

UNTO ETERNITY

The rest is silence.

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

The third week of July 1974. It was a week of high festivities in our bungalow at Courtallam. There was a family get-together. All three of Kalaithanthai's daughters had come with their husbands and children. There was a lot of merriment and laughter. To add to the joy, we had Dr. M.Varadarajan, Vice-chancellor of the Madurai-Kamaraj University and some syndicate members as our guests. Kalaithanthai was very happy and all mornings and evenings were devoted to literary, religious and sometimes political discussions. The talks were naturally rambling and ranged over a wide field. There seemed no end to the delight.

The Sunday preceding the fateful day was particularly full of literary pursuits. There was a discussion on the ancient judicial system and Kalaithanthai recalled the story of Manuneethi Cholan. To render justice to a dumb animal, the king had run his chariot over his only son. We were all delighted to hear Kalaithanthai quote the relevant stanza from Periapuranam describing the event.

A little later, Mu.Va, who was just leaving for Madurai, happened to refer to a poem in *Purananuru*, by the poet Mosikiranar. The poem concerns the poet Mosikiran and the Chera king, Peruncheral Irumporai. The poet had come to visit the king who happened to be away. Being very tired, the poet laid himself on the *murasukkattil*, which was vacant as the *Murasu* (drum) had been taken out for *abishekam*, and fell asleep. It was an outrage. The king who returned saw the poet sleeping on the *murasukkattil*. Far from getting angry, the king began fanning him with a *samaram*. Such was his regard for

Tamil and Tamil poets. Mosikiranar woke up and he was touched by the king's kindness, and the outcome was a beautiful poem. As Mu.Va. gave an explication of the poem, pointing out the subtleties and nuances in some of the lines, Kalaithanthai was delighted. That night Kalaithanthai recalled the poem and the conversation. "Is there anything in the whole world to equal Tamil culture as embodied in the poem?" he wondered. He wanted me to read it to him again. I had great difficulty in spotting those lines from the bulky volume. He instructed me to copy it down the next day. I marked the poem and laid the book aside. But the copying was not destined to be done.

That night the moon shone brightly and our bungalow and the garden were bathed in moonlight. It was a vision of delight. Kalaithanthai stood for a long time on the balcony and was thrilled by the glory of the night and murmured, "How beautiful, how beautiful!"

The blow fell the next day July 29, 1974. In the morning, Kalaithanthai got up as usual, recited the *Tirumurais* and went for his morning stroll. He walked majestically towards the Tiger Falls—it turned out to be his last stroll in the garden he loved most.

What a glorious death it was! There was no ailment, no pain, no suffering. He gently walked into the arms of death. He was greater in death than in life. His end came in Courtallam, the place he adored most.

He is gone forever. And we who remain behind can only mourn in vain. He lived a full, glorious and purposeful life. He lives in the institutions he built up, in the temples of learning he established and in the hearts of his countless fellowmen for whose welfare he tirelessly strove. To adapt poet Shelley,

...till the future dares

Forget the past, his name and fame shall he

An echo and a light unto eternity.