

Earthman

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CHAPTERS 2-5

Chapter 2

Christopher didn't know who Ayrishswami was or that Jaffna was in the north of Ceylon. He let himself be put on a bus filled with quiet Tamil businessmen going north to the Hindu area on a pilgrimage. He let the bus conductor put him on another bus filled with fishermen coming from the market. For the rest of his life he remembered his continuous gagging at the smell of their empty baskets.

When he got off the bus he had to walk, and was passed from a fisherman to a clerk to a coolie who left him and his case with a servant in a cluster of half-a-dozen houses on the edge of a coconut grove. The servant salaamed him with joined hands and scampered away into the largest hut, the only one with its own garden and kadjan fence. Christopher looked around. The well kept flowerbeds and the neatly swept sand-paths were the first signs of returning order since he had left the Buddhists.

A man was standing at the gate of the main house. He wore glasses, was powerfully built, bare to the waist, dressed like a native. He came towards Christopher with joined palms.

"Good day to you," he said with a British accent. Christopher's eyes went from the flecks of dark pigmentation that dotted the broad fair-skinned shoulders to the abundant copper-coloured hair. This really was an Irishman. He had about him the air of a chief of one of the great clans. He stood looking at Christopher through rimless spectacles. The red hairs on his arms gleamed even in the soothing spent light.

"Are you Irish Swami?" he asked with a stir of something like curiosity.

"I am." He led the way to the entrance of his coconut-thatched house. "You'll find it easier to sit down if you take your shoes off."

Christopher kicked his shoes off, looking into the room, and Irish Swami bent down swiftly to range them neatly together.

Christopher watched the broad freckled back in embarrassment. This man was at least fifteen to twenty years older than he was, but he made Christopher feel worn and used up, untidy. It was the first time anybody had produced a reaction in him in many weeks, and it encumbered him heavily with the almost forgotten sense that he was responsible for how he looked and behaved.

Irish Swami made coffee in silence while Christopher sat on the mat and looked around. There were no chairs, only mats and a table lifted a few inches from the ground by stumpy legs. Apart from this there was a bookshelf. The papers on the table were in neat piles. There was one drawer at the bottom of the bookshelf. Nothing else in which to conceal untidiness. The ceiling was held up by palmyra poles that met the bare beams.

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Above that rested a double layer of kadjan thatch. In spite of its bareness the room was marked by a high degree of civilisation. Perhaps it was the predominance of books or the fine quality of the cement or the smell of clean wood and rose petals from freshly spent incense sticks. Whatever it was Christopher felt lumpy and ungainly, as though he and the shabby, bulging suitcase defaced the room. Irish Swami came back from the entrance of the back courtyard where the kerosene stove stood.

He put a cup of coffee in front of Christopher and got himself into a cross-legged position on the floor without using his hands.

Christopher drank the coffee aware of the holes in his socks. He also tried to tuck his feet under himself, managed one but sloshed coffee on to the floor.

"Who are you?" asked the Irishman while Christopher mopped the floor with a grayish handkerchief. The man had a right to some explanation if he were going, for some reason, to take him in.

Christopher explained. He spoke for five hours. Sometimes Irish Swami gave instructions to the servant in Tamil, but otherwise he listened without moving, his eyes lowered.

Christopher had to move. He shifted. He rubbed his ankles. Sometimes he had to stand up and walk about in spite of the holes in the toes of his socks, but he did not stop speaking and eventually he forgot about the holes. He had never had anybody listen to him in just this way-without laughing, sympathizing, showing surprise, delight or fascination. This was passive listening, almost grave, like a steady flame into which he threw everything. Old letters, manuscripts, programmes, anecdotes, souvenirs, trunkfuls of them. He couldn't unload quickly enough.

Three times he thought he had come to the end, but always as he was going to say Well, that's just about all, and once when he had already mid it, he found something else, another vivid fragment that would explain his life.

Finally he muttered in the unsure tone he had started with, "I think that's about it."

The red-haired man lifted his head and looked at Christopher.

"Who are you?" he asked in exactly the same casual, matter-of-fact way he had done hours earlier.

Oh no! Christopher looked around. Was he locked in one of those static illusions again? But he wasn't drunk. And it wasn't static. He could remember the sequence of the day and yesterday and the day before that. It meant that he had been speaking to a nut. He had thought the room and dress were only some sort of eccentricity.

"But I've just been telling you," said Christopher, too discouraged, too tired to play a madman's game. By what dented logic had this man spent hours pretending to listen?

Christopher had come all this way for nothing, and all he wanted to do was sleep. He was too tired to pretend.

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"You've told me where you were born and who your parents were and all about your wives and your ambitions and your failures, but who are you?"

Christopher stared into the man's bronze coloured eyes. "Well, that's all I know. I can't tell you more than I know, can I?"

"Ah, then you admit there's a possibility you don't know?"

What sort of man was it who could ask these questions of someone who had been traveling all day and trying verbally to relive his life for hours on end?

"I think I'd better find a bed somewhere and get some sleep," said Christopher wearily.

"There are no beds here. We're free of beds here. Down with the furniture makers." The man pointed a broad thumb at the mat and grinned wryly. It was fast turning into a scene from Alice in Wonderland.

"You're not the Mad Hatter by any chance?" asked Christopher, deciding to sink into the confusion.

"Exactly who I am." A hand covered with first hairs rested approvingly on Christopher's arm. "Come, I'll show you your room. And I'll teach you how to sleep in it." Irish Swami got up in that effortless, unwinding way. "But first we'll get something to eat."

Christopher's welcome of this last suggestion was disproportionate. He had no need for food, his appetite not having returned. However, he had just heard the first unqualifiedly reasonable utterance since his arrival; something which almost anybody might have said in the circumstances.

Irish Swami was sensible about food and served it abundantly and regularly. He was also sensible about sleep once you got used to the idea that the best way to have it was on a thin straw mat. He went to some trouble to show Christopher the adjustment that had to be made so as to sleep on the muscles instead of the bones.

Christopher spent the first few nights tossing on the floor like a banderilla'd bull, and during the day his mind behaved in much the same way under the impact of Irish Swami's conversation, but it was clear that the Buddhists had sent him here on the assumption that he was an eccentric seeker and that the eccentric Swami had taken him into his small ashram for the same reason.

And in a way he was, of course. He was looking for a new exit. Or more positively a tidal wave had washed him up on to Irish Swami's doorstep in this fishing village where the old ways were not viable, and as long as he was here there was no choice but to adapt to certain exigencies. He explained this to Irish Swami to avoid commitment rather than dishonesty, and was told that he had been received for that very reason.

The Buddhist monk had written that he had no preconceptions, no religious background and no particular direction. "Stay three days and then we'll see. The gate is always open if you can't stand it," and after three days, "Stay another week, if you like.

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The tradition is that an ashram is bound to three days' hospitality to any seeker, no questions. Afterwards things are on a different basis. I'll explain as we go along."

Christopher stayed because he did not know where to go, but also because the unpredictability of this man was the first thing to disperse the numbness that had settled on him since his arrival in Ceylon. It kept him on his toes. Even to be jarred was something, a sign of returning life. For weeks nobody's personality had been important enough to move him out of his inert stupor. Now he was exasperated every time Irish Swami justified his actions by the Tradition. How could a man who constantly quoted Lewis Carroll and Jung and Rabelais and the Vedas live by any tradition without being a false or a nut?

There was only a latrine in the ashram compound, no bathroom, and Irish Swami took him to the well on the fourth morning. The well was very much a centre of the village, where people not only drew their water and bathed but stayed to wash their clothes and exchange news or sit quietly on their haunches while the cotton cloths dried in the sun.

Christopher sat on the paving with Irish Swami. There were only two chain pulleys to lower the buckets: they had to wait their turn. Irish Swami had explained the procedure to him, and for the sake of opacity Christopher wore two pairs of underpants beneath his trousers. The men wore loin cloths while they endlessly poured buckets of water over themselves, and though Christopher was resigned to this public exhibition he would have preferred to carry a bucket of water back to the ashram as Paul, Irish Swami's Tamil disciple, who lived in the next hut, had been doing for him. But this was the fourth day, and technically Irish Swami was no longer his host but the principal of the ashram initiating him into his way of doing things.

Christopher sat anxious to get it over, though apprehensive of his turn and also interested, despite himself, at this backward plunge in time.

"Why don't you build a bathroom at the ashram?" he asked casually.

"Why should I?"

"I don't know. Isn't it a nuisance to have to go through all this in public all the time?"

"Public?" echoed Irish Swami in his buoyant way as he was beginning to do, to indicate that Christopher was using a term he had himself discarded. "There's nobody but myself and Bhagavan, but if I still have the illusion that it is other people watching me... well, does it matter? We all look very much the same, which is as good a reminder as any."

He held out his arm with its copper-coloured nimbus. "It sometimes happens that I wonder why this isn't brown. It'll happen to you when you've lived in the area a few years." He flicked his forehead and corrected himself. "What am I saying? A few months."

Not bloody likely, thought Christopher. He was acutely conscious of his skin, so much lighter than the Tamil, almost grayish-brown. He did not feel any of the joyous identity with which he had immediately merged himself into Spain or Greece. There was

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something besides time and space that separated him from these people, and he didn't think it was colour.

"But don't you spend a lot of time just waiting here?"

"Why can't we just sit? What have you got that's so important to do?" Irish Swami rattled off his answers in a new way, which must be the fourth-day manner. The humouring period was up, and though Irish Swami spoke little unless questioned he pounced every time. He always had an answer, immediately and fully formulated, and Christopher saw that by staying he exposed himself to more than a way of living. . . unless he kept quiet.

But when Christopher stood in his two pairs of underpants by the side of the well, while Irish Swami showed him how to latch his bucket on, he forgot. "Why forty buckets? Why not thirty or forty-five?"

For the first time the people were all looking at him. They had been doing so from the beginning but never all at once. It made Christopher nervous and betrayed him into speaking just when he most needed to be silent.

Irish Swami turned away from the well. "He wants to know why forty buckets?" he shouted out in English. "Why not thirty or forty-five?" He repeated it in Tamil.

Christopher, humiliated and angry, retained just enough observation to see that most of the Tamils did not understand. A buzz of discussion went around and someone cried out in English, "We always done like this."

"That's your answer," grinned Irish Swami and went on pulling at the chains. "That's the Tradition."

He made Christopher pull the second bucket up and showed him exactly at what angle to pour it over himself. Not down his back or down his front but directly over himself so that the water caught as much of his body as possible.

"That way forty buckets is just about right to keep you cool for the rest of the day. If you waste it you might need forty-five at that. These people have it pretty carefully worked out. They've been doing it for centuries. Good for your arm muscles anyway."

Irish Swami reverted to his third-day manner to say this. The question to the villagers had been a warning. No humour. For the first time Christopher began to see how this man operated. First a whip-flick for surprise, then once you were going a carrot in the form of intelligent conversation yesterday, then fourth day a kick in the rump to remind you where you were and who was boss.

Christopher worked the pulleys impassively. That explained the subdued condition of Paul and Ramesh, the two resident disciples. And Irish Swami hadn't wasted a minute.

Here he was on the morning of the fourth day, his beer belly hanging over the elastic of his underpants, pouring water over his stupid head for all the world to see, except that it wasn't all the world, only a few dozen, very few, sitting on their haunches.

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A few villagers who didn't matter, he told himself. It flustered him that they could all sit for hours in a position that would have felled him in minutes. And they were all lean and hard and covered with a simple strip of loin cloth while he stood at the centre in two pairs of complicated jockey trunks, the fat boy of the class fumbling with the bucket and wasting water... the village idiot.

It was a bad dream. How had he got into this? He tried to think of familiar situations and people to tide him over the last twenty buckets. His arms were already tired. All he could summon was Raoul's face smiling at him with Gallic irony.

"Twenty-five!" sang out Irish Swami. He was calling the score every five buckets. This sort of strategy might work very well with the passive, disciplined Tamils and even with the wilder but more lethargic Sinhalese, but it certainly wouldn't work with Progoff. The gate was there and it was open, as Irish Swami had pointed out, and he was certainly going to use it, but not before he had turned the tables on Irish Swami. He'd never let anybody pull rank on him before.

Not even in the army, where he'd looked up all the books and got a colonel yanked. Christopher had charged him in front of the entire mess of refusing to advance with his leading companies when subjected to heavy decimating fire from M.G. 42's.

After that they had got a responsible colonel.

Thirty!

Right. He didn't know how he'd do it. He only knew that he must. Christopher decided to give all his energy to the last ten buckets, which were going to be the worst. But suddenly they weren't. They were lighter. His muscles were co-coordinating. Some purpose was knitting inside him. The decision was made.

Something had to be done. This arrogant Irishman had these people under his thumb. People like this were just asking for it.

If you didn't stop them they went on and on. Christopher knew them all. He smelt them out. It didn't matter if it was a British gentleman coward or an Irish eccentric. They belonged to the same family of bullies. Christopher had suddenly got the sweep, and the spill of the bucket as he moved back from the well, in one continuous movement. It was an exhilarating discovery. He had also found his reason for being here.

After the bath Irish Swami continued his policy of appeasement. "You were beginning to get the hang of it at the end."

He nodded curtly and Christopher clamped down on the absurd gratification that followed this meagre palliative. He refused to let Irish Swami wash his shirt. He would do it himself.

The moment he started scrubbing at his shirt he regretted his gesture of independence. "Come here beside me," called Irish Swami loudly. "You're too near the well. The whole village has to use it, remember." He was still conciliatory, but the moment of reward was over. Christopher crawled back with the soap and his dripping shirt. He had been denounced again.

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This was not the intention, but it got more embarrassing when Irish Swami patiently showed him how to beat the cloth. It was not to be flung down straight in front of you. The idea was to bring it in again as it came down so that the material crumpled up on the cement, producing maximum vibration and minimum shock. A few wallops like that could be more effective than a washing machine. Christopher watched the repeated sudden crumplings of the white cloth against the cement. The movement began to have an aesthetically hypnotic effect on him.

The big blond arm rotated without a stop, save for the moments it took for the cloth to pack itself together. Christopher saw it stop with that thrill of dismay reserved for the end of a perfect dance.

All he could manage was to thwack the shirt as near to his knees as possible and spatter himself with soap. "You're not trying to lambaste the cement, man. Bring it in. Bring it in as you come down. That's better," encouraged Irish Swami soothingly, but at the next attempt to pull it in smartly just before it hit the floor the shirtsleeves flew out, acting as parachutes. There was no impact, no sound at all. He turned the sleeves inside out, took the shirt by tail and neck and brought it down with such force that he heard a button crack.

A sliver of mother-of-pearl caught the sun in oyster glints as it skimmed away. "That's the trouble with shirts. Too many doodahs. Still, you're not doing too badly for the first time."

Christopher felt no glow. He didn't think he'd deserved it this time. He watched Irish Swami rinsing the shirt and his own white cotton cloths. He was watching everything now. He knew that tomorrow or the next day or the day after that, sooner or later, he would be forgiven nothing. His first job was to get the hang of all this. Until he had he would be in no position to give his attention to outsmarting Irish Swami. They hung the clothes on a line between two trees, then they both retired to sit in the shade.

Christopher counted. The men were indeed throwing forty buckets over themselves. Nudged by a new involvement he saw an altogether different scene on the raised cement podium. He now understood why the quadrangle of cement was so extensive, between fifteen and twenty yards square. There had to be plenty of room to stand well away from the edge of the well to protect the water. Then many people had not hung up their clothes but spread them on the paving to bake.

What Christopher turned back to constantly was the movements, all the movements but specially those of the two people sluicing themselves carefully at the well. It was true. They poured the water measuringly, sparingly, as though they knew its value. Not a drop fell that had not first touched them. Also the own pounding their clothes. They all used the upward swing, the imperceptible tug back in. The thwack had a special sound. Some were more skilful than others and their note was clearer, sharper, but none as sharp as Irish Swami's. Christopher could find nobody else to swing him into that net of stillness.

He was aware of his own lack of skill, his utter inability to handle things, to fend for himself in a world where so little was ready made or even prepared beyond the initial

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stage. First that would apply to any Westerner and most rich Orientals, no doubt. Is that why this Irishman had chosen to live here?

"What made you decide to live like this?" The question was out before he could calculate its effect. Irish Swami was quick to answer him in the tone of his intention.

"Because if you want to understand the tradition you must live the tradition." Irish Swami made a circular movement with his outstretched arm. "This is part of it. You can't get it like this." He squinted, hunched down and pretended frantically to turn pages in a book. He was so good a mimic that

Christopher could feel the musty weight of the invisible volume under his hand. "Books are good. They've got it down. I write them myself. But if you want the efficacy of the tradition you've got to live it." He jabbed his finger towards the well itself, his own ashram in the next plot to the left, to another ashram a little way down which supplied him and the poor with food, to the cluster of huts beyond the grove, and, with a rainbow movement, to the big temple where pilgrims came, lastly, behind it, to the estuary where people made their temple ablutions.

"That's where you'll find it." Christopher witnessed for the first time one of Irish Swami's methods of finalising a discussion: a tremendous emphasis on one word in the last sentence, a slight turning away of the head and a lowering of the golden lashes to the cheek. Christopher's next question would have been about how Irish Swami had first come to the East. He was curious to know whether he had chosen to come or whether he too had been ejected.

Instead he waited until Irish Swami's head came round again. Why didn't people bring all their washing at one time? Dangerous as it was he could not help his questions.

"How many outfits do you think these people have? Sometimes one, two or three at the most. I've got two, but one's enough outside monsoon season. Most of the year one will do."

At lunch Irish Swami watched him eat. Hungry from the well exercise, he was intent on getting his rice and vegetable down rather than following the table protocol of the small ashram dining-hall. He disregarded the stares (Paul and Ramesh were looking). He hadn't come here to learn how to eat with his right hand and pick up his glass with the left.

"What am I doing wrong?" he asked, just to hear the sound of his unenthusiastic voice.

"Show him, Paul." Paul, a slim, gentle, timid Tamil boy who was usually treated with affectionate contempt, demonstrated that you did not twist your food around in your hand but picked it straight up with the fingers. You didn't mess all the vegetables and dhal and rice together. You left it as much as possible in the pattern in which Irish Swami had served it on your leaf-plate—a mound of white rice in the centre and five different types of curried side dishes around it. You were not just stuffing your face. You were the divine offering the divine to the Divine.

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Christopher looked. The other leaf-plates did retain order and symmetrical arrangement, while his own was a shambles. He had wolfed his food. The others ate deliberately.

"I'm used to eating with a fork." He didn't try too hard to keep the wryness from his voice. Irish Swami let it pass.

"You'll get the hang of it. Take a few days, that's all."

CHAPTER 3

When Christopher awoke from his after-lunch doze he sat on his verandah and lit a cigarette. He knew what he had to do. He could see the main gate from where he sat. He had to go through there . . . quietly. He had already resolved in England that he didn't want to make trouble for anybody. This was a peaceful little community without him. He didn't want to do anything to change it. Only he couldn't stay here eating three meals and washing clothes under the eyes of this crank every day.

The excitement of challenging Irish Swami had dissolved in his sleep. He must be getting too old and weary for that sort of life. Not when he was drying out, no, not any time. He could see the coconut palms, the green grove dotted with mud huts.

Over the land at the back of the ashram he could see the shining estuary and the splashing brown children. This he had to leave; a pity, because he didn't know where he could find anything comparable. He did not know where to go at all because he had slammed so many down behind him. Still, he would close that little gate quietly. There was nothing more important for him now than to spend the rest of his life in peace, without making mischief. He wanted to live in modest dignity.

That was all, but it had always been missing. He pulled cigarette smoke in deeply, and then let it out again.

That was another thing. He had smoked as usual for the first three days, and today every time he lit up he could see that copper-head turned on him like a beacon. Ah no! All the coconut groves and estuaries in the world wouldn't be worth the overt and covert criticism.

He flicked his cigarette on to the sand path. Immediately he remembered how meticulously Paul had swept the path this morning and looked for its landing spot. It was at the foot of the nearest tree, and above it were golden brown rings rippling round the trunk.

Christopher froze, his knees together, his shoulders hunched. The rings spiraled down. Only Christopher's eyes moved, but more slowly than the snake, which was the same colour as Irish Swami's hair when exposed to sun. The cigarette must have drawn its attention. At the bottom of the tree it slithered to full length and made its way through the sand towards Christopher. It slid up the narrow ledge of verandah, came to Christopher's stockinged feet, paused, turned around and went back to the sand path, from which it disappeared into a hedge.

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Christopher stared at the winding patterns it had left in the sand. It took half-a-minute for his muscles to unclamp. Immediately he sprang up, yelled Irish Swami and heard his voice gargling feebly. His second cry traveled right through the compound, but before Irish Swami had reached his gate Christopher was loping towards him. The Swami was unperturbed.

That particular snake wasn't venomous. There was any number of them around. He had forgotten to mention them. The remarkable thing was that Christopher hadn't seen one before.

"How do you know they're not poisonous?"

Irish Swami showed him his arm. Near the elbow were two little red holes. The flesh looked as though a pair of dividers had punctured it. A snake had struck from the fence last night. They only bit when they were disturbed, finished Irish Swami, yawning.

"Don't you carry any serum?" asked Christopher.

"Of course I do." Irish Swami waved the big cheroot he was smoking. "This. The only bad snakes around here are little ones. Russell's vipers. If you're ever bitten come straight to me. I'll ram this in." He advanced with the glowing point of his cigar. "It'll hurt but it will be all right." Christopher drank his coffee, suffering Irish Swami's jungle lore in silence.

"You did the right thing by sitting still," pointed out Irish Swami, as though there had been a wide variety of decisions.

"Probably why he turned round. No animal attacks if you can really still yourself. In fact, you can actually bring any animal to a halt by halting all movements in yourself... all the cat family, wild buffalo too, even the sloth bear."

Snarling, growling or charging animals sounded quite innocuous, and a sloth bear positively friendly. The silent enemy was waiting in the bushes and trees and fences and perhaps in the kadjan of this very roof.

"Have you ever been bitten by a poisonous snake?"

"Sometimes." The offhand tone was bad taste.

"And you weren't afraid, I suppose?"

"It's fear that makes you sick or kills you. If you don't have it, if you are completely without it, your system can handle the venom. The more afraid you are the worse it is and the surer you are to get bitten."

"And you've never been sick?" It was the Irish boasting he couldn't stand.

"Yes, I was sick once for two days. I was living in a cave. My guru Anandaswami sent me there. It was dark and I sat on one. I didn't even see it. It got me on the hip. I walked to the nearest village and drank a bottle of arrack. The pain lasted for two days, the longest days I've ever spent. Then it went."

This was the first plausible thing Christopher had heard in this room on the subject of snakes. It enabled him to admit his terror.

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"I just got paralyzed. I couldn't have done anything but sit still."

"It was enough. Of course, once they're on the attack you have to be completely quiet inside too."

"How?"

Irish Swami grinned his big, happy-maniac grin. "All westerners are the same. They come; they want to see a miracle. Then they're off again because they're sure it's just a stunt."

"I don't care if it's a stunt or not. You say that is the only way of protecting yourself and you say the ashram is full of snakes, so I want to know if you've ever pulled it off and how."

"I'll tell you. You slow down your circulation and your breathing. But before you can do that you have to learn to sit still while your shirt is drying." Irish Swami winked and added a staccato "tak" to announce his direct hit.

"Tak," acknowledged Christopher. He thought he had done everything necessary to hide his impatience this morning.

"I never tried it with a snake but I did it with a sloth bear. They're the most dangerous animals in the jungle because they're too stupid to know whether they're in danger so they attack everything. Not very big."

Irish Swami got up and showed him the size of a sloth bear. "Terribly sharp long claws that can rip you open." Irish Swami bent his flexible wrists and fingers into dangerous looking weapons. Then he bent his knees and looked around stupidly. Christopher could see the square footed dazed brutishness of the animal.

"I was getting up after a meditation when I saw him. He'd been looking at me from behind, couldn't quite make out what I was. Probably never seen a man before. As soon as I moved to get up he started running towards me." Irish Swami showed him the slovenly loping gait.

"I wasn't standing up yet. I was in this position and I held it. Then he started sniffing around me. Come on, you be the bear and sniff. I can't do both." Irish Swami was crouching and Christopher, caught by his immobility, closed in as slothbearishly as possible.

"Come on, have a good sniff," urged Irish Swami in a slow whisper. "He sniffed me everywhere."

Christopher turned around the man, nudging him with his nose, threatening him with his paws. Suddenly he felt uncomfortable and moved back a little. Irish Swami's eyes were fixed on the floor and his face set in the repose of a death mask.

What had made him draw back was the absence of heartbeats as he thrust his face into the red fuzz of Irish Swami's breast. He watched it for expansion and contraction, but neither the stomach nor the chest yielded at all. There was nothing about the shoulders or neck to suggest shallow breathing.

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Christopher brought his wristwatch up. After five minutes with his face still three inches from Irish Swami's shoulder Christopher saw the first signs of human pumping pushing at the ribs. He moved cautiously away and watched Irish Swami come back. They both sat down. Irish Swami started talking at his usual rapid rate. "You know what happened?"

Christopher shook his head.

"He pissed on me and walked off."

Irish Swami yelled with indecorous laughter and this time Christopher joined in. As soon as he had controlled himself Irish Swami launched into a wild-buffalo story and ended up stripped to his loincloth waving his lungi in the coy, elfish little dance he had done to distract the buffalo.

All day and in the next days Christopher was alternately nailed down by the Irishman's unleashed energy and charm and crucified by his implied and overt criticisms.

It was an acceleration of their initial encounter that marked their outward exchange after the snake episode, or rather the bear episode. It was now impossible to dismiss the table drill, and the lavatory ritual, for which the left hand was reserved, and the interminable waiting at the well as whimsies or local colour. They could be the preliminaries or necessary adjuncts to the system of life by which a man could learn to control his physiological rhythms. Christopher found himself committed not to stay. . . never that. . . but to wait and see.

Irish Swami endorsed this ambiguous position by urging Christopher to read a selection of books from the library in the spare hut with the purpose of discovering the tradition to which he was most drawn. Tradition, he insisted, whether Christian, Buddhist, Judaic or Vedic, was the only access to truth for the uninitiated. Direct revelation was either handed on verbally or sometimes written down by the seer.

Insightful study of these produced commentaries from which evolved rules and disciplines that led to liberation. Only by the unconditional and strict observance of these could anybody hope to liberate himself.

On this he was adamant, Christopher would have said fanatical but for the opulence with which the case was spread before him, illustrated with instances, samples, paradoxes, legends from all major religions as well as Greek epics, Jung and a dazzling blend of physics and metaphysics.

His innate suspicion of conversion faded when he was offered passage to any part of the world where the tradition of his choice could be studied and lived. He had never mid he wanted to be liberated and did not know what it meant. Though he could not listen with anything but complete absorption to the discourses of this most accomplished speaker he reminded himself that, in his twenty-two years of baulking, tradition and custom had been the most effective provocations.

He was intimidatingly intrigued and nervously flattered that Irish Swami should give so much time to a purpose in himself that he was totally unable to descry.

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"What difference does it make if you've never heard the word *moksha*? Of course you're looking. Your little waiter could see. The monks could see it. It's not even worth discussing because anybody with the slightest *nous* would recognise it. What makes it interesting is that you're stumbling so blindly that you're a demonstration of how infallibly It all works in spite of what you think or don't think, which is a lot of balderdash anyway."

Irish Swami puffed at his cigar and wrinkled his nose at Christopher's thoughts.

"Have you ever heard of the *neti-neti* method?"

Christopher's answer was invariably no to the have-you-ever heard questions.

"Well, look it up. It's the negative way of the seeker who says not this, not that, until he's excluded every possibility, every known thing but It, which is always the unknown. You want out, out of everything you've ever tried. That's *neti-neti*."

There was a felt logic to this, and people had pushed and prodded him into an it-pattern for want of a better term since he was off the bottle. This explanation of his actions made at least as much sense as Joan's, on which he had relied for the twelve years of his marriage. Joan was wrong. He was no gifted primitive, no noble savage... no savage at all.

He had not overcome his fear of snakes. Sometimes when he could no longer bear the pressure of new concepts he walked down the ashram path and out of the gate, sure of the long slithery menace hidden in the crutch of every tree. At such times the green and brown on the edge of the estuary became sour and hostile and he longed to be walking beside the Seine. Europe had become a mythically ordered region for him. His tempo was that of the city river or the Mediterranean circuit.

In the afternoon he tried to find his way through Irish Swami's traditions. He forced himself through as much of the recommended reading as possible, Rene Guenon's coolly Gallic affirmations, Suzuki's deadpan koans, the austerity of the Little Vehicle, the extravagances of the Greater Vehicle, sayings of the Hasidim and Sufis, Christian liturgy.

But he could not decide whether he was more drawn to Zen or Catholicism, the Hasidim of the Sufis, Mahayana or Hinayana. None of them held him much unless Irish Swami flamboyantly illustrated a point with story, paradox or mime, or just silence and a finger pointed at the villagers. Christopher had no background in comparative religion or even religion besides his schoolboy years of C. of E. before-breakfast chapel. This was no background at all, not in Irish Swami's eyes or for his present purpose. So he swallowed painfully.

He looked forward to getting away by himself with books every afternoon, for Irish Swami seemed prepared to live his life for him day after day. But he had no foundation, no terminology, no mental acquisitiveness. He could not apply himself. His alert curiosity was reserved for the person of Irish Swami only. It teased him to think of the possessionless Irishman and himself. They had probably started life fairly even.

The one behaved as though he had arrived. Christopher knew himself to be aimlessly wondering. Travel, even with the Swami providing the passage, choice of a

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new habitation and routine all required effort. It seemed simplest to tell Irish Swami that he would try it his way here.

At the end of the first week Irish Swami took him down the lane to the temple. Remembering his behavior in Notre Dame Christopher tried to back out. He didn't want to disgrace the Swamiji, bowed to by the villagers as well as his own disciples.

He was still looking for something better than a protest when Irish Swami sat down and lit a cigar. Christopher sat apprehensively beside him on the paving. He had not noticed they were in the temple courtyard.

In spite of a series of low parapet walls it looked like a squatters' colony with groups and families idly talking, eating or resting, all in full view of the tea and food and haberdashery stalls which surrounded the low walls on two sides. On the third side the estuary lapped the temple steps, on which women were beating their washing.

Christopher leaned against the wall of the middle parapet and watched. "You see," said Irish Swami. "You're always looking for trouble that doesn't come. Look at that." Irish Swami held out the white inside of his forearm. Christopher had already noticed the dark tattoo of two small curly-script words.

"What is it?" He usually avoided being cornered into questions, but he had been looking for such an opening.

"*Summa iru*. Tamil. Simply be." He wagged his head village style from side to side in the way which meant a variety of things from yes to I'm off or here I am. It meant anything, and the Swami's face was a complacent parody of his usual happy smile.

"Simply be. What's that?" asked Christopher, amused, curious, a little exasperated. The wacky head movement started again....

"Everything," he pounced suddenly. "What's that, you ask? It doesn't even ring a bell in you because your mind is always on the go, churning up a lot of balderdash, expecting trouble, and so if it doesn't come you make it. If you can stop your mind and simply be you'll have no problems. Just sit quietly here, simply be when you're waiting for your shirt, to begin with. Do one thing at a time and do it properly. Sit properly, eat properly. Be properly. That means no wondering about what is going to happen at the temple, good or bad, or what has happened. You're not there or there."

The cigar pointed behind to the tea stall and ahead to the estuary. "Know where you are and be there."

Christopher took these sudden outbursts in silence. The fellow was nuts. It was difficult to keep that in mind. The man was too interesting, a figure of stature and education. Scholarly achievement too. But the lunacy was part of it. Probably why he was here.

Christopher had never been accused of thinking too much before. Never. There was no other explanation for Irish Swami than that he was eccentric to the point of mental disturbance.

The temple provoked no rejective tension. Nothing was expected of him. He could simply watch the people. Many of them came to Irish Swami, bowed, and stayed

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for a chat. When they went he sometimes translated and commented for Christopher's benefit. The bare-chested temple priests consulted the westerner on finance and policy, on which he appeared to occupy semiofficial status. Pilgrims and villagers crouched at his feet for blessings. People detached themselves from their little settlements in the courtyard and brought tea back from the tea stall in aluminum canisters. They brought cooked rice and vegetables in multiple tiered copper tiffin-carriers. "They look as though they live here," cracked Christopher.

"They do. See that man? The one chewing betel against the wall. He's had trouble with his mother-in-law. He's staying here until it blows over."

"You mean he sleeps here in the courtyard?"

"Yes, why not? He sleeps here on his mat. He bathes and washes his clothes in the estuary. He buys his food from the stalls. Why not?"

"What about them? That looks like a whole family." There was a tall young man among them who would get up from time to time and walk about the court in precise patterns according to some unpredictable inner geometry that made him turn abruptly when he came to certain points. He fixed them as he went along and sometimes broke into a shy smile as though at some stupendous discovery. Christopher had avoided asking about him directly in case the Swami should insist he was sane.

"This temple (Selva Sannidhi) is dedicated to **Muruga**, the young warrior son of the great Shiva. It is known for its therapeutic qualities in curing what we call the mentally disturbed." He laughed quietly to himself. But Christopher found this quiet joke more disconcerting than the insane yell of laughter that was much closer to his own style.

"There's nothing wrong with washing and eating and sleeping or being mad in a temple, Christopher. That's what it's here for. It's built for the people. This is where they come when they're in trouble. They don't go on holidays, they go on pilgrimages. Or do you think it should be reserved for Saturday and Sunday?"

"No. No, I don't." Christopher didn't think anything on the matter. He didn't feel restrained here and he liked the idea of a man being able to get out away from a family situation.

The daily visits to this market place cum devotion complex became the most enjoyable part of his life. The stream of devotees took much of Irish Swami's attention, lifting the brunt of it from Christopher. This did not hinder the Swami's intermittent asides, amusing commentaries and translations with which Christopher supplemented his observations to work out what the village was about.

It was in the temple that Christopher felt the first thrust of penetration through the incomprehensible fabric of the villagers' thought. He watched a little old man hopping and skipping in and out of the queue of devotees. This stretched from beyond the outer parapet to the inner temple in a straight line.

The devotees strained over each other's shoulders to see the doors of Muruga's inner temple burst open and the camphor lights flame around him at the climax of the ceremony. At certain intervals every person in the line circled, holding his hands above

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his head. Many knelt down in complicated prostrations, placing first one cheek, then the other, then the forehead against the paving.

It was at these sacred moments that the little old man became convulsed with laughter, twisting and skipping crazily, almost derisively through the ordered line. Christopher nudged Irish Swami.

"Don't the priests mind?"

"He's been here for years. Never misses this puja." Irish Swami followed the little man's weavings with a smile as though having to see him afresh through Christopher. "Why should they mind?" he asked provocatively.

"After all, he's mad. If he hasn't been cured for years he probably won't be. I mean, he looks as though he's making fun of the whole thing."

"Sacrilege?" offered Irish Swami, turning to look at Christopher witheringly through his lenses. "Isn't that the word you're reaching for? There is no sacrilege here. Everything is sacred."

Christopher barely caught the words above the crescendo of drums inside the temple. Irish Swami's round bronze eyes turned away to find the mad dancer before Christopher could decide what was meant.

"Besides, they're not so sure that he's mad. They know there's more than a chance that we've gone wrong. Perhaps we've forgotten how to dance before the Divine. What would you like for him if he were your father, Christopher? This or a mental home?"

Within the outer parapet was a cluster of women. They had started the puja by swaying their hips slowly in time to the drums. Now two were caught up in an erotic pelvic beat while a third was kneeling and bringing her head towards the paving in a repeated act of submission. It came lower and lower every time.

He caught a glimpse of it as it flung back, ecstatic, eyes staring, mouth wide open. By now he was supplying his own answers. If these were hysterical women why shouldn't they work it out in the temple? Nothing churchy here. The drumbeats were closing in on themselves.

Women were still washing on the temple steps and the man with mother-in-law trouble slept. The little man was writhing his dance of laughter and the woman was pounding her head against the stone. Suddenly the drums stopped. The worshippers pivoted with raised hands, crying "Haro-hara," and stared into the temple. When it was all over the dancer-devotee sat quietly against a wall. A priest walked towards the thrashing woman.

As her head came up he threw sacred ashes expertly into her gaping mouth. The shock of it stopped her dead.

"Well?" asked Irish Swami, turning to Christopher.

He looked around the courtyard for the right word. People were coming out with red and yellow smears on their foreheads. He drew a deep, impotent sigh. What could he

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say that wouldn't merit a rebuke? What could he say at all? Good, frightful, cathartic? The word wasn't in the adjective category. His whole vocabulary was crippled.

"It seems to work," he said, pleading lenience.

Irish Swami was mystified. "It does."

CHAPTER 4

Christopher's mornings continued prosaic. He now took over from Paul the job of sweeping the ashram paths with a leaf broom. Apart from Irish Swami's enclosed garden, the borders around the trees and the neat rows of bushes clipped by Irish Swami himself, the rest of the ashram grounds were sand.

On the first morning the Swami showed him.

On the second Paul helped him.

On the third he was left to himself. It had to be done before breakfast, so he swept the leaves together as quickly as possible, leveled the sand before Irish Swami's gate and the dining-hall where it was most likely to be noticed, washed his hands at the tap and went into breakfast.

Faith his stomach full and heavy he stood in front of the dining room while Irish Swami pointed silently at fallen leaves. They looked familiar, yet Christopher was sure that he had swept all the paths quite clear to avoid this sort of situation.

"I thought I'd got them all," he muttered. "Perhaps they fell during breakfast."

"Balderdash. Can't you see they've been trodden on?"

Christopher swept again. Some of the leaves were half imbedded and would not be caught by the broom. He looked up for instructions.

"What's the matter? Are you paralyzed? Pick 'em up with your hands." This had never occurred to Christopher. Sweeping was sweeping. But he picked leaves up one by one and crept over the disturbed patches. He was tired and his shirt clung to him.

It had taken him more than one hour and a half. Next morning he got up as soon as the scripture-prescribed gargling and hawking at the well woke him. The shoemaker had finished his sandals yesterday. He wore these and his new shorts. He worked bare-chested. He swept and swept until he was dazzled by the order of the garden. He picked up every single leaf and even plucked the drying ones from low branches, bushes and flowers in case they should betray him before Irish Swami's emergence. He was shaking a branch when the Swami appeared on his verandah in a loincloth.

"How's that?" called out Christopher.

"Wrong direction!"... cheerfully.

"What's first?" He was always saying what's that.

"Size eleven or ten and a half, I would my."

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The imprints of his sandals were all over the ashram, showing every tortured pigeon-toed and splay-footed stance he had taken to get the mind clear. There were even half-soles where he had tiptoed guiltily past the Swami's private enclosure.

"You didn't sweep ahead of you. You had to back away from your own footprints so that you could sweep over them." Irish Swami showed him the crab-like sideways backing. "Any villager can show you. You see, you won't believe there's only one way. Your ego refuses to believe. Time enough to start experimenting and being creative when you've learnt the right way.

There's a reason for it. There's a reason for everything, I tell you." He came down from the verandah and grabbed the broom. "Now watch." He set to work with wide rhythmical sweeps, one hand resting on his bent back. The footprints went and in their place appeared a design of semi-circles. Every ten steps the sweeps were inverted so that an orderly geometric pattern grew up the path.

"There. If you want to leave your stamp on the sand that's the way to do it." He balanced the broom delicately on his palm.

"The spiritual path is skill in action." He sang out his motto to the tune of Danny Boy in a lyric Irish tenor. "The path of the spirit," he added to the next bars, "is skill in the sand." He thrust the broom back and went into his house singing.

Christopher recoiled fastidiously every time his ego was brought into these purely manual operations, but the Swami's working demonstrations left him defenseless. He was going to have to stay long enough to outdo him after all. He began erasing the remaining prints. In his head he was working out original designs. Their execution would have required a setsquare and a pair of dividers.

The first half of the day was a formal drill whether his sergeant-major was there or not. When he wasn't Christopher always expected an ambush or an unannounced barefoot approach. Irish Swami walked as noiselessly as a tracker. He would suddenly be there, at the well, behind Christopher's sweeping arm; in the room while he rifled an untidy case for clean clothes; behind him when he typed letters for Joan, Raoul (these he never posted) or his mother.

"Iru, iru... summa iru." It was a constant admonition, take it vary, crooned, hissed or bellowed in his ear according to Irish Swami's mood or Christopher's degree of excitation. At times he would simply thrust his tattooed arm under Christopher's nose, grin and walk out.

Irish Swami was there. Coming out of the latrine Christopher encountered him. "How did it go?" In the morning at the side of the mat: "How did you sleep? You haven't got that leg right yet. You turn it in, like this." He was there when he wasn't, knowing how Christopher had slept from a look at his face, whether he had smoked from a sniff at his room three hours later, what he had bought at the stalls from the gossips at the temple.

Christopher watched his own movements, his thoughts. He learnt to do without toilet paper, used his left hand to wash, and sprinkled lime in the spotless latrine. He used forty buckets and did without soap. The tradition said that soap defiled. Extra grease and

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dirt could be massaged away, the natural oils retained. He even learned to keep a tidy plate and his suitcase ready for inspection.

It must have been the afternoon that made the rest of the dogged, slogging day worthwhile. At three Christopher walked to Irish Swami's compound for coffee, which neither Paul nor Ramesh drank. The Irishman was as addicted to coffee ("Shouldn't be but I am") as Christopher had been to alcohol.

It released his vocabulary and sharpened his memory. It switched off much of the guru and sent the conversationalist bounding out. He became the historian of his life, of India, of the world. His studies in religion and archaeology allowed him to deal with civilisations like a Cartier expert dismissing flawed gems.

"The Greeks. The Greeks. Well, what about them? That's all we know in the west. The beginning of everything," compassionately.

"The Greeks were the tint to lionise and barbarise culture. They only started the process for us but they did a good job. Turned it into a cult, disintegrated it with their man-centred humanism. Able fellows, the Greeks. They gave it a noble twist. When the Babylonians got comfort-bound and scent to the dogs everybody could see what happened. The Greeks had it both ways, made it a gimmick... science, liberalism, got to know how we're thinking, you know, even if the premise is a piece of dung. All educated westerners are superior to primitive Indian villagers, therefore we are superior."

"That's yours, Christopher. Aristotelians would reel before the categories in logic that any second-rate pundit has at his fingertips. The occident is still hamstrung by the Greeks. At Oxford they're actually going backwards. They've started analyzing the first word of the premise. What does all mean before we can go any further? Mathematical logic has to end up like higher mathematics, knowing it knows nothing. They never made that mistake here. They analyzed and mathematised as much as anybody, but they always knew that to know the world you have to become the world. That's why they don't disturb knowledge by applying it. You have to be Brahma. To know the moon you don't go to the moon and have a look around. Be the moon."

He shook a finger at Christopher. "Be the moon, you understand. Otherwise you know nothing about it. Once you've done that you may come back with some interesting facts about it. Then the monkeys in America and Russia will start applying them. Be the moon. Be the star. Be the.. ."

"But how?" pleaded Christopher. The man was no less potty in the afternoon, but when he divulged Christopher became subject to the disease.

"How? But how?" mimicked Irish Swami. "Typical western question. No humility. Got to have a method. Gimme, gimme. No humility. No patience. We won't sit down and wait and learn and listen." Then came the silent private shake of laughter.

Christopher mistrusted the vituperative attacks on the west.

"You identify with it, of course. Simply be," said Irish Swami quietly at the end of his merriment. "Come on. Time for the temple."

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The vicious way Irish Swami spoke of departed disciples was suspect too. The fanatical cleanliness. The preoccupation with order. Christopher had misgivings about them all, but caught in a cataract of words he would find his criticisms and reservations unjust. From any point of view his knowledge was elementary compared to the Irishman's erudition. His range and flow turned Christopher's much-admired tales into crummy little vignettes. He was a stale anecdotist listening to a master extemporizing. Irish Swami might be deranged, but there was nothing spurious about his conversation. It never wandered. He was genuinely possessed when he talked.

At the temple he settled down and pointed things out for Christopher, the humorous as well as the serious, but when Christopher asked obliquely why the priests looked better fed than the other villagers.

"Ah that's what we always want to know, isn't it? Where does the money go? But the villagers don't want to know. They give. They know that all money goes to Bhagavan in the end. Of course a little sticks to the priests. Why not? This isn't a parish church. No books to balance, you know."

Always an answer. It became a private hobby: to find the point that didn't have an answer. But while he was looking, observing, trying to find a weak kingpin, he sat still. He never gave the tattooed arm occasion to shoot out over the coffee lectures or in the temple courtyard. But he questioned.

"Balderdash," returned Irish Swami when he couldn't be bothered to answer a question.

"But what's the good of the mind if you can't use it?" exploded Christopher.

"The mind has its uses." Every word was accentuated, and Christopher waited for the Swami to contradict himself once again. He didn't. "The mind is there to be enlightened. Once it is it can organise what it has received. Until that happens you're living in the ignorance."

And since it was settled that Christopher was a man living in the ignorance, not surprisingly he did and said nothing right.

When he hit on something that was not wrong it was for the wrong reason.

"Nice morning," he said one day when Irish Swami came to the verandah to watch him sweep.

"Balderdash. You say it's a nice morning because you think it's a nice morning. You're recording your impression for what it's worth, that's all. As long as you know that you won't do much harm. Trouble is you don't."

It was a normal way to start the day, and before Christopher's anger could explode he would remind himself that he was living in a madman's house. This soothed but did not entirely convince him. The paths were too straight, the cement mixed by those red-haired hands too fine and smooth, the houses built by the same hands too neat and well maintained. There was too much order to dismiss it all with such a charge. This was no Hansel and Gretel marzipan cottage. True that Paul and Ramesh prostrated to him

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morning and evening, but they liked it. Everybody in the village seemed to like it. It was the custom to bow to the guru.

Christopher had swept the paths meticulously every day. His beer-belly was melting, he could swing forty buckets up without panting. . . well, hardly at all. . . maybe thirty.

He was gaining confidence. One morning, after the first balderdash, he laid his broom quietly beside a little mound of swept leaves and looked up at the crazy one on his verandah.

"Look, I can't take it any more. Haven't we who live in the ignorance any right to a little peace?"

Irish Swami pointed at the gate. "You know how to open it."

He could be as miserly with words as he was extravagant.

Christopher looked at the gate. He knew how. He didn't want to. He didn't know where to go. He told himself he had a score to settle but didn't know if this was true. He picked up his broom in silence.

"You know, that's typical socialist jargon, Christopher.

Haven't we a right?" Irish Swami ruminated the words and did some stretching exercises while Christopher swept, his left arm in the required position on his back, but clenched. The man could never leave a thing alone. "Those living in the ignorance never get any peace." He stopped his exercises to do his secret mirth-quake. "That's why you're always getting annoyed with me. Ignorance. Otherwise it wouldn't touch you. You get annoyed with yourself mostly, you know."

"I don't."

"Let's see," and Irish Swami pointed out that Christopher hadn't burnt the leaves for days, that he had swept them into a mound to avoid work.

"I swept them there for the last three days because I intend burning them at the end of every week." Christopher stated this truth with dignity but he was annoyed with himself because he knew very well that the minutest deviations meant trouble.

"Every week! In a week's time the leaves will be moulding. The nature of the sand will have changed. You'll have trouble burning it. You'll make a mess and a stink." The explanation was given patiently. "That's what happens when you try to make things easy. One day you'll believe my way is the easy way."

It was, for the Irishman. Life was easy for him. He was at the top and he did everything without difficulty. Paul and Ramesh obeyed unquestioning because they also believed that there was only one way to do things.

The first time Christopher took the initiative in trying to do it the ashram-way he ran into a problem.

He was tired of walking from the well to the ashram in damp underpants and having to take his shorts off then and each time he went to the latrine. You couldn't fling

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water at yourself with your shorts around your knees. The others only had to gird their cotton up at the waist.

He had hoped the Swami would for once use his prerogative usefully to tell him to wear the traditional and suitable clothes.

When he suggested it himself Irish Swami wagged his head in the usual non-committal agreement. There were several major obstacles. First Christopher had to get rid of all his other clothes. Secondly, if he was going to dress like the others he would be regarded by the whole village as a disciple and it would mean he would have to obey the guru's instructions. "What am I doing now?" asked Christopher in shock.

"You don't know anything about the guru-disciple relationship. It takes the westerner between eight and twenty years to surrender to the guru."

"How long did it take you?"

"Ten," snapped Irish Swami. "And I was trying." Thirdly, Christopher was to hand over the whole of his army pension and take whatever was given for pocket money or nothing at all. "The ego doesn't like it."

Christopher didn't like it either, but it had to be considered.

It was impossible to live in these clothes; besides, he had gone so far already. What could he lose? And there was nothing to spend his money on. "Does the gate stay open?"

"The gate is always open. You walk out on your two bare feet." Then Irish Swami laughed loudly and pounded the floor with his hand in amusement. "You can always count on it. The first thing the ego does is to look for the escape hatch," by way of explaining the amusement. "It thinks if it goes from here to there," pointing at the gate, "it's free. That's what I call living ignorance."

That's what I call hysteria, thought Christopher.

CHAPTER 5

He had so little to lose, a battered case full of old clothes, the risk of having to wait two or three weeks for his pension cheque before he shoved off. He had stood it for three weeks. He could take the same again. He was that much time further from arrack, and considerably less jumpy. He could sleep on the floor and he knew the drill. He didn't think Irish Swami's mind could hold many surprises for him. As for his own position, he had from the beginning behaved like a born slave to this exuberant and exacting eccentric. He didn't believe his position could deteriorate.

He did what was asked of him in connection with things. He gave away all clothes and belongings except his typewriter and manuscript, which he spread in chapters under his mat. He tried to use the title of respect, Swamiji, but the name of Ayrishswami was so deeply cut into his memory that the Swami, amused, said it didn't matter.

At first he took little mincing steps to avoid losing the lungi, which was a straight piece of cloth tied round the waist like a towel but pleated in on itself like an unsewn skirt to allow for a full stride. Also he was afraid of tripping over the hem.

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Once he found he was secure in the new dress, he discovered the problem was really bare feet. He showed Irish Swami his lacerated soles after a walk, and begged to be allowed to wear sandals. No. No sandals. There was a reason for that too. A barefoot European in these clothes would immediately be recognised as a seeker, and men, and specially women, would leave him alone and relate themselves accordingly.

There was one thing that Christopher knew he should now do, which he tried to do, but could not. He could not prostrate before the Swami as Paul and Ramesh did. Every time he thought he was going down something locked in his spine and he stood stiff and ill at ease, raising his joined palms as high as he could in respectful substitution.

What made this embarrassing was that when he asked Irish Swami to accompany him into the temple for a puja he had no trouble in getting down flat on his belly before the idols.

Irish Swami no longer went to the pujas himself. He preferred to stop in the courtyard with local religious heads of the regions or the temple trustees or visiting students or just about anybody.

He first took Christopher into the temple when it was empty save for a top-knotted priest and a matted ascetic who had been sitting in a corner all day. He immediately showed Christopher how to apply the red and yellow powders to his forehead with the third finger of the right hand.

"What are they?"

"There you go asking questions. You don't have to know what they are. Just do it. There is efficacy in the puja. If you don't believe that what's the use of my showing you? There is efficacy in everything I tell you, so just do it. Let's get going. The puja starts here."

Here was a pair of closed doors that shut Muruga into his own temple within the temple, and before these Christopher was to wait upon the god respectfully with folded arms.

"Not like that. You're not a tourist leaning up on himself for comfort. You stand respectfully like this with your palms against the front of the upper arms. Go and see the statue of Ananda at Polonnaruwa." (later he produced a photo). The priest would lead the worshippers in a circumambulation of the various shrines. The major ones were those of Ganapati, the elephant god, Shiva's other son and therefore brother to Muruga.

Christopher had no trouble in laying himself flat on the floor for him or to the snake in the pit who was fed at every puja. On his way back he pulled at the bell as Irish Swami showed him.

Everybody pulled it to call Muruga's attention, and then they were in front of Muruga's closed down. The great final prostration was here.

Irish Swami as guide threw a glare. It was only by himself, lost in the stream of circumambulatory worshippers, that Christopher broke out of the Seahard Chapel capsule. The din of the conch and drums acted like the trumpets on Jericho's walls.

Earthman

Christopher stretched out on the floor knowing for the first time the full extension of his body and mind. He was making up for a lifetime's deprivation of ritual.

He entered the enclave and dropped into the oceanic current. The drums and conch delivered him from all maneuvers of speculation but for a thudding insistence that he had surely been saved from perpetual deprivation. Their crescendo lightened all burdens and warmed to life an intelligence inert and frozen under the tension of a frantic intellect. The murmur and sough of exordium called imperfectly under the percussive clamour. The conch screech glanced the surface of his skin with inorganic fingers. He abandoned himself.

He completed the circumambulation, and after ringing the bell for Muruga waited quietly with folded arms before the closed inner shrine. Restlessness was dead. He had not gone round the temple, but he agreed with Irish Swami that he had circled the world.

The doors burst open. Muruga, ringed in cosmic flames peacocked in splendour, aimed his spear at him. He brooked this agonizing danger repeatedly. He never got used to it. He stood helpless waiting for impalement, unable even to join his palms.

Had he been capable of moving forward to breast the spear he could have charged right through what menaced him. But the spear tip held the initiative over the latent surge of his muscles.

They would not contract; seemed superfluous in his moment of need... until the shouted laudation released him for the epiphany. "Hero-hara!" he called, and called and called again.

He lay full-length seeking the curve of the worn stone. He listened. He heard his own systolic and diastolic pulse deep under the paving. He sank into the tread of ritual measure. It led him to a grey-brown birth... to the sacredness of repetition itself, the involuntary drumming of animal courtship and the beat of mating wings.

He heard the strut of feet around the golden calf. It tipped the spear with Moses' anger.

His ear opened to the forbidden. It saturated his blood and sealed it from other thirsts.