



The Missing Mail

THOUGH his beat covered Vinayak Mudali Street and its four parallel roads, it took him nearly six hours before he finished his round and returned to the head office in Market Road to deliver accounts. He allowed himself to get mixed up with the fortunes of

the persons to whom he was carrying letters. At No. 13, Kabir Street, lived the man who had come half-way up the road to ask for a letter for so many years now.

Thanappa had seen him as a youngster, and had watched him day by day greying on the pial, sitting there and hoping for a big prize to come his way through solving crossword puzzles.

"No prize yet," he announced to him every day. "But don't be disheartened."

"Your interest has been delayed this month somehow," he said to another. "Your son at Hyderabad has written again, madam. How many children has he now ?"

"I did not know that you had applied for this Madras job ; you haven't cared

to tell me ! It doesn't matter. When I bring you your appointment order you must feed me with coconut payasam" And at each of these places he stopped

for nearly half an hour. Especially if anyone received money orders, he just settled down quite nicely, with his bags and bundles spread about him, and would not rise till he gathered an idea of how and where every rupee was going.

If it was a hot day he sometimes asked for a tumbler of buttermilk and sat down to enjoy it. Everybody liked him on his beat. He was a part and parcel of their existence, their hopes, aspirations, and activities.

Of all his contacts, the one with which he was most intimately bound up was No. 10, Vinayak Mudali Street. Ramanujam was a senior clerk in the Revenue Division Office, and Thanappa had carried letters to that address for over a generation now. His earliest association with Ramanujam was years and years ago.

Ramanujam's wife was away in the village. A card arrived for Ramanujam. Thanappa, as was his custom, glanced through it at the sorting table itself; and, the moment they were ready to start out, went straight to Vinayak Mudali Street, though in the ordinary course over 150 addresses preceded it. He went straight to Ramanujam's house, knocked on the door and shouted: "Postman, sir, postman." When Ramanujam opened it, he said: "Give me a handful of sugar before I give you this card. Happy father!

After all these years of prayers! Don't complain that it is a daughter. Daughters are God's gift, you know. . . . Kamakshi lovely name !" " Kamakshi," he addressed the tall, bashful girl, years later, "get your photo ready. Ah, so shy !



Here is your grandfather's card asking for your photo.

Why should he want it, unless it be . . ."

"The old gentleman writes rather frequently now, doesn't he, sir ?"

he asked Ramanujam, as he handed him his letter and waited for him to open the envelope and go through its contents. Ramanujam looked worried after reading it. The postman asked: "I hope it's good news ?"

He leaned against the veranda pillar, with a stack of undelivered letters still under his arm. Ramanujam said: "My father-in-law thinks I am not sufficiently active in finding a husband for my daughter. He has tried one or two places and failed. He thinks I am very indifferent. . . ."

"Elderly people have their own anxiety," the postman replied. "

The trouble is," said Ramanujam, "that he has set apart five thousand rupees for this girl's marriage and is worrying me to find a husband for her immediately. But money is not everything. . . ."

"No, no," echoed the postman ;

"unless the destined hour is at hand, nothing can help. . . ." Day after day for months Thanappa delivered the letters and waited to be told the news: "Same old news, Thanappa. . . . Horoscopes do not agree. . . . They are demanding too much. . . . Evidently they, do not approve of her appearance."

"Appearance ! She looks like a queen. Unless one is totally blind . . ." the postman retorted angrily. The season would be closing, with only three more auspicious dates, the last being May 20th. The girl would be seventeen in a few days. The reminders from her grandfather were becoming fiercer. Ramanujam had exhausted all the possibilities and had drawn a blank everywhere.

He looked helpless and miserable.

"Postman," he said,

"I don't think there is a son-in-law for me anywhere. . . ."

"Oh, don't utter inauspicious words, sir," the postman said."

When God wills it . . ." He reflected

for a while and said :

"There is a boy in Delhi earning two hundred rupees. Makunda of Temple Street was after him. Makunda and you are of the same subcaste, I believe . . ."



"They have been negotiating for months now. Over a hundred letters have passed between them already. . . . But I know they are definitely breaking off. ... It is over some money question. . . . They have written their last message on a postcard and it has infuriated these people all the more. As if postcards were an instrument of insult ! I have known most important communications being written even on picture postcards ; when Rajappa went to America two years ago he used to write to his sons every week on picture postcards. ..."

After this digression he came back to the point. "I will ask Makunda to give me the horoscope. Let us see. . . ." Next day he brought the horoscope with him.

"The boy's parents are also in Delhi, so you can write to them immediately. No time to waste now." A ray of hope touched Ramanujam's family. "I have still a hundred letters to deliver, but I came here first because I saw this Delhi postmark. . . . Open it and tell me what they have written," said Thanappa. He trembled with suspense.

"How prompt these people are ! So they approve of the photo ! Who wouldn't ?" "A letter every day ! I might as well apply for leave till Kamakshi's marriage is over . . ." he said another day.

"You are already talking as if it were coming off tomorrow ! God know how many hurdles we have to cross now. Liking a photo does not prove anything. . . ." The family council was discussing an important question : whether Ramanujam should go to Madras, taking the girl with him, and meet the party, who could come down for a day from Delhi. The family was divided over the question. Ramanujam, his mother, and his wife none of them had defined views on the question, but yet they opposed each other vehemently. " We shall be the laughing-stock of the town," said Ramanujam's wife, " if we take the girl out to be shown round. . . ."

"What queer notions ! If you stand on all these absurd antiquated formalities, we shall never get anywhere near a marriage. It is our duty to take the girl over even to Delhi if necessary. . . ."

"It is your pleasure, then; you can do what you please ; whyconsult me ? . . ."

Tempers were at their worst, and no progress seemed possible. Time was marching. The postman had got into the habit of dropping in at the end of his day's work, and joining in the council.

"I am a third party. Listen to me," he said. "Sir, please take the train to Madras immediately. What you cannot achieve by a year's correspondence you can do in an hour's meeting." "Here is a letter from Madras, madam. I am sure it is from your husband. What is the news ?"



He handed the cover to Ramanujam's wife, and she took it in to read. He said : "I have some registered letters for those last houses. I will finish my round, and come back. . . ." He returned as promised. "

Have they met, madam ?"

"Yes, Kamakshi's father has written that they havemet the girl, and from their talk Kamakshi's father infers they are quite willing. . . ."

"Grand news ! I will offer a coconut to our Vinayaka tonight."

But," the lady added, half overwhelmed with happiness and half worried," there is this difficulty. We had an idea of doing it during next Thai month. . . . It will be so difficult to hurry through the arrangements now. But they say that if the marriage is done it must be done on the twentieth of May. If it is postponed the boy can't marry for three years.

He is being sent away for some training. . . ."

"The old gentleman is as good as his word/" the postman said, delivering an insurance cover to Ramanujam."

He has given the entire amount. You can't complain of lack of funds now. Go ahead. I'm so happy you have his approval. More than their money, we need their blessings, sir. I hope he has sent his heartiest blessings. . . ."

"Oh yes, oh yes," replied Ramanujam,"

My father-in-law seems to be very happy at this proposal. . . ."

A five-thousand-rupee marriage was a big affair for Malgudi. Ramanujam, with so short a time before him, and none to share the task of arrangements, became distraught. As far as it could go, Thanappa placed himself at his service during all his off hours. He cut short his eloquence, advices, and exchanges in other houses. He never waited for anyone to come up and receive the letters. He just tossed them through a window or an open door with a stentorian

"Letter, sir." If they stopped him and asked : "What is the matter with you ? In such a hurry!", "Yes, leave me alone till the twentieth of May. I will come and squat in your house after that" and he was off.

Ramanujam was in great tension. He trembled with anxiety as the day approached nearer."

It must goon smoothly. Nothing should prove a hindrance."

"Do not worry, sir; it will go through happily, by God's grace. You have given them everything they wanted in cash, presents, and style. They are good people. . . ."



"It is not about that. It is the very last date for the year. If for some reason some obstruction comes up, it is all finished for ever. The boy goes away for three years. I don't think either of us would be prepared to bind ourselves to wait for three years."

It was four hours past the Muhurtam on the day of the wedding. A quiet had descended on the gathering.

The young smart bridegroom from Delhi was seated in a chair under the pandal. Fragrance of sandal, and flowers, and holy smoke, hung about the air. People were sitting around the bridegroom talking. Thanappa appeared at the gate loaded with letters. Some young men ran up to him demanding : "Postman! Letters ?" He held them off.

"Get back. I know to whom to deliver." He walked up to the bridegroom and held up to him a bundle of letters very respectfully. " These are all greetings and blessings from well wishers, I believe, sir, and my own go with every one of them. . . ." He seemed very proud of performing this task, and looked very serious. The bridegroom looked up at him with an amused smile and muttered : "Thanks."

" We are all very proud to have your distinguished self as a son-in-law of this house. I have known that child, Kamakshi, ever since she was a day old, and I knew she would always get a distinguished husband," added the postman, and brought his palms together in a salute, and moved into the house to deliver other letters and to refresh himself in the kitchen with tiffin and coffee.

Ten days later he knocked on the door and, with a grin, handed Kamakshi her first letter : "Ah, scented envelope ! I knew it was coming when the mail van was three stations away. I have seen hundreds like this. Take it from me. Before he has written the tenth letter he will command you to pack up and join him, and you will grow a couple of wings and fly away that very day, and forget for ever Thanappa and this street, isn't it so ?

"Kamakshi blushed, snatched the letter from his hands, and ran in to read it. He said, turning away : "I don't think there is any use waiting for you to finish the letter and tell me its contents."

On a holiday, when he was sure Ramanujam would be at home, Thanappa knocked on the door and handed him a card.

"Ah!" cried Ramanujam.

"Bad news, Thanappa. My uncle, my father's brother, is very ill in Salem, and they want me to start immediately."

"I'm very sorry to hear it, sir," said Thanappa, and handed him a telegram.

"Here's another. . . ." Ramanujam cried : " A telegram!" He glanced at it and screamed :



"Oh, he is dead !" He sat down on the pial, unable to stand the shock. Thanappa looked equally miserable. Ramanujam rallied,

gathered himself up, and turned to go in. Thanappa said : "One moment, sir. I have a confession to make. See the date on the card."

"May the nineteenth, nearly fifteen days ago !"

"Yes, sir, and the telegram followed next day that is, on the day of the marriage. I was unhappy to see it. ...c But what has happened has happened,'

I said to myself, and kept it away, fearing that it might interfere with the wedding. . . ."
Ramanujam glared at the postman and said :

"I would not have cared to go through the marriage when he was dying. . . ." The postman stood with bowed head and mumbled :

"You can complain if you like, sir. They will dismiss me. It is a serious offence."

He turned and descended the steps and went down the street on his rounds. Ramanujam watched him dully for a while and shouted :

"Postman !" Thanappa turned round ; Ramanujam cried :

" Don't think that I intend to complain. I am only sorry you have done this. . . ,"

"I understand your feelings, sir," replied the postman, disappearing around a bend