger, and if he gets into danger because we suppressed the truth, its consequences will keep haunting you<sup>99</sup>.

**Poli:** What objection will I have, sir?

**Sou:** You really believe that murder didn't happen?

**Poli:** Certainly, sir.

**Sou:** At that time, you went out to attend to your morning ablutions/nature's call, right?

**Poli:** Yes, sir.

**Sou:** When you went out to attend nature's call, you also took your servant with you, right?

**Poli:** Yes, sir.

**Sou:** (takes pen and paper) Tell me, I will write down the same events.

**Poli:** What, sir?

**Sou:** I am preparing the statement for the witness you are going to give. Tell me everything that happened. I will write down.

**Poli:** I got urgent message that my wife is seriously ill. I don't know what to do, sir. I got a vehicle arranged to go back. Please let me go – can I take care of family if I am running around courts giving witnesses?

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<sup>99</sup> A more rationalized version of 'that sin will be ascribed to you'

**Sou:** Why didn't you tell till now? It's a matter of serious concern. But in any case, you have to give witness. If what you are going to speak in the witness box is written down, you will be well-prepared and not stutter there. It wouldn't take more than ten minutes. Tell me.

**Poli:** Have to give witness, sir?

**Sou:** How can you not, tell me? If those who know the truth don't tell, who else will?

**Poli:** Sir, you are a big officer. Will you listen to this poor setty's words, without brushing aside?

**Sou:** Of course, I will!

**Poli:** What is truth and what is not, sir? Did I see the truth? Did I really go to out at mid-night? If I did, wouldn't the ghost on the banyan tree jump down and kill me? For witness, do you really need this stupid Poli Setty? If you will, couldn't you get any number of witnesses? If you bribe any of the countless brahmins around, they will come and tell whatever you ask them to, wouldn't they?

**Sou:** Stop with that. I don't want bogus witnesses. I want only those witnesses who will tell the truth.

**Poli:** Anyone can tell that much, sir. Do I really know what truly happened? I will tell whatever you ask me to, sir.

**Sou:** Then why did you say you know?

**Poli:** If I say I wouldn't give witness, will the constable keep quiet, sir?

**Sou:** Will he keep quiet even now?

**Poli:** If I give witness, will the inspector not strangle me?

**Sou:** If not, will the constable do the same?

**Poli:** Ordinary people like me have to do whatever the officials ask us to do, otherwise it's noose for us, isn't it sir? If the constable says, "Poli Setty has to give witness", I have to say yes. If the inspector says, "You bloody Poli Setty, if you give

witness, I will kill you”, I have to say yes. If they say, “We will transfer head constable, don't be afraid”, I have to say yes. That night was I not in my village, sir? Did I not go to the Lingoram village fair?

**Sou:** Trusting your witness, I gave a confidence boost to Lubdhavadhanlu. What to do now?

**Poli:** You are a powerful official, sir! If you put your mind to it, wouldn't all these petty issues melt away? Please discard my witness, sir. You can get any number of brahmins to give witness.

**Sou:** I understood your worthiness. You can leave for now.

**Poli:** (gets up) Are you angry, sir? If you get angry, can I survive? Shall I send you pure cow ghee?

**Sou:** Send it to your inspector.

**Poli:** (as he leaves) He is different and you are different. But aren't both of you same for people like me?

**Sou:** Enough, leave. Leave.

**Poli:** If you get angry, can I survive? (as he steps out) God, saved for now! Tomorrow morning, I will visit Lord Venkateswara and light ghee lamps.

(Exits.)

## Location 4: Street

(Agnihothravadhanlu and Naidu enter.)

**Agni:** So you want me to drop the case, is it?

**Naidu:** Otherwise, you will run into serious trouble. That English lawyer spoiled everything.

**Agni:** And should we assume that Ramappantulu has run away?

**Naidu:** Any doubts about it?

**Agni:** He took my bracelet and mortgaged it.

**Naidu:** You can say good-bye to it.

**Agni:** Oh, no! That's my grandfather's! He mortgaged with the prostitute who lives along the way you came by the other day.

**Naidu:** Rama, Rama! He didn't mortgage it with her at all. Moreover, he had taken her necklace and mortgaged it somewhere. Where did you get that drunkard?

**Agni:** Does Ramappantulu drink?

**Naidu:** Has he not drunk the bracelet and necklace as well?

**Agni:** Scoundrel!

**Naidu:** By the way, I made an appeal to the deputy collector to ensure that forgery case is not filed against you, right? What will you pay me for that?

**Agni:** What can I pay? I don't even have a paisa to plug into my belly button/navel. Unless I reach my village, I can't raise any money.

**Naidu:** Okay, write a promissary note. I will get you money.

**Agni:** I will not write it, even at the cost of my life. I promised to my father on his death bed that I will never sign a loan note.

**Naidu:** Okay, I will come to your village along with you. Get me a cart-load of grains.

**Agni:** If I pay both cash and grains to one fellow, how can I survive? I will give you two bags of chillies.

**Naidu:** At least that is confirmed?

**Agni:** Agnihothradhanlu never breaks his word. Lubdhavadhanlu made me bankrupt. How come he is not getting punished?

**Naidu:** But Soujanya Rao pantulu is helping him. All officials listen to him.

**Agni:** I heard that teacher married Avadhanlu's daughter, is that true?

**Naidu:** Non-sense. Will he really do that?

**Agni:** Then why is he after Lubdhavadhanlu?

**Naidu:** Soujanya Rao pantulu is a very good man – one in a million. He helps anyone who is in adversity.

**Agni:** Then, why is he backing that scoundrel who married that widow and sitting on my neck? There comes that donkey!

(Girisam enters hurriedly. Agnihothradhanlu falls on him from the side. Girisam ducks and escapes, and while running away, pulls Agnihothradhanlu's legs, while saying "Respects to father-in-law". Agnihothradhanlu falls.)

**Naidu:** Is he your son-in-law? (lifts him and dusts him)

**Agni:** May his final rites be performed under a tree! I will kill him!

**Naidu:** If you kill your son-in-law, your daughter will become a widow. Please calm down.

**Agni:** May a chicken be fried in your house!

**Naidu:** Great blessing! Let's go.

## Location 5: Lubdhavadhanlu's place of stay

**Lubdha:** (chants some devotional peom of Rama) Ramanama tarakam. Bhakti mukti daayakam.

(Girisam enters, hugs Lubdhavadhanlu and cries, "Big brother!")

**Lubdha:** What is this, boy?

**Girisam:** I heard that a murder case is filed against you, so I just came running, giving up food and sleep! Why didn't you send word?

**Lubdha:** Who needs to do anything, when Soujanya Rao pantulu is doing everything. But boy, did you abduct Agnihothradhanlu's daughter? You taught him a good lesson. By any chance, did you marry her?

**Girisam:** Will I do such a stupid thing? Elder brother, my folks had great hopes that you will raise me and get me married also, but ...

**Lubdha:** Once we cross this danger, we can think of all that.

**Girisam:** (with a choking voice) When I hear what Soujanya Rao pantulu has to say, I don't get the hopes of getting past this danger. Since I am close to you, am well-educated and intelligent, Soujanya Rao pantulu insisted that I give you good advice.

**Lubdha:** You saw him?

**Girisam:** You ask if I saw him? Hm, I went to him with a strong recommendation. He loves me like his own son. Since he couldn't think of any idea, he asked me to talk to you and head constable and give a suitable advice. So, listen to me. Write one adoption document. Since you don't have your own son, you need someone to take care of your after-life, right?

**Lubdha:** All my relatives are only eyeing my money but none is bothered about my welfare/well-being.

**Girisam:** Did you ever give even a penny to any one at all? Don't you see? Am I not the only one with care for you and struggling to help you? Do any of your relatives have even an iota of love or care or affection for you?

**Lubdha:** Let them not. Who cares?

**Girisam:** But I never expected even a penny from you. I asked you to adopt me to take care of your after-life. If not me, adopt someone else.

**Lubdha:** This life itself is going great guns (sarcastic)! Will think of after-life later, if I live.

**Girisam:** I gave you this suggestion because Soujanya Rao pantulu asked me to give you a good advice. But then, I do know that you don't listen to your faithfuls. Okay, leave it. I will give you another suggestion. Pay heed at least to that. In case

you get punishment, you will need someone to take care of your affairs, right? I am the only one who knows English and is knowledgeable about transactional affairs, right? So, write out a power of attorney letter in my name.

**Lubdha:** Why are you pushing me further deeper into my sorrows? For everything, I have Soujanya Rao pantulu. Enough. He will take care of everything.

**Girisam:** That's what I also said, right? Everybody has to listen to what he says, not just you and me. So, in the case of these two issues, we will listen to what he says and do accordingly, okay?

**Lubdha:** Not a single statement is forthcoming that is useful for me in my current situation of troubles.

**Girisam:** Then, why do you think I came this far? If you had paid heed to what I wrote in my letter that day, you wouldn't have run into these problems now.

**Lubdha:** My brains were really in my knees then.  
(Head constable and shop keeper enter.)

**Head:** Avadhanlu, who is this?

**Lubdha:** My younger brother.

**Head:** I don't know what to do. The ascetic also has vanished/disappeared.

**Lubdha:** Oh, god! What to do now?

**Head:** That's what I am thinking.

**Lubdha:** Where do you think he would have gone?

**Head:** Since morning, he has been saying Sri Jagannadha Swami is calling him...

**Shop:** If you search arrack shops, you will get him.

**Head:** What a thing to say, brother! Whatever the ascetics do is acceptable. It's not wrong. Couldn't find him in any shop.

**Shop:** Then, wait on the Anakapalli road and catch him.

**Girisam:** Why do you need the ascetic?

**Head:** He showed us the Guntus shastri and his daughter using his special vision.

**Girisam:** *Damn non-sense! Utter superstition* – which English official will listen to these stupid things and believe you?

**Head:** Let the English officials not believe it. Isn't it enough for us if we know that that girl is alive and is at so-and-so place?

**Girisam:** *Ignorance!* What clues have you got?

**Head:** She was seen sitting and crying on a cot in a hut.

**Girisam:** Did you see?

**Head:** How will that be visible to us? Such visions will be visible only to small children who are innocent.

**Girisam:** We have thatched huts and poor cots all over the world. How do we identify which one it is?

**Head:** He said he will again see with his special vision (anjanam) tonight and tell us the name of the village.

**Girisam:** Will all these anjanam's and ghosts come to use in the evidence act?

**Head:** You don't know that ascetic. He is a great sidhdhi. He can do whatever he wants. If he were next to me, I could take on the world. I will be lucky if he returns by evening after worshipping Lord Jagannath.

**Girisam:** It's a ten-day journey, right? How will he go and come back in a day?

**Head:** He has the speed of wind.

**Shop:** Yeah, he will run away with the speed of wind the moment he sees those to whom he owes money. You didn't let me collect my dues from him :-)

**Head:** You and your stupid dues! Once we get over this danger, I myself will clear your dues.

**Shop:** You think that's possible?

**Head:** With the help of all of you, why not?

**Shop:** Spare me, sir! Please don't ask me to give witness.

**Head:** You won't, is it?

**Shop:** How can Someone like me who is surviving on the shop, get tangled in this witness business? I lost lot of business ever since I have been running around like this. If I don't go back to my village, I will have to shut shop.

**Head:** is this all your friendship, my friend?

**Shop:** if I continue to go around with you, the new head will -

**Head:** What? New head constable?

**Shop:** Inspector saab told me. What about my money, bhai?

**Head:** The inspector has killed me in every way!

**Shop:** That ascetic destroyed me. Will I ever get back my money?

(Shop keeper exits.)

(Asiri enters.)

**Asiri:** (scratching his head) Sir, I got message that my grandmother is seriously ill.

**Head:** Idiot! Will you go off without giving witness?

**Asiri:** Will she be alive till I give witness and go?

**Head:** You liar! I will break your head! Who the hell got you this message?

**Asiri:** Bullock cart drivers from my village, sir.

**Head:** You donkey! If you move out of your house, I will break your back!

**Asiri:** If I go you will kick me. If I don't, they will kick me.

**Head:** Who are 'they'?

**Asiri:** Inspector saab.

**Head:** This inspector wouldn't let the witness come.

**Girisam:** Asiri – you know what I can do. If you don't walk straight into the witness box and give witness, I will strangle you and throw you into the well.

**Asiri:** What is this sir? Each of you are telling me to do different things. What should I do? And what do I know

anyway? Good bye to serving you. I didn't see her jumping over the wall, sir. Gavarayya trapping the ghost in the bottle..she jumping over the wall – it's all a lie! I didn't see anything.

**Girisam:** How can he give witness without seeing, elder brother?

**Lubdha:** My fate – what else can I say?

**Head:** Who is this? Does he know anything about court cases?

**Girisam:** I also know know the face of court cases. In fact, policemen don't know the face of truth at all. It's better to sit in the jail rather than escape punishment with fake witnesses. Even at the cost of wealth and life, one should not tell lies and make others tell lies.

**Head:** Who is this, doing *Shalya Saradhyam*<sup>100</sup>?

**Girisam:** I am the younger brother of Lubdhavadhanlu garu. My name is Girisam. I have passed all exams, you know?

**Head:** Oh, you are the one who got hooked to that widow? (sarcastic)

**Girisam:** Do you know what defamation means? I am Soujanya Rao pantulu's friend. Pantulu garu sent me here to check out on the strength and veracity of the witnesses and give suitable advice to you and my elder brother.'

**Head:** Then you should be helping us, right? Is it possible to get true witnesses in this world? I have seen as many witnesses as the number of hair strands on my head. I have seen even the witnesses prepared by big lawyers. You are preaching morals because you are inexperienced, but even high court lawyers tell us to turn the witnesses around. May

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100A great metaphor from Mahabharath - Shalya, who drives Karna's chariot in the Kurukshetra war, is always saying discouraging words to Karna, to make him lose his resolve and to weaken him (he does this because he is partial to Pandavas, whom the Kauravas are fighting and Karna is on Kaurava's side).

you live well, please don't get me into trouble with your preachings about true witnesses. I will lose my respect and reputation.

**Girisam:** If not to help you and my brother, why do you think I came a long way? I have no objections to you producing fake witnesses as per your wish. My opinion is that truth is equal to god. We shouldn't forget that. So I will stick to truth even at the cost of my life. It is said that people are of different tastes and opinions. Some will like toor dal pachchadi, some will like moong dal pachchadi and some may like both. Similarly, some like lies, some like truth and some like a mix of both. That is the nature of this world. So, when the need arises, making Asiri fellow tell a lie without any hesitation is my responsibility. Asiri – you remember my power, right? If you don't give witness, I will kill you.

**Head:** Ah, come to my way like that. I will serve you with my life. (to Lubdhavadhanlu) Instead of listening to that scoundrel Ramappantulu, if you had listened to well-wishers like this, you wouldn't have gotten yourself into this pit, right?

**Girisam:** Hm, our fellow doesn't listen to his people. He has been saying for many days that he will adopt me. If he does it, will I not look after him? Okay, leave that, at least write a power of attorney in my name, I say. He doesn't do even that.

**Head:** Avadhanlu garu, why don't you do at least that?

**Lubdha:** Let's think of it later.

**Girisam:** If you are suddenly thrown into jail, what can you do after that?

**Head:** Jail is ready?

**Girisam:** Said that just for argument sake. We should be prepared for the worst and then hope for the better. Inspector's conspiracy is pretty strong. Poli Setty told Soujanya Rao pantulu that he will not give witness and gone off to his

village.

**Head:** Oh, no! What to do now?

**Girisam:** That's what I and pantulu garu are worried about.  
(Priest Gavarayya enters.)

**Head:** Gavarayya garu, did you see guruji?

**Gava:** Just now he was coming with me! Till now he was in *samadhi* on the platform in your backyard.

**Head:** I didn't find him on the platform in the backyard?  
Anyway, once he comes I am saved. Where is he?

**Gava:** What is this you are asking like that? He is right here in front of you (shows the empty place in front of him). You don't see him? (looking at the empty place) What guruji, why did you suddenly become invisible? Oh, because of your guruji's order, is it? But then how come I am able to see you? Oh, because of the special powers I have? Okay, how long will you be like this? For another fortnight? (to head constable) That's what guruji said.

**Head:** Before that, the noose will tighten around our necks.  
What to do?

**Gava:** (looking at the empty space) What is your word, guruji?  
(to head) Nothing will happen to you, it seems.

**Head:** He said tonight he will see using his special vision?

**Gava:** (looking at the empty space) What is your word, guruji?  
(to head) He says he will do everything through me.

**Head:** It will be good if he becomes visible.

**Asiri:** Why sir, I can see him.

**Gava:** Ghosts and sidhdhis will be visible to tantrics like me. To blind devotees like him. To innocent children. That's it. Not to others.

**Girisam:** Damn humbug! (hits the empty space next to head constable) Who is here? Head constable sir, this is all bogus and cheating.

**Gava:** Just because you learnt a couple of English words and became an atheist, you think miracles will stop happening? Would your stick even touch sidhdhis? Like you, the registrar also made long speeches, but when we took him to the grave yard and shown him ghosts, he got bedridden with fever for six months. If you abuse sidhdhis, your head will blow up.

**Asiri:** Sir, I can see the ascetic!

**Girisam:** (jumps onto Asiri fellow) Idiot! Where is he?

**Asiri:** No sir, no sir! I said jut like that.

**Girisam:** You lying scoundrel! (to head) instead of arranging proper witnesses, you have fallen into the traps of this Gavarayya. Do you see that?

**Head:** Sir, don't say that. We have to come out of this case only with his help (in his ear) Gavarayya garu is our important witness.

**Gavara:** This place, desecrated by the converted and the fallen, is not the place for tantrics and sidhdhis. (looking at the empty space) Come guruji, let's go.

**Head:** Gavarayanna, where are you going?

**Gavara:** Wherever I feel like going to.

**Head:** But then, what about witness?

**Gavara:** What Lubdhavadhanu married is not human but a ghost of seduction. If I give witness that it's a human that jumped over the wall, will the mantras work for me after that? Ask Girisam to give witness on my behalf. (To Girisam) Though inspector saab has studied more English than you, he still has belief in our scriptures, miracles and ancient procedures.

**Head:** You are going to him, are you?

**Gavara:** (while leaving) He sent word for me.

**Head:** Please come back. I have something to tell you.

**Gavara:** (while leaving) Tell that something (looking at Girisam) to that great man.

(exits.)

**Head:** (to Girisam) You kept your word about this witness. No need for any other witness.

**Girisam:** Coming to that, I myself will be the main witness and make the case lose steam. Just watch. But don't tell Soujanya Rao pantulu yet.

(Curtains down.)

## Location 6: House of Soujanya Rao Pantulu

(Pantulu's bedroom upstairs. A glass lamp on a table emitting dim light. In the middle of the room, opposite to the door towards the steps, there is a cot with mosquito net. Pantulu will be lying down on it awake. On the other side of the cot, there is a small round table with a hard-bound copy of Bhagavad Geeta. And next to that in a chair is Girisam.)

**Girisam:** My heart is struggling with a dilemma. On the one hand, I am anxious to get my brother safely out of this dangerous situation and on the other hand, I am not able to reconcile to the inevitable situation that only telling a lie is the way to accomplish it. When I told head constable, “prepare real witness and not a fake witness”, he got very angry with me. Can we not get real, true witness if we try?

**Sou:** True witness! That's in the era of truth! One who speaks the truth will not come to give witness; one who comes to give witness can't tell the truth.

**Girisam:** Why can't he, sir?

**Sou:** The truth that's haunting him is not needed for the defence lawyer. The truth that's haunting the opponent is not needed for his lawyer. By the time cross-examination starts, any witness will become creative, however strong he is. That's why gentlemen hesitate to get into the witness box.

**Girisam:** When the lawyers are making the witnesses tell lies, what is the salary-drawing judge doing?

**Sou:** They will write down all the lies being paraded by lawyers of both parties, until their (judge's) hands hurt.

**Girisam:** Then what is the purpose of the courts?

**Sou:** That's what I also have been thinking about for a long

time now. Even big lawyers shamelessly make their witnesses tell lies. Some soft lawyers ask them to overturn the witness. Honest and traditional lawyers like me don't like to commit such sin, but at times when we know that witnesses of our parties are telling lies, we keep quiet. That's why I reduced my practice considerably. Eventually I may even stop practice.

**Girisam:** If all lawyers are like you, there will not be untruth at all. I never knew this level of malpractice existed in the law profession. I can tolerate anything but untruth.

**Sou:** it's not just untruth that's plaguing this profession. There are lot of other unethical practices in this profession. Like anti-naach movement, one may need to start anti-vakil movement as well. Head constable is not at fault. Without fake witnesses, cases can't be won. Since you were raised in the path of truth, you despise the way cases are run in the courts.

**Girisam:** But then, what about the fate of my brother?

**Sou:** There is one way. If that Guntur shastri can be traced and brought, no other witness will be needed.

**Girisam:** If you can tell me a way to catch him, I will search heaven and hell and catch him.

**Sou:** Your ability pleases me. Our country will improve if we have strong young men like you. To make sure your efforts bear fruit, I will make all necessary arrangements. Since your personal problems are also cleared, you can start immediately. I am sad that your marriage is getting postponed due to this.

**Girisam:** Don't worry about it sir. My guruji's teaching is – *duty first, pleasure next*. Since my childhood, I have focused on it and since I have good control, I am always occupied with some task on hand. So I am averse to women. That's why my folks gave me the nickname of *Napolean of Anti-naach*. I decided to spend my entire life for social reform under the tutelage of my

guruji. But looking at Buchchamma's pure heart and her pathetic situation, and due to my affection towards my student, I grew fond of her and agreed to marry her, but not for physical pleasures. She also loves me and has decided that widow re-marriage is a good thing to do and so agreed to marry me. So our marriage will be *true love marriage* and not ordinary widow marriage, sir.

**Sou:** That's what your guruji also wrote. But if you marry a widow, maybe your brother will not adopt you?

**Girisam:** He will not transgress your word, sir. If he doesn't agree, I am willing to give up being adopted but I will not leave Buchchamma who is dear to my life.

**Sou:** She is lucky.

**Girisam:** Such a gem of a lady (gets shocked to see a stranger come up the stairs quietly and stand in front of him, and stands still without another word leaving his mouth; Soujanya Rao pantulu notices it and)

**Sou:** What happened? Why are you staring like that? (he also looks in the direction Girisam is staring and notices the stranger)

**Girisam:** I feel I am the lucky one to have gotten such a gem of a lady. Saving some one by helping that person is the greatest good, as the saying goes. Since my brother is leading his life without causing harm to anyone, I want to save him however difficult it may be for me.

**Sou:** (to the stranger) Who are you?

**Stranger:** I came on an urgent work. Please forgive me for coming without prior intimation. I didn't see any servant downstairs.

**Sou:** Please come in and sit.

**Girisam:** (gets up, goes in and brings another chair and sets it next to his) Please sit down.

**Stranger:** (doesn't sit) No need.

**Sou:** Please sit – (to the stranger) Who are you?

**Stranger:** Do I have to tell who I am?

**Sou:** If for some reason you can't reveal your name, that's okay.

**Stranger:** For the task I have come for, my name is not relevant. Due to certain reasons, I can't reveal my name. Please forgive.

**Girisam:** Didn't Shakespeare say, "*What is in a name?*" My take is, there is great wealth in one's name. In fact our scriptures dictate that one shouldn't utter one's name aloud, lest one may incur a great sin. I am sure you would know it.

**Stranger:** (to Pantulu) If it's someone else, I can make up some fake name and tell. But I can't lie to you.

**Girisam:** Just as those who look at King Bhoja suddenly become poetic, no one can look at your face and tell lies, sir.

**Stranger:** Except one person.

**Sou:** One should not tell lies to anyone.

**Stranger:** My mother taught me to be good to good people and bad to bad people. So, I can't tell you lies.

**Sou:** Your mother is pious, but you follow the first half and change the second half – to be good to even bad people. If you do that, this world, created by the kind God, will be even more sweet and pleasant for you. You and those in your circle also will be happy. Who can decide what is good and what is bad? There is good in bad and bad in good.

**Girisam:** What valuable words! Let's say there is one bad fellow. Why, let's say I am that bad fellow. Being good in front of such a bad fellow is being worthy. In front of good people such as you, everybody will be good.

**Sou:** You expressed my thoughts very well.

**Stranger:** (to Soujanya Rao pantulu) Taking your word as the

teaching of my teacher, from now onwards I will try to be good even to bad people. Earning your tutelage is a great treasure for me. Visiting good people will have good results, I am told. You stated that there will be good even in bad. I hear that there is nothing bad in your goodness.

**Sou:** Only God has complete goodness. What does the world know anything about bad in my goodness?

**Girisam:** Missionaries call it *the original sin*. Our folks call it bad karma. [some swear words] *Beg your pardon*. This *original sin* drags even the most disciplined and most pious into the wrong path. You will know all this.

**Sou:** One hides their bad nature and displays only the good side to others – according to Bhagavad Geetha .

**Stranger:** Some will exhibit even goodness that is not there and make the world believe them.

**Sou:** True. That's why I said it's only our heart that can know good and bad and not the world.

**Stranger:** one can fool the world through by pretentious behaviour only for a while, not for ever. The world will soon be able to see the difference between gold and brass. (to Girisam) What do you say?

**Girisam:** Pantulu's sleep is getting delayed/disturbed. If you can tell us why you came -

**Stranger:** By nature, usually the world is blind to goodness and has a hundred eyes to see badness. So once the world closely observes some one for long and declares to be a good person, he has to be good – good people such as you can't be found anywhere even if one searches very hard. So, being able to 'see' you today has made today as the most auspicious day in my entire life.

**Girisam:** No doubt about that.

**Sou:** I am trying to be a good person. There is nothing more to

be than that. You still haven't told me the purpose of your visit.

**Girisam:** Shall I find out and tell you tomorrow morning?

**Sou:** Will someone who came on an urgent errand, that too insisting on being anonymous, tell you what their purpose of their visit? What an old timer you are!

**Girisam:** I thought I may be able to help him and also it's your sleeping time. That's why I asked.

**Stranger:** Girisam garu is a do-gooder for the whole world.

**Sou:** Do you already know him?

**Stranger:** Who doesn't know Girisam garu?

**Girisam:** He is generous to say that, but what great worth do I have to be known to everyone? Maybe because I frequently give lectures, it's possible such good people as this person know me. And felicitate me too. I also may have seen him earlier. That's why I wondered that I had seen him when he came in here. But since he desires to be anonymous, I wouldn't make any attempt to recollect and recognize him. I will go and sleep. Both of you can continue to talk.

**Sou:** Okay.

**Girisam:** (to Soujanya Rao pantulu) namaskaram (to the stranger) Are you a brahmin?

**Stranger:** No.

**Girisam:** (to the stranger) Then my respects – *to the unknown* (while leaving, pauses at the door, turns around and looks at the stranger and gestures as if entreating and then leaves.)

**Sou:** Girisam is a poet – and a very worthy young fellow.

**Stranger:** Marrying widows and being anti-naach are also necessary to be considered 'good', sir?

**Sou:** One can marry widows if one likes. Or else not. It has nothing to do with goodness. But one who has relationships with prostitutes can never be good.

**Stranger:** Is that it? Or, even talking to them, seeing them and listening to their singing are also considered bad?

**Sou:** That's an even better decision.

**Stranger:** I think you are anti-naach.

**Sou:** Yes.

**Stranger:** (smiling) Girisam garu is also anti-naach, right?

**Sou:** Don't you know? He is the guru of anti-naach.

**Stranger:** He is guru for me also.

**Sou:** Is it? I am happy about that.

**Stranger:** For long, I got a doubt in this matter that hasn't yet been clarified. If you forgive me, I will share it with you.

**Sou:** Tell me – what's wrong in that?

**Stranger:** If prostitutes are not called for singing, how can they earn their livelihood?

**Sou:** If they get married, the matter will be settled.

**Stranger:** You mean, marry someone like Girisam garu?

**Sou:** How could you say that? In a day or two he is going to marry a chaste widow, how will he marry a prostitute?

**Stranger:** I think it's Girisam garu from whom I heard that there are prostitutes called 'geisha's in Japan and great people marry them it seems. Do you say Japan is a great country?

**Sou:** Yes, but should we follow bad habits and customs of such countries, even if they are great? Girisam wouldn't take part in such not-so-sacred deeds.

**Stranger:** Then how do prostitutes who want to marry get desirable grooms? Or is it your opinion that prostitutes should be willing to marry any kind of men?

**Sou:** I haven't yet deeply thought about this matter – why can't prostitutes learn other professional skills and spend their time gainfully and in a socially acceptable manner?

**Stranger:** If they do so, will good people like you marry them, then?

**Sou:** What a question to ask? I will never marry a prostitute. Even if I am offered money worth my weight, I wouldn't even touch a prostitute.

**Stranger:** If by accident a prostitute's body touches you?

**Sou:** (smiling) I will chop off that part of my body. You are asking me very strange questions.

**Stranger:** Prostitutes' community may be bad. But as you stated, couldn't there be good in bad? Isn't good acceptable wherever it is?

**Sou:** Yes, goodness is acceptable wherever it is. But you still haven't told me the purpose of your visit.

**Stranger:** My purpose was only to see you.

**Sou:** Should you come at night to see me?

**Stranger:** I didn't want to disturb your work, that's why I came at this time.

**Sou:** Not at all. I don't have any such work that couldn't be interrupted.

**Stranger:** I heard that you consider the work of those in distress as your own. It's just this – I know someone who can provide strong help in the case of Avadhanlu garu.

**Sou:** If so, I consider you as our god-send.

**Stranger:** I should be worthy of such a word, isn't it?

**Sou:** Why do you say that?

**Stranger:** Well, that job can only be done by a prostitute. That's why I was hesitating...

**Sou:** Let's give her money.

**Stranger:** You can't buy her with money.

**Sou:** Then what does she desire?

**Stranger:** I think her wish is impossible to satisfy.

**Sou:** But still, go ahead and tell what it is.

**Stranger:** I think it wouldn't achieve any purpose, except that it will make you angry.

**Sou:** Does she want me to keep her? That will never happen.

**Stranger:** Bad luck to that old brahmin! What can we do (sigh)?

**Sou:** What a stupid woman! How can she ask for such inappropriate wishes? How come you carried such an inappropriate message?

**Stranger:** When we are talking about general matters, isn't common to discuss both good and bad? Doesn't anyone with basic sense know that she got a very crazy impossible wish into her head, sir?

**Sou:** Am I Cupid, for her to fall in love with?

**Stranger:** Maybe because she thought you are a very good person.

**Sou:** Prostitutes don't bother about goodness. This must be part of some big plan.

**Stranger:** May be she has read 'MruChCha Katikam'?

**Sou:** Women like Vasanthasena<sup>101</sup> exist only in the imaginations of crazy poets but not in the real world. No doubt she is upto something - no alternative?

**Stranger:** You question me and then get angry if I tell you what I heard. What can I do?

**Sou:** Due to the mercy of Lord Krishna, I am making sincere attempts to get rid of anger. Tell me what you intend to tell.

**Stranger:** If you don't want to keep her, you can marry her – that's her opinion.

**Sou:** Did your mother also teach you to jeer at good people?

**Stranger:** I promise on your Krishna – I have innocent devotion towards you. I will never get disrespectful thoughts about you. Trust me. It's not fair to find fault with the messenger who brings the message. Not that such things will happen. Because you are a lawyer, I thought you will be able to solve the knotty

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101The high-end prostitute in MruChChaKatikam

problems posed by that prostitute. That is all.

**Sou:** Because lawyers are the right partners/rivals for prostitutes? (smiles) I admit defeat. Don't get into ridicule. Prostitutes wouldn't refuse money. Ask her to ask for money. Either I will give or he (Lubdhavadhanlu) will give.

**Stranger:** Why that far? If she can be bought with money, I myself can give. I already submitted that to you. You don't want to believe?

**Sou:** By the way, you said you are Girisam's student, didn't you? Aren't you anti-naach? Then how did you get to know all this insider information from a prostitute? Is this to mock at me or a conspiracy against me?

**Stranger:** What can I say to those who don't believe? This is neither mockery nor conspiracy. I am honestly anti-naach. Wouldn't anyone with an iota of intelligence be anti-naach? But by a twist of fate, I got into relationship with prostitution/prostitutes.

**Sou:** What is that twist of fate?

**Stranger:** This! (the stranger removes the turban, lets loose the hair, turns back and removes the coat and re-drapes the shawl across the shoulder and turns around to face Soujanya Rao pantulu) You asked me my name and place. My place is Vijayanagaram. My name is Madhuravani!

**Sou:** (first, is surprised and then gets angry and gets up) What treachery!

**Madhuravani:** Guruji shouldn't forget his own teachings. There could be good even in bad. And who decides what is good and what is bad?

**Sou:** What a deceit!

**Madhuravani:** I came with a pure conscience. God shall know the truth but my act appears to be treachery and deceit to you. What can I do?

**Sou:** You can leave immediately.

(Madhuravani leaves behind her turban and coat and goes till the door.)

**Sou:** Stop, stop – (Madhuravani comes back and stands in front of him, a little aside)

**Sou:** You forgot to take your coat and turban.

**Madhura:** That is all? I left my heart itself; what more? (again turns around and takes two steps towards the door)

**Sou:** Listen!

**Madhura:** (looking back) What did I forget this time?

**Sou:** You didn't forget. It's I who forgot. What about Lubdhavadhanlu?

**Madhura:** Even though your goodness is well-known to the world, it didn't generate compassion in you for him.

**Sou:** To save him, I will do anything that is justful and fair. A prostitute has never come to my house. I have never talked to one. Today I am deeply saddened that my vow is broken.

**Madhura:** You are wise and know everything. What vow-breaking<sup>102</sup> are you talking?

**Sou:** What more can be worse than having a prostitute in the bed room at night and talking to her?

**Madhura:** You didn't ask me to come, right? Don't vakils take up prostitutes' cases?

**Sou:** Maybe, maybe not; but you are not my party, right?

**Madhura:** I agree. But I am the person who can save your party. How does it matter who I am? Can't you give me an appointment? Let it be. When prostitutes can go to temples to see the deity, why is there opposition to seeing good men like you?

**Sou:** You are making me feel very shy by referring to me several times as 'good person'. Don't repeat that. You can

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102'Vratha bhangam' is the original Telugu word. Did a rough translation

come to see me, but not at night.

**Madhura:** Oh, then if I send intimation that I am a prostitute, you will see me during daytime?

**Sou:** Looks like some enemies of mine have sent me here (looks her up and down) Must be real dare-devils!

**Madhura:** Then your own goodness must be your enemy. If I do your job without taking any remuneration or compensation, will you believe me, then?

**Sou:** If you are such a good person, why don't you help out that poor brahmin yourself? Why drag me into it?

**Madhura:** Can you believe that I am a good person?

**Sou:** Will I not believe if you save that poor brahmin?

**Madhura:** Then let me propose to you a verdict that is equitable to both parties.

**Sou:** I am afraid that if you are in front of me for too long, I would probably agree to whatever you propose.

**Madhura:** (turns her face to one side) One small kiss is too much to ask?

**Sou:** With that, will you do the task that you promised to?

**Madhura:** What to do?

**Sou:** You are determined to break my vow, is it?

**Madhura:** No appreciation that I have come down by a step! Why should I make you do something that you don't like to do. I take leave. (takes two more steps towards the door)

**Sou:** Stop (sits up on the cot and wraps himself with blanket) Sit down.

**Madhura:** I shall not.

**Sou:** I will give you a thousand rupees. Take it and save that brahmin.

(Again Madhuravani turns to leave)

**Sou:** Don't go – you want a kiss, it it? What a crazy person you are? What do you gain from it?

**Madhura:** I don't know.

**Sou:** No choice?

**Madhura:** I think so.

**Sou:** Then I agree to it because I have no choice. Is kiss more valuable than a thousand rupees? Okay, tell me what help you have come to provide.

**Madhura:** Forgot – unless you promise me that no harm will come to anyone involved in it, I can't reveal any names.

**Sou:** You won't tell otherwise?

**Madhura:** No.

**Sou:** I will ensure that no one comes to harm due to Avadhanlu. Except him, if any one else has caused harm to anyone else, then it's beyond my control.

**Madhura:** That would suffice. Now I will tell you. Karataka Shastri disguised his disciple as a girl and conducted the marriage.

**Sou:** Oh, Karataka Shastri is Guntur Shastri??

**Madhura:** Yes, he just attached a small salt-and-pepper beard to his chin. That's all the difference.

**Sou:** What a horrible thing!

**Madhura:** It's not his fault. Agnihothradhanlu's daughter is his niece. You are aware that it was decided to give her in wedding to Lubdhavadhanlu. Karataka Shastri garu came up with this plan to break up this alliance and save his niece. Please don't let any harm come to him.

**Sou:** Wow! What a surprise! Am I awake or sleeping?

**Madhura:** Pay my fee and then go to sleep.

**Sou:** I am a poor man, can't pay your fee.

**Madhura:** I thought that's my wealth in the whole world!

**Sou:** You are a beauty. Not that I hate to kiss, but...I feel sad that I have to break my vow

(moves to kiss her)

**Madhura:** Wait!

**Sou:** What?

**Madhura:** What about my vow?

**Sou:** What could that be?

**Madhura:** That I shouldn't spoil those who are good – that's my mother's teaching.

**Sou:** So?

**Madhura:** So, I will not let you kiss me.

**Sou:** I am grateful to you!

**Madhura:** Can I see that book, sir?

**Sou:** Sure.

(Madhuravani opens that book and reads.)

**Madhura:** Bhagavad Geetha – is it a book that good people read, sir?

**Sou:** It's a book that turns even bad people into good people.

**Madhura:** What is there in it?

**Sou:** Whoever reads it gains an invaluable friend.

**Madhura:** Who is that friend?

**Sou:** Sri Krishna.

**Madhura:** Sri Krishna makes friends with prostitutes also?

**Sou:** He makes friends with whoever believes in him. For 'paramathma' there is no caste or creed.

**Madhura:** Isn't Sri Krishna anti-naach?

**Sou:** So imprudent you are!

**Madhura:** Then I will read this book and become a good person.

**Sou:** If you want you can take it.

**Madhura:** I am grateful - may I leave now?

**Sou:** (gives a thoughtful look to her long beautiful plaited hair, then) You are a good person. You probably were born to some good man, by mistake. Can't you give up this profession? Or, your financial position is not okay?

**Madhura:** By god's grace, I am not in a poor situation. I am aware of the low social status of my profession. After earning the kindness/grace of good men, why will I be in a poor position?

**Sou:** (pointing at Krishna's portrait on the book cover) I have given you the only person who fully qualifies to be called 'good man'. As your friendship with him grows stronger, you will not think of people like me.

**Madhura:** May I come to see you once in a while?

**Sou:** (hesitates)

**Madhura:** Even if I give up my profession, good -

**Sou:** Then, fine. You can come.

**Madhura:** I am grateful. (hugs the book to her bosom, and with folded hands) Bye!

**Sou:** Just one more thing! (Madhuravani raises her eyebrows) Where did you get to know Girisam?

**Madhura:** Pardon me.

**Sou:** Won't tell?

**Madhura:** If you order me to tell, how can I disobey? Please let him live.

**Sou:** You are thinking of his life. What about that poor Buchchamma? What will happen to her if something happens to him? You didn't think of it.

**Madhura:** (thinks) Yes. For a while he taught me English. He also kept me for a while.

**Sou:** Till when?

**Madhura:** Till a few days ago.

**Sou:** Okay. Wait a minute (goes out and comes in bringing Girisam along) Napoleon of anti-naach! Do you know her?

**Girisam:** Sometime back, there used to be a *foolish young man* called Girisam. And there used to be a *beautiful naach devil* called Madhuravani. It's true that he, due to ill-fortune,

fell into her trap and got lost in darkness. After some time, realized and remembered his guru's teachings, came out of that darkness and went to his guruji, left the past as a dream and got back to the good path. That Girisam is this Girisam – that Madhuravani is this Madhuravani! She again appeared here, just to pull me, who is just a foot away from heaven, back into hell! *I turned altogether a new leaf* – fell into the well of sins, realized it, repented it and am *reformed*. It adds to your reputation to help sinners like me but not destroy their lives! *I crave your mercy!*

**Sou:** How long since you have leapt out of darkness into light?!

**Girisam:** (remains silent)

**Sou:** (to Madhuravani) You should be able to tell.

**Girisam:** How does it matter since when? Aren't *twenty four hours enough for true repentance?*

**Sou:** Aa! How easily your guru gets deceived due to a cheater like you! You deceived me too! I will send an urgent telegram to your guruji in Pune not to have you as his disciple anymore and to admit Buchchamma to a widow home there. She will study, become knowledgeable and marry someone she likes. Or may not. You said you are reformed. If that is true, go and complete your college education. As long as your conduct is good, I will help you financially. Get good sense and lead an honest life. You called Madhuravani a devil. But you are the devil. She didn't reveal your unworthiness until and unless I insisted. Not only did she save an honest old brahmin but she saved Buchchamma also from a bad fellow like you. By that she did a great help to me. So, to express my gladness, I shake hands with her (shakes hand with Madhuravani). Napoleon! Get out immediately!

**Girisam:** (to himself, as he steps out) *Damn it!* The story has gone wrong!

(Curtains Down.)

***The End***