

Father Washes Away His Pennies and Pounds

Part 1, Chapter 1, pp. 1-6.

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In front of the entrance gate of our house was a low earthen platform, immediately inside was the byre, in the centre an open courtyard, and beyond that a veranda, and behind it lay the kitchen. The shrine had a great big window like a door. To anyone sitting there every last stick and stone outside was visible. This was where Father always sat.

He used to go out every morning at eight o' clock, and return in the evening at six. As we had no watches in those days, the sun falling on the coping meant eight o'clock, and the cattle coming home in the evening meant six o'clock. Our clock was a guess-work one. Father returned with the returning cattle; his routine never varied. As soon as he came in, he bathed, then said his prayers, fingered his rosary and made his offerings to the dogs. His stern eye watched even the kitchen. Among Hindus, cooking is considered almost a religious rite, so whoever was doing it- and this was invariably my mother- had first to bathe and wash her sari, and put it on again still wet. Everything had to be done with the right hand, the left, which is 'unclean' hanging on one side as if broken. It took at least two hours for father to finish his evening prayers and all his acts of worship. By that time dinner would be ready, and at ten or eleven at night he would dine.

We are a family of five brothers and sisters. There had been several others, but only five of us survived. My oldest sister was Bhiku, who married Pendse, and of whom much is to be told. After her came Keshav, then Bhagirathi, Vishnu and lastly myself. There were fifteen or sixteen years between Bhiku and me. Not one of us sat near Father, or dined with him. Even on high days and holidays it was the same. This by no means implies that he paid no attention to his children. From the window of the shrine his severe eyes followed everyone and everything.

All our neighbours were high-caste Brahmans like ourselves, even if one of them came to call, Mother had to sprinkle water over their footprints when they left, to purify the ground made 'unclean' by their touch. Nevertheless, when Father was out of the house in the morning, there was no lack of fun for all. As soon as his back was turned the women nearby gathered in our house and we children collected our friends. Mother always hungered for companionship. She would bathe other people's babies, comfort the young daughter-in-law, dispense medicine to one, speak kindly to another. She even went into a Maratha woman's house once, and baked big flat cakes with brown sugar stuffing, though the Marathas are of a lower caste than ours, and no Brahman can touch them. But all this she did secretly. Father's rule was another story. To him everything brought in from outside was 'unclean' and had to be washed, down to the very salt and pepper. Once he ordered the children to wash the salt. They determined to reform him, and tying up the salt in a piece of cloth, they soaked it well and hung it on a peg. In no time the salt had

dissolved, and drained out. When father came to look into the bag, behold there was nothing. From that day on, salt, sugar, both brown and white, oil and clarified butter, were permitted to go unwashed.

The washing of all things fell for the most part to Mother and Grannie. According to orders they washed everything, or at least made a pretence of washing; and so long as they did it themselves the salt and sugar never dissolved. Many a time they practiced deception, and taught us to dissemble too, but not without reason, for when the grain was brought in from the fields, father demanded it should be washed before it was stored. How could Mother and Grannie wash twenty bushels of corn at a time? They washed a little of it, and spread that over the rest of the heap. When Father came home in the evening he would question all the children. They had been well-coached beforehand, and for the most part told the same story; but if one took fright and made a slip, that is, spoke the truth inadvertently, then the whole household would be thrown into confusion. At that late hour of night everything that had been polluted must be washed before Father's eye, the children must be well whipped for telling lies, and lastly Father himself, being contaminated by them, must bathe again. We endured this inquisition every evening.

Having answered the call of nature in the morning, Father needed four lumps of earth, each as big as coconut, with which to rub his hands and feet clean. For twenty-five years, without a break, he brought this earth from the jungle two or three miles away, from a certain place where no one was ever likely to go and contaminate it. They say a great pit is to be found there even now. Taking this earth he would sit hour after hour 'purifying' his hands and feet.

Once three baskets of guavas were left under the eaves. They lay there till evening. They should by rights have been sent to Nasik to be sold, but for lack of a man to take them, they remained where they were. They were 'unclean'; they were not washed. Everyone wanted to eat the fruit, but no one had the courage. We spent the whole day wondering whether to eat it or not. In the end it was decided that we should take turns, one watching by the door while another ate a guava. At last my turn came, but no one would stand on guard for me. All by myself I went to the door and, seeing no one coming picked up a guava and began to eat it. Like a gift dropped from heaven, Father appeared standing before me. The guava still in my hand, I fled for my life, and hid behind a big wooden beam in the corner of the veranda. Out of the back door went Father, and cut a stout rod from a custard-apple tree. He came back crying, 'Where is that brat?' dragged me out from behind the beam, and thrashed me there and then. Grannie was grieved out of measure when she saw me, and everyone else in the house was petrified with fright. 'If this child tells any tales,' they said one to another, 'everyone will be beaten, and beyond that the whole house will have to be spring-cleaned from top to bottom.'

One day I was lying near a heap of wheat. My doll was beside me. I had dressed her in a sari and then, in the midst of my play, fallen asleep. The doll's sari made a link between me and the wheat. Father came in and his eye lighted upon it. Seeing the wheat polluted his anger knew no bounds. He seized me, and began beating me.

One of my sisters and my brother also were polluted by something, so having been well beaten, I was sent down to the Godavari with them to bathe.

On our way there we decided that one of us should be drowned. By such a death of one of his children Father's eyes would be opened, and he would never trouble anyone again.

No sooner said than done. Together we went down into the river. We were all of one mind, to give Father the fright of his life. It was I who had been beaten; therefore it was I who determined to carry out the plan, and teach Father his lesson. I grew faint; water flowed into my nose and mouth. My face was towards the west, and my eyes began to grow dim in the rays of the setting sun. At that moment a neighbour was sitting saying his evening prayers in front of us. He happened to see me, and jumping at once into the water pulled me out. Having revived me, he took me home. Father learned no lesson. It was I who learned the lesson.

One cannot but laugh at it all now. That childlike hiding behind the beam, reforming Father, these and other things are as fresh before my eyes as the day they happened.

Once between one and two hundred rupees rent came in. The money was put down in the courtyard, and covered with a heap of cow dung, while Father departed on his usual business. We children had to mount guard on the dung-hill all day long. When Father came back in the evening, he took the money down to the river to wash. There he forgot all about it, and only remembered it after he had reached home. But what was the use? What is gone is gone.

In short even Father's pennies and pounds were washed away in the flood of his purifications.