



Project Madurai

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மின்நொகுப்புத் திட்டம்



"Ponniyin Selvan" of Kalki Krishnamurthy



English Translation
by Indra Neelameggham

Part IA New Floods (chapters 1 – 30)

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Kalki's
Ponniyin Selvan



Part 1-A
[Chapters 1 - 30]
New Floods

Translated 1990
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A Guide To Pronouncing

More or less phonetic spelling is used for proper names, place names and literary works. Tamil words are used when inevitable. English spelling for place names use the more popular anglicized version -- Tanjore instead of Tanjavur -- when applicable.

The letters zl are used to denote the Tamil alphabet/sound . There is no known way to symbolize this in English. Thus the name `Cho a' is written as Chozla. It can be pronounced with the Z silent as in Chola, Paluvoor etc.

(For further details on Chozla history of this period, refer to Colas by Prof K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, Madras University Historical Series 9, 1955, reprinted 1984, University of Madras, India.)

Kalki's Ponniyin Selvan

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 1 -- Aadi Festival

We welcome our readers to get into the boat of imagination and go sailing down the flood of sourceless, endless time. Let us travel a century for every second and quickly reach the times of a thousand years before the present.

In the southern end of Thirumunaipadi, which lies in between the Thondai Kingdom and the Chozla Kingdom, about two leagues far to the west of Thillai Chittrambalam, (Chidambaram Town) there spreads an ocean-like reservoir. It is known as Veera Narayana Lake. It is about a league and a half long north to south and about half a league wide east to west. Time has twisted its name: for these days the reservoir is known as Veeraanattu Lake.

In the windy months of Aadi-Aavani (August), when new floods fill the reservoir to almost overflow, anyone who looks at the Veera Narayana lake will surely recall with pride and astonishment the splendid deeds of our ancestors in Tamil Nadu. Did those ancients do things merely for the welfare of themselves and the people of their own times? ... They fulfilled tasks that would benefit thousands of future generations in their sacred motherland.

On the 18th day of the month of Aadi, in the early hours of the evening, a young warrior, mounted on a horse, was riding down the banks of this ocean-like Veera Narayana Lake. He belonged to the Vaanar clan which is famous in the history of the gallant Tamils.

Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan was his name. Having travelled a long distance and being worn and weary, his horse was walking along rather slowly. The young cavalier did not seem concerned about this. The sprawling reservoir had so enchanted his heart!

It was common for rivers of the Chozla Kingdom to run with flood waters touching both banks during the Aadi month festival of Padhinettam Perukku. The lakes fed by these rivers would also be filled to capacity, with waves jostling and colliding upon their embankments. Waters from the river called North Cauvery by the devout, but commonly known as Kollidam, rushed into the Veera Narayana Lake, through the Vadavaru stream and made it a turbulent sea.

Seventy four floodgates on the lake distributed the bounty via aqueducts to distant tracts of the country side. With these irrigation waters from the lake, activities such as ploughing, sowing and seed transplanting were being carried out as far as the eye could see.

Here and there, the song of farmers who were ploughing and women who were transplanting created a pleasant and joyous music. Listening to all this, Vandiya Devan was

riding quite slowly, without prodding his tired horse. As soon as he had climbed the embankment, he had started counting the floodgates with the intention of finding out if popular claims, which declared the lake to have seventy-four floodgates, were true! After having come about one and a half leagues along the bank, he had counted seventy gates.

Aha! How huge is this lake? How wide and how long? Can we not say that the tanks built by the great Pallava monarchs in the Thondai Kingdom are mere ponds and pools compared with this immense reservoir? Did not Prince Raja-aditya son of King Paranthaka who conquered Madurai, think of building this great tank to conserve the waters of the North Cauvery which were going wastefully into the sea? And did he not execute his thinking into action? How great a genius he must have been! Who can we compare to his brave nobility! During the battle at Takkolam, did he not, riding an elephant go to the forefront and single handed, enter combat? And in the course of that confrontation did he not receive enemy spears on his chest and give up his very life? And because of it did he not get the title Deva who reposed atop the elephant as he departed for the heavens meant for the brave? These kings of the Chozla Dynasty are remarkable! They were just as just as they were brave! And as in justice they excelled in the veneration of their Gods.

Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan's shoulders swelled with pride when he thought of his good fortune in having received the friendship of a Chozla prince of such a dynasty. Just like the waves that dashed against the banks of the lake because of the swift western breeze, his heart too bubbled with gratification and pride. Thinking all such thoughts Vandiya Devan reached the southern end of Veera Narayana Lake.

There he could view the panorama of the Vadavaru stream separating from the North Cauvery and falling into the lake. For a short distance inside the embankment, the lake shore was silted forming a sandy beach. A number of casuarina trees and wood-apple trees had been planted on the beach so that rising flood waters would not destroy the embankment. Nanal reeds had grown thickly along the water's edge. From a distance, the scenic view of the rushing waters from the tree lined North River merging into the lake in the south-west, seemed like a colorful, newly created painting. Vandiya Devan saw a few other things that increased the pleasing joyousness of this enchanting scene. Was it not the day of the Aadi Festival? Crowds of people from nearby villages, dragging their carts covered with canopies of sandal-colored, supple coconut-leaves, were coming there. Men, women, children and even several elderly folks all wearing new clothes and vividly dressed in various ways had come. Bunches of fragrant flowers, such as the hearts of country cactus, chrysanthemum, jasmine, gardenia, champaka and iruvatchi decorated the braids of women.

Several had come with families bringing stewed rice and fancy picnic foods. Some stood by the water's edge and ate their picnic rice-dishes from platters of plantain-flower petals. Others, more brave, had ventured further into the water to cross over to the bank of the Vadavaru. Some children threw the platters from which they had eaten into the floodgates and clapped their hands with laughter to see the petals float through the gates to be rushed onto the canals. Some mischievous young men plucked the flowers off the heads of their loved ones and threw them into the water, merely to see them being cast upon the shore.

Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan stood there watching all this for a while. He listened with an eager ear when some of the girls with pleasant voices sang. They sang traditional boat-songs and flood-songs as well as folk songs like Kummi and Sindhu.

Come, oh ye young maidens,
Look at the North river bubbling by!

Come watch, oh ye friends,
Look at the White river rushing by!

Come, oh come all ye girls,
To look at the Cauvery tumbling by!

Such flood-songs pleasingly flooded the ears of Vandiya Devan. Others sang ballads about the bravery and fame of Chozla kings. Some girls sang of Vijayala Chozla who had fought in thirty-two battles and had worn his ninety-six body wounds like ornaments. Others sang acclaiming the bravery of his son, Aditya Chozla, and how he constructed sixty-four Shiva temples all along the Cauvery - from where it rose till it mingled into the sea. One girl sang the fame of King Aditya's son, Paranthaka Chozla, who had not only conquered the Pandiya, Pallava and Chera kings but had also sent an army to Lanka to hoist his victory flag. When each girl sang, several people stood around her listening with rapt attention. They applauded with loud shouts of "Ah, ah" and expressed their happiness!

An elderly woman noticed Vandiya Devan who was sitting on his horse and listening to all this. "Thambi! You seem to have come from a long distance; you are tired! Come down from your horse to eat this stewed rice," she said.

Immediately several young girls noticed our youthful traveller. They whispered amongst themselves about his appearance and laughed merrily. Vandiya Devan was overcome by a certain mortification on one side and delight on the other. For a moment he considered dismounting and eating the food offered by the old woman. If he did so, the young maids would surely gather around to tease and laugh.

So what? Is it easy to behold so many beautiful maidens in one place? Even their laughter and teasing would be heavenly music. In Vandiya Devan's eyes all those girls on the lake shore appeared like the heavenly nymphs Ramba and Menaka!

At the same time he noticed something towards the south-west along the flow of River Vadavaru and hesitated. About seven or eight large boats with white, spreading sails filled with the breeze were coming swiftly like white swans floating with wide-spread wings.

All the people engaged in various merriments turned to avidly look in the direction from which the boats were coming. One of the boats came forward more swiftly and reached the lake shore where the embankment turned west. Several well-built footmen carrying sharp & shiny spears were in that boat. Some of them jumped on to the lake shore and started shoving the people with shouts of "Go! Move!" Before being pushed around too much, the people picked up their containers and belongings and quickly started climbing upon the bank. Vandiya Devan could not understand any of this. Who were these men? Who were coming in the sailboats behind them? Where were they coming from? Perhaps they belonged to the royal household?

Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan approached an elderly man leaning upon his cane by the bank. "Sir, whose men are these? And whose boats are those coming behind like a school of swans? Why are these footmen chasing away the people? And why are the people hurrying away?" came his questions, one upon the other.

"Thambi! Do you not know? There is a flag flying in the middle of those sailboats. See what is embossed on it!" said the elder.

"Seems like a palm tree."

"It is a palm tree! Don't you know that the palmtree-flag belongs to the Lord of Pazluvoor?"

"Is it the great warrior, Lord Pazluvoor, who is coming?" asked Vandiya Devan in a startled voice.

"It must be so. Who else could raise the palmtree-flag and come?" said the elderly man.

Vandiya Devan's eyes opened wide with immeasurable surprise as he looked towards the boats. Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan had heard much about Lord Pazluvoor. But, who would not have heard about them? The names of the brothers - The Elder Lord Pazluvoor and The Younger Lord Pazluvoor -- were renowned from Lanka in the south to the Kalinga Kingdom in the north. Pazluvoor, situated on the northern banks of the Cauvery near the city of Uraiyoor was their capital. Even from the times of Vijayala Chozla, the Pazluvoor Family had won heroic fame. They had a lot of give and take with the royal family of the Chozlas. Because of this and also because of their nobility, bravery and fame the Pazluvoor clan had all the distinguishing characters of a royal family. They also had the right to carry their own pennant.

The elder of the present Lords of Pazluvoor had fought in twenty-four campaigns. During his times he had won acclaim as having no equal in war in the Chozla Kingdom. Since he had now crossed the age of fifty, he no longer entered the battlefield directly. Nevertheless, he now held several eminent positions in the government of the Chozlas. In the Chozla Empire, he was the head of finance; head of food supply. He had the authority to levy taxes according to political needs. He had the right to call upon any princeling, nobleman or squire and order them thus: "This year you shall pay this much tribute" and the powers to implement such orders. Therefore, next to Emperor Sundara Chozla he was the most powerful man in the Chozla Kingdom.

Vandiya Devan's heart brimmed with an eagerness to meet this powerful, illustrious and noble Lord of Pazluvoor. At the same time he recalled the words uttered in privacy by Prince Aditya Karikala, at the new Golden Palace in Kanchi City.

"Vandiya Deva, I know you to be a brave man. At the same time I trust you to be intelligent and give you this immense responsibility. Of the two letters I have given you, deliver one to my father the Emperor and the other to my sister the Younger Pirati. (Pirati is the term used to refer to princesses of the ruling house.) I hear all sorts of rumors about even the senior officials of the kingdom in Tanjore. Therefore, the contents of my letters should not become known to anyone. Even the most eminent persons should not realize that you are carrying letters from me. Do not get into quarrels with anyone on the way. You should not merely avoid conflicts of your seeking; but also not be involved in disputes thrust upon you. I very well know about your courage. You have proved it several times. Therefore, there shall be no loss of valor in escaping from duels forced upon you. Most important, you should be particularly careful about the Lords of Pazluvoor and also my Young Uncle Madurandaka. I do not wish them to know even who you are! They should definitely not know why you are going!"

The Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire and the Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Armies, Prince Aditya Karikala had told him all this. The Prince had repeatedly advised Vandiya Devan about how he should behave. Since he recalled all this, Vandiya Devan suppressed his desire to meet Lord Pazluvoor. He whipped his horse to move on quickly. In spite of the prodding, his tired horse merely plodded ahead. Having decided to spend the night at the Kadamboor fortress of the noble Sambuvaraya, he resolved to procure a better horse before resuming his journey the next morning.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 2 -- Azlvar-adiyan Nambi

Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan rode down the embankment and turned his horse towards the southern path; his heart danced with joy: like those sailboats skipping across the waves. The excitement buried deep in his heart seemed to erupt outward. His intuition said that he was going to meet adventures experienced by none in one lifetime.

What joyous delight even as I approach the Chozla Kingdom! What wonders will the fertile, bountiful land beyond Kollidam hold? How would the men and women of that country behave? How many rivers? How many reservoirs? How many clear streams? How wondrous would be the river Ponni (Cauvery) praised in song and epic? How enchanting would be the flower laden punnai, konnai and kadamba trees on its banks? Would not the wink of the lily and the blue-lotus or the blossoming welcome of a red-lotus be a pleasant sight? How magnificent would be the spectacular temples erected by these devout Chozlas along both banks of the Cauvery? Aha! Pazlayarai! Capital city of Chozlas! Pazlayarai that turned Poompuhar and Uraiyoor into small country towns! What of its palaces, towering columns, armaments, guard houses, busy markets, Shiva temples of granite and towering Vishnu temples?

Vandiya Devan had heard about the captivating devotional poems - Thevaram & Thiru-vaaimozli - sung by music experts in those temples. He was soon to have the fortune of hearing them. That was not just it -- he was soon to attain favors beyond his wildest dreams. He was to personally meet Emperor Paranthaka Sundara Chozla, who was comparable to the God Velan in valor; who was as handsome as Manmatha the God of Love. Furthermore, he was soon to meet the Emperor's beloved daughter, an incomparable jewel among women, the Younger Pirati Kundavai!

Hopefully there would be no interruptions along the way. So what if there are obstacles? I have a spear in hand, a sword at my waist, armor on my chest and courage in my heart. But the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, my Prince, are strict: do not enter into any skirmish until the assigned task is completed. It is pretty trying to obey that order! I have followed it thus far in my travels. A mere two-day journey remains. I must be patient until then.

Travelling with the intention of reaching Kadamboor Fort before sunset, Vandiya Devan soon reached the Vaishnava temple in the town of Veera-narayana-puram. Since it was the day of the Aadi Festival, a large crowd of people had gathered in the woods and glades around the temple.

Vendors selling jack-fruit, banana, sugar-cane and various other edibles had set up shops. Others sold flowers such as lotus buds for worship of the Gods as well as blooms to decorate the braids of women. Mounds of tender coconuts, myrrh, candy, jaggery, betel leaves, pressed rice and puffed grain were on display for sale. Fun-games and other amusements were in progress here and there. Astrologers, expert palm readers, soothsayers and magicians who cured

poison-bites: of these there was no dearth. Amidst all this Vandiya Devan noticed a large gathering standing on one side and he heard loud noises of argument among people in its middle. An immense urge rose in him to find out what the argument was about. He could not control it! Stopping his horse by the roadside near the crowd, he dismounted. Signaling the horse to wait, he parted the crowd and walked right in.

It surprised him to find only three persons involved in the debate. Even though they were merely three men, the crowd around them periodically cheered their chosen favorites rather loudly. Vandiya Devan realized the cause for this commotion and watched to find out the reason for the argument.

One of the debaters seemed to be an exceptional follower of the Vaishnava faith: he wore the sandal-paste namam markings of the sect all over his body; he had styled his hair into a topknot on his forehead. A short staff was in his hand; his short, squat frame seemed quite strong.

The other was a follower of Shiva, wearing broad ash marks on his devout body.

The third wore ochre robes and had completely shaved all the hair off his head. He was neither a Vaishnava nor a Saiva: he seemed to be an Advaita philosopher beyond any sect.

The Saiva devotee was saying, "Oh you Azlvar-adiyan Nambi! Give me an answer to this! Did not Brahma try to find Shiva's head and Vishnu search for His feet? Unable to see neither head nor foot did not both seek the sanctuary of Lord Shiva's auspicious feet? That being so, how can your Thirumal Vishnu be a greater God than Lord Shiva?"

Hearing this Azlvar-adiyan pounded his staff saying, "Well fella! You fanatic Saiva dust-worshipping priest! Stop your nonsense. Recall that your Shiva gave boons to the ten-headed Ravana, King of Lanka. Did not all those boons turn to sawdust when confronted by Sri Rama, an incarnation of our Thirumal Vishnu? When that is so, how can your Shiva be a greater God than our Thirumal?"

At this the ochre-clad monk who believed in the One-supreme Being, intervened to say, "Why do you both argue wastefully? There is no end to your arguments about Shiva being a bigger God or Vishnu being greater. Only while you are involved in these pagan rituals of devotion will you quarrel about Shiva and Vishnu. The path of Knowledge is greater than devotion. Then there is the state of Absolute Knowing, beyond even Knowledge. When you reach that state there is no Shiva and no Vishnu. All existence is the Supreme Being. Do you know what Sri Sankara the Teacher says in his dissertation on the scriptures"

At this point Azlvar-adiyan Nambi interrupted, "Stop it you fellow! Do you know what your Sankara who wrote

all those explanations for the Upanishads, the Bhagavat Gita and other scriptures finally say?

Sing of Govinda, Sing of Govinda,
Sing of Govinda, Oh foolish mind!

He said it three times! It is to dumbheads like you that he refers when he mentions foolish minds." The crowd responded to this with thunderous clapping, mocking laughter and loud cheers of "Aha, oho".

The monk did not stay quiet. "Hey you with the topknot on the forehead! It is correct that you refer to me as a foolish mind. You hold an ordinary wood-staff in your hands; you are surely a wood-brained wastrel. It is surely because of my foolish mind that I have come to talk with a wastrel like you."

"Oh Sir! This is not an ordinary wood-staff. If need be it has the power to break open your shaven head," and saying this Nambi raised his staff as the crowd cheered him.

The Philosopher interrupted. "Dear fellow! Stop it! Keep the staff in your own hands. I shall not be angry even if you hit me with your stick. Neither will I dispute with you. That which hits is Supreme! That which is hit is also Supreme! If you lay hands upon me it is like hitting your own self!"

Upon hearing this Nambi announced, "All of you watch! The Supreme is going to serve the Supreme a hallowed-hit. I am going to hit myself with this staff," swirling his staff he moved towards the monk.

Watching all this, Vandiya Devan wondered if he should grab the staff from the fellow with the topknot on his forehead and serve him a few smacks from it. However the monk seemed to have suddenly disappeared. He mingled into the crowd and vanished! At this the Vaishnava supporters in the crowd cheered even louder.

Azlvar-adiyan turned towards the Saiva devotee, "You foot-dust worshipper, what do you say? Will you continue this debate or would you too run away like the monk?" he said.

"Me? I shall never run away like that philosopher spouting mere words. Did you think of me also as your Kannan (Krishna)? Is not your Krishna the same fellow who received beatings from the butter-churn because he stole butter from the homes of milkmaids? ..." Before the Shiva worshipper could finish, Nambi interrupted.

"Why sir? Did not your Shiva carry loads of dirt for the sake of dry pudding and get beaten on his back? Have you forgotten that?" Swirling his staff he approached closer.

Azlvar-adiyan was a stocky, well-built brute. The Shiva devotee was an emaciated man. The cheering supporters in

the crowd were ready to enter the tussle. Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan felt that he must stop this absurd rumpus.

He came forward and said, "Sirs why are you arguing? Do you have nothing better to do? If you itch for a fight, why not go to Lanka? There is a big war going on there."

Saying, "Who is this fellow trying to make peace?" Nambi quickly turned towards him. Some people in the crowd liked Vandiya Devan's fearless mein and charismatic face.

"Thambi! You tell them." They cheered, "Tell these quarrel mongers the truth. We will support you."

"I will tell the facts I know. There seems to be no quarrel between Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu-Narayana. Those two seem to be quite friendly and pleasant towards each other. Then why are these two men arguing?" Hearing these words of Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan the people snickered.

The Shiva devotee commented "This boy seems to be intelligent. But jovial words cannot end the argument. Let him answer this question: is Lord Shiva a greater God than Vishnu or is he not?"

"Shiva is a great God. So is Thirumal Vishnu. Both are equal. Worship whomever you want. Why quarrel?" said Vallavarayan.

"How can you say that? Where is the proof that Shiva and Vishnu are equal?" chided Azlvar-adiyan.

"Proof? I will give you proof. Last night I had been to Vaikunta, the abode of Vishnu. At the same time Shiva came visiting. Both were seated on equal thrones. They seemed to be of equal height. Still, to avoid any doubt, I measured their height with my arm ..."

"Young man! Are you mocking me?" roared Azlvar-adiyan.

"Yes, Thambi yes. Tell us more!" applauded the crowd.

"Upon measuring them, I found both to be of exactly the same height. Without stopping at that I asked both Shiva and Thirumal directly. Do you know what they said? `Hari and Shiva are one and the same. Those who don't know this should have their mouths filled with dirt!' Saying it they gave me this fistful of dirt to throw in the mouths of the idiots who quarrel about it." Vandiya Devan opened his fist to show a handful of dirt. He then threw it among them. Upon this all hell broke loose. The men in the exited crowd started picking up dirt and rubble and began throwing it at each other. Azlvar-adiyan also entered the fracas with shouts of "Idiots! Unbelievers!" and used his staff. A great disturbance and commotion was about to erupt. Luckily, a stentorian announcement thwarting all this, was heard nearby.

"Best of warriors, bravest of the brave, he who destroyed the very roots of the Pandiya army by attacking furiously, he of the victorious spear, he who engaged in twenty-four combats and wears sixty-four battle-wounds on his sacred body, the Chozla Secretary for Finance and Food, the lord who can levy taxes, The Elder Lord of Pazluvoor, is announced. Make way! Make way!" A thundering voice made the announcement.

The heralds who made these announcements came first. Then came the drummers. Behind them came men carrying the palmtree-flag. Next marched several smart footmen bearing lances and spears. Behind all these men came a dark, well-built man seated on a finely decorated elephant. The sight of the warrior on the elephant looked like a dark cloud resting atop a mountain peak. People stood on both sides of the roadway and watched. Vandiya Devan guessed that the man seated on the elephant was Lord Pazluvoor.

Behind the elephant came a palanquin with silken drapes pulled close. Before he could wonder who could be inside, Vallavarayan saw a fair hand full of bracelets and bangles come out and slightly part the curtains. The dazzling face of a girl could be seen inside the palanquin: like the moon shining forth from behind a shifting cloud cover.

Though he was a connoisseur of the beauty of womankind, though her captivating face seemed like the radiating full moon, for some reason, Vandiya Devan was not happy to see that face. An irrational fear and disgust took hold of him. At the same time the woman's eyes focussed on something near Vandiya Devan. The next instant the horrified sound of a girl's scream was heard. The screens pulled shut once again!

Vallavarayan looked around him. His intuition said that the lady had screamed upon sighting something nearby. He searched around again. Azlvar-adiyan was leaning back on a tamarind tree just behind him. He saw that the fanatic Vaishnava's face had turned undescribably horrible and ugly. His heart filled with irrational surprise and revolt.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 3 -- Vinnagara Temple

Sometimes trivial incidents lead to events of great significance. One such incident now occurred to Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan. Remember, he was standing by the roadside to watch the procession of the Pazluvoor Lord and his entourage? His horse stood a little away from him.

Some of the men walking towards the end of the Pazluvoor retinue sighted the horse. "Dear chap! Look at this mule!" said one of them.

"Don't say mule. Say mare," corrected the other. "Set the semantic research aside! First of all find out if it is a donkey or a mule!" said a third man. "Let's check it out!" said yet another as he approached the horse. He tried to jump on its back, but the intelligent horse realized that this was not its master; it refused to let him mount.

"Hey! This is a troublesome horse. It will not let me mount! Perhaps only a prince of well established lineage can ride it! Well then, Tanjore Muthuaraya will have to come back!"

His friends laughed at this witticism. Tanjore Muthuaraya's dynasty had vanished a hundred years ago! Now, a flag bearing the tiger symbol of the Chozlas flew over Tanjore.

"The horse may think so. However, if you ask me I would say that a fully alive Thandavaraya is better than a dead Muthuaraya from Tanjore," said another undaunted man named Thandavaraya.

"Thandavaraya, find out if this pesky horse that wont let you come near is really a horse! Perhaps it is a dummy dance-horse come in for the temple festival," said another prankster.

"Ok, let's examine it," saying this Thandavaraya twisted the horse's tail. The proud horse kicked its hind legs several times and began running amok. "Hey, the mule is running away! It really is a mare!" shouted the man and with cries of "Ooi, ooi," they began to chase the horse even further.

The horse began running helter skelter amidst the festive crowd. People trying to avoid its hooves moved away in a hurry. Even so, some of them were kicked down. The horse ran wild. All this happened within a few seconds right in front of Vandiya Devan. From the expression on Vallavarayan's face, Azlvar-adiyan, the Vaishnava, surmised it to be his horse.

"Thambi, did you see the work of those Pazluvoor brutes? What happened to the boldness that you showed in front of me? Could you not show your valor against them?" he pointed out.

Vandiya Devan felt a piercing outrage. Yet, he grit his teeth and remained patient. The Pazluvoor men were a large group. There was no point in confronting the whole lot. Neither did those men wait for him to pick a fight. Laughing over their pranks with the horse they had quickly marched ahead.

Vandiya Devan started walking in the direction in which the horse had gone. He knew that his horse would run for a while and then stop. So he did not worry about it. He felt that one day he should settle the score with those arrogant men of Pazluvoor and the idea became firmly etched in his mind.

His horse stood in a clearing beyond the tamarind grove, wearing a saddened expression. As he approached it, the horse neighed; the speechless creature seemed to say, "Why did you part from me and subject me to these travails?" He quietened the horse by patting its back and then led it back towards the road.

Several persons of the festive crowd asked, "Thambi why did you bring this unruly horse here? See how it has kicked us?" Others pacified them with words like "What will this young man do? What could the horse have done? We have to blame those Pazluvoor rogues for this mishap."

Azlvar-adiyan waited at the roadside. Vandiya Devan frowned. What nuisance is this... It seems as if this fellow will not let go.

"Thambi, which way are you going?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"Me? I plan to go a little ways west and then a bit to the south; then go around east to travel southwest."

"I am not asking all that. I meant, where do you plan to stay tonight?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Perhaps, if you were planning to stay at the fort of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya, I have an assignment to be done there ..."

"What! Do you know magic or witchcraft? How did you know that I was going to Kadamboor Palace?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"What is so surprising about it? Tonight, several dignitaries from various places are going there. Lord Pazluvoor and his retainers are also going there."

"Is that true?" said a surprised Vandiya Devan.

"Yes, it is true. The elephant, the horses, liveried footmen and other honors were from Kadamboor. They came to receive Lord Pazluvoor; all such protocols are always observed wherever he goes."

Vandiya Devan became thoughtful. The opportunity to stay in the same lodgings as Lord Pazluvoor was not easy to come by. He may even chance to make the acquaintance of that esteemed warrior. However, the experience with the unruly retainers of the Lord still rankled bitterly.

Azlvar-adiyan interrupted these thoughts in a begging voice, "Thambi, will you do me a favor?"

"How can I help you? I am new to these parts."

"It is a task that is possible for you. Take me along to Kadamboor Fort tonight."

"Why? Is some fanatic Saiva coming there? Are you going to debate about the greatness of Shiva and Thirumal to conclude who is the greater God?"

"No. No. Did you think that getting into arguments was my only occupation? Tonight there will be a lavish banquet at Kadamboor. After the feasting there would be several entertainments: music, pantomimes, miracle plays, gypsy dancers and mystic oracles. I wish to see the gypsy dance and hear the oracle."

"Even then, how can I take you along?"

"Say that I am your servant."

Vandiya Devan felt that his earlier doubts were confirmed. "Find someone else for such deception and fraud. I do not need a servant like you. Anyway no one will believe it; from what you say, I doubt if they would even let me into the fort tonight."

"Aha! That means you are not going to Kadamboor upon invitation!"

"Well, I have an invitation of sorts. Kandamaran, the son of Lord Sambuvaraya, is my close friend. He has invited me several times to come and stay at his palace if I come to these parts."

"Is that all! Then even your situation is kind of doubtful tonight!"

Both kept walking onwards, silently, for a while. "Why are you still following me?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"I was about to ask you the same question. why are you following me? Why don't you go your own way?"

"Well it is because of not knowing which way to go. Where are you going? Perhaps to Kadamboor?"

"No. You said you cannot take me there. I am going to the Vinnagara temple."

"To the presence of the deity Veera-narayana-perumal?"

"Yes."

"I too would like to go to that temple and worship that perumal."

"I thought that you would perhaps not come to a Vishnu temple. It is a temple that should be seen; a deity worthy to behold. The priest Eshwara Munigal offers services at the temple. He is a venerable man."

"I too have heard this. But, it is very crowded. Is there some special celebration at the temple today?"

"Yes, today is the day of the Saint Andal. It is also the Aadi Festival of Padhinettam Perukku. All these festivities are because of this. Thambi, have you heard any of the invocative poems of Andal?"

"I have not heard any."

"Don't. Don't ever listen to her poems!"

"Why this hatred?"

"It is not hatred. Nor is it enmity. It is for your benefit that I say it. If you ever happen to hear any of the melodious psalms of Andal, you will drop your swords and spears; like me, you too will fall in love with Kannan and start upon a pilgrimage to all the Vishnu temples."

"Do you know any of these psalms of Andal? Can you sing them?"

"I know some. I also know some of the poems of Nammazlvar who translated the Vedas (scriptures) into Tamil. I am going to sing some of them at the shrine. If you wish, you can listen. Here comes the temple." By now they had reached the Vinnagara temple.

Paranthaka Chozla I, a grandson of Vijayala Chozla, had won the title Conqueror of Madurai and Lanka. He was the monarch who established the foundations of the Chozla Empire. He achieved historical fame because he covered the roof of the temple at Chidambaram with gold. Besides titles like Jewel among Chozlas, Greatest of Warriors, he also had the honored name of Veera Narayana.

During Paranthaka's times, the Rashtrakutas in the north were powerful monarchs. He expected them to come from Manyaketa (roughly present day Maharashtra) and invade the territories of the Tamils. Therefore he stationed a huge army, led by his eldest son Prince Raja-aditya, in the Thirumunaipadi Territories north of the Cauvery.

Prince Raja-aditya had a brilliant idea while his large numbers of soldiers waited in idleness, with nothing to do. Using them he wished to fulfil a major undertaking for the benefit of the population. Enormous quantities of flood waters flowing in the Kollidam river were going wastefully into the sea. Wishing to make use of these waters, he made his soldiers build a huge, spreading reservoir. In honor of his distinguished father he named it the Veera Narayana Lake. He then established the town of Veera-narayana-puram on its shores and also built a Vinnagara temple.

The Sanskrit term Vishnu Griha meaning Abode of Vishnu, became Vinnagara in Tamil. Does not Sri Narayana, i.e., Vishnu recline upon the primeval waters in sublime meditation? Therefore, it was customary in those days to build Vinnagaras on lake shores so that the deity would protect the reservoir. Therefore, the Prince

constructed a temple for Veera-Narayana at Veera-narayana-puram.

It was to this temple that Vandiya Devan went in Azlvar-adiyan's company. At the sanctum sanctorium Azlvar-adiyan began singing. He sang a few devotional poems by Andal. He then sang a few verses of Nammazlvar:

Praise, praise,praise the Lord,
Gone is the curse of this wretched life;

There is nothing left here for Lord Yama,
Who created the hells of despair and death;

These creatures of the ocean-colored Lord,
Reckoned on this earth, the sorrows of these times;

See, they have come to worship him,
Serve him with dance and song;

We saw, we saw, we saw,
We saw things pleasing to the eye;

Come, Come all ye worshippers!
Come adore him, come here to salvation;

Follow the path of these souls dear to Lord Madhava,
Live on this earth with dance and song of his glory.

When Azlvar-adiyan sang these songs, tears overflowed from his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. Vandiya Devan listened attentively. Though tears did not stream from his eyes, he was very moved. His biased opinions about Azlvar-adiyan were somewhat transformed. This fellow is very devout, he thought.

Several others listened to the songs with interest. The temple trustees came to listen. The priest Eshwara Munigal heard them with tear laden eyes. The priest's son, a mere child, stood nearby and listened with rapt attention. Azlvar-adiyan sang ten such poems and then stopped with these words:

These be merely parts
Of Thennan Gurukoor Maran Sadagopan's
Devotional compositions
numbering one-thousand and twenty
which would melt any devout heart.

The priest's son whispered something into his fathers ears. Wiping his tear-laden eyes the priest came forward to ask, "Sir, it is said that Gurukoor Sadagopa known as Nammazlvar has sung more than thousand such poems. Do you know them all?"

"I do not have that fortune. I know just a few of his ten-liners," replied Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

"I entreat you to teach this child all the songs you know," requested the priest.

In later years this town was to attain several honors. The boy with the childish face shining with devotion would grow up to be known as Nadamuni Adigal the foremost of Vaishnava teachers. He would go to Gurukoor, the blessed

town from where Nammazlvar hailed; search and collect all thousand poems; set them to music; sing them and along with his disciples popularize those songs all over the country. Alavandar who would be born as the grandson of Nadamuni Adigal would perform several miracles.

Even the great Saint Sri Ramanuja himself would come to visit this hallowed place of their birth. When he comes he will be amazed by the Veera Narayana Lake and its seventy-four irrigation-gates. He would wish to establish seventy-four monastic seats to spread the holy word of Lord Narayana's grace and benevolence to all the populace in the same fashion that the reservoir distributed its bountiful waters through seventy-four irrigation canals for the welfare of the people. Later seventy four such monastic-teaching-seats or pitams would be established.

Let us leave it to scholars to describe all these magnificent happenings of Vaishnava history and return to our hero Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan.

When they came outside the temple after their worship, Vandiya Devan said "Sir, Mr. Nambi! I did not realize that you were such a devout and learned person. If I had annoyed you with my impudence please forgive me."

"I forgive you Thambi. Say, will you now do me a favor?"

"Did I not say that I cannot help you on your request? Did you also not agree?"

"This is something else. I will give you a small note. If you stay at Kadamboor Fort, you must find an appropriate time to give it to someone."

"To whom?"

"To the lady who was in the closed palanquin behind Lord Pazluvoor's elephant."

"Mr. Nambi! Whom do you take me to be? Am I the fellow for such activities? If anyone but you had uttered such words to me ..."

"Thambi! Don't be agitated. If it is not possible you can let it be. Go your way. However, if you help me in this matter, my help might be useful to you at some later time. There is no harm done. You can go."

After this Vandiya Devan did not tarry any longer. He jumped on his horse and sent it galloping towards Kadamboor.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 4 -- Kadamboor Fort

The horse had by now rested well and become quite energetic. Within a few hours it reached the gates of Kadamboor. Lord Sengannan Sambuvaraya was an important Chozla nobleman in those days. His castle gates resembled the entrance of a large city-stronghold. The towering walls on both sides of the gate curved around like a fortress.

A number of elephants, horses, large bullocks as well as grooms to hold, feed and water these animals stood near the gates. Here and there men stood with flaming torches to provide light; oil pourers were ready to add oil to the lighted torches. Sighting all these bustling activities, Vandiya Devan felt a bit dismayed and hesitant. Something special seems to be taking place here; why have I come here now ... At the same time he felt an overpowering urge to find out what the special occasion was. The fortress gates were wide open although men holding long lances stood near the gates. They looked like the messengers of Yama, the Lord of Death.

The dauntless youth decided that the best thing to do would be to ride boldly and go in; any hesitation on his part would alert the guards to stop him. He translated his thoughts into action. But what a disappointment?! As soon as the horse neared the gates, lances crossed in front to obstruct the way and stop him. Four men came forward and held onto the horse's reins. One of them peered at Vandiya Devan. Another held up the flaming torch to light his face.

With anger darkening his face, Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan asked "Is this customary in your town? Stopping guests at your gates ...?"

"Who are you? Impudent fellow. Where do you come from?"

"Are you asking me my name and town? Thiruvallam in the Vanakapadi Kingdom is my town. Once upon a time, soldiers in your country were proud to tattoo the names of my ancestors on their breasts. My name is Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan! Do you know?"

"Why did you not bring a liveried herald to announce all this?" said the gate-keeper. Others around him laughed.

"Whoever you are, you cannot enter! All the expected guests have already arrived. The Master's orders are to not let in anyone after that," said their leader.

Hearing this altercation, some footmen who were standing nearby came closer. "Hey! Is this not the same mule that we chased into the festival crowd?" said one of them.

"Donkey, not mule," corrected another. "Look at the starched up fellow sitting on his donkey," added another.

Vallavarayan heard these words. He had been thinking, why get involved? Perhaps I should go away quietly.

Maybe I should show the token bearing the seal of Prince Aditya Karikala and then go in. When I have the signet of the Prince, the Commander-in Chief of the Northern Armies, none in the regions between River Pennar and Cape Comorin can impede my way. It was in the midst of these ponderings that he heard the mocking words of the Pazluvoor lackeys. Immediately deciding his course of action, he said "Let go of my horse. I am going back."

The gate-keepers let go of the reins. Vandiya Devan employed both his legs to apply a sudden pressure to the underbelly of his horse. At the same time he drew his sword from its scabbard at his waist. The swirling sword flashing like swift lightning in his hand appeared like God Vishnu's spinning Chakra (discus). The horse galloped forward into the fortress. The men in the way seemed to suddenly fall down. Lances and spears were thrown apart, clanging noisily. The horse flew amidst the gossiping men of Pazluvoor. The totally unexpected, lightning attack scattered the men in all four directions.

Several other actions took place immediately: The fortress gates banged shut thunderingly. "Catch him! Hold!" shouts arose; spears rubbed against swords making a "clang, clang" noise. Suddenly the drums announcing danger, boomed "dadam, dadadam". Several men -- maybe twenty, thirty, fifty or even more -- surrounded Vandiya Devan and his horse. He jumped down to the ground; swirling his sword in all directions he shouted "Kandamara! Kandamara! Your men are killing me!"

Hearing his words, the men were stunned into hesitation and moved away a little.

At the same time a thundering voice was heard from the upper balcony of the palace tower. "What is that noise out there? Stop it!" Several persons were standing there, looking down on the disturbance below.

"Master! Some fellow has broken our guard and entered here. He is shouting the young master's name," replied the gate-keeper. "Kandamara, go find out what the commotion is about," said the thundering voice from the tower. Vandiya Devan surmised the voice to be that of Lord Sambuvaraya.

He and the men surrounding him waited for a while. "What is all this about?" a young voice said. The men parted to make way for a youth coming hurriedly. He noticed Vandiya Devan who stood there twirling his sword, like God Muruga after killing the Demon Soora.

"Vallava! Is it truly you?" he said in an emotional voice and ran forward to heartily embrace his friend.

"Kandamara because you repeatedly insisted, I came to your house. I received this warlike welcome here," Vallavarayan pointed to the men around him.

Kandamaran said to his men, "You idiots! Move aside. Your brains are like budding shoots on a pounding block."

Kandamaran took hold of his friend's hand and led him hastily into the castle. His feet did not stay put on earth; and his heart danced with joy. What can captivate the heart of a youth more than a true friendship from his youthful days? Yes, of course there is a thing called kaadal (love). But being in love has as much sadness and pain as joy and pleasure. In the cheerful friendship of youth there is not even a shadow of sadness. All is heart pleasing happiness.

"Kandamara, what is all this hustle and bustle about? What is happening here today?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Oh! I'll explain what's happening here afterwards. Remember the days when you and I were at the army garrison near the Pennar river? Remember your wishes `We must meet Lord Pazluvoor, I must get the acquaintance of the great Lord of Mazluvoor, I must meet that one and this one'? That lord, this lord, every fellow - you can meet them all here tonight," said Kandamaran.

He then took his friend up to the upper chambers where the guests were seated. He presented him to his father Lord Sambuvaraya and said "Father! I have mentioned several times about my friend Vandiya Devan of the Vaanar Clan. This is he." Vandiya Devan bowed and greeted him with reverence. However, Lord Sambuvaraya did not seem too happy about it.

"Is that so? Is he the fellow who created all that disturbance at the palace gates below?" asked the father.

"He was not the cause for the disturbance. It's those idiots we have for gate-keepers" said the son.

"Still, he need not have arrived in this sensational manner; today of all days and that too hours after darkness," said lord Sambuvaraya.

Kandamaran frowned. He did not wish to continue the debate with his father. He led Vandiya Devan aside. He presented his friend to Lord Pazluvoor, seated on a lofty throne amidst the other guests, and said "Uncle! This is my dear friend Vandiya Devan. He is from the noble Vaanar clan. He and I were on guard duty at the army base north of the Pennar river. In those days he would often express a wish to `See and meet the bravest among warriors, the great Lord of Pazluvoor' and would often ask `Is it really true that he has sixty-four war-wounds on his body?' I would tell him `One day you can meet him and count them'."

"Is that so Thambi? Will you not believe it unless you personally count them? Such distrust? You suspect that none but one of the Vaanar clan can be brave?" said Lord Pazluvoor.

Both friends were startled. They had not expected the nobleman to thus misconstrue their words of praise. Vandiya Devan felt irritated. Without showing his feelings

he said "Sir! The fame of the brave Pazluvoor clan has spread from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas. Who am I to doubt it?"

"Good reply. Intelligent fellow" muttered Lord Pazluvoor.

With a feeling of having escaped with that, the friends went out. Lord Sambuvaraya called out to his son and whispered, "Serve your friend some food as early as possible and tell him to go and sleep in some secluded spot. He seems tired after a long journey!" Kandamaran shook his head angrily and walked on.

Later Kandamaran took his friend to the inner chambers of his mother. Several women were gathered there. Vandiya Devan bowed low and greeted Kandamaran's mother. He surmised that a girl hiding shyly behind her was Kandamaran's sister. He had imagined all sorts of things based upon Kandamaran's descriptions of his younger sister. In a way, he was now disappointed. His eyes searched around among those women, with an eagerness to find the lady who had come in the palanquin with Lord Pazluvoor.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 5 -- The Gypsy Dance

Both friends came out from the inner chambers. A voice from inside called out, "Kandamara! Kandamara!"

"My mother is calling me. Wait right here. I'll be back instantly," said Kandamaran as he went inside once again. The voices of several women talking all at once, the sound of questions being asked one upon the other and Kandamaran answering them with some confusion could be heard. He also heard the women inside laughing gaily. The thought that they were perhaps laughing at him caused some shame and anger in Vandiya Devan. When Kandamaran came out, he took hold of his friend's hand and dragged him onwards saying, "Come let us look around our palace."

He showed him all the beautiful moonlit terraces, music rooms, dance halls, storage rooms, well furnished chambers, living quarters, audience halls, turrets, towers, stables and other places. After a while Vandiya Devan asked, "Kandamara, you made me wait outside your mother's chambers and went in again. At that time what was so special to provoke the laughter and joy inside? Were the women so happy to see me, your friend?"

"They were all very happy to meet you. In fact my mother and others liked you a lot. But they were not laughing about you ..."

"Then why the laughter?"

"You know the Lord of Pazluvoor? At this age, after all these years he has recently married a very young girl. He has brought her here in a covered palanquin. Apparently he has kept her locked up in his own chambers without sending her to the inner apartments in the palace. One of the maids who saw the girl by peeping in through the window, came and described her beauty. That is the cause for the laughter. They were discussing if she was a Singhala girl, a Kalinga lady or perhaps a maid from Chera. You know that the ancestors of the Pazluvoor clan originally came here from the Chera country?"

"I have heard it too. Perhaps you had told me earlier. That's OK! Kandamara, how long is it since Lord Pazluvoor married this mysterious beauty?"

"It must be less than two years. He has not left her alone for even a short while from the time he married her! He takes his ladylove along wherever he goes; in a closed palanquin! In fact there has been a lot of sniggering about it all over the country. Vandiya Deva, won't there be ridicule and derision if men who are past a certain age get involved in such entanglements with women?"

"I do not think that is the reason. Kandamara, shall I tell you the real reason for the laughter? Generally women are envious. Don't think I am belittling the women in your family. All womankind is like that! The women of your household are dark-colored beauties. However, Lord Pazluvoor's beloved is rosily-fair and golden-hued. That is why these women do not like her; they are making up stories about her...!"

"Hey! What is this wonder? How do you know about her complexion? Why, have you seen her? Where? How did you see her? If Lord Pazluvoor knows of this, your life is not yours!"

"Kandamara, I am not afraid of all that. You know it. Moreover, I have not done anything improper. I was watching, one among the crowd on the roadside, when Lord Pazluvoor and his retinue went past. The elephant, horses, livery, footmen, drummers -- I believe all these were honors sent by your family to receive him. Is that true?"

"Yes we had sent all those accolades. So what ...?"

"So what? Nothing. I was just comparing the reception that you accorded to Lord Pazluvoor and the welcome given to me; nothing else ..."

Kandamaran laughed lightly, "We gave him the tribute and honor due to the official who levies taxes. A welcome appropriate to a great warrior was given to you! Sometime, with God Muruga's grace, when you become the son-in-law to our house we shall give you the honors due to a bridegroom and welcome you."

He then added, "But, you were about to say something else; we were sidetracked. Oh yes! You were saying that Lord Pazluvoor's beloved was very fair and light in color. How did you know that?"

"Lord Pazluvoor was coming seated on the dark, huge elephant from Kadamboor Fort: like Yama, the God of Justice seated upon a huge water-buffalo! All my thoughts were concentrated on him. While I was building dream-empires about one day becoming famous and powerful like him, a covered palanquin followed him. Even as I wondered about who could come in a covered palanquin, a hand from inside parted the curtains. I could barely see the face within. The hand and face were golden-hued. That was all I saw. From what you said just now, I realize that she must be the beloved of Lord Pazluvoor."

"Vandiya Deva, you are a lucky fellow! It is being said that no man has glimpsed upon that Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. You could at least see her hand and face for a second. From what you saw, can you guess anything about the nation which gave birth to that beauty?" asked Kandamaran.

"I did not ponder about it at that time. Now that I think of it, she is perhaps a woman from the Kashmir country; or she is a beauty who hails from the distant lands across the sea like Java, Kadaram (Malaya), Yavana (Greece-Rome). Maybe she is a princess from Arabia: I believe that women in that country are hidden behind veils from birth till death."

At that moment, the sound of musical instruments could be heard somewhere nearby. Several kinds of drums, flutes, pipes and instruments like salli, karadi, parai, udukku were being tuned together. "What is that noise?" asked Vallavarayan.

"The Kuravai Koothu (gypsy dance) is about to begin. The drums and flutes are being tuned in preparation. Would you like to watch the gypsy dance? Or, would you like to eat early and sleep well?"

Vandiya Devan recalled Azlvar-adiyan mentioning the gypsy dance. "I have never seen the gypsy dance; I must surely see it," he said.

When they walked ahead a little and turned, they could see the stage being set for the dancers. The guests were gathering in front of the stage. The stage for the gypsy dance was set in a wide courtyard spread with clean-white sand and situated in a spot surrounded by the palace walls and the towering battlements of the fort. The stage was decorated with colorful drawings of cocks, peacocks, swans and parrots. They had further decked the stage with several fragrant flower garlands, red-rice popped white, colored millet, yellow turmeric and other powders, kunrimani (small red berry-beads), and other vivid decorations. Tall oil-lamps and flaming torches tried to drive the darkness away. But the swirling fragrance from

smoldering frankincense and smokey torches created a misty screen dimming the lights. The musicians sat on both sides and in front of the stage and played their instruments with gusto. The fragrant flowers, sweet smelling incense and the drum beats all together made Vandiya Devan feel light-headed.

After all the important guests were seated, the nine maidens who were to perform the gypsy dance came on the stage. They wore the tight fitting clothes and ornaments suitable for dancing; they had bell-filled anklets on their feet; brilliant red hued flowers of the hill country, flowers favored by the God Muruga, decorated their hairstyles. A long garland woven with such flowers thrown upon their shoulders, seemed to bind them to each other as they stood upon the stage. In their hands they daintily grasped beautiful parrots made of sandalwood painted a vivid green.

After greeting the audience they began to sing and dance. They first sang a few verses in praise of God Muruga. They sang of the brave deeds of Muruga; and they sang of his victorious spear which killed the demons Soora-padma and Gaja-mukha and then dried up the vast ocean. They sang of how he chose for his bride, a maid from the Tamil country, a gypsy maid from the hills who was guarding the millet fields, even as heavenly nymphs offered prayers to marry the young warrior-God. Their song celebrated the grace and benevolence of Velan, i.e., Murugan who bears the spear. The lyrical songs, the fast paced dance, the quick drum-beats, enchanting flute all in combination bewitched those who were watching. With the following words of prayer the dance concluded:

Let hunger and disease be destroyed;
Let enmity be routed;
Let rain and fertility increase;
Let bounty grow boundless.

The maidens stepped off the stage and moved away.

Next, a man and woman dressed as oracles -- thevar-aalan and thevar-aati, came on stage. The divine-man and divine-woman wore blood-red clothes. They had brilliant garlands made of blood-red oleander flowers. They had painted their foreheads with bright red kumkum powders. Even their lips seemed blood-red because they had chewed the betel leaf and areca-nut. Their eyes seemed blood-shot!

The Velan Attam or oracle dance, began calmly enough. They danced by themselves and with arms linked together. As time passed the tempo and passion increased. The divine-woman picked up a spear from the side. The man tried to pry it from her hands; and she would not let go. The dance became more frenzied: finally the man leaped across the resonating stage, jumping high, he plucked the spear from his companion. With an expression of fear on her face she moved away behind the screens.

The divine-man now danced all by himself with more and more rapid movements. He acted the part of the God Velan

killing the demon Soora. Soora's head was chopped off repeatedly. But the severed-head grew back again and again. Velan grew angrier and angrier as the head came back again and again. Sparks flew from his eyes. In the end Soora fell dead. Thevar-aalan threw his spear down.

By now all musical instruments were quiet. Only the little hand-held drum, the udukku could be heard. A priest stood near the stage fanatically beating the hand-drum. Each part of Thevar-aalan's body shuddered. Those in the audience whispered to each other: "The spirit has materialized."

Soon the priest looked at the frenzied Thevar-aalan and said, "Vela! Muruga! Commander of the Gods! Lord who killed Soora! Please reveal your divine predictions to us, your devotees."

"Ask fellow! Ask whatever you want! I will reveal all!" replied the delirious man. "Will the rains be good? Shall we have plenty of water? Will the land be bountiful? Will our desires be fulfilled?" asked the priest.

"The rains will be in season. The waters would be abundant. The land will be fruitful and desires will be fulfilled! But you have not made offerings to my Mother! The Goddess desires a sacrifice. The Mother-Goddess wants a sacrifice!" shouted the dancer in delirium.

"What sacrifice?" asked the priest.

"Will it be offered if I ask?"

"Yes, we will offer it. We shall surely offer the sacrifice."

"She wants the blood of royalty! She thirsts for the blood of a prince from a thousand year-old dynasty!" shouted the frenzied dancer in a horrible voice.

The dignitaries seated in front of the stage -- Lord Pazluvoor, Lord of Mazluvoor, Lord Sambuvaraya and others, they looked at each other. Their eyes seemed to talk a secret language. Lord Sambuvaraya seemed to make a sign to the priest.

The priest stopped beating his hand-drum. The dancer dropped upon the stage like a felled tree. The woman dancer ran in to help him out. The audience dispersed silently. Somewhere outside, the howling of wolves could be heard.

Vandiya Devan, who had been watching all this with some agitation, looked towards the direction in which the howling wolves were heard. There, atop the outer ramparts of the fortress, he saw a head!

It was Azlvar-adiyan's head. For a second he was subject to a horrifying feeling. It appeared as if the severed head of Azlvar-adiyan had been placed upon those walls. He blinked his eyelids to look again: the head was no longer there! He felt ashamed about the worthless fear that had

taken hold of him. Several other emotions beyond his experience seemed to agitate his thoughts.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 6 -- Midnight Meeting

After the gypsy dance and the oracle dance, there was a lavish feast for the guests. Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan could not enjoy the banquet. His body was tired and his mind was agitated. His friend Kandamaran, seated next to him, pointed out the several dignitaries with pride.

Besides Lord Pazluvoor and Lord Sambuvaraya, there was Thennavan Mazlava-roya Lord of Mazlapadi Mazluvoor; The Elder and largest land-holder of Kunrator had come; then there was triple-crowned Pallava-roya. The Lords Thanthongi Kalinga-roya, Vanangamudi Munai-roya, Deva-senapati Poova-roya; that fearless lion, Lord Muthu-roya, double-canopied Raajali, and the chief land-holder of Kolli Hills -- all these men were there at the banquet. Kandamaran whispered their names into Vandiya Devan's ears and pointed them out discretely.

These dignitaries were not ordinary men; nor was it common to see them all assembled together in one place like this. Each of them was a territorial chieftain; or they had earned the distinction of territorial chieftains because of their bravery. In those days, the title araya or raya which was derived from the sanskrit word raja or Tamil word arasa (meaning king) denoted nobility or royalty. Territorial chieftains and noblemen of equal rank were entitled to add the suffix rayan or arayan to their names. They were also called by the name of their town with the added title. (In fact our hero Vandiya Devan bore the name Vallava-royan because he was born in the noble family of Vallam.)

But, these chieftains did not bear their titles merely because of their noble birth and thereby enjoy the comforts and indulgence of palace life. Only those men who were able-bodied and brave enough to enter the battle-field could safeguard their titles and territories. Therefore, each of these men had not only participated in several campaigns but they also bore the wounds of such warfare on their bodies. Now, all these men governed their territories or kingdoms under the suzerainty of Emperor Sundara Chozla of Pazlayarai. Many of them were important officials of the Chozla government.

Normally, Vandiya Devan would have felt immense elation at having seen all these noblemen in the same place. However, he felt no joy about it. Why have all these men gathered together here? The question occurred to him again and again. All sorts of garbled doubts filled his mind.

With his mind filled with such confusion, he sought his bed in the isolated spot readied by Kandamaran for him. Because the palace was hosting several important dignitaries, a tiny, covered terrace was allotted to him as a bed-chamber.

"You seem to be very tired. Lie down and sleep well. I will take care of the other guests and later come to sleep in this terrace itself," said Kandamaran before going away.

As soon as he lay down, sleep swirled into Vandiya Devan's eyes. Nitra Devi, the Goddess of Sleep took hold of him completely. But what use? There is Mind which cannot be conquered even by the Goddess of Sleep! Even though his body remained still and his eyes stayed tightly shut, thoughts buried deep in the mind blossomed into dreams. Several meaningless incidents, happenings beyond reason took place in that dream world.

Somewhere in the distance a lone wolf howled. One wolf became ten wolves; hundred wolves; they all howled together. While howling they came nearer and nearer and nearer. In that pitch darkness their eyes burned like tiny embers. They came closer and closer. Vandiya Devan tried to turn around and run away to escape. But, on the other side there were tens, hundreds, no thousands of dogs -- barking loudly, rushing towards him. The eyes of those hunting dogs glowed like embers. What will happen to me if I am caught in between these mad dogs and wolves? thought Vandiya Devan and shivered.

Luckily there was a temple right in front. He ran into the temple and pulled the door shut, bolting it hurriedly. When he looked around it seemed to be a temple of the Mother Goddess. A statue of Kali stood there with a horrible face and tongue hanging out. A priest rose from behind the statue. He held a terrible machete in his hands. "Oh! You have come," he said as he came closer and closer.

"What is the history of your noble family? For how many generations have your clansmen ruled their kingdom? Tell the truth!" said the priest.

"The Vallava Rayas of the Vaanar family had ruled for three hundred years. During my father's times we lost all our lands to the Vaithumba kings," replied Vandiya Devan. "Then you are not the right sacrifice. Run away," said the priest with disgust.

Suddenly Kali turned into a statue of Krishna! Two delightful maidens came in, singing the psalms of Saint Andal and danced with abandon in front of the statue. While he was enchanted with these sights, he heard the song "We saw, we saw, we saw things pleasing to the eye," behind him. Turning around he saw Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. Yes it was him singing. Oh no. Not him; it was just his head that sang. The severed head was placed on the sacrificial alter!

Unable to bear this sight, Vandiya Devan turned away. Upon turning, he banged his head upon the pillar. The dream melted away. Eyes opened. But he saw a sight that seemed to mix reality with dreams.

In a spot directly in front of his terrace, he could see the fortress walls of Kadamboor palace; he could see a head on top of these walls. It was the head of that very same Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. This time he realized that it was neither a dream nor a hallucination. Because, however long he stared at it, the head remained there. It was not merely a head, there was a body behind it. He could easily detect both hands of Azlvar-adiyan holding on to the wall. In addition, the fellow was staring rather intensely at something below, inside the wall.

What is he looking at so earnestly, inside there? ... There is some kind of deception and intrigue in this. Azlvar-adiyan could not have come here with good intentions. He must have come here with vile plans to perform some evil deed. Is it not my duty, being Kandamaran's dearest friend, to stop this wickedness? How can I sleep in idleness without guarding the house of these folks who have fed and housed me tonight? Vallavarayan jumped up. He picked up a knife in its sheath lying on his side and stuck it in his waist-band. He walked towards the direction in which he saw Nambi's head.

Remember, he was sleeping in a corner of the upper terrace? From there as he walked towards the outer walls of the palace, he had to go around several turrets, pillars and decorative rooftops. After walking on for a while he suddenly heard the sound of voices talking somewhere nearby. He hesitated. Hiding himself behind a pillar he peeped down below.

In a narrow courtyard enclosed by tall walls he saw about ten or twelve men seated comfortably. The towering walls hid the rising moonlight. However, an iron oil-lamp buried in the wall gave some light. All the men seated there were the dignitaries he had met at the banquet earlier; the chieftains and elder officials of the Chozla Empire.

They must have gathered in this midnight conference to discuss some important matter. Azlvar-adiyan must be trying to spy upon what they were saying and doing, by hanging on the outer walls. There is no doubt about the fact that Azlvar-adiyan is a very shrewd and clever fellow. From where he was positioned on the wall, Azlvar-adiyan could more or less see all the men seated in conference below. He could hear their talk very well. But the men seated there could not see Azlvar-adiyan. The courtyard and palace wall were situated in that fashion! Somehow, the fellow had chanced upon such a perfect spot.

Capable fellow. No doubt! But all his cleverness will not work with this Vandiya Devan of the Vaanar clan. Somehow, I must get hold of that masquerading Vaishnava fanatic ... but if I am to catch him, I cannot do so without attracting the attention of the men assembled below. I have

to cross the courtyard before I can reach those walls. There may be some danger in crossing the courtyard in full view of those men.

He recalled the words of Sambuvaraya saying "He need not have come here, today of all days."

These men are gathered here to discuss something important. It is clear that they do not want anyone to know what their discussions are about. In such a situation if they suddenly see me, they will start suspecting me. By the time I explain about Azlvar-adiyan he would have jumped off the wall and escaped. All that will remain is the doubt about me. If they ask, "Why did you, who were supposed to be sleeping, come here?" what can I reply? I will definitely put Kandamaran in a delicate position. There! Even Kandamaran is part of this meeting; he is seated at the back. If I ask him in the morning I can know all.

As these thoughts ran through his mind, Vandiya Devan saw a covered palanquin resting in one corner of the courtyard below him. Is this not the same palanquin that came behind Lord Pazluvoor and his elephant? That lady who was in it, who parted the curtains to peep outside, I wonder where she is now. I believe the old man did not even send her to the women's apartments. This is the predicament if somewhat older men marry very young girls. Suspicion drains their very life. They cannot bear to be parted from their young wives even for one moment! Perhaps even now, Pazluvoor's Young-Queen is in this palanquin! Gosh! Look at the fate of this great warrior! At this age, he is enslaved by a slip of a girl and is on tender-hooks. She is not all that great a Rathi, Menaka or Ramba (heavenly beauties).

No, Vandiya Devan had not forgotten the feeling of distaste which he experienced when he had seen her by the roadside. I wonder what this brave Lord Pazluvoor sees in her? More surprising is this Azlvar-adiyan's madness. Maybe he is waiting on that wall because this palanquin is here. What is the relationship between him and her? How can I know? Perhaps she is his sister; or maybe his sweetheart. Maybe Lord Pazluvoor forcefully abducted her. He is capable of doing such things. Maybe this fellow is wandering around trying to find an opportunity to meet her and talk to her. Why should I bother about all this. Let me go back to sleep, thought Vandiya Devan.

Just as he made this decision he heard his name being uttered down below. Immediately he began to listen with some interest.

"That fellow who came in saying that he was a friend of your son? Where is he sleeping? He should not hear anything that we utter here. Remember that he serves the Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Armies. Till all our plans are complete and the time for action arrives, no one should know about our plans. Even if there is the slightest suspicion that this fellow knows something, he must not be

let outside this fortress. In fact it would be better to put a complete end to his activities ..."

Our readers can guess how Vandiya Devan felt upon hearing these words. But he did not move away from the spot. He made up his mind to listen to all their talk.

Who was the Northern Commander-in-Chief? It was none other than the eldest son of Emperor Sundara Chozla. None other than the Crown Prince, next in line for the throne. Why should these fellows object to my serving that Prince? What is it that they are planning that must be kept secret from the Prince?

At that moment Kandamaran intervened for his friend: "Vandiya Devan is sleeping peacefully in the corner terrace. He cannot hear the discussions in this meeting. He will not interfere in things that do not concern him. Even if he hears something he will not hinder your plans in any way. I will be responsible for that."

"I am happy that you trust him so much. But none of us know of him or his credentials. That is why I warned you. What we are going to discuss now is about the rights of succession to a large empire. Even if one whisper gets out because of carelessness it may lead to severe consequences. All of you must remember this," said Lord Pazluvoor.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 7 -- Laughter And Hatred

Vandiya Devan made up his mind as soon as he heard the words 'Right to the empire' uttered by Lord Pazluvoor. What are these men going to say about the rights to succession? Who are they to discuss it? I must definitely find out what is happening here. I better sit right here; there cannot be a more convenient hiding spot. Let the Nambi go do what he wants. Why should I bother about him?

Vandiya Devan had surmised earlier that something mysterious was taking place in that palace. The cryptic words of Azlvar-adiyan, the arrogant behavior of the gatekeepers, the frightening words of the frenzied soothsayer -- all these had raised several doubts. Here was an opportunity to clear all those apprehensions! Why not utilize the heaven sent chance?

Well! Even Kandamaran, who I considered a dear friend, has not told the truth. He sent me to bed and has come to this secret midnight-meeting. I must not let him off easily tomorrow!

By now, Lord Pazluvoor had started talking. Vandiya Devan listened carefully. "I am here to announce a very grave news to you all. That is why Sambuvaraya has

convened this meeting. Right now, the health of Emperor Sundara Chozla, is cause for great concern. I have secretly asked the palace Doctors: they have said 'There is not much hope now. He is not likely to live much longer.' Therefore, we have to decide upon the next course of action." So said Lord Pazluvoor.

"What have the astrologers said?" asked one of the men.

Another replied "Why ask the astrologers? Hasn't the long-tailed comet been appearing in the evening skies for several days? Is that not enough?"

Lord Pazluvoor replied to this: "We have consulted the astrologers also. They postpone the time a little. That is all. Anyway, we have to now think about who is eligible to succeed to the throne ..."

"What is left to think about now? Was not Aditya Karikala coronated as the Crown Prince two years ago itself?" declared a hoarse voice.

"True. But I would like to know if any one of us was consulted before the coronation took place. Each one of us gathered here belongs to well established clans that have strived for more than a hundred years, for more than four generations, to acquire the eminence of this Chozla Empire. My great-grandfather died in the battle of Thirupuram-biyam. My grandfather lost his life during the war in Vellur. My father sacrificed his life at Takkolam. In a similar fashion, ancestors to each of you have given their lives to establish the greatness of this Chozla Empire. Young men from our families have died in the battlefield. Even today, sons from our family and clan are engaged in warfare in Lanka. But the Emperor did not consult our opinion for the decision about a successor to the throne. Even Emperor Dasaratha of the Epic convened an assembly of his advisors before deciding to crown Lord Rama as the Crown Prince; he consulted his ministers, advisors, army commanders and chieftains under him. But, our Sundara Chozla did not consider it necessary to consult anyone ..."

"It is correct to say that he did not consult any of us. However, it is not accurate when the Lord of Taxes says that the emperor did not consult anyone! The opinions of the Elder Pirati Sembiyan Madevi and that of the Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi were asked for. Can Lord Pazluvoor deny this?" When a member asked this in a mocking voice, some others of the group laughed.

"Well! You all laugh! I do not know how you can think of laughter. My very heart burns when I think of it; my blood boils. I wonder why I should safeguard my life and live without any sense of shame. The soothsayer who danced in frenzy said that the Goddess is asking for a sacrifice. He asked for a human sacrifice; of a prince from a thousand-year old dynasty. Give me up as the sacrifice. My family is more ancient than a thousand years. With a blow across my throat, each of you with your swords offer me as the

sacrifice. The Mother Goddess will be satisfied; my soul will be satisfied."

Lord Pazluvoor spoke the above words with as much rage as the frenzied soothsaying-dancer.

Silence prevailed for a short while. The whistling of the western breeze and the whispering of the trees near the wall were the only sounds.

"I beg for the patience and forgiveness of the Pazluvoor King for having uttered some words in ignorance and the thoughtless laughter that followed. You are our leader without any equal. We here, are all ready to carry out any of your commands. We will walk in the path you direct us. Please grant forgiveness," spoke an emotional Sambuvaraya.

"I too lost my composure. You should forgive me. Think of one thing. Two hundred years before today, Vijayala Chozla broke the power of the Muthuaraya kings and captured Tanjore. During the battle of Thiru-puram-biyam, he helped the Pallava army and destroyed the legions of Madurai Pandiya. From that moment, the Chozla Kingdom has been growing and expanding day-by-day. The Chozla's had not acquired this greatness even during the times of historic Karikala Valava who built the embankments for the Cauvery. Today, the empire spreads from Cape Comorin in the south to the Thungabhadra-Krishna rivers in the north. The Pandiya Kingdom, Nanjil Kingdom, the Chera Kingdom which has not been subjugated by anyone so far, Thondai Territories, Paagi, Gangapadi, Nulampadi, Vaithumba Territories, the Chitpuli nation, Bana lands, Kudagu Hill Territories where river Ponni rises, -- all these lands are now under Chozla control and are paying tribute. The Chozla tiger-flag flies in all these countries. By now, even Lanka in the south as well as Vengi and Rashtrakuta in the north should have come under our sway. I do not have to give you the reasons for them not being vanquished; you know the reasons"

Lord Mazluvoor intervened: "Yes. All of us know the reason. There are two reasons for Lanka, Vengi, Kalinga and Rashtrakuta not coming under our suzerainty. One cause is the Northern Commander-in-Chief, Prince Aditya Karikala; the other is the Commander of the Southern Armies, Arulmozli Varma."

"I agree with the reasons given by Lord Mazluvoor. For the last hundred years the practice for appointing a commander in the Chozla Kingdom was different. Brave warriors, with the experience of several campaigns would be selected as Generals of the army and as Commanders-in-Chief. But what has happened today? The elder Prince is a commander for the northern armies. What is he doing? He is not planning campaigns against the twin territories of the Rashtrakutas or against Vengi (modern Eluru of Andhra) in the northeast. He sits in Kanchi, building a Golden Palace! I ask you, the bravest warriors born in the best of clans: till now, has any king in the Tamil Nation

built a Golden Palace for his own dwelling? Even the most famous Emperor Paranthaka, who conquered Madurai and Lanka and is now in his heavenly abode, did not build himself a Golden Palace. He merely covered the roof of the temple in Chidambaram with gold. But Prince Aditya Karikala builds himself a Golden Palace in Kanchi, for his residence! Apparently, the huge palaces from which great Pallava monarchs ruled their empires for several generations, are not adequate for the prestige of our Prince! He builds a Golden Palace! He embeds rubies and diamonds in the walls of that palace. Not a copper coin from all the treasures captured from our campaigns in the Gangapadi, Nulampadi and Kudagu Territories has he sent back to the treasury in the capital till now."

"Has the construction of this Golden Palace been completed?"

"Yes. My spies tell me that it has been completed. In addition letters arrived for the Emperor from his beloved elder son! He wants the Emperor to come and stay for a while, in that newly constructed Golden Palace."

"Is the Emperor going to Kanchi?" asked another alarmed voice.

"You need not have any concern about that. I am there to take care that nothing like that will take place; my brother, the Commander of Tanjore is also there. None can enter the fort of Tanjore without the consent of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. None can interview the Emperor without my knowledge; nor can they give letters. Twice or maybe thrice, I have stopped letters that arrived for him."

"Long life to Lord Pazluvoor! Hail the Chanakian political astuteness of the Pazluvoor king! Long life to his bravery!" such shouts arose.

"Please listen a little longer! Much more than the deeds of the Crown Prince, the activities of Prince Arulmozli Varma who has gone to Lanka are peculiar. What do we know of the rules of warfare? For generations and over several hundreds of years, what policy have our ancestors followed? If our armies invade enemy territories, the food supplies and payments for our armies have to be procured from those enemy lands. The wealth to pay our army must be captured in those enemy regions. Excess treasures should be sent back to the government treasury in the capital city ... But, do you know what Prince Arulmozli is doing? He wants food supplies to be sent from here, by ships, to feed our soldiers in Lanka! For the last one year, ten times, I have sent such shiploads of supplies."

"Most unusual and peculiar! We cannot tolerate such illegalities! Never heard of such behavior!" rose several voices.

"Listen to the reasoning of Prince Arulmozli for this peculiar behavior. If we try to procure supplies for our armies from the territories we invade, we would cause a lot

of inconvenience to the civilians and gain the displeasure of the farmers in that land. Our dispute is with the royalty of Lanka; not with Lankan populace. Therefore we should not harass them in any way. After winning our battles against their royalty, we should rule with the full approval of those people. Therefore, the food and monies must be sent from the homeland."

Someone from the meeting intervened by saying, "We should not demand anything from the nations we have conquered! We should fall at their feet and worship their people! I have never heard of such conduct in warfare."

"Ask me about the consequences of such activities! Because of these undertakings of both the Princes, the treasury and granary in the royal palace at Tanjore often become empty! I am compelled to levy more taxes on you and also collect tributes from all of you. Perhaps that is why the Chozlas have appointed me as their Tax Official. If I had not considered the welfare of this country as most important, I would have given up my positions long ago!"

"Oh no! Never! Your holding these positions gives us several assurances. Why have you not spoken about these things to the Emperor?"

"Why not? I have personally spoken to him about it several times. Every time I am put aside with words like, 'Ask the Elder Pirati. Ask the Younger Pirati.' Remember I told you earlier, the Emperor has lost the capability of thinking for himself. Neither does he ask our opinion on important matters. The words of his elder aunt, the Elder Pirati Sembiam Madevi, are gospel to him; after that he wants me to consult with his beloved daughter the Younger Pirati Kundavai. I, who have grown grey in the service of this nation, I, along with other ministers, have to go and stand in the presence of that slip of a girl -- a girl who has not crossed the River Kollidam in the north or River Kudamuruti in the south -- and then consult her opinion. How is this story? From the days of this Chozla Kingdom being established, I have never heard of such interference from women in the politics of the nation. How long can I tolerate such humiliation? If all of you unanimously agree, I shall give up my official positions which trouble me to levy taxes and fill the treasury, and go back to my own city."

"No! Never. Lord Pazluvoor should not forsake us like that. The Chozla Empire has been established with the aid of thousands of brave men shedding their blood over four generations; such a nation will be torn apart in confusion within a short time if he does that," said Lord Sambuvaraya.

"Well then, you should all give me your ideas about what to do in this situation. What is the solution to this women's rule which is worse than the power of the amazonian Queen Alli?" asked Lord Pazluvoor.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 8 -- Who Is In The Palanquin?

For a while, the men in that meeting talked and argued amongst themselves. Since several voices were raised at the same time, Vandiya Devan could not hear anything clearly.

In a louder voice, Lord Sambuvaraya said, "Don't we have to answer the requests of the King of Pazluvoor? What is the point of each one talking like this? It seems to be hours past midnight. Look at the moon!"

"I have a certain doubt. Some others also, like me, may have a similar reservation. If Lord Pazluvoor promises not to be angry, I would like to ask about it," said a hoarse voice which had spoken once before.

"Is it Vanangamudi Raya, who is talking? Please, let him come forward into the light," said Lord Pazluvoor.

"Yes, it is me! Here, I have come up into the light."

"It is customary for me to show all my anger in the battlefield and against my enemies. I have no anger against friends. Therefore, please ask any question without any hesitation."

"I will surely do so. The allegations against Emperor Sundara Chozla, those very same accusations are placed against Lord Pazluvoor by some people! I may not believe them, but I would like some clarification," said Vanangamudi Munai Raya.

"What are they? What charges? Please explain."

"We all know that Lord Pazluvoor married a young girl about two years ago..."

With an angry voice, Lord Sambuvaraya interrupted: "We object to such words by Munai Raya. It is totally indecorous to ask such improper questions of our beloved leader, our chief guest."

"I request Lord Sambuvaraya to please remain patient. Let Munai Raya express his reservations freely. It is better to voice one's opinions in the open than bury them in the mind. It is true that I married a young girl after my fifty-fifth year. I certainly accept that. But, I never declared myself as a reincarnation of Lord Rama who vowed to have only one wife! I never said that I will wed only one maid. I love that girl; she returned my sentiment. According to the ancient tenets of this Tamil country, willingly, we married each other. What is wrong in that?" asked Lord Pazluvoor.

"Nothing wrong!" replied several voices.

"I never said there was anything wrong about his marriage. Who amongst us is monogamous? But ... but ..."

"But what? Ask without reluctance."

"Some people say that in all matters Lord Pazluvoor consults and acts according to the wishes of the Young-Queen he married recently. They say that he acts according to her direction even in matters of the state. It is said that he takes his Young-Queen along wherever he goes."

A laugh was heard in their midst.

Lord Sambuvaraya jumped up. "Who laughed? Let him come forward and explain why he laughed!" he roared while drawing his sword from its scabbard.

"I laughed! Don't be agitated Sambuvaraya!" said Lord Pazluvoor. He then continued, "Munai Raya! Is it a crime to take my legally wedded wife wherever I go? It is true that I take her with me to visit several places. But it is inaccurate to say that I consider the Young-Queen's opinion in matters of the state. I have never done that."

"If so, I request Lord Pazluvoor to clear just one more doubt. Why has this palanquin, which should have stayed in the women's courtyard, come here to our confidential meeting? Is there someone inside the closed palanquin or not? If there is no one inside, how is it that I heard somebody clearing their throat? Was it the jingle of bangles that I heard inside, a little while ago?"

When Munai Raya asked these questions, a curious silence prevailed amidst that gathering. Since these doubts had occurred to most of them, none spoke against the words of Munai Raya. Lord Sambuvaraya was muttering something to himself. But nothing was said.

Tearing the silence apart, in a distinct voice, Lord Pazluvoor said, "Good question. I am obligated to give an answer. I shall clear your misgivings before we conclude our meeting. Can you wait another half an hour? Do you have that much trust in me?"

"Yes we do. We have complete trust in you, Lord Pazluvoor," said Sambuvaraya.

"Let no one think that my reverence or loyalty to Lord Pazluvoor is less than that of anyone else. Since he invited us to speak freely, I asked. Apart from that I am ready to obey all his orders. I shall give up my very life if he commands it!" said Vanangamudi Munai Raya.

"I know about Munai Raya. I also recognize the trust you have all placed in me. Therefore, let us now come to a conclusion about the matter for which we convened this meeting. Let Emperor Sundara Chozla Paranthaka live long in this world and rule this Chozla Empire for a long time. However, unfortunately, if something happens to him: if the words of the palace doctors' come true, if the

omens forecast by the comet appearing in the sky come true -- we have to decide who is eligible to succeed to the Chozla throne."

"We request that you state your opinion on this matter. There is no one here who has anything to say against your views."

"That is not correct. Each one of you must think and then express an impartial opinion. Permit me to recall some old history to your memories. Twenty-four years ago, King Gandara Aditya who was a great philosopher and devout soul, died unexpectedly. When he died, his son, Madurandaka, was a one year old child. The Queen-consort of Gandara Aditya, the Lady Sembiyan Madevi, announced to us, the wishes of the King: his younger brother Arinjaya was to accept the Chozla throne after him. Therefore, we crowned Prince Arinjaya as the Chozla monarch. However, fate did not decree that Arinjaya should sit on the throne for more than a year. When Arinjaya died, his son, Paranthaka Sundara Chozla, was a youth of twenty-four. Considering the welfare of the nation, all of us -- the ministers, advisors, territorial chieftains the heads of all the clans and leaders of the cities and districts -- decided unanimously, and crowned Sundara Chozla. None of us had cause to regret this. Because, until two years ago, he ruled the nation with justice; he respected our wishes and opinions and ruled this country lawfully. Because of him the Chozla power grew to include all neighboring nations under its sway.

"Now, the health of Sundara Chozla is cause for concern. In this situation, who is eligible to succeed the Emperor? Madurandaka, the cherished son of King Gandara Aditya, is now grown up; he has the intelligence, education, the character, the devotion to God, all the qualities of a person worthy of the throne. Sundara Chozla's son, Aditya Karikala, who is younger to him by one year, is stationed in Kanchi as a Commander-in-Chief. Who between these two has the right to succeed to the throne? What is the code of inheritance among the clans? What is the law? What is the ancient tradition of the Tamils? Is it justice if the elder brother's son, Madurandaka inherits the nation? Or, is it legal for the grand-son of the younger brother to succeed? Each of you must consider this and clearly state your decision."

"Madurandaka, the son of the elder brother Gandara Aditya has the right to succeed. That is legal, justice, tradition," said Lord Sambuvaraya.

"I agree", "That is my opinion too," so rose several voices.

"Your convictions are mine. Madurandaka deserves the throne. However, is everyone here ready to support and further this belief? Are you all ready to sacrifice your lives, your wealth and very soul for this cause? This very minute, are you all ready to swear in the name of Goddess Durga and take an oath of allegiance?" When Lord Pazluvoor

asked this question his voice had a certain harshness, not heard till then.

Silence prevailed for some time. Lord Sambuvaraya then said, "We are ready to take such an oath of support. Before that, we need one clarification. What are the feelings of Prince Madurandaka? Is he ready to accept the throne and rule this Empire? We have heard that the cherished son of Gandara Aditya has forsaken the pleasures of worldly life and is fully involved in the devotion and worship of God Shiva. Several persons have said that he has no interest in worldly kingdoms. We have also heard that his mother, the Elder Pirati Sembian Madevi is totally opposed to his ascending the throne. We wish to know the truth about this from you."

"A good point and you raised it at the correct time. I must clarify this question. I should have explained earlier -- forgive me for not doing so," with this long introduction Lord Pazluvoor spoke as follows: "The whole nation knows that the Lady Sembian Madevi discouraged her only son from having any interest in affairs of the state and raised him as a Saiva ascetic. But, neither nation nor people know the reason behind such behavior. The Elder Pirati feared that his very life would be in danger if her son Madurandaka had any wish to rule the empire ... "

"Aha! Is that so!"

"Yes! To any mother, the wish that the son to whom she gave birth should stay well and alive is greater than a desire that he should sit upon the throne of the Kingdom. Young Prince Madurandaka, who considered the words of his mother as gospel, turned his mind in the path of devotion and asceticism. Nevertheless, for sometime, his mind has slowly undergone some transformation. 'This Chozla Empire is mine; it is my duty to rule the nation!' such thoughts have taken root and grown in his heart. If he knows that all of you are ready to support his cause, he is ready to come forward at a suitable time and openly declare his intentions."

"What proof do we have for this?"

"I will, without delay, produce proof that will satisfy all of you. If I furnish such proof, will each of you take an oath of allegiance to this cause?"

Several of the men said "We will! We will!"

"I hope no one has any other kind of reservation?"

"No! None!"

"Then, I shall show proof. I shall also clear the doubts raised by Lord Vananga-mudi Munai Raya." With this declaration, Lord Pazluvoor rose from his seat. Walking majestically, he neared the closed palanquin.

"Prince! Please part the curtains and grace the outside with your appearance. Permit these brave warriors, who are ready to sacrifice their very life, wealth and soul for you, to gaze upon your face." Lord Pazluvoor spoke in a very deferential voice.

Vandiya Devan, who was sitting behind the pillar on the upper terrace and listening to all these discussions with an overpowering curiosity, now peeped down carefully. As before, a hand parted the curtains of the palanquin. It too was a golden hand. It seemed to be the very same fair hand he had seen once before. But he now realized that he had surmised the golden bracelet worn by royalty to be a bangle. A dazzling face, comparable to the full moon, could be seen the very next instant. A handsome figure, comparable to Manmatha, the God of Love, stepped out of the palanquin and smiled.

Aha! Is this Prince Madurandaka, son of Gandara Aditya Deva? I mistook him to be a woman? I concluded that it must be a girl, because of the closed palanquin!? But, did Azlvar-adiyan Nambi also make the same mistake? Vandiya Devan looked around to see if Nambi was still thrusting his head above the wall. That spot of the palace wall was now shrouded by shadows cast by the trees. He could see nothing.

By now he heard some shouts from below. "Long Live Madurandaka! Praise the Crown-Prince Madurandaka! Victory to our brave spears!" They were passionate outbursts. Vandiya Devan saw that all the men in the courtyard were now standing; they held their swords and spears high up above their heads and cheered. Thinking that it would be dangerous to remain any longer in that spot, he turned around and hurried back to his terrace and laid himself down.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 9 -- Wayside Chitchat

Vandiya Devan had spent all his life until that day, in the dry lands north of the River Palar. Consequently, he did not know how to swim in a flowing river. Once, when he was in the army on border patrol along the banks of the North Pennar, he waded into the river for a bath. He was caught in a swollen whirlpool. That sinister and devilish whirlpool made him go round and round. At the same time it dragged him downwards. Very soon the whirlpool had drained all his strength. I cannot escape now; I have to drown in this whirlpool and die! -- just as he lost hope he was thrown out, by God's grace. The waves threw him on the shores and saved him.

When he went back to bed that night in Kadamboor, he experienced the same feeling he had while caught in the whirlpool. He felt that with no choosing of his own, he

had fallen into the huge whirlpool of a political conspiracy. Could he escape from this swirling treachery just as he had escaped from that whirlpool?

The information he had gleaned from the midnight meeting at Kadamboor baffled him. The dangers from external enemies to the Chozla Empire had been overcome only a few years ago. Prince Aditya Karikala -- brave, expert in warfare, a veritable Chanakya in politics; with his intelligence and optimum use of the capable Chozla armies, he routed the powers of the Rashtrakuta monarch, King Krishna, from the Thondai lands. In a way the external enemies were destroyed. Now, internal disruption and intrigue were raising their head. What would be the consequence of this internal discord which is more dangerous than external strife?

Are not the important officials, ministers, chieftains and famous warriors of the Chozla nation involved in this frightening endeavor? What kind of persons are the Lord of Pazluvoor and his brother? What is their power? How much prestige do they have? What about the others who met here today? They are all powerful, distinguished and eminent personalities. Is this the first meeting of this kind? I wonder; to how many other places has the Prince been taken in a closed palanquin by Lord Pazluvoor? Aha! The fact of being married to a young girl in his old age has served him so usefully in this conspiracy!

Until that day, no doubt about Prince Karikala's eligibility to the Chozla throne had risen in Vandiya Devan's mind. He had not even dreamed that a challenge would arise. Of course, he had heard of Madurandaka, the son of King Gandara Aditya. He had heard that, like the father the son was an ardent worshipper of God Shiva. But he had never heard anything about his rights to the succession or that he would demand his rights. In fact Vandiya Devan had never thought about such things.

What is the legality, the justice? Who is truly eligible to succeed to the throne? Karikala? Madurandaka? The more he thought about it, he felt that both sides had equal justification. If it really comes to a confrontation, who will come out victorious? What is my duty in this situation? Aha! I started on this journey from Kanchi while building all sorts of dream fortresses. I desired to attain eminent positions in the Chozla Empire by pleasing the Crown Prince Karikala! I even hoped that in due course I would regain the ancestral territories of my Vaanar clan. The very limb that I caught hold of, to achieve all these dreams, seems ready to drop! ... Thinking of all such things when he came to bed the second time that night, Vandiya Devan suffered with sleeplessness for a long time. In the end, towards the late hours of the night just as the eastern skies were turning light, he somehow went to sleep.

The next morning, Vandiya Devan did not get up even when the golden-red rays of the rising sun fell piercingly upon him. He was jolted awake when Kandamaran came and shook his shoulders. With the courtesy shown to any

guest, Kandamaran asked, "Did you sleep well?" And then he added, "After all my other guests had gone to sleep, I came up here and checked; you excelled in service like Kumbakarna (a mythical hero who slept half his lifetime)!"

Stifling everything that he remembered, Vandiya Devan said, "All that I recall is coming up to bed after the gypsy dance. I am just getting up! Oh, ho! It is already so late: it must be several hours past sunrise. I have to start immediately. Kandamara, tell your servants to get my horse ready."

"This is really fine! How can you leave so soon? What is the hurry? You must stay here for at least ten days before you go on," said Kandamaran.

"No, my dear fellow! I had news that my uncle in Tanjore was in a bad shape; his survival itself is doubtful. I have to go quickly to see him before he is gone. I must leave immediately." Vandiya Devan said this with total conviction, without any hesitation.

"You must then stay here for a while, at least when you go back."

"Why not? We shall think of it at that time. Permit me to leave now."

"Don't be in such a hurry. We can start after the morning meal. I shall accompany you till the banks of River Kollidam."

"How can you do that? You have all sorts of important guests. How can you leave them and ..."

"I have no guest more important than you ..." saying this Kandamaran stopped suddenly. "Yes the guests are important people. But my father can take care of them. The other officials of this palace can do that. I could not chat with you even last night. I can rest in peace only if I chitchat with you for a little while, along the road. I shall certainly come with you till the Kollidam."

"I have no objection. Your wish. Your convenience," said Vandiya Devan.

After more than two hours, both friends mounted on two horses started from Lord Sambuvaraya's palace. The horses cantered quite slowly. The ride was rather pleasant. The friends did not seem to mind even the road dust sprayed upon them by the swift northern wind. They had lost themselves in old remembrances. After some time Vandiya Devan said: "Kandamara! Even though I spent just one night in your house, it was very useful to me. Just one disappointment. You used to recount all sorts of things about your sister, while we were on the banks of the North Pennar. I could not even see her properly! When she peeped from hiding behind your mother, I could glimpse about one-eighth of her face! Your sister seems to possess

a shyness and modesty that is more than any one girl's share."

Kandamaran's lips twitched as if to say something. But no words came out.

"Still, no regrets. You have invited me to stay with you for a few days on my way back. I can make her acquaintance at that time. By that time your younger sister may be able to overcome her shyness about me. Kandamara, what is your sister's name?"

"Manimekala."

"Oh! What a delightful name! If her character and beauty are like the name..."

Kandamaran intervened and said in a forlorn voice, "My friend! I beg this one thing of you. Please forget my sister. Please forget all that I mentioned about her to you. Do not even utter her name."

"What is this Kandamara? Every thing seems topsy-turvy? Even last night you hinted that I may become a son-in-law to your clan!"

"It is true that I said it. Since then the situation has changed. My parents have arranged to wed my young sister elsewhere. Manimekala has also agreed."

Vandiya Devan cheered within his heart: "Long live Manimekala." He did not have any trouble guessing who was selected to wed Manimekala. They must have pledged her to Madurandaka who stepped out of the closed palanquin. They are perhaps arranging such marriage alliances in order to gain strength for the Prince's cause. Lord Pazluvoor is a dangerous and capable politician.

"Oh! You have contracted one of your rich guests who came last night as the bridegroom. Kandamara, I have no surprise about this; nor am I really disappointed. In a way it was expected."

"Expected? How is that?"

"Who would give their daughter to a destitute-orphan like me? Which maid will agree to marry a poor fellow who has neither house nor land. What is the use now if my ancestors had ruled kingdoms long ago?"

"My dear friend! Enough of this, stop! Don't think so shoddily of me or my family. What you think, is not the reason. There is something much more important. You will agree if you know of it. But I cannot reveal the reason now. When the time comes you will know."

"Kandamara, what is this? You have been talking quite mysteriously today."

"Forgive me for that. It is a big secret that I cannot reveal even to you. Whatever happens, trust me that nothing will come between our friendship. When it is time to reveal plans, I will run to you and disclose all the details. Trust me until then."

"Thanks for the pledge! But what is the situation wherein you may have to forsake me? And, I am not one to live upon my faith in somebody else. I trust my own sword and spear."

"There may be an opportunity to use that sword and that spear soon. At that time I hope we will fight side by side. Your dreams also may then be fulfilled."

"What is this? Are you soon expecting some war? Or, are you planning to enter the battlefields of Lanka?"

"To Lanka? You will be surprised if you hear the details of the ridiculous campaign in Lanka. I believe we have to supply the rice and other foodstuffs from Chozla country for the soldiers fighting in Lanka. Shameful! I am talking about something else. Be patient for a while. I will tell you at the right time. Don't kindle my mouth now."

"Alright. If you don't wish, don't tell me anything. Don't even open your mouth. I think I can see the river ahead of us."

They could really see the torrents of the immense River Kollidam at the end of the road. Within a few minutes the friends reached the river bank.

The fresh floods of the spring month filled that great river. The far side seemed very distant. Trees on the other shore seemed like small bushes. Reddish silt laden waters, filled with rapids and whirlpools drawing fantastic pictures, thundering joyously, celebrating with a loud roaring sound, trying to break through the high banks on both sides, rolling and tumbling towards the eastern sea, rushing onwards -- Vandiya Devan looked upon this sight and stood there in amazement.

A ferry boat waited near the landing wharf. Two boatmen with long poles in their hands waited readily. One gentleman was already seated in the boat. He appeared to be of the Saiva sect. Catching sight of the two men coming upon the bank, a boatman asked, "Sirs! Are you both coming in this boat?"

"Yes. He will come. Wait for a while."

Both friends jumped off their horses. "I came without thinking. What can I do with this horse of mine? Can it go in the boat?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"No need. There! Look! Two of my footmen are following us. One of them will lead your horse back to Kadamboor. The other fellow will come with you in this boat. He will

procure another horse for you on the other shore," said Kandamaran.

"Aha! How thoughtful. You are my true friend."

"You must have thought of the Kollidam as comparable to the Palar and Pennar rivers. You wouldn't have known that you cannot cross this river with a horse."

"Yes. Forgive me for under-estimating the rivers of your Chozla lands. Gosh! What a river! What floods? It seems to roar like the ocean."

The two friends took leave of each other with a hearty embrace. Vandiya Devan walked down the river bank and got into the boat. One of Kandamaran's footmen also climbed into the boat. The boat was ready to leave. The boatmen thrust their long poles deep into the water.

Suddenly, from a distance they could hear shouts: "Stop! Stop the boat!" said a voice. The boatmen hesitated without pushing their poles. The fellow who shouted came running up the bank. With one glance, Vandiya Devan recognized him. He was Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. Recognizing the newcomer as a follower of the Vaishnava sect, the gentleman in the boat said "Go! Let the boat go! I will not come in the same boat as that imposter. Let him come in the next ferry."

But Vandiya Devan looked at the boatmen and said, "Wait a bit. Let him also come. There is plenty of room in this ferry boat. Let us take him." Vandiya Devan wished to question Azlvar-adiyan and learn more about the happenings of last night.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 10 -- The Astrologer Of Kudanthai

River Ponni, born and raised in the Kudagu Hills, after her childhood was past, wished to meet the Ocean King, her chosen husband. She went swiftly, crossing hill and dale, rocky mountain and canyon. As she came closer and closer, the joyous anticipation of meeting her beloved Lord, the Ocean King, made her thrive and grow. She went even further. Two arms grew to embrace the lover. Spreading her arms wide, she leaped and surged forward. Two arms were not sufficient for her ardent enthusiasm. Her loving arms grew into ten, twenty, hundred! Stretching out all these arms in eagerness she neared the Ocean King. She was the bride meeting her beloved. Chozla women, her bridesmaids, dressed her in such wondrous ways. They clothed her in the beautiful greens of rice-fields. They decorated her with colorful flowers; and showered her with fragrant woods. How can we describe the enchanting kadamba and punnai trees on both her banks: they covered her with pearls and rubies of flowers.

Who would not be overjoyed to cast their eyes upon you, dear Ponni? Which maid will not be beguiled by this, your bridal attire? It is but natural that attractive young girls should gather around you just as bridesmaids surround a ravishing bride.

One of the arms stretched out by Ponni or Cauvery, to reach out for her Lord the Ocean King, is known by the name River Arisil. The beautiful Arisil flows to the south of and very close to River Cauvery. One could not easily view this petite river from a little distance. The groves of trees, growing thickly on both its banks hide the river. One could consider the Arisil as a princess who never stepped out of the enclosed courtyards of a royal palace. There is no comparison to this beautiful virgin river.

Let our readers forget that it is the inner courtyard of a palace and come with us to the banks of the Arisil river. Let them enter these woody groves on its banks. Oh! What an enchanting sight meets our eyes! It seems to add radiance to beauty; to add sweetness to nectar.

Who are these divine women, seated on the beautifully carved barge, constructed like a floating swan? Who is the radiant jewel among women, seated in their midst, like the full moon among twinkling stars, like a queen born to rule all seven worlds? Who is the gentle damsel seated next to her, playing the veena (lute like instrument)? Who are these heavenly beauties coming down the stream, mixing the pleasant melody of their music with the gurgling noises of the river?

One of them had large eyes shaped like darting fish; the other was blue eyed; yet another had a face like the blossoming lotus; another girl had wide dark eyes shaped like the petal of a blue lily. Ah! The girl playing the musical instrument, one could watch forever, her soft fingers dancing over the taunt strings of the veena.

What can we say about the sweetness of the song they sang? Even the water in the river seemed to be still as it listened to their melodious music. Even the cuckoos and parrots on the trees listened quietly. We humans, blessed with the fortune of being able to listen, why should we not be enchanted by their song? Let us listen to them:

Walk slowly, walk shyly,
Praise to you, dear Cauvery;

Dress yourself in beautiful clothes:
Fragrant gardens full of humming bees;
Open wide, those large dark eyes:
Dancing fish of deep dark seas;

Dancing does not melt a lovers heart:
Like a good monarch's mace of justice;

When nightingales sing in deep woods;
And peacocks dance amidst flower groves;
Dance gently, dear Cauvery:
You disturb the garlands on Kama's shoulders.
The garlands at his waist are all asway;
What caused it? The very name of your dear Lord:

An expert spear like dart;

Walk slowly, walk shyly,
Praise to you, dear Cauvery.

Where have we heard this delightful Tamil poem? Oh yes, is it not from The Silappadikaram (an ancient poetical work)? The poem seems even more enchanting and delightful when these maids sing it. Perhaps they are the maids of honor in River Arisil's court? Or is this the magic of some sorcerer? It entices every beholder.

The barge floated down gently till it stopped near a landing amidst the woods. Two maidens are getting down. One is that dignified lady, comparable to a queen of the seven worlds; the other is her companion who was creating the enchanting harmony while playing the veena. Though both are beautiful, there was a difference between the two of them. One has the dignity of a lotus blossom in full bloom. The other has the pleasantness of the night-time water lily. One is the radiant full moon; the other is the young crescent of late evening. One is the dancing peacock; the other is a singing nightingale. One is a queen of the Gods; her friend is Rathi, the beloved of Cupid. She is the fast flowing turbulent Ganga. Her companion is the gentle Cauvery.

Without further ado, without leaving our readers in further suspense, let me introduce these two ladies. The lady with a certain dignity in her posture is Kundavai, the beloved daughter of Emperor Sundara Chozla. She is the elder sister to Arulmozli Varma who would later attain historic fame as Rajaraja I. She is the lady revered by the people as the young royal princess, the Younger Pirati. A distinguished daughter of the Tamils, she laid the foundations for the greatness of the Chozla Empire. She is the capable lady who will raise and mould the ambitions of Rajaraja's son Rajendra and make him the greatest of monarchs in South Indian history.

Her friend is Vanathi, a noblewoman from the clan of Kodumbalur chieftains. She came to enjoy the fortune of being a part of Kundavai's household. In the future she would attain greatness unparalleled in history. She is now a young girl, full of modesty and a pleasant gentleness.

After both had alighted from the barge, Kundavai turned to her other companions and said, "You can all wait here. We will be back in an hour."

All those maids, who were her companions, were noblewomen from the households of the aristocrats and chieftains in the Chozla nation. They had come to the Pazlayarai Palace, considering it a fortune to be included as maids of honor to Kundavai. Now, when Kundavai went ashore with just one girl from among them, saying, "I'll come after a while," a certain envy and disappointment could be discerned in their eyes.

A horse drawn chariot awaited their pleasure on the shore. "Vanathi! Get into the chariot," said Kundavai. When both were seated, the chariot moved swiftly.

"Akka! Where are we going? Can you tell me?" asked Vanathi.

"Why not? We are going to the house of the Kudanthai Astrologer," said Kundavai.

"Why are we going to an astrologer's house, Akka? What do we have to ask him?"

"What else? To ask about you! For some months now you seem to be a girl possessed, lost in some dream world, losing weight. We are going to ask him if you will be cured of these fantasies and become healthy once again. We are going to ask him all these things!"

"Akka! Let good fortune be showered upon you! There is nothing wrong with my health. We don't have to ask him anything about me. Let's go back."

"No, my dear no! I am not going to ask him anything about you. I shall ask him about me!"

"What do you have to ask about yourself? What is there to ask an astrologer about yourself?"

"I am going to ask him if I would ever be married; or am I going to spend all my life a virgin maid!"

"Akka! Why ask the astrologer about it? You have to ask your own heart! Just nod your gracious head: princes from all the fifty-six kingdoms from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas would come running, vying with each other. Why, even princes from across the seas from Yavana and Kadaram will come. I wonder which of these princes will have the fortune of receiving your hand. You have to determine that!"

"Vanathi, even if I accept all that you say as truth, there is one obstacle. If I marry any one of these princes from an alien nation, I will have to go with him to his kingdom. My dear, I have a great dislike to go away from this delightful Chozla Kingdom where the Ponni flows! I have taken an oath that I will not go to another kingdom from here.. ..."

"That is no obstacle! Any prince that marries you will stay at your feet as your slave. If you order him to stay here he will remain here."

"Oh dear Lord! That will be like picking up a rat and tying it up in your waistband! How can we retain an alien prince in our lands? Do you know the consequences of such activity?"

"Anyway, whatever you say, a person born as a woman will one day have to be married. Is that not so?"

"No law says that my dear. Vanathi, think of the Lady Avvaiyar. Did she not live for a long time as a queen among poets but a virgin maid?"

"Because of a boon from the Gods Avvaiyar became an old maid in her young age. You are not like that."

"Well if I do have to be married, I think I shall choose an orphan Chozla warrior for my consort. That fellow will not have any kingdom. He will not demand that I go to another nation. He will remain here itself, in this Chozla country."

"Akka, does it mean that you will never leave these Chozla Territories?"

"Never will I leave. Even if they offer to crown me as a queen of the heavens, I will not leave!"

"Now I am quite happy."

"How is that?"

"If you move to another kingdom, I will have to follow you. I cannot be parted from you. At the same time I have no heart to leave this bountiful Chozla land!"

"If you are married, won't you have to leave?"

"I am not going to marry anyone, Akka."

"My dear girl! What happened to all the advise you were giving me just now?"

"Am I like you?"

"You deceiver! I know everything! Are you trying to throw dust in my eyes? You have no great love for this Chozla land. The Chozla nation you love is bearing sword and spear and has gone to Lanka to conduct a campaign! You think that I do not know your secrets?"

"Akka! Akka! Am I so foolish? Where is the sun? and where is the morning dewdrop? What is the use, if a dewdrop wishes for the friendship of the fiery sun?"

"The dewdrop is small! And the sun is mighty and bright! Still, does not the dewdrop impound the bright sunshine in itself? Tell me?"

Vanathi now replied in a voice filled with cheer and eagerness: "Are you saying that? Can a mere dewdrop attain the sun?" Then suddenly she felt depressed. "The dewdrop wishes to do so; in fact it enslaves the sunray! But what use? Within a short time it is severely punished. It dries up in the bright sunlight and disappears without a trace!"

"That is wrong, Vanathi. The sun recognizes the love of the dewdrop and merges her into himself. He thinks that his beloved maid, the dewdrop, should not be seen by

other men. He lets her out again after darkness. Doesn't the hidden dewdrop appear again every morning?"

"Akka, you are telling me all these stories to cheer me up."

"So! You do say that you need cheering up. There is some sadness in your heart. All these days you maintained that 'Nothing is wrong'. That is why I am going to the Astrologer of Kudanthai."

"If there is a sadness in my heart, what is the use of asking an astrologer about it?" sighed Vanathi.

The house of the Kudanthai Astrologer was situated in the outskirts of that city, in an isolated spot, besides a Kali temple. The chariot did not enter the city, but went around and reached that house. From the way the charioteer drove his chariot without any hesitation or doubt, it appeared that he had driven there several times before.

The Astrologer and one of his disciples waited readily outside the house. The Astrologer welcomed his visitors with great reverence and courtesy.

"Great lady! A reincarnation of both Kalaimagal (Goddess of Learning) and Thirumagal (Goddess of Wealth)! Welcome. Welcome. It is the fortune of my humble abode that you have come in search of me once again!"

"Mr. Astrologer! I hope that nobody else will come in search of you at this time?" asked Kundavai.

"No one will come Thaye! Not many people come in search of me these days. Only when troubles in the world increase will people seek the astrologer. Nowadays, under the rule of your esteemed father -- The Emperor Sundara Chozla -- the people have no troubles at all! They possess all the comforts and luxuries and live life with happiness. Who will come in search of me?"

"Do you mean to say that I have some troubles and therefore, I have come to consult you?" asked Kundavai.

"No. Great lady, no. Which blind fool will say that the beloved daughter of Sundara Chozla who possesses immense wealth, has any troubles? Since the people have no troubles, this poor astrologer is cast into misfortune. Nobody takes care of him. Therefore you have come here like a Goddess with solicitude for my troubles. Please enter and grace my humble house. Look at me, talking while I detain you here on the doorstep!" said the resourceful Astrologer.

Kundavai turned to the charioteer and said, "Take the chariot to the shade of the banyan tree behind the temple and wait."

Kundavai and Vanathi entered the Astrologer's house as he led them inside. The Astrologer turned to his disciple and said warningly, "Wait outside and guard the entrance

carefully. Even if accidentally someone happens to come by, do not let them enter."

The parlor in the Astrologer's house was decorated to receive his royal visitors. In an alcove in the wall was a decorated figure of the Goddess Devi. Two seats were made ready for seating the visitors. A tall metal lamp was lit. The floor gleamed with intricate kolam decorations. Several tablets and palm leaf charts with the scribbles and symbols of the astrologer's trade were scattered about. After both ladies were seated, the Astrologer sat down.

"Madam, please tell me why you have come?"

"Sir! Can you not find out even that by your astrology?" asked Kundavai.

"So be it, Thaye!" said the Astrologer and closed his eyes. He muttered some incantations and after a while looked at them saying "Lady, you have come here today, mainly to ask about the horoscope of this young girl. That is what the grace of the Goddess reveals to me."

"Aha! Remarkable! How can we praise your powers? Yes sir! I have come to ask about this girl. She came to the Pazlayarai Palace about a year ago. For the first eight months she was very cheerful and happy. Amongst my companions she was the most joyous, most filled with playful laughter. For the last four months, something has happened to her. Often, she seems depressed. She seems to live in some abstract world. She has forgotten her laughter. She says that nothing is wrong with her health. If her parents come and ask me tomorrow, what reply can I give?"

"Thaye! Is she not the beloved daughter of the Lord of Kodumbalur? Is her name Vanathi Devi?" asked the Astrologer.

"Yes; you seem to know everything."

"I even have the horoscope of this young Lady. I have it in my collection. Please wait a little."

The Astrologer opened an old casket by his side and searched awhile. He then picked up a palm leaf notation of a horoscope and peered at it.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 11 -- Sudden Entry

The town known as Kumbakonam, was known as Kudanthai or Kudamooku during the times of our story. Besides the virtue of being a pilgrimage center, it was also famous because of the Astrologer of Kudanthai. A little distance to the south of Kudanthai, a majestic view of the interim capital of the Chozla's, Pazlayarai, with its temple

towers and palace turrets reaching the skies, could be glimpsed.

The Astrologer of Kudanthai had collected the horoscopes of all the royal family living at the Pazlayarai Palace. He had searched amidst this collection and found the horoscope of Lady Vanathi of Kodumbalur. After peering at the palm leaf notation of the horoscope for a while, he stared at the face of Vanathi; then again looked at the notation. He was peering and staring one after the other, but did not open his mouth to utter a single word!

With a little impatience Kundavai asked, "What Sir? Are you going to say something or not?"

"Thaye! What can I say? How can I say it? I had studied this horoscope once before and could not believe it myself. I doubted if anything could be like it and kept it aside. Now, when I behold the divine face of this Lady and see her horoscope at the same time, I am astounded!"

"Be amazed! Be astounded! After you have been astounded enough, say something in particular."

"Madam, this is a very fortunate horoscope. I am saying it with the belief that you will not mistake my words. This is one step better than even your horoscope! I have never, till now, seen such a lucky horoscope."

Kundavai smiled. Vanathi said with some shyness, "Akka! He is calling this most unfortunate girl the luckiest person in this world! Everything he utters will be like this."

"Amma, what are you saying? If my statements are incorrect, I will give up my practice!" said the Astrologer.

"No. Mr. Astrologer, no. Don't do anything like that. Keep predicting such good things to the people. But you are uttering generalities; you have said nothing in particular. That is why she doubts you."

"You want me to say something specific? Here, I will say it. Four months ago, something that appeared to be an ill omen occurred. Something slipped and fell. But in truth, that is not an ill omen. It is from that incident that this Lady will obtain all her good fortune."

"Vanathi, remember what I said? See?" said Kundavai Devi.

"You must have told him about it before!" said Vanathi.

"Sir, look at the way this girl talks?"

"Let her talk Thaye, let her say whatever she wants now. Tomorrow when she marries the king of kings"

"Yes, talk about such things! Young girls will listen happily if you speak to them about marriage."

"That is what I have been saying too. If I suddenly raise the topic of marriage, people will say 'This old man has lost his senses.' That is why ..."

"Where will her husband come from? When will he come? What is his identification? Can you tell us all these things from the horoscope, Sir?"

"Oh yes! Why not? I can say it very well." The Astrologer peered into the horoscope once more. Whether he examined it carefully or pretended to do examine it, none can say!

Then looking up decisively he said, "Madam! A husband for this maid does not have to come from very far! He is quite nearby. However, that brave warrior is not in this country now. He has gone across the seas."

Upon hearing these words, Kundavai looked at Vanathi. Vanathi tried to contain the happiness that bubbled in her heart; but could not do so: her face showed it.

"Then, who is he? What clan? Any signs to recognize him?"

"Oh yes. Very clear signs. A prince fortunate enough to marry this girl, will have the sign of the conch and discus on his palms."

Once again Kundavai looked at Vanathi. But Vanathi was looking down, almost hiding her face. "Won't there be some signs or significant lines on her palms also?" asked Kundavai Pirati.

"Thaye! Have you ever seen the soles of this girl's feet? ..."

"Sir! What are you saying? Are you asking me to touch her feet?"

(Greeting a person by touching their feet denotes extreme humility, or servitude.)

"No! Oh no! I am not saying anything like that! However, sometime in the future, thousands of princesses, queens and empresses will pray for the fortune of touching this noble lady's feet."

"Akka! This old man is teasing me. Is it for this, that you brought me here? Please get up; let us go" Vanathi said this with some real anger.

"Why are you agitated my dear? Let him keep saying what he wants ..."

"I am not saying anything. I am just explaining the notations in this horoscope. Poets often talk about lotus feet. Please ask this Lady to show me her feet a little bit. Her sole will surely have the line of the red-lotus."

"Well! That's enough Sir. If you say anything more about this girl, she will get hold of my hands and drag me out. Tell us something about the man who is to be her husband."

"Yes. Of course, I shall do so. The fortunate youth who will take her hand will be the bravest among brave; he will wear the victory garlands from fighting in the forefront of hundreds of campaigns. He will be a king of kings. With the praise and support of thousands of kings, he will sit upon the throne of an emperor for a long time."

"I do not believe your words. How is that possible?" asked Kundavai. Several emotions -- eagerness, happiness, fear, doubt, worry -- danced on her face.

"I too don't believe it. He is thinking of something else and saying all this. He is uttering such words to make you happy!" said Vanathi.

"If you don't believe my words today, there is no harm. One day you will believe it. Don't forget this poor astrologer on that day."

Vanathi asked once again: "Akka, shall we go?" Two tear drops peeped at the corners of her dark eyes.

"I have to tell you just one more thing. Please hear that also and then leave. There will be several obstacles and dangers for the young man who is to marry this Princess. He will have several enemies ..."

"Oh!"

"But all the dangers and obstacles will fly away in the end. Enemies will be totally destroyed; the Lord who attains this Lady will cross all impediments and achieve great positions. There is something much more important than even this ... Thaye! I am an old man. Therefore, I can reveal all without hiding anything. You should look at the stomach of this girl sometime. If you do not find the lines and sign of a banyan (ficus) leaf on her stomach, I will give up my practice of astrology."

"Sir, what is so special about the sign of the banyan leaf?"

"Don't you know who the Lord who reposed on the banyan leaf is? A son with the aspects of that great Vishnu will be born to her. Her Lord is likely to have all sorts of dangers, obstacles, impediments and bad periods. But the son who is to be born of this Lady will have nothing that is a deterrent. All that he thinks of will be concluded; anything he undertakes will be completed; his touch will be golden; wherever he steps will be under his sway; whatever he sees will have the tiger-flag flying over it. Madam, the armies led by her son will flow in all directions, with no hinderance, like the fresh floods of the Ponni. The Goddess of Victory will be his bonded slave. The fame of his native lands will spread across the worlds. The fame of his clan will last as long as this world exists!"

When the Astrologer spoke these words as if in some frenzy, Kundavai was looking at him with rapt attention, listening to every word he uttered. She was startled to turn around upon hearing the distressed call, "Akka!"

"Something is happening to me," said Vanathi in further distress. Suddenly she fainted and fell to the floor.

"Sir! Please fetch some water quickly," saying this, Kundavai lifted Vanathi onto her lap. The Astrologer brought some water. Kundavai sprinkled the water on her friend's face.

"Nothing will go wrong, Amma! Do not be concerned," said the Astrologer.

"I am not worried. This is her habit. This has happened four or five times till now. She will open her eyes and get up after some time. Upon waking she will ask if this is the earth or paradise," said Kundavai.

Then, in a much softer voice she asked "Sir! I came to ask you something very important. Have you any news?"

The Astrologer's manner changed; he said some words to her very precisely and quickly.

Then, Kundavai Pirati asked, "I hear that people in the countryside and cities are talking about all sorts of things. The long tailed comet has been appearing in the skies for sometime. Is there some meaning to all this? Is there some danger to the empire? Will there be any change, confusion?"

"Lady, don't ask me about that. There is no horoscope for kingdoms, nations or political events; neither can I predict anything by astrology about them. I know nothing about such matters through the science I practice. Perhaps the seers and philosophers or the devout and ascetic may be able to foresee something. This poor fellow does not have such powers. In politics the stars and planets of astrology have no power." The Astrologer spoke these words with a certain emphasis, looking at Vanathi who seemed to be stirring.

"Sir! You talk very skillfully. You don't have to study the horoscope of a nation. But can you not reveal particulars about my father and my brothers? Isn't studying their horoscopes like looking at the horoscope of the nation?"

"I will look into them at leisure and tell you. Thaye, in general this period is full of confusion and danger. All of us have to be a little careful."

"Sir! About my father..., the Emperor ... I am quite worried ever since he moved to Tanjore from Pazlayarai."

"I have told you earlier, Madam. This is a period of grave danger for the Emperor. All your family has to face great

danger. With the grace of the Goddess Durga all will be overcome."

"Akka, where are we?" asked the faint voice of Vanathi.

Vanathi, who had her head on Kundavai's lap, blinked her eyelids several times like the buzzing bee, and looked around.

"Darling, we are still on this earth. The flower-laden flying-chariot has not yet come to take us to the heavens. Get up! Let us get into our mere horse drawn chariot and go back to the palace."

Vanathi sat up and asked, "Did I faint?"

"No. You did not faint. You took a little nap on my lap. I even sang you a lullaby. Did you not hear it?"

"Please do not scold me Akka. Without my awareness, I felt dizzy."

"Yes. You will feel dizzy. Quite dizzy. If this Astrologer had predicted all those grand fortunes for me, even my head would feel dizzy."

"Not because of that Akka. You think I believed everything he said?"

"I don't know if you believed it or not? But this Astrologer was quite worried about you. I should not take a poor spirited person like you, anywhere, anymore."

"I said that I did not want to come to this astrologer. You insisted ..."

"It is my fault. Get up. Let us go. Can you walk to the doorstep? Or, should I carry you on my hip?"

"No. No. I can walk very well."

"Please have a little patience Thaye! I shall give you some sacrament-offerings of the Goddess. Please receive them before you go," said the Astrologer as he tidied his papers.

"Sir, you described all sorts of things for me. But you did not say anything for Akka?" asked Vanathi.

"Amma, I have told everything to the Younger Pirati. What is there to say afresh?"

"About the bravest of warriors who is to marry Akka"

"That dauntless gallant" interrupted Kundavai with some surprise.

"Doubtless. A very capable prince..."

"He who has all the thirty-two signs of good looks; Jupiter in wisdom; a veritable Saraswati (deity of learning) in

knowledge; handsome as Cupid, Oh no, as Arjuna (epic warrior)!"

"When will that handsome prince, deserving of the Younger Pirati come and where will he come from?"

"How will he come? Upon a horse? On a chariot? By walk? Or, will he rip open the roof and jump down from the skies?" asked Kundavai with a mocking voice.

"Akka, I can hear the hoof beats of a horse," Vanathi said this with some agitation.

"You will hear most wonderful things unheard by anyone else."

"No. I am not joking. Listen."

By now all three could hear the quick gallop of a horse on the road outside.

"What if you hear it? Won't horses gallop along the road?" said Kundavai.

"No. It seems to be coming here, to this house."

"OK. Get up. Let us go."

At this time they could hear some confused noises outside the door. Voices could be heard.

"Is this the Astrologer's house?"

"Yes; who are you?"

"Is the Astrologer home?"

"You cannot enter."

"I will do so."

"I cannot let you."

"I must see the Astrologer."

"Come later."

"I cannot come later; I am in a great hurry."

"Hey! You! You fellow! Stop! Stop!"

"Damn it! Move away! I'll kill you if you stand in the way."

"Sir! Sir! Please! Please! Don't enter! Don't go in."

The confused shouts came closer, and closer. The wooden front door opened with a bang. With all this great commotion, a young man made a sudden entry.

Another fellow was trying to drag him back by pulling at his shoulders. The youth shook off the hands, stepped across the doorway and came into the room.

Our readers would have guessed the identity of the newcomer! Yes, it was our youthful hero, Vandiya Devan. All the three pairs of eyes inside the house looked at that warrior.

Vandiya Devan also looked at the people inside; no; he looked at only one person inside. Not even that. He did not

see even Kundavai Devi completely. He just saw her golden face. Did he at least see her face completely? -- not even that! He saw the petals of her coral red lips, opening slightly with surprise; he saw her wide open eyes brimming with mischief, surprise and laughter; he saw the dark eyelashes and eyebrows; he saw the sandal colored forehead; he saw the rosy dimpled cheeks; he saw the throat shaped like a smooth conch-shell. He saw all these at the same time and individually! They became embossed in his heart.

All this was for just a second. He quickly turned towards the Astrologer's disciple and said, "Why man, inside ... Why didn't you say that these ladies were inside the house? If you had said it, would I have come in like this?" With these words he pushed the man outside and crossed the doorstep once again. Even then, he turned to look at Kundavai once more, before going out.

"Dear me! It seems like the quiet after a raging storm!" said Kundavai Pirati.

"Listen. The storm has not stopped!" said Vanathi of Kodumbalur.

The debate between the Astrologer's disciple and Vandiya Devan was still continuing.

"Sir! Who was that?" asked Kundavai.

"I do not know, Thaye. Seems like a foreigner; looks as if he is a rough fellow."

Kundavai suddenly thought of something and laughed brightly. "Why are you laughing, Akka?" asked Vanathi.

"Why am I laughing? We were talking about my bridegroom -- if he would come on horseback, riding an elephant or jump down from the roof; I thought of that and laughed!"

Vanathi was also possessed of an uncontrollable laughter now. Their laughter rose like waves on the ocean shore. Because of their laughter even the noises of the dispute outside stopped.

Immersed in silent thought the Astrologer gave kumkum to both ladies. After receiving it both women rose and walked outside. The Astrologer went along.

Vandiya Devan who was standing aside near the doorstep, saw them and said loudly, "I beg pardon. This genius did not tell me that you ladies were inside. That is why I entered in such a hurry. Forgive me for that."

With a pleasant face and mischief-filled, teasing eyes, Kundavai looked up at him once. She did not say a single word in reply. She took hold of Vanathi's hand and walked towards her chariot under the banyan tree.

"The women of Kudanthai seem to have no manners. Can they not utter even one word in reply to a gentleman who accosts them?" The words of Vandiya Devan spoken in a loud voice could be heard by everyone.

After helping them both be seated, the charioteer also climbed to his perch. The horse drawn chariot moved swiftly towards the banks of River Arisil. Vandiya Devan stood watching till the chariot disappeared from sight.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 12 -- Nandini

Don't we have to disclose how Vandiya Devan, whom we had left in a ferry-boat on the banks of the Kollidam, arrived at the doorsteps of the Astrologer of Kudanthai?

The Saiva gentleman, who objected to having Azlvar-adiyan in the boat, turned towards Vandiya Devan and said, "I let this fellow get in because of you, Thambi. However, as long as we are in this boat he should not utter that eight-letter word. If he says it, I shall demand that he be thrown into this Kollidam! These boatmen are my men!"

"Sir! Devout Mr. Nambi! Did thy hallowed ears hear it?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"If this fellow does not utter the five-letter word, I too shall not utter the holy-name of eight-letters" said Nambi.

(Note: The eight letter word is the name of Vishnu -- na-mo-sri-na-ra-ya-na-ya -- worshipped by the Vaishnava sect; the five letter word -- na-ma-si-va-ya -- denotes Shiva worshipped by the Saiva sect.)

"Who is this fellow to object to my uttering the five-lettered holy name of the great God Shiva? No! Never!

Though you may be bound by chains
and thrown into the deepest seas,
Your only companion and hope is
the name na-ma-si-va-ya!"

These words were uttered in a roaring voice by the Saiva gentleman. Upon hearing it, Azlvar-adiyan began singing in a louder voice:

I searched, and upon searching found
the holy name,
Na-mo-sri-na-ra-ya-na-ya;

Saying the words, "Siva, Siva, Sivaa!" the gentleman stuck both his index fingers into his ears! When Azlvar-adiyan stopped singing, he took his fingers out of his ears.

Azlvar-adiyan looked at Vandiya Devan and asked, "Thambi, you ask that fanatic Saiva fellow. He is in such

agony when he merely hears God's name! Does not this river Kollidam wash the lotus feet of God Narayana who reposes in Srirangam and then come down here? Is it not because these waters, which have touched the feet of Narayana, have become hallowed, that Shiva performs penance while immersed in these waters at Thiru-anai-kava?"

Before he could conclude this long story, the Saiva zealot became very furious and rushed towards the equally fanatic Vaishnava Nambi. Since both entered into a fist fight at one end of the boat, it seemed as if the ferry-boat would soon capsize! One of the men and Vandiya Devan intervened and separated them.

"Oh, you great and best of devout souls! Both of you seem to have a wish to drown in the floods of this Kollidam and go directly to paradise! But I have several other engagements left on this beautiful earth," said Vandiya Devan with some disgust.

One of the boatmen articulated his opinion, "I am not sure if one would definitely enter paradise if he falls into the Kollidam! But, I guarantee that you would enter the innards of a crocodile! Look over there!" His finger pointed at a big crocodile with its terrorizing, wide open jaws.

"I am not one bit scared about those crocodiles. Would he not come to my aid, Lord Narayana the original God, who saved the elephant Gajendra from such a crocodile? Where would he go?" said Azlvar-adiyan.

"Where would he go? Perhaps he is hiding in the sari-folds of the milkmaids of Brindavan!"

"Perhaps Shiva is entangled in another predicament: just like that time when, having given boons to the demon Bhasma, he was running around with terror; perhaps Thirumal has gone to save him from yet another such predicament," retorted Nambi.

The fanatic Saiva replied: "Perhaps this fanatic ignoramus does not remember how Vishnu's pride was demolished during the burning of Tripura?"

"Why do you argue like this? I don't know! Why don't each of you worship the God to whom you are devoted?" said Vandiya Devan.

It would be appropriate to explain to our readers at this time, why the Saiva devotee and Azlvar-adiyan argued in this fashion and why there was a similar wordy duel at Veera-narayana-puram.

In the ancient Tamil land, for almost six hundred years, (up till about the tenth century AD) the religions of Buddhism and Jainism held prestigious sway. Because of these religions, the Tamil land gained several advantages. Sculpture, painting, poetry, literature and other such arts were nurtured and developed. Emphasis was on Sanskrit.

Later the Azlvar's (Vaishnava saints) and Nayanmar's (Saiva saints) appeared. They sang melodious poems -- devotional songs in nectar-sweet, divine Tamil. They fostered and developed the Vaishnava (of Vishnu) and Saiva (of Shiva) sects of Hinduism. Their preaching was quite powerful. They utilized the power of art, sculpture and music for their missionary work. Several others set their songs to divine music and sang them. Those who listened to these musical poems were enticed, enamored and subject to fanatic devotion. The Shiva and Vishnu temple-towns mentioned in such devotional songs acquired new merit and fresh holiness. Temples, which till then were built with wood and brick, were renovated and rebuilt with stone and sculpture. Such holy renovation-works were undertaken even since Vijayala Chozla's times by the Chozla monarchs and members of their family as well as other nobility.

At about the same time an important event occurred in the Kerala nation. A great soul was born in the village of Kaladi. At a very young age he gave up worldly pleasures and became an ascetic. He studied all the sciences and literature in the northern language (Sanskrit) and became an expert. He then established the foundation for the Advaita philosophy, based on the principles gained from the Hindu scriptures -- Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavat Gita and Brahma Sutras because of his expertise in Sanskrit. He, Sankara the Teacher, traveled all over the Indian sub-continent and established eight religious-seats for propagating Advaita philosophy. Ascetics who espoused his philosophy spread his word all over the country. (Advaita meaning non-dual, advocates the non-dual nature of existence; that God is only one; and that God and man are one and the same.)

Thus, in the Tamil lands, during the times of our story (tenth century AD) there was a great religious revival and awakening. Certain harmful consequences, arising out of this revival, also spread throughout the countryside. Fanatic Shiva devotees and fanatic Vishnu devotees rose here and there. They entered into fights wherever they met each other. Sometimes, Advaita philosophers also entered into these disputes. Wordy duels often turned into fistfights and brawls.

There is an interesting story that reveals the extent of this rivalry between the religious sects of those times. A man from Srirangam, of the Vaishnava sect, was once walking along the outer walls of the Shiva temple at Thiru-anai-kava. Suddenly a stone hit his head. He was wounded and bleeding. The Vaishnava man looked up towards the sky. He saw a crow sitting atop the old temple tower and surmised that a piece of brick from the dilapidated spire dislodged by the crow must have fallen on his head. Immediately he forgot his wound and pain and became quite delighted. He said, "Oh you devout Vaishnava crow from Srirangam! Good that you are demolishing this Shiva temple completely!"

In those days, this fanatic rivalry between the Vaishnavas and Saivas was widespread. Knowing about this will be very helpful to readers who may have the intention of reading further chapters in this story.

When the boat reached the other shore, the Saiva gentleman looked at Azlvar-adiyan and cursed him with these words: "May you loose all prosperity and become utterly destitute," before he went on his way.

The footman from Kadamboor who had come with Vandiya Devan went away towards the nearby village of Thiru-panan-thal, saying that he would come back with a mount for him. Azlvar-adiyan and Vandiya Devan sat down under a large banyan tree on the river bank. Several kinds of birds roosting in the thick, leafy branches of that wide-spreading, large tree raised a pleasing musical sound. Both of them, Devan and Nambi, tried to pry the secrets from each other's mouths. For a while they talked of this and that in a round-about fashion.

"Well Thambi, you did go to Kadamboor without taking me with you?"

"Even my entry into that fortress was fraught with great difficulty, Mr. Nambi."

"Is that so? How did you go in? Perhaps you did not go at all?"

"I did enter. I did go in. If I make up my mind to do something will I take a backward step? The gate-keepers stopped me. I goaded my horse to gallop inside and all the men obstructing my way fell away in confusion. Before they could rise and surround me, my friend Kandamaran came to my rescue and took me inside."

"That's what I thought. You are a very courageous fellow! And then, what happened? Who else had come there?"

"All sorts of dignitaries had come. I do not know their names. Lord Pazluvoor had come. His young bride had also come. Dear me! How shall I describe the beauty of that lady!"

"What? Did you see her?!"

"Yes. Why not? My friend Kandamaran took me to the inner courts of the women. I saw her there. Amidst all those women, the Young-Queen of Lord Pazluvoor was the greatest beauty. Among all the dark-colored beauties, that queen's face shone like a radiant full-moon. All the heavenly beauties: Ramba, Urvasi, Tilottama, Indrani, Chandrani -- all of them must be mentioned only after her."

"Dear me! You describe her with such rapture! Then, what happened? Did you see the gypsy dance?"

"Yes. It was very captivating. I thought of you at that time."

"I was not fortunate to see it. What happened after that?"

"The velan attam (oracle-dance) took place. The `divine-man' and `divine-woman' came upon the stage and danced with frenzy."

"Did the spirit manifest? Did they declare any oracle?"

"Oh, yes! `All endeavors will be achieved. The rains will be good; the land will be bountiful,' said the soothsayer."

"Is that all?"

"He then said something about political affairs. I did not listen to that carefully."

"Dear, dear me! Is that so? You should have noticed Thambi! You are a young man; you seem to be brave and courageous. If anybody talks about political affairs at any place, you should listen carefully."

"You say the truth. I too felt the same thing this morning."

"Why feel so in the morning?"

"This morning my friend Kandamaran and I talked all along the way as we rode to the banks of the Kollidam. I believe that after I had gone to bed last night, all the dignitaries who were at Kadamboor convened a midnight-meeting to discuss some important political affairs."

"What did they discuss about?"

"That, I do not know. Kandamaran said something in a cryptic fashion but he did not explain clearly. He said that some event was to take place very soon and that he would explain at that time. All his statements were rather mysterious. Why Sir! Do you know anything?"

"About what?"

"Everybody in the countryside and city is talking about it? A comet can be seen in the skies and the empire may be subject to some grave danger; there may be a change in the Chozla monarchy; this and that ... Such talk has been heard even in the Thondai lands. Also, I believe that all sorts of important officials meet together quite often, to discuss about the `Rights to the succession' of the Chozla throne. What do you think? Who is likely to succeed to the throne?"

"I don't know anything about such matters. What connection do I have with political affairs? I am a devout Vaishnava; I am a slave to those who serve the Azlvar saints; I sing the devotional songs that I know and go from one holy place to the other."

After uttering these words Azlvar-adiyan began singing the following words:

I spied upon his golden presence;
I saw his divine grace.

Vandiya Devan interrupted him, "Let good fortune be yours. Please stop this."

"Dear me! You ask me to stop singing these divine Tamil psalms!"

"Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi! I have a suspicion. Shall I disclose it?"

"Please do."

"You will not come to beat me up with your wooden-staff?"

"You? Is it possible for me to hit you?"

"I think that all your devotion, your Vaishnava fanaticism, your psalm singing -- everything is one big deception. I suspect it to be a big masquerade!"

"Oh! Oh! What talk is this? Offense! Abuse!"

"No offense and no forgiveness. You put on such guise to hide your womanizing! I have seen some others like you: who wander around with an obsession for womankind. What you find in such women, that I do not know! I seem to dislike any woman I see."

"Thambi, I too know of some men who are crazy about women. But don't mix me up with such fellows. I am not a masquerader. Your suspicions are incorrect."

"Then why did you ask me to deliver your note to the girl who came in the palanquin? That too, how can you lose your heart to a woman who is married to another? Did you not want to come to Kadamboor mainly to see her? Don't deny it."

"I won't deny it. But your reasoning is not correct. There is a much more appropriate justification. It is a long story."

"My horse hasn't arrived yet. Tell me that story. I can listen."

"By `story' I do not mean an imaginary tale. It happened truly. An astonishing account. You will be shocked if you hear it. Do you want me to recount it?"

"If you would like to."

"Alright. I shall tell you. I am in a great hurry to go someplace else; nonetheless, I will tell you that story before I go. I may need your help sometime later. You won't refuse it then, will you?"

"If it is justified I will help you. If you do not like it, don't tell me anything."

"No. No. I must surely tell you the story. The young bride of that demon, Lord Pazluvoor, the girl to whom I asked you to carry a note, her name is Nandini. You will be surprised if you hear what I have to say about Nandini. You will wonder if there can be such atrocities in this world." With this preamble, Azlvar-adiyan started narrating the story of Nandini.

Azlvar-adiyan Nambi was born in a village on the banks of the River Vaigai, in the Pandiya Kingdom. All his family were ardent Vaishnava devotees. One day, his father was walking in the gardens along the river bank when he found an orphan baby girl who was abandoned in the garden. He brought the infant home. Because the child was very attractive and beautiful, all the members of his family loved and nourished her. Since the child was found in a garden (nandavan), they named her Nandini. Nambi, considering her a younger sister, loved and cherished her.

As Nandini grew in years, her devotion to God Vishnu also grew. All the people around them believed that she would become another Andal (Vaishnava saint) to captivate all their hearts. Azlvar-adiyan believed it more than anyone else. After his father's death, he took up the responsibility of raising that girl. The two of them travelled from one town to another, singing Vaishnava poems and spreading the belief in devotion to Vishnu. People who heard Nandini, wearing basil-leaf garlands and singing the psalms of the Azlvar saints, were enchanted.

At one time Azlvar-adiyan had to go on a journey to Thiruvendakam (Tirupati). His return was delayed. A mishap occurred to Nandini.

The final great-battle between the Chozla and Pandiya kings was fought near Madurai City. The Pandiya armies were totally destroyed. King Veera-pandiya had fallen in the battlefield with wounds all over his body. Some of his personal servants found him: they tried to revive him and save his life; they brought him away from the battlefield and into the house of Nandini which was nearby. Nandini, upon seeing the condition of the Pandiya king, was filled with pity and she nursed him in the sickbed. However, the Chozla soldiers soon found this out. They surrounded Nandini's house, entered inside and killed Veera-pandiya. Lord Pazluvoor, captivated by the beauty of Nandini whom he found there, imprisoned her and took her away with him.

All this happened three years ago. After that Azlvar-adiyan could not see Nandini at all. From that day, Azlvar-adiyan was trying to meet and talk to Nandini. If she wished it, he would free her and take her away. He had not succeeded in that endeavor so far.

Upon hearing this tale, Vandiya Devan's heart was touched. For a second, he considered telling Nambi that the person inside the covered palanquin in Kadamboor was not Nandini; that it was Prince Madurandaka. Something in his heart prevented him. Perhaps all this tale was the fertile imagination of Azlvar-adiyan. Therefore, he did not reveal the secrets he had learned at the Kadamboor fortress. By now they could see the footman from Kadamboor coming back, leading a horse.

"Thambi, will you do me one favor?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"How can I help you? Lord Pazluvoor is capable of controlling all this Chozla Empire. I am a single fellow with no powers. What can I do?" Vandiya Devan answered him carefully. Later he asked, "Mr. Nambi, are you saying that you do not know anything about political affairs? Can you say who is eligible to succeed to the Chozla throne if something happens to Sundara Chozla?" After saying this he examined Nambi's face eagerly to see if there was any change in his expression. There was not an iota of change.

"What will I know of such matters, Thambi? Perhaps, if you ask the Astrologer of Kudanthai, he may be able to tell you something."

"Oh? Is the Astrologer of Kudanthai that capable?"

"Very capable. He will make predictions based on astrology; he will know your mind and explain the future. He knows all the worldly activities and will base his predictions accordingly."

Vandiya Devan made up his mind to see the astrologer before he went any further! From ancient times humanity is fascinated in finding out about what will happen in its future. Princes have this fascination; paupers have it too. The most learned and knowledgeable have it; the foolish and ignorant ones also do so. There is no surprise about the fact that our youthful hero, Vandiya Devan, who was travelling upon secret government affairs across cities and nations, had such a fascination.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 13 -- The Waxing Moon

The Astrologer led Vandiya Devan into the house after the chariot carrying the princesses had disappeared from view. He seated himself on his best seat. He asked the youth who was looking around to sit down and examined him from head to toe.

"Thambi, who are you? Where have you come?"

Vandiya Devan laughed.

"Why are you laughing, my son?"

"Nothing. You are such a famous astrologer. You ask me such questions! Can you not find out by your astrology about who I am and why I came here?"

"Oh! Is that so? I can find out. But if I find out and predict things on my own behalf, I am wondering who will pay for my services."

Vandiyā Devan smiled and then asked, "Sir! Those two who came here before me, who are they?"

"Ah! Them? I realize whom you are asking about. I know Thambi, I know. Are you not asking about the persons who were in here when you dragged my disciple and made a sudden entry into my house? You are asking about them aren't you? Those two, who left in that swift chariot raising the road dust behind them, you are asking about them?" said the Astrologer in a rambling fashion.

"Yes. Yes. I am asking about them..."

"OK. Ask. Ask as much as you wish. Who said not to ask? Those two persons were two women!"

"That was obvious even to me! Sir, I am not blind. I can differentiate between men and women. Even if it is a man masquerading as a woman I can find out."

"Then, why did you ask ..."

"Women means, who are they, what kind? ..."

"Oh ho! You are asking about that! According to the science of beauty, women are classified into four kinds: padmini, chittini, gandarvi, vidyadari. You seem to have some expertise in the study of beauty! According to that fourfold classification those two women belong to the padmini or gandarvi class."

"Oh God!"

"What, my son?"

"If I call out to God, why do you answer?"

"What is wrong in that? Haven't you heard that God is everywhere? It seems that you have not kept company with learned people. God is in me. God is in you too. My disciple, whom you dragged inside, God is in him too..."

"Enough. Enough. Please stop!"

"God asked me to talk all this time; and now God commands me to stop!"

"Sir! Mr. Astrologer, those two women who left just now - who are they? What is their family? Where do they come

from? What is their name? -- that is what I asked. If you can answer me without rambling like this ..."

"If I answer you, what will you give me, my son?"

"I shall offer you my thanks gladly."

"You can keep the glad offering to yourself. If you are willing to give some gold offering, let me know."

"Will you answer clearly, if I make a gold offering?"

"I will answer only if an answer is possible. Thambi, listen to this. Several persons will come and go from an astrologer's house. One should not talk about one visitor to another. I will not tell you anything about the persons who left just now. Neither will I disclose a single word about you, to any person who may come later and ask about you."

"Ah! Everything that Azlvar-adiyan Nambi said about you seems to be true!"

"Azlvar-adiyan? Who is he? A person with that name?"

"What, don't you know him? He talked as if he knew you very well. Have you never heard of Azlvar-adiyan Nambi?"

"Perhaps I know the man. Don't remember the name. Describe him a little, let me see."

"He is short and squat. He wears his hair in a topknot on his forehead. He wears his vaetti (loose lower garment of men) tightly around his young paunch. Making a paste of sandal powder, he wears it in vertical marks all over his body; readily enters into fiery fights with devout Saivas; if he sees an Advaita philosopher, he raises his wooden staff. Sometime ago you said 'You are God; I am God.' If Azlvar-adiyan had heard it, he would have raised his staff and rushed over to beat you, by saying 'God is hitting God.' He ..."

"Thambi, From what you say, I think you are talking about Thirumalai."

"Does he go by other names like that?"

"That fanatic Vaishnava has a different name in different towns."

"Does he also disguise himself in different garbs for different persons?"

"Oh yes! He will put on masquerades appropriate for the occasion and time."

"Will everything he utters be mixed with fancy and falsehood?"

"About seven eighths of what he says will be full of imagination. The rest may be gospel truth."

"So, you say that he is a very wicked fellow."

"One cannot say that! He is good to the good; bad to the wicked."

"That means we cannot trust his words and do anything."

"Believing or not believing depends on the words uttered."

"For example, he said that if I come to you and asked you for astrological predictions, you will give expert answers..."

"Did I not say that about one eighth of his speech will be gospel truth? That statement belongs to that category!"

"Then predict something for me by your astrology; foretell something. It is getting late and I have to go in a hurry."

"Where do you have to go in such a great hurry, my son?"

"Can you not reveal that also from your astrology? Where should I go? Where should I not go? If I do go, will my endeavor be successful? -- I came to ask you all these things."

"I need some basis to foretell or predict by my astrology; I need a horoscope to study; if there is no horoscope, I must at least know the day and star under which you were born. If you do not know even that, I need a name and address."

"My name is Vallavarayan."

"Aha! Of the Vaanar clan?"

"Yes I am that very same Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan."

"Say it like that! Thambi why did you not say this before? I think, I even have your horoscope with me. If I search for it I can find it."

"How is that Sir?"

"What other occupation do astrologer's like me have? We collect the horoscopes of men and women born in noble families..."

"I am not from any such famous noble family."

"How can you say that? Do you not know of the fame and prestige of your clan? How many poets have sung the praises of the Vaanar clan in how many poems? Perhaps you have not heard the poems?"

"Recite one such poem. Let me hear it."

The Astrologer immediately sang the following poem:

Are there lips that do not speak of your fame: oh noble Vaana?
Are there chests that do not have your name tattooed on: oh brave Vaana?
Are there flagpoles that do not bear thy colors: oh victorious Vaana?
Are there domains that stand beyond your survey: oh majestic Vaana?

When he sang, it was quite obvious that the Astrologer was not a musical expert. Nevertheless, he sang the poem clearly and with involvement.

"How is the poem?" he asked.

"The poem is pleasing to the ear! But now, I have to tie my colors to the horns of some bull! I have to stand atop the branches of a banyan tree to survey my domain. Even that is doubtful. My weight might break the branch and throw me down!" said Vandiya Devan.

"Today your situation is like that. How do we know what can happen tomorrow?"

"I thought that you might know; that is why I came here."

"What can I know Thambi? Like everybody I am a short lived human being. But the planets and stars foretell the future. I have learned to understand a little of what they say and then explain it to those who seek me."

"What do the planets and stars foretell about me, Mr. Astrologer?"

"They foretell that you will grow day by day."

"Dear me! That is pretty good! The height that I have now is itself quite too much. I had to bend low as I entered your house! What can I do if I grow taller? There is no use of such generalities. Say something specific."

"If you ask me about something particular, I can answer more specifically."

"Tell me, the enterprise on which I am going to Tanjore, will it succeed?"

"If you are going to Tanjore on your own behalf the endeavor will succeed; if you are going on someone else's behalf, I have to see that persons horoscope before I answer."

Vandiya Devan shook his head in astonishment and placed a finger upon his nose. "Sir, I have never encountered as astute a fellow as you."

"Do not flatter me, Thambi."

"Ok. I shall ask what I want clearly. I wish to meet the Emperor in Tanjore. Is that possible?"

"There are two astrologers greater than me in Tanjore. You have to ask them."

"Who are they?"

"One is the Elder Lord Pazluvoor; the other is his brother the Younger Lord Pazluvoor."

"It is said that the health of the Emperor is in a bad state. Is that true?"

"People will say all sorts of things. Why not? Don't believe all that they say; neither should you repeat such things."

"Can you tell me who has the right to succeed to the Chozla throne if something happens to the Emperor?"

"That throne is not for you nor for me. Why should we bother about it?"

"From that fate we are saved!" said Vandiya Devan.

"It is true Thambi. The rights of succession to an empire is not an ordinary matter. It is a very dangerous topic. Is that not so?"

"Sir! At present the Prince who is in Kanchi, the Crown Prince Aditya Karikala..."

"Yes he is there; you have come on his behalf. Haven't you?"

"You have found that out in the end; no harm done. What about his fortune?"

"I don't have his horoscope in my hands now Thambi. I have to study it."

"What about the fortunes of Prince Madurandaka?"

"His, is a peculiar fortune; similar to that of womenfolk. His fortunes are always subject to the power of others."

"Even now people say that the Chozla Empire is under Women's Rule. They say that it is worse than the rule of the Queen Alli?"

"Thambi, where do they say such things?"

"To the north of the Kollidam."

"Maybe they are talking about the power of the new bride married by the Elder Lord Pazluvoor."

"I heard differently."

"What did you hear?"

"They said that the beloved daughter of the Emperor, the Younger Pirati Kundavai, is the one ruling like that."

The Astrologer peered into Vandiya Devan's face carefully. He tried to read the face to find out if he was saying these words after recognizing Kundavai, who had left his house a little earlier. There was no sign to support the doubt.

"Totally wrong Thambi. Emperor Sundara Chozla is in Tanjore. Kundavai Pirati lives in Pazlayarai. Moreover ..."

"Moreover what? Why did you stop?"

"During the daytime one must look in all four directions before speaking; at nighttime not even that. But, there is nothing wrong in telling you, I think. What power or influence does the Emperor have these days? All the authority is held by the Lords of Pazluvoor." After saying this the Astrologer examined Vandiya Devan's face once again.

"Sir! I am not a spy of the Lords of Pazluvoor. You do not have to suspect me of that! A little while ago you talked about the impermanence of kingdoms and royal dynasties. You gave me the example of my own Vaanar clan. Please tell me the truth. How is the future of the Chozla Dynasty?"

"I can tell truthfully without any uncertainty. Towards the end of spring the River Cauvery and its tributaries will be filled with new floods. The people living on the river banks know very well that it is a flood that will rise day by day. Till the beginning of the summer months the flood will keep rising. By the autumn months the waters start receding. The people living along the bank realize it to be an ebbing flood. The Chozla Empire is now like the fresh flood of springtime that grows day by day. For several more hundreds of years it will grow and spread. The Chozla Empire is now a Waxing Moon. The day of the Full Moon is far away. Therefore the Chozla power will expand more and more."

"After talking all this time, you have said one thing explicitly! Thanks! If possible, just tell me one more thing. I have a great desire to go on a ship and travel to distant lands..."

"That wish will definitely be fulfilled. You have the fortune of the wheel. You will be travelling constantly, as if you have wheels on your feet. You will go by walk; ride upon horses; go on elephants and you will also travel aboard ships. You have the fortune to go on a sea voyage very soon."

"Sir, about the Commander of the Southern Armies, Prince Arulmozli Varma who is now conducting a campaign in Lanka -- what do the planets and stars say about him?"

"Thambi, those travelling by ship use an instrument made of the magnetic stone to find their directions. Lighthouses also help these sailors. But do you know what aids the ship

in the midst of the wide open seas? What is the constant friend of the sailors? It is the pole star seen in the low northern skies. The other stars and planets all keep moving from their positions. Even the group of the 'seven seers' (little dipper) travels in a circle. But the pole star is never shaken from its fixed position. The younger son of the Emperor, Prince Arulmozli, is like that pole star. He has the firmness of mind unshaken by anything. In addition to the virtues of selflessness and morality, he possesses the goodness of bravery and chivalry. He excels in worldly knowledge as much as in learning. He has a charming face, like that of a young babe which calms the aches of those who gaze upon it. He is the darling son of the angel of good luck. Just as sailors take direction from the pole star, it will be very useful, if youths like you who embark on the adventure of life, take direction from Prince Arulmozli."

"Dear me! What is all this that you describe about Prince Arulmozli? It appears like a lover describing his beloved?"

"Thambi, if you ask any fellow of the Chozla country on the banks of the River Ponni, he will say the same."

"Many thanks Mr. Astrologer. If the need arises I shall follow your advice."

"Because I saw that your lucky planets are also on the rise, I said this."

"I shall take leave of you Sir! Along with my heartfelt thanks, offered gladly, please accept this small tribute of gold offered to you." Saying this, Vandiya Devan placed five gold coins in the palms of the Astrologer.

"The benevolence of the Vaanar clan has not died even now!" said the Astrologer as he hid the coins in his waistband.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 14 -- A Crocodile On The River Bank

In those days, those who wished to reach Tanjore from Kudanthai, travelled along the banks of the rivers Arisil or Cauvery and reached the town of Thiru-vai-ar. From there, they would turn south to go towards Tanjore. Convenient ferrys or fords to cross the rivers Kudamuruti, Vettar, Vennar and Vadavar were available only along that route. Vandiya Devan who started from Kudanthai, first went towards the banks of River Arisil. The sights that he saw along the way astonished him, being more exquisite than what he had heard about the Chozla countryside. Any beautiful sight appears more striking when it is viewed for the first time!

Emerald green rice fields, gardens of ginger and turmeric, plantations of sugarcane and banana, groves of tender

coconut palms; streams, rivulets and brooks; tanks, pools and canals; all these made a mosaic of the landscape. Water-lilies bloomed in profusion in the creeks; Lotus and blue-lily were in riotous display on still-water ponds and pools. The large red-, white-, and blue-lotus flowers dazzled his eyes. He had never seen such flowers before! White storks and herons flew in large groups like soft clouds. Red-legged cranes stood on one leg and performed penance. Crystal clear water rushed frothing along conduits. Farmers ploughed their rice paddies -- muddy fields, darkened with good fertilizer and rotting leaves -- even deeper. Women transplanted seedlings in the well tilled fields. As they were bent on their task they sang pleasant folk-songs.

Sugar mills were established next to the cane plantations. They fed the mature, dark cane of the previous year's harvest into those mills and extracted sweet-juice. The aroma of the fresh juice and boiling molasses being made into sugar-candy and jaggery filled the air and tingled the nose.

Small cottages with roofs thatched with coconut palm-leaves and houses with tiled roofs were found amidst the palm groves. In the villages, they had cleaned the streets and front porches to a mirror brightness and decorated them with beautiful drawings of rice-powder. On some front porches they had spread the new paddy to dry in the hot sun. Hens and roosters came and pecked at the grain and ran hither and thither with cries of "Koko ro ko, koko ro koro!" The little girls set to guard the grain did not seem to bother: "How much grain can the tiny hens eat?" - they thought in disdain as they continued with their board games with cowrie shells.

The smells and smoke of cooking rose from chimneys on rooftops. The fragrance of paddy being cured, millet-grain being parched, and meat being roasted mingled with each other. Such smells made Vallavarayan's mouth water.

Blacksmiths had their shops along the roadside. The fires in such smithies burned bright with glowing embers. The sound of hammers striking iron could be heard loudly. The smithies were filled with implements essential to farming, such as plough-share points, wheel-pins, shovels, hoes and rakes as well as sharpened spears, lances, swords and shields; farmers and soldiers vied with each other to buy these instruments of their trade.

Small temples could be spied in the midst of tiny villages. The sound of drums being beaten and pipes being played inside the temples mingled with the pleasant music of religious chanting and singing of devotional poems like Thevaram.

Priests carried the guardian deities of the village, like Mariamman, on little cots and pots balanced on their heads; they danced the Karagam in tune to the beat of little udukku drums held in their hands as they sought alms of grain and produce.

Men, tired of their work behind the ploughs, rested beneath shady, wide spreading mango trees. They entertained themselves by setting sharp horned goats to fight each other.

Pea-hens roosting on housetops called out to their mates in a shrill voice; the pea-cocks lifted their long, beautiful tails with difficulty and flew up to them majestically. Turtle-doves shook their heads and danced with cooing sounds. The parrots and cuckoos -- poor creatures shut up in cages -- sang sweetly.

Vandiya Devan rode upon his horse rather slowly, enjoying such scenes. His eyes had plenty to occupy them. His heart also enjoyed all the sights. But his inner mind dwelt upon the picture of a girl, covered in mist.

Aha! Why didn't that girl open her reddened lips and utter a few words? What would she have lost by uttering a few sentences? Who could she be? Whoever she is, shouldn't she have some manners? Do I seem like a fellow to be ignored? -- That wily old astrologer never did reveal who that girl was! He is clever; very clever. How he measures the depth of one's heart! Such experienced words he utters! Of course he did not predict anything sensible or specific. About political affairs ... he escaped without disclosing anything! He merely repeated things known to everybody in a fascinating manner. But he did make the good prediction about my lucky-stars being on the rise ... Let the astrologer of Kudanthai prosper in his trade.

Vandiya Devan rode onwards with such thoughts occupying his mind. The sights presented to him, dragged him off and on from this dream world to reality. Finally he reached the banks of the River Arisil. After going a few yards he heard the sound of women laughing and the jingle jangle of their bracelets.

The women were completely hidden by the thick groves of trees growing on the bank. He peered into the trees, trying to locate the women who made the noise. Suddenly he could hear the fear filled screams "Oh dear", "Ai Oh", "Help", "Crocodile!" said the voices of several women. He whipped his horse in the direction of the shouts. He soon spied several maids in a clearing between the trees close to the water. Their faces were filled with fright. But, -- surprise of surprises -- two of them seemed to be the very same women he had seen in the astrologer's house! Vandiya Devan recognized all this within the fraction of a second.

That was not all. A horrible crocodile opening its jaws wide, could be seen at the foot of a thick tree trunk, blending with the roots, half in the water and half on the bank. He had recently seen one such fearful crocodile in the floods of the Kollidam. He had heard how dangerous the beast was. Therefore, when he saw the reptile, his heart skipped a beat and his whole body froze with agitation for a minute.

The crocodile was very near the girls who had been laughing merrily a few moments earlier. It was opening its horrible jaws wide and appeared monstrous. The crocodile had to only move just one step closer; one of the girls would be gone! She could not escape because of the thick tree!

However confused his heart and mind, there was nothing wrong with his courage. He did not even think beyond one second about what he should do. He took careful aim and swiftly threw the spear in his hand. The spear pierced the crocodile's back, entered deep into its hide and stood upright. Our hero, immediately jumped off his horse and drawing his sword he rushed towards the reptile to finish it off in one stroke.

He heard the girls laughing once again, like before. The sound was repulsive to Vandiya Devan's ears. Why do these foolish women laugh like this at this dangerous moment? he thought.

Having rushed forward, he stopped in shock and surprise for a minute. He saw the faces of those women. He could see no fear or fright in them. He could just detect the signs of laughter and mischief. He could not believe that they were the same girls who cried out for help a few minutes ago.

One among them -- the maid he had seen in the astrologer's house -- spoke in a pleasant, elegant voice: "Girls, stop it! Why are you all laughing?" He heard her scolding as if in a dream.

He moved closer to the crocodile and then hesitated as he raised his sword. He turned to look at the faces of those girls once again. A suspicion, which filled his heart with shame, humiliating his very existence -- rose in him.

By now, that girl -- the lady who had dwelt in his thoughts for some time now -- parted from her friends and came forward. She stood before him, in front of the crocodile, as if guarding it!

"Sir! I am very thankful to you. Please do not trouble yourself unnecessarily," she said.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 15 -- Vanathi's Tricks

We request our readers to please recall that earlier moment in our story when Kundavai and Vanathi climbed onto the chariot and rode towards Kudanthai, leaving their friends on the banks of the River Arisil. We shall now listen to the conversation of those maids who were left behind.

"My dear Tarika, look at this good fortune that has blown the way of that Kodumbalur female! What is so fascinating about her for our Younger Pirati?"

"No fascination, no nothing! For the past four months that girl has been going around like one deranged; she is often falling down in one of her fainting fits. The Younger Pirati is worried because they have left that orphan girl in her care. She is taking Vanathi to the Astrologer to find out what ails her. Perhaps it is because of some ghost or spirit? If it is so, don't they have to get rid of it with some magic or spell?"

"It is no ghost and no phantom. Which spirit will come and possess her? She is capable of driving away a hundred ghosts." A girl known as Varini uttered these words with some venom.

"All those fainting fits of Vanathi are one big deception my dear. That snake thinks that she can capture the Prince in her coils if she does such things."

"What Niravati says is true. And that is not the whole story. Remember that day when the Prince was leaving on his campaign she dropped the platter with the lighted lamp? Even that, she did mainly to attract the attention of the Prince. How can a platter carried in both hands slip like that? Or is our Prince some sort of fearsome tiger or bear for her to be frightened?" continued Varini.

"And she pretended to fall into a faint immediately; How clever."

"More than all her tricks, the funny thing is that Kundavai Pirati and the Prince believed her!" added Sendiru.

Mandakini offered the comment, "These are times for those who deceive and tell lies and falsehoods."

"The Prince who had already mounted his horse, leaving for the campaign; he came back into the palace to look at her! What else does one need? See how successful her tricks were?"

"What you say about the Prince is of course true. There is none in the fourteen known worlds to compare with him. There is none like him even in the imaginary tales and epics. But what I say is something else. This Vanathi, -- who fainted -- do you know what that fainting is really about? There is no need of going to an astrologer to find the cause! If anyone had asked me I would have explained." Varini was sure of herself.

"What is that fainting? You can tell us, can't you?" asked Sendiru. Varini then whispered something in her friend's ears. Niravati intervened, "Hey! What's the secret? Let us know it too!"

"I believe it is not an ordinary fainting fit! It is a lovelorn fit!" Upon hearing these words all the girls laughed

merrily. Hearing this noise, the birds upon the trees flew out with noisy wing-beats.

"When our Prince comes back from Lanka she will again try her magic tricks on him. We should not give place for that."

"If this Vanathi does not go mad by the time the Prince returns, I shall change my name from Tarika to Tataka (an ogress of the epic Ramayana)."

"OK! Let it go! Don't we have to complete the task assigned to us before the Younger Pirati comes back? Come girls, enough of this," said Mandakini.

After that, two of them removed one of the loose planks at the bottom of the barge. In a long alcove under it, they found a crocodile! That is, a dead crocodile preserved and stuffed with fibre and cotton! They took it out. The girls then paddled the barge a little way along the bank and pulled in near a clearing; a large mango tree grew along the bank with thick spreading roots. They pulled the stuffed crocodile amidst the tree roots. It lay among the roots, half in the water and half out. The girls bound a thin string to one of its legs and tied it to the root, preventing the stuffed reptile from floating away!

Tarika asked, "Why did the Younger Pirati want us to leave the crocodile here, like this?"

"Don't you know? Vanathi is so timid and poor-spirited, frightened of each and everything. To get rid of her fear and make her brave."

"If we consider all these things, it seems as if the Younger Pirati really intends to wed this foolish Vanathi to our Prince!" exclaimed Niravati.

"If anything like that happens, I shall poison this Vanathi and kill her," said the jealous maid, Varini.

"All this jealousy of yours is not warranted. All the kings of the world, the monarch of Manyaketa in Rashtrakuta, the Emperor of Vengi, the King of Kalinga and even the Emperor of Kanouj are ready to give their daughters in marriage to our Prince. Who will care about this Vanathi from Kodumbalur?" said soft spoken Mandakini.

"All those kings may be ready, like you say; but what are the wishes of our Prince? I believe he always says 'If I ever marry, I shall marry a girl from the Tamil lands.' Don't you all know this? asked Sendiru.

"Then, all is well. All of us should polish our charms and show our competence. What this Vanathi can do, we can also achieve!"

Let us now explain the reason for such talk amongst these women.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 16 -- Arulmozli Varma

About a thousand and more years ago, the best of kings, Paranthaka Sundara Chozla (AD 957-973), ruled as an Emperor without equal in South India. He had ascended the Chozla throne several years before the times of our story. For the past several hundred years Chozla power had been growing. Chozla Territories were spreading in all directions. Even so, when Sundara Chozla ascended the throne, his enemies in the south and north were powerful.

Gandara Aditya who had ruled before him, was immersed in devotion to God Shiva; he had merited the title Gandara-aditya who had knowledge of (knew) Shiva. He did not show much interest in expanding his territories. After Gandara Aditya, his brother Arinjaya, who ascended the throne, ruled for a short year. After Arinjaya's death at Atrur, his son Paranthaka Sundara Chozla came to power.

Sundara Chozla had all the qualities essential for a great king. Being skilled in war, he led a campaign to the southern region in the very beginning of his reign. A great battle took place between the Chozla and Pandiya armies at a place called Chevoor. Mahinda, the King of Lanka, had sent a large battalion to help his friend Veera-pandiya, who ruled at that time from Madurai City. The large Chozla armies defeated the combined forces of the Pandiyas and the Lankans at Chevoor. Veera-pandiya who lost his armies, lost his crown, lost his friends, saved his life and ran from the battlefield to escape into hiding. He hid himself in the rocky caves of a desert and bided his time.

Most of the Lankan army was destroyed in the Chevoor battle. Some soldiers who survived, abandoned their fame and bravery and escaped to Lanka with their lives.

It had been the practice of the Lankan kings to send their men in support of the Pandiya kings, in the clashes between the Chozlas and Pandiyas. Sundara Chozla wished to put an end to this practice. He decided to send a Chozla contingent to land in Lanka and teach the island king a lesson. He sent a large army to Lanka under the command of a chieftain of Kodumbalur, known as Paranthaka the Younger Lord of Velir. Unfortunately the Chozla army did not land in Lanka all at one time. They did not have adequate shipping facilities for that.

The battalions which had landed first started advancing without any forethought. Mahinda's Lankan army led by Commander Sena came out and surrounded the Chozla forces in a surprise move. A terrible battle was fought. In that engagement, the Chozla Commander lost his life. Stone inscriptions (deciphered in recent years) refer to him as the Younger Lord of Velir who fell in Lanka.

When Veera-pandiya who was hiding in the desert caves, heard this news, he gathered courage once again and emerged. Again he assembled a large army and entered the battlefield. This time, the Pandiya legion was completely destroyed. Veera-pandiya also lost his life. Aditya Karikala, the elder son of Sundara Chozla, took part in this final battle and performed various heroic deeds. He also acquired the title 'The Valiant Prince who wrung the head of Veera-pandiya.'

In spite of all this, the Chozla Emperor and all his generals, advisors, ministers and soldiers, did not forget their wish to teach the Singhala King Mahinda of Lanka a lesson. A large force was gathered in readiness for the campaign. The question "Who should lead this legion?" arose. The Crown Prince Aditya Karikala - Sundara Chozla's elder son -- was at that time busy with his troops in the northern border. He had captured the ancient city of Kanchi, after routing the armies of the Rashtrakutas who had occupied the Thiru-munai-padi and Thondai Territories. He was making preparations to lead his armies further north.

In this situation, a fierce competition rose among the other generals in the Chozla nation for the privilege of leading the Lankan campaign. Jealousy and accusations resulted from such rivalry. It was very rare to find someone who did not wish to enter the battlefield in that ancient Tamil land! The competition was about who should go to the war-front. Enmity and envy would often result from such competition.

There was fierce rivalry amongst the Chozla generals about who should lead the Lankan campaign and establish the Chozla fame by destroying the pride of the Singhala Kings. Prince Arulmozli Varma, the younger son of Emperor Sundara Chozla, came forward to put an end to this rivalry. "Father! I have spent enough time in the luxury of the Pazlayarai Palace, as the darling child of my aunts, grandmothers and mothers. Please appoint me as the Commander of the Southern Armies. I shall go to Lanka and lead the Lankan campaign," said the young Prince.

Arulmozli Varma was barely nineteen years old at that time. He was Sundara Chozla's cherished younger son; he was the beloved child of all the queens who lived at the Pazlayarai Palace; he was the darling of the Chozla nation.

Sundara Chozla was possessed of a handsome countenance. His father Arinjaya had fallen in love with her beauty and married Kalyani, Princess of the enemy kings of Vaithumba. The son born to Arinjaya and Kalyani was named Paranthaka; however, the citizens and countrymen of the Chozla nation who saw the handsome face of the Prince called him Sundara Chozla (sundara meaning beautiful.) He came to be known by this name.

All the children born to this handsome Prince were attractive and beautiful. But the youngest child, Arulmozli, surpassed all others in beauty. The charm of his handsome face was not of this world; it seemed to be divine! When

he was a baby, the queens of the Chozla palace would repeatedly kiss his cheeks and make them flush. More than any other person, his elder sister Kundavai cherished him. Though she was barely two years older to him, Kundavai felt that the responsibility of rearing this divine child was hers! In his turn, Arulmozli returned all the love and adoration that his sister showered upon him. The brother would not cross the line drawn by his elder sister. The Younger Pirati had to merely utter one word; even if all the three great Gods - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva came together and said something against that, Arulmozli would not consider their words. The elder sister's words were gospel to the younger brother.

The sister would often peer into her darling brother's face. Not just when he was awake; she would gaze upon the face of her sleeping brother for hours together. There is some divine grace in this boy; It is my duty to bring it to the forefront and make it shine! thought the young Princess. When her brother slept, she would often pick up his hands and study the lines on his palms. To her, those lines would appear to have the sign of the Conch and Discus. Aha! He is born to rule this world! He will bring the whole world under one rule, she would think. But, there was no possibility of his ascending the Chozla throne. Princes elder to him -- eligible to ascend the throne -- there were two others before him. Then, how could he acquire a kingdom? On which throne could he sit? Who knows divine intentions? The world is big; several kingdoms and territories exist on this earth. Have we not heard of princes and kings who ventured into alien lands and by their prowess acquired kingdoms? Have we not read of such happenings in novels and epics? That ancient prince who was thrown out of his kingdoms on the banks of the Ganga, did he not sail the seas to reach Lanka and establish a mighty nation? Didn't his Singhala Dynasty rule firmly in Lanka for a thousand years?

Kundavai thought of such things constantly. In the end she came to the conclusion that her younger brother was the appropriate commander to lead the Lankan campaign.

She said, "Thambi, my darling brother Arulmozli! It will be difficult for me to part from you for even one second. However, the time has come for me to send you on your way. You must lead the Lankan campaign and leave for the island."

Arulmozli agreed joyously. He had waited for the day -- to escape from the life of luxury and the smothering love of the maids and queens in the palace. His beloved sister had now ordered him to do so. What other worry could he have? What other impediment?

If Kundavai had made up her mind, there was nothing that would not take place in the Chozla nation. The Emperor loved his beloved daughter to that extent! He trusted her implicitly!

Prince Arulmozli was appointed the Commander of the Southern Armies. He led his men into Lanka, and conducted the campaign for some time. But the war would not end easily. There was a difference in his method of campaigning and that of others. Supplies and support requested by him did not come from his native land. Therefore, once in the midst of all his endeavors he came back to Tanjore. He spoke to his father and arranged matters to his satisfaction. He prepared to depart for Lanka once again.

Kundavai had arranged for several auspicious ceremonies at the main palace in Pazlayarai, to bid farewell to her darling brother. When Arulmozli stepped out, the victory drums in the palace courtyard boomed; conches were blown; kettle-drums beaten loudly. Cheering shouts rose sky-high.

All the royal ladies of the Chozla clan blessed their beloved Prince; they anointed his forehead with holy ashes, and warding off evil eyes, sent him on his victorious journey.

All the maids-of-honor in Kundavai's court stood on the palace steps carrying golden patters laden with a lighted lamp. These maids were no ordinary folk. They were from the famous noble families of the south. They had come to Pazlayarai, considering it a great opportunity, to serve the Elder Pirati Sembiyan Madevi and to become companions to Kundavai Pirati. Vanathi, a daughter of the Kodumbalur chieftain, the Younger Lord of Velir, was one among them.

When those girls saw the Prince coming down the palace steps, all of them felt a certain agitation in their hearts. When the Prince came closer, they waved their platters with the lighted lamp before him (to ward off the evil eye). At that moment Vanathi felt her whole body shiver.

The golden platter in her hands slipped and fell with a "clang" to the ground. The thought, "Oh dear! What is this ill omen!" rose in every mind. But when they saw the wick burning bright even if the lamp had fallen, they felt it was after all a good omen. The elders assured them, "This is a good sign."

Prince Arulmozli smiled at the girl who had dropped the plate for no apparent reason and continued his descent down the steps. As soon as he moved ahead, Vanathi fell down in a swoon. She had fainted with the mortification of having committed such an impropriety. Upon the orders of Kundavai, the serving maids carried her into the palace. Kundavai hurried inside, without even waiting to see her beloved brother mount his horse and depart; she went in, to revive her friend.

Holding the reins of his horse, the Prince who had seen the girl faint, sent his footman inside to find out "How is the girl who fainted?"

Kundavai sent the footman back with the words "Tell the Prince to come back here for a minute." The brother who had never crossed the commands of his sister, came back accordingly. The sight of his sister trying to revive the young girl lying on her lap touched his heart.

"Akka! Who is this girl? What is her name?" he asked.

"She is the daughter of the Younger Lord Velir of Kodumbalur. Her name is Vanathi; of a timid disposition."

"Oh! Now I understand why she fainted. Was it not her father who led the earlier campaign to Lanka? Didn't he die in the battlefield over there? Perhaps she remembered that."

"Maybe. But don't worry about her. I can look after her. I called you back to wish you well. Go to Lanka and come back victorious and soon. Send me news as often as you can!" said the Younger Pirati.

"Fine! You too send me news if anything happens here."

By now, Vanathi was regaining consciousness; perhaps due to the pleasant sound of Prince Arulmozli's voice! Her eyelids opened softly. Upon glimpsing the Prince, her eyes opened wider. Her face gained some color and revived; coral red lips smiled; cheeks dimpled.

Along with her senses a shyness also returned. She sat up quickly. She was mortified upon seeing the Princess behind her. She recalled everything that happened. "Oh! What have I done Akka?" she asked with remorse.

Before Kundavai could reply, the Prince intervened, "Don't worry about that Vanathi! Anyone can make a mistake. You have every reason to be agitated. I was explaining it to my sister."

Vanathi wondered if she was dreaming or if it was real. The Prince who never looked at any woman was talking to her. He is consoling me and cheering me up! How can I bear this fortune? - Look, how my whole body shivers, I am dizzy again....

"Akka, my men are waiting. Permit me to leave. When you send me news from here, let me know how this girl feels. Look after this orphan girl carefully." He then departed.

The other maids and companions were watching all these happenings from the windows and balconies. The flame of jealousy began to glow in their hearts.

From that day onwards Kundavai showered a special affection upon Vanathi. She kept her by her side constantly. She had her personal tutors teach her all the arts and learning she had. She took Vanathi along wherever she went. She led her into the garden and talked secrets. She shared all her dreams about her younger

brother with her new friend. Vanathi listened to everything carefully.

After the above incidents took place, Vanathi fell into fainting fits four or five times. Kundavai would revive her and soothe her. When Vanathi would sit up, with her chest heaving with sobs, Kundavai would console her with words such as "My dear foolish girl! Why are you crying like this?"

"I don't know Akka! Please forgive me," Vanathi would reply. Kundavai would embrace her and comfort her.

All these activities further enraged the other maidens in the palace.

Therefore, was it not natural for those girls to talk in that fashion, when the two friends had gone away in the chariot towards Kudanthai?

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 17 -- A Horse Galloped

Kundavai had decided that Vanathi was the appropriate bride for her incomparable brother. But Vanathi had one fault: she was too timid. How could a girl who was to marry the bravest of brave warriors, who was to give birth to a son to rule the whole world, be so fainthearted? Kundavai wanted to change her timidity and make her brave and courageous. She had arranged for the deception with the stuffed crocodile for this very purpose. But, the Lady of Kodumbalur passed that test easily.

Upon returning from the house of the Kudanthai Astrologer, Kundavai and Vanathi climbed into their swan shaped barge. The barge floated downstream for a short distance. The girls would often play in the water amidst the thick groves of trees. They reached their favorite spot and disembarked. When everyone had climbed down, one of the girls screamed "Crocodile!" "Help!" She was pointing beyond the tree near which they were standing. All the other girls soon took up the cry and ran hither and thither.

But Vanathi, who was usually of a frightened disposition, did not exhibit any fear. She was not scared even upon seeing the horrible crocodile, with its wide open jaws, right next to her. Vanathi was not afraid even when she saw the faces of the other girls who were pretending to be afraid according to Kundavai's instructions.

"Akka, the crocodile is powerful only when it is in the water; it has no strength when it is on land. Tell these girls not to be afraid!" said Vanathi.

"You deceiving thief! This is not a live crocodile; it is a stuffed carcass! Someone has already told you that!" said one of the other girls.

"I am not afraid even if it is really alive. I am only afraid of lizards."

It was at this point, that Vandiya Devan arrived there to save those maids from the terrifying crocodile! He jumped off his horse and in one run threw his spear as he came rushing forward. When Vallavarayan heard the words of the lady who stood in front of the crocodile, his whole body became alert. His disappointment that she had not talked to him earlier at the astrologer's house was now demolished.

But, that crocodile behind her - with its gaping jaws -- somehow created an uneasiness in him. Why is she standing in front of the crocodile? Why is she asking me not to bother? And why is that horrible crocodile not moving from its spot all this time?

The lady continued: "Sir! In Kudanthai, you begged pardon for having entered the astrologer's house in a hurry. We came away without giving you any reply. You might have perhaps construed that all women of the Chozla country are mannerless creatures. Please do not think so. I was a little confused because my friend had suddenly fainted in that house. That is why I did not reply"

Oh, ho! What a pleasing voice this is? Why is my heart pounding like this on hearing her speak? Why is my throat parched? Not even did the marching drums of the war, or even the sweet music of the flute and lute fill me with such joy. Nothing shook me up like this. Why am I not able to interrupt her and say something? Why is my tongue tied? Why has the gentle breeze stopped? Why has the Arisil stopped flowing? And then this crocodile? Why is it still, like this?

While Vandiya Devan's heart was agitated in this manner, his ears could continue hearing that girl's voice as if in a dream: "... even now, you did this Sir, thinking that you were saving us. You threw the spear at the crocodile. It is rare to find gallants who can handle the spear with such speed and accuracy..."

All the other girls standing under that tree now laughed sharply. The laughter shattered Vandiya Devan's infatuated dream. The magic cords, -- that girl's speech -- which bound him, were cut loose. He examined the crocodile again; moved aside from the girl in front of him and neared the reptile. He shook the spear embedded on its back and pulled it loose. No blood gushed from the hole made by his weapon: then? some plantain fiber and cotton came out.

Those wicked girls laughed again. This time they clapped their hands and applauded.

Vallavarayan's heart and body shrank with mortification. He had never met such disgrace ever before. Such a great blow to his pride in front of all these women! Are these women? No, no! they are ogresses! I should not tarry next to them. I should not look upon their faces. Damn this! My darling spear! Is this your fate, to suffer such dishonor? How will I wipe out this blemish? ...

All these thoughts raced through Vandiya Devan's mind within one moment. If those who stood there laughingly had been men, the clearing would have turned into a battlefield! Those who dared to laugh would have lost their lives that very instant! River Arisil would have run red with their blood. But they were women! What could he do to them? The only recourse was to run away and escape!

Without even looking back at the face of the girl who had captivated his mind, Vandiya Devan ran up the river embankment. His horse, which was standing up there, neighed. Vandiya Devan felt that even his horse was laughing at him along with those girls. All his anger turned towards the horse. He jumped upon its back and smacked it sharply, twice with his whip. The self-respecting horse quickly galloped along the trail on the riverside.

For a while, Kundavai Pirati gazed in the direction in which the horse had galloped away. She watched till the dust raised by the horse had settled.

Turning towards her companions, she said, "Girls! None of you have any refinement even now! You shouldn't have laughed like that. When we are alone we can laugh and tease as we wish. Don't we have to show some decorum when a stranger is in our midst? What would that youth think about the women of the Chozla country?" spoke Kundavai.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 18 -- Idumban Kari

We left Azlvar-adiyan, also known as Thirumalai, at the ferry landing near Kollidam. Let us consider that Vaishnava zealot once again.

When Vandiya Devan sat upon his horse and rode away towards Kudanthai, Mr. Thirumalai started mumbling these words to himself: "This youth is very sharp. If I enter through the sieve he squeezes in through the floor decoration. I have not been able to find the truth about whose man he is, or why and where he is going. I don't know if he was part of the treasonable meeting at Kadamboor Fort. Luckily, I mentioned the Astrologer of Kudanthai to him! Let us see if that old man can find out what I could not ..."

"Hello Sir! Are you talking to that ficus tree -- or, are you talking to yourself?" Hearing a voice behind him, Mr. Thirumalai turned around. The servant who had come from Kadamboor and procured the horse for Vandiya Devan, was standing there.

"My good man! Are you asking me? I wasn't talking to myself; neither was I talking to the tree. I had a little discussion with a vampire sitting upon this tree," said Mr. Thirumalai.

"Oh! Is that so, Sir! Is the vampire of the Saiva sect or of the Vaishnava sect?" asked that good man.

"That's what I was trying to find out. You interrupted and now the vampire has disappeared. ... Let him go! ... What is your name, my good man?"

"Why do you ask, Sir?"

"You saved us in the middle of the Kollidam by preventing the ferry-boat from overturning. Shouldn't I remember a commendable fellow like you?"

"My name ... My name ... is Idumban Kari, Sir." He said it with some hesitation.

"Oh! Idumban Kari? I have heard it somewhere ... before..."

At that time Idumban Kari did something very peculiar! He placed the spreading palms of both his hands one upon the other, and wriggled his thumbs. As he did this, he looked at Azlvar-adiyan's face.

"My dear man! What is this sign? I don't understand ...?"

Idumban Kari's dark face darkened further. His eyebrows drew close in exasperation. "I? I didn't make any sign," he said.

"You did. You did do so. I saw it. Exponents of the classical dance Bharata Natyam, hold a certain posture when they represent the first incarnation of God Vishnu; you did something like that."

"The first incarnation of Vishnu? What is that, Sir? I don't know?"

"Don't you know of Thirumal's first incarnation? The Pisces!"

"Are you talking about fish?"

"Yes. My dear man! yes!"

"Very good Sir! Your eyes are something special! On an ordinary tree you can see a vampire and empty hands look like the fish incarnation. Perhaps, Sir, you have an extra fondness for fish!"

"No. No. No such thing my dear man! Don't sidetrack me. If you wish, let us drop the matter. But tell me this: do you remember that radical Saiva fellow who came with us in the boat? Do you know where he went?"

"Do I know? Oh yes. I saw him; he came along the same road when I went to buy the horse. He kept cursing you all along the way ..."

"What did he say?"

"He said that if he sees you again he would cut off your topknot and shave your head and ..."

"Ah! Does he know the barber's trade?"

"He said that he would wipe out all the namam marks of your sect from your body and cover you with ashes!"

"Is that so? Then, I must surely meet him. Do you know the name of his home-town?"

"He said that it was Pullirukum Vellur, Sir."

"Everything else must wait till I meet that zealot! My good man, where are you going now? Will you be coming in that direction?"

"No. No. Why should I go there? I have to cross the Kollidam and go back to Kadamboor. Won't the master pluck my eyes out, if I don't show up?"

"If that is so, go quickly my man! See, the ferry-boat is about to leave."

Idumban Kari looked back; what Azlvar-adiyan said was true. The ferry-boat was about to leave.

"That's fine Sir. I shall leave immediately." After uttering these words he started walking quickly down the embankment, towards the ferry landing. He looked back once, when he was half way down. By then Azlvar-adiyan had done a strange thing: he quickly climbed the ficus tree on the shore and reached the topmost branches of that huge tree. Idumban Kari could not see him.

Idumban reached the ferry landing and stopped. "Are you coming back to the other shore?" asked a boatman.

"No. I shall come in the next ferry. You can go," said Idumban Kari.

"Ah! Is that all? The way you came running down, I thought you wanted to catch this boat!" The boatman pushed his long pole into the water; the ferry slid into the deeps currents.

By now Azlvar-adiyan had climbed into the thickest branches of the tree and completely concealed himself.

Aha! I thought correctly! This fellow did not go in that boat. He is going to come back. I must see where he goes and what he does next. I clearly saw his hands make the sign of the fish. What does it mean? Fish! Fish! Fish ...! What is represented by the sign of the fish? Ah! isn't the fish a symbol on the Pandiya flag? Perhaps, ha! ... Could it be so? Let us wait ... Let me wait with some patience. The patient ones shall inherit the fields; the hasty will get the forest! But these days it seems better to inherit the forest than the field. Anyway let me be patient... Azlvar-adiyan shared these thoughts with the invisible vampire in the tree.

Soon, his expectations came true. The ferry-boat left without Idumban Kari. Idumban looked up at the ficus tree from where he stood. His eyes searched in all directions. After making sure that Azlvar-adiyan was nowhere in sight he came back to the same spot under the tree. His eyes searched around once again before he sat down. His eyes kept looking hither and thither as if searching for someone or something. But, he did not look up into the branches of the tree. Even if he had looked up he would not have spotted Azlvar-adiyan easily for Thirumalai had hidden himself well.

About an hour passed in this fashion. Azlvar-adiyan's legs began turning numb. He could not remain hidden amidst the tree branches much longer. Idumban Kari did not appear as if he was about to leave soon. How to escape? However carefully he descended on the other side of the tree, he was sure to make some noise. Idumban Kari would surely see him. He had a sharp knife thrust in his waistband. What guarantee that he would not use it?

What can I do? Shall I make horrible noises like a ghost or demon and jump down on him? If I jump like that he may think that the vampire is attacking him and fall down in a faint or run away. I can then run away and escape! ... When Thirumalai Nambi Azlvar-adiyan was considering these options, it seemed as if his patience would be rewarded.

A man could be seen walking up from the south west i.e., the Kudanthai road. Thirumalai's intuition warned that Idumban Kari was waiting for that man. Soon, his intuition proved to be right.

Upon seeing the new man, Idumban Kari stood up. The newcomer made a sign like the one Idumban had made before. That is, he placed the palm of one hand upon the other and wriggled his thumbs, making the sign of the fish. On seeing it, Idumban made a similar sign with his hands.

"What is your name?" asked the newcomer.

"My name is Idumban Kari. What is yours, Sir?"

"Soman Samban."

"I was expecting you, Sir!"

"I too came in search of you."

"Where should we go?"

"Westward!"

"Where?"

"To the enemy memorial."

"Near Thiru-puram-biyam ... "

"Don't talk so loudly. If someone hears it?"

"There is no one here. I looked."

"If someone is hiding near-about?"

"Impossible."

"OK. Let us leave. I don't know the way very well. You go first. I shall follow you at a little distance. Stop and make sure that I am following you as you go on."

"Fine. It is not a good road. The path is full of stones and thorns. We have to walk through forest and thicket. Watch and walk carefully."

"That's alright. You leave now. Even if it is a forest path, hide if you see anyone. Understand?"

"Yes. I know."

Idumban Kari started walking westward along the banks of the Kollidam. Soman Samban followed him a little later. Azlvar-adiyan waited on the tree till both were hidden from his sight. He had watched and heard everything!

"Ah ha! These are bad times! All sorts of unexpected things are happening. I think I am going to find out about some mysterious activity. God's grace has given me the opportunity to find out. Now, getting details depends on my resource-fulness. I could not get all the details at Kadamboor. I should not be thwarted like that again. Thiru-puram-biyam Memorial means they are talking about the memorial temple for the Ganga King Prithvi-pathi. It is more than a hundred years since that memorial was built. It is now dilapidated! The forest has encroached and surrounded that area. The village is quite away from the memorial.

"Why are these men going there? If the matter is to be discussed between these two, they would have talked about it here itself. There is no need to walk a league along a forest path. I am sure some others are likely to come to that spot. Why? Why did one of them refer to the memorial of King Prithvi-pathi as 'The enemy memorial'? Whose enemy was Ganga Prithvi-pathi? Yes! My surmise is likely to be true. Anyway let me find out. They have walked along the banks of the Kollidam. I shall walk along the

River Manni. It doesn't matter if the forest is thicker along the banks of the Manni. Why should I bother about the forest and hills or the stones and thorns. I am used to them -- They have to be afraid of me!"

Muttering these words and thinking such thoughts, Azlvaradiyan descended the ficus tree and went a little southward. He came to the banks of the River Manni and started walking west. He walked through forests meeting no one on the way and by about sunset he reached the memorial temple near Thiru-puram-biyam.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 19 -- Battlefield And Forest

It was a practice among the Tamils of the ancient times to erect a hero stone and raise a memorial for great warriors who died bravely in the battlefield. If the memorial was marked merely by a stone tablet the place was known as the stone monument of the warrior. If a statue of a divinity was consecrated along with the marker, the place came to be called a palli padai or memorial shrine and temple.

One such memorial-temple existed near the village of Thiru-puram-biyam, on the northern banks of the River Manni about half a league from Kudanthai. It had been erected in memory of a great warrior, the Ganga King Prithvi-pathi who had died in a great battle near that village.

Those who read world history may recall that the great battles of Waterloo and Panipat changed the very course of history. The battle of Thiru-puram-biyam had a similar significance with regard to South Indian history. That battle took place in the year AD 885, about a hundred years before the times of our story. It is essential that all persons interested in the history of the Tamils should know the details of that battle.

The early Chozla kings of the Sangam Age -- Karikala Valava, Ilan-chet-chenni, Perunar-killi, Thodi-thot Sembian -- ruled with great fame and prosperity. For about five to six hundred years after their times, a long eclipse clouded the fame of the Chozla's. The Pandiyas in the south and the Pallavas of the north squashed the Chozlas into becoming petty chieftains. Towards the end, the Chozlas had to give up their coveted capital city, Uraiyoor, to the Pandiyas and move east. The Chozla chieftains who moved east made Pazlayarai, near Kudanthai, their new capital. But they did not forget their rights to their long time capital, i.e., Uraiyoor. Neither did they give up their title of Rooster Kings -- a title of monarchs who ruled from Uraiyoor which was also known as Kozliyoor (kozli in Tamil means rooster.)

Of the Chozlas of Pazlayarai, Vijayala became famous as an incomparable, brave warrior. He had fought in the

forefront of various battles and had ninety-six war-wounds on his body. Latter day poets sang his praises enumerating his wounds to be 'Ninety and twice of three more' and said that he 'Wore on his brave body ornaments of battle-wounds numbering ninety and six.' His son, Aditya Chozla was comparable to his father in bravery. He also took part in several great campaigns. Vijayala Chozla had retired in his old age after crowning his son as the king.

At that time the enmity between the Pandiyas and Pallavas had grown to result in several skirmishes and fights. The Pandiya king of that time was Varaguna. The Pallava monarch was Aparajita. The battles between these two powerful rulers often took place on Chozla territory! Just like the rooster caught in the midst of a clash between one elephant and another, the Chozla people suffered: caught in the midst of the enmity of two super-powers.

King Vijayala tried to make the best use of these wars for gaining his own supremacy. In each skirmish or battle he would join forces with one opponent or the other. Victory and defeat were equal: but the warrior spirit of Chozla men became well established.

Several tributaries branch from the Cauvery to form a delta -- the fertile lands of the Chozla country. All these tributaries branch and flow to the south of the Cauvery. There is only one tributary between the Kollidam and Cauvery rivers. It is known as the River Manni.

The final test of strength between the super-powers took place as a great battle near the village of Thiru-puram-biyam situated to the north of the Manni. The armed strength of both sides was more or less equal. Pallava Aparajita was supported by the Ganga King Prithvi-pathi. Aditya Chozla also supported Aparajita.

Compared to the armies of the Pandiyas, Pallavas and Gangas the Chozla battalion was tiny. But Aditya knew that if the Pandiyas were victorious this time, the Chozlas would be totally destroyed. Therefore, like the Cauvery mixing into the mighty ocean, his tiny army joined the larger Pallava forces.

The battlefield spread across one square league. The four divisions of the army -- chariot legions, elephant brigade, cavalry and infantry were ready. When elephant clashed with elephant, like two mountains hurled against each other, the skies thundered. Horses flew against horses like furious storms thrown one against the other; lances and long spears held by the horsemen shone like lightning. Chariot dashed against chariot: broken into smithereens and thrown in all directions. The noise of the whistling arrows and clashing swords filled the skies and shook the four corners of the world. After a fierce conflict lasting over three days, the field looked like a sea of blood. Dead horses and elephants appeared like islands in that sea. Lifeless bodies formed dunes. Broken chariots floated like driftwood from a sunken ship. Both sides had lost thousands, tens of thousands of men.

After the first three days of battle, a very tiny battalion of the Pallavas remained intact. Those men who lived were very tired. But Pandiya forces attacked again and again as if they owned some divine spell against tiredness. A council-of-war was held in King Aparajita's tent. The three kings -- Aparajita, Prithvi-pathi and Aditya together with their generals, met to discuss further action. They decided that they could no longer oppose the enemy; it was best to retreat to the north of the Kollidam.

At that point a miracle happened in the battlefield. Vijayala Chozla -- weak with old age, bearing numberless war-scars over his body, having lost the power to use his legs because of wounds -- somehow came to the battle front. The old war-lion realized that if the Pallava forces withdrew beyond the Kollidam, the Chozla entity would be completely wiped out. His roar instilled new life in the remaining Pallava men.

"One elephant; give me just one elephant," shouted the old monarch.

"All our elephant brigade is lost. Not one elephant remains alive," they said.

"One horse. At least bring me one good horse," he asked.

"Not a single horse survived," replied the men.

"At least, have two brave warriors of the Chozla nation survived? If you are alive come forward!" roared the brave soldier.

Instead of two, two-hundred came forward.

"Two men -- with courage in their heart and strength in their shoulders -- two among you lift me up. The others follow two after two to take their place. If the two carrying me fall, those behind come forward." The bravest of brave men spoke with a firmness.

Two giants came forward and lifted Vijayala onto their shoulders. "GO! Go to the war-front!" he roared.

A battle was still being fought in one corner of the field. The southern forces were fighting bravely, making the northerners retreat. Vijayala Chozla seated on the shoulders of two brave men entered that fight. He rushed into the midst of the enemy legion, swirling two large swords held in each hand; none could oppose him or stop him. Wherever he went dead bodies of enemy men rose in piles on both sides. Men who retreated earlier came back to see this miracle. They stood in shock to see the inhuman bravery of Vijayala Chozla. They cheered each other and came back to fight.

And that was it. The fickle Goddess of Victory changed her mind; her favor was now bestowed upon the Pallava army. The three kings gave up the idea of retreating

beyond the Kollidam. They too entered the battle field. Soon the Pandiya army began its retreat. They did not stop till they reached the borders of their Pandiya Territories.

Ganga Prithvi-pathi performed various deeds of valor that day. He established his brave fame and gave up his life in the field. They erected a hero stone in his memory in the battlefield. Later it was built into a memorial-temple or palli padai.

That gory battlefield lay waste for a few years; not a weed grew on that land. People avoided going near the place. After a while, forest began claiming the land for itself. Trees and creepers began growing thickly around the memorial temple. Wolves took up abode among the bushes. Owls and bats lived in the dark branches of tall trees. In the course of time, no one went near that temple. Over the years the building began to crumble. Soon it turned into ruins. By the times of our story, the place had become a totally deserted ruin in the middle of a forest.

Azlar-adiyan reached the ruined memorial when darkness was setting in. The gargoyles carved on the upper walls of the memorial stared at him and tried to frighten him. But that brave Vaishnava was not one to be frightened easily. He jumped up and climbed on to the roof of the structure. He then hid himself carefully amidst the branches of a tree that covered the roof. He kept watch in all directions. Soon, his eyes were able to peer into the darkness and discern various shapes. His ears were able to hear even the tiniest of noises.

One hour, two hours and even three hours passed after sunset. The darkness around him was suffocating. Now and then he heard the rasping sound of forest trees: branches rubbed against each other. There! a wild-dog was climbing a tree. An owl hooted; bats screeched. Birds frightened by the wild-dog beat their wings loudly as they tried to perch on higher branches. Wolves had begun to howl.

He heard a noise above his head: looked up. Some small animal -- lizard or squirrel jumped to a different branch. A small patch of the clear sky could be seen through the branches of the tree. Stars twinkled and peeped down. In that silent, dark forest the stars seemed to extend a friendly smile towards him. Therefore, Thirumalai Nambi Azlar-adiyan looked up at the stars and started talking softly:

"Oh! My dear star friends! Today you seem to be laughing at the foolishness of these human beings on this earth. You have good reason to laugh! You might remember that horrible battle which took place in this very spot a hundred years ago; and how the whole area was a wretched ruin of blood and death. Perhaps you were surprised at mankind and their petty enmities! You wondered why they butchered each other to create rivers of red. It is called bravery! Even a hundred years after a man's death they consider him an 'Enemy' -- they referred to it as the 'Enemy memorial'. They are going to meet near the enemy

memorial and talk and conspire of more harm to the living in the name of the dead! Oh you twinkling lights of the skies! Why won't you laugh? Yes. Laugh as much as you wish. Dear God! Is my coming here a big waste? Is the whole night going to pass like this? Are those men, whom I expected, coming here, or not? Did I hear wrong? Did I not see correct? Or did those men who made the sign of the fish change their plans and go some place else? -- What disappointment? Disappointment? I cannot forgive myself if I am cheated today... Ah! ... I think I can see some light in that direction. What is it? The light is now hidden. No. I can see it. No doubt now. Someone is coming here; he is holding a torch of burning twigs. No, not one man -- I hear two men. My waiting has not been wasted."

The two men who came crossed the path and went beyond the memorial temple. They stopped in the midst of a small clearing nearby. One fellow sat down. The man holding the lighted twigs looked around. There was no doubt: he was expecting some others. After sometime, two others came and joined them. They must have been very brave men; men who had come to that spot several times before. Otherwise, they could not have found their way in that darkness in that forest. Those who came first and the late comers talked amongst themselves. But, Azlvar-adiyan could not hear a single word! Oh dear! All my effort seems useless. I cannot even see those men clearly. What shall I do?

Two more men joined them very soon. They talked of something to each other. One of the men who came last, had a bag in one hand. He opened the string tied around his bag and poured its contents on the ground! Gold coins shone brightly in the light of the burning twigs. The man who dropped the coins laughed like one possessed:

"My friends! We are about to destroy the Chozla Kingdom using Chozla gold! Isn't it funny?" He laughed loudly again.

"Ravidasa, don't make such a racket! Let us talk softly," said another.

"Fine! What does it matter how we talk in this place? If anybody hears us, it will be owls and bats; wolves and wild-dogs; luckily they cannot repeat what they hear!" Ravidasa laughed even more loudly.

"Maybe. But, it is better to talk softly."

They started talking amongst themselves, softly. Azlvar-adiyan felt that it was a waste to sit on top of that roof without hearing anything. He must get down and go near the clearing to listen to their talk. He must manage to avoid the danger from such activity. Azlvar-adiyan started down from the roof top. His stocky body disturbed the tree branches and made a slight noise.

One of the men in the clearing jumped up quickly, saying, "Who is that?" Azlvar-adiyan's heart stopped beating for a

few seconds. There was no way of not being discovered, except to run. Running would cause more noise. They will surely catch him. A vampire bat on the tree spread open its huge wings; it then opened and closed its wings lazily several times and whistled "Oorm, oorm," loudly, twice.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 20 -- The First Enemy

Azlvar-adiyan gave his heartfelt thanks to the vampire bat which helped him at the right time; a hooting owl gave further aid. The conspirators gathered in the clearing thought that the noise was made by the owl or the bat.

"Hey fellow! This bat has frightened us. Kill it!" said one man.

"No need. Sharpen your knives and save them for other important tasks; keep them to rout the very roots of our enemy clans! Bats and owls are not our enemy; they are our friends. We are awake when normal folk sleep. These owls and bats are awake with us." The man called Ravidasa spoke these words.

Thirumalai moved forward step by step, quietly, while he listened to these words of Ravidasa. Soon he neared a large marudai tree. The roots of that hundred year old tree spread in all directions. Hollow spaces could be found in between and below the thick roots. Thirumalai stood in one such hollow blending his body with the tree trunk.

"We have no dearth of funds as long as the royal treasury in Tanjore exists. All we need is determination to complete the task we have undertaken. We should be capable of guarding our secret from becoming known to anyone, until the assignment is done. We have to divide ourselves into two groups. One group must travel to Lanka immediately. The other must go to the Thondai regions and wait for an opportunity to achieve our goal. Both jobs must be completed more or less at the same time. If there is any delay after finishing with one enemy, the other fellow will become forewarned. We should never let that happen. Do you all understand? Who among you are ready to go to Lanka?" asked Ravidasa.

"I can go." "I shall go." Several voices rose at the same time.

"When we meet the next time, in the Pandiya Kingdom, let us decide about who is to go to Lanka. Till then, we have several arrangements to make here itself."

"Which is the best way to go to Lanka?" asked one man.

"We can go by Kodi Karai. That is a good place to cross the sea. But it is difficult to reach Kodi Karai from here.

Enemies all along the way; spies everywhere. Therefore it is better to go to Sethu and cross the sea to Matottam. Those going to Lanka must know how to swim in the sea and they must be ready to row a boat or catamaran if the need arises. Who among you knows how to swim?"

"I do." "I can." said a few voices.

"We must first meet Mahinda, the King of Lanka and then complete our job. Therefore, at least one of us who goes to Lanka must be able to speak the Singhala language. Ah! Why hasn't our Soman Samban come yet? Did any of you see him today?" asked Ravidasa.

"Here, I am coming." The voice came from a spot very close to the hollow in which Thirumalai was hiding. Azlvar-adiyan flattened his body further against the tree trunk. Dear, dear me! How troublesome it is, that my wretched body has grown so prosperous.

Two more newcomers came and joined the group in the clearing. Azlvar-adiyan peeped out from his hiding place, showing a bare minimum of his face outside the hollow. He recognized the late comers as the two men who had met under the tree on the southern banks of the Kollidam.

On seeing the two new men, Ravidasa exclaimed, "Welcome! Welcome! I was afraid that you were in some trouble and may not come to this meeting. From where and by which way are you both coming?"

"We came along the bank of the Kollidam. On the way, a pack of wolves surrounded us. It was quite difficult to escape from them. That is why we are late," said Soman Samban.

"There is reason if you are afraid of the tiger or lion! What can we achieve with the help of men who are afraid of wolves?" asked the man who was holding the lighted twigs.

"Don't say that my friend! The wolf or jackal is worse than any lion or tiger which is a solitary enemy that attacks alone. We can fight against them and manage. But wolves come in packs. They are more dangerous. Didn't our incomparable king of kings lose the battle and give up his life because the Chozla jackals came in large packs all at one time? Would it have happened any other way?"

"We shall totally destroy the whole pack of wolves. We shall kill their very roots." Soman Samban swore with vehemence.

"Here are the tools to help that cause!" said Ravidasa, pointing at the gold coins. Soman Samban picked up a few coins and examined them.

"Yes! The tiger symbol on one side; palm tree on the other side," he exclaimed!

"Chozla gold! Lord Pazluvoor's signet. I did what I said I would do. What news from the rest of you? Does Idumban Kari have any special news?" asked Ravidasa.

"Yes. He has news. Let him tell it in his own words," said Soman Samban.

Idumban Kari began speaking: "As per your orders, I joined the household of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya and am working as a servant in his palace. Last night my efforts bore fruit. Yesterday, a huge banquet was held at Kadamboor. Several guests -- the Elder Lord Pazluvoor, Lord of Mazluvoor, Vanangamudi Munai Raya and others had come. The gypsy dance and velan attam, the oracle dance, took place. The man who danced as the divine-man foretold the future when the spirit manifested him. His predictions were helpful to our intentions. Everybody thought that the Elder Lord Pazluvoor had brought his Young-Queen in the closed palanquin to the palace. Lord Pazluvoor announced that Emperor Sundara Chozla was in poor health and that he was not likely to live long. All the dignitaries met and decided that Prince Aditya Karikala was not the rightful heir to ascend the throne; they decided that Prince Madurandaka had the right to succeed as Crown Prince. Some among them were doubtful if that Prince would agree to accept the throne. Lord Pazluvoor then promised that 'He will accept personally,' and opened the curtains of the closed palanquin. Prince Madurandaka came out from the palanquin and agreed to accept the throne..."

"They are going to crown that brave fellow who roams around disguised as a woman! Very good! Let them crown him! Everything is happening according to our plans. An internal confusion in Chozla politics is very useful to our cause. Now, whatever happens, no one will suspect us! Idumban Kari! You have brought very good and important news. But, how did you learn of all this? How did you get the opportunity?" asked their leader, Ravidasa.

"I tried to put myself forward working in the inner chambers of the palace. I was assigned the task of guarding the courtyard where the dignitaries met, to hold their discussions at midnight. While on guard duty, I made good use of my eyes and ears."

"Did you learn of anything else by making such good use of your senses?"

"Yes. I found something else. Another fellow, a stranger, was spying on that midnight meeting and listening to everything that was being said; he was hiding on the outer ramparts of the palace and watching everything."

"Oh! Who was he?"

"A fanatic Vaishnava fellow with a topknot on his forehead"

"Ah! Was it him? That's what I surmised. What did you do with him? Did you report him to your masters and get hold of him?"

"No. I did not do that. I had thought that he may be one of us. I thought that you may have sent him."

"You made a big mistake! He is not one of us. He is short and stocky; a quarrelsome fellow. His name is Thirumalai Appan. Sometimes, he calls himself Azlvar-adiyan Nambi."

"Yes. That very same fellow. I realized my mistake this afternoon when I found out that he was not one of us."

"How did you find that?"

"One of the friends of my younger master Kandamaran had also come to the fort last night. I did find out that he had no connection with Lord Pazluvoor and his fellow conspirators. That friend went to sleep in some corner. This morning, my younger master came to the banks of the Kollidam accompanying his friend. I heard him speak of his intentions and stood in front of him often in the course of my duties. My master asked me to come along. The master went back to Kadamboor from the north shore; but, he ordered me to go to the south shore and procure a horse for his friend before I returned. I asked permission to visit my aunt in Kudanthai after that. That is how I could come here without any problem."

"All this is fine! But, how did you find out about that fanatic topknot fellow?"

"When the ferry boat on the Kollidam was about to leave, that fellow came and joined us in the boat. He exchanged some heated words with Kandamaran's friend. Therefore, I doubted my conclusions about him being one of us. It appeared as if he was waiting for me on the south shore of the Kollidam. So, I made our secret sign to him but he did not understand. I then knew that he was not one of us."

"You have committed a grave error! You should not make our sign to persons whose antecedents are not known. My Friends! Please listen to this," said Ravidasa, and he continued in a more agitated voice, "Our assignment is in Kanchi. And in Lanka. Our greatest enemies are in these two places. But, an enemy more important than those two, our first enemy is Thirumalai Appan who wanders around in the name of Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. He is capable of thwarting our intentions and destroying all of us. He is trying to abduct that peerless lady who is our leader."

After announcing this, Ravidasa continued, "In the future, if any one of you see him, anywhere, in any circumstance, use any weapon in your hands to pierce his heart and kill him! If you carry no weapon, use your bare hands to choke him to death. Or destroy him cunningly with poison; push him into the flood to feed him to the crocodiles. Lure him to a cliff top and push him to death. Kill him mercilessly,

like you would any poisonous snake, lizard or scorpion. More commendable, if you can give him up as a human sacrifice to the Goddess Kannagi or the Goddess Kali. He is going to be an impediment to our intentions as long as he is alive."

"Mr. Ravidasa! You are saying this with such conviction. He must be a very artful fellow. Who is he?"

"He? He is a terribly capable spy!"

"Whose spy?"

"I was not sure myself, for a long time I suspected him to be a spy of Sundara Chozla or Aditya Karikala. I realized that he was not that. I now think that he is a spy of that evil old she-devil who lives in Pazlayarai -- that Elder Pirati."

"Ah! Is that true? Why does that old woman, involved in her devotions to the Gods, need a spy?"

"All her devotions are rubbish! That old Queen's devotion to Shiva is as big a masquerade as this topknot fellow's Vaishnava fanaticism! She is a fiend who is hostile to her own son. That is why her very own brother, Lord Mazlavaraya of Mazluvoor quarrelled with her; he now belongs to that Pazluvoor fellow's group."

"Mr. Ravidasa, are there any others like that Vaishnava extremist?"

"There is an astrologer in Kudanthai. I suspect that fellow. He pretends to foretell the future by astrology to one and all and discovers their secrets. None of you should ever go to him. If you go to him, you will surely be hoodwinked."

"Whose spy is he? What do you think?"

"I have not been able to find out that! Perhaps he works for that false prince who is in Lanka now. But I am not very concerned about that astrologer. He cannot do much harm to us. I am apprehensive about that Vaishnava fellow. He should be killed upon sight: like some evil, poisonous creature!"

Azlvar-adiyan, hidden under the hollow tree root, heard all this; his whole body was drenched in sweat and he shivered with fright. He doubted if he could ever escape with his life from that forest. To top it all, he felt like sneezing; just at that time! He tried as much as he could to control that wicked sneeze. He stuffed his face into his scarf and "Aatch" he sneezed.

At that time the gentle breeze had died. The whispering trees were quiet. The quiet "Aatch" was heard very clearly by the men gathered in the clearing. Ravidasa looked up and said, "There is some noise near that marudai tree. Take the light over there and see what it is."

The man holding the lighted twigs came towards the tree. As he came closer and closer, the light increased. He had to take just one more step, the light would then fall completely on Nambi. Then, what will happen? It would be impossible to escape with his life.

Azlvar-adiyan's heart beat faster and faster. He eyes looked all around, up and down, searching for something to aid his escape. Nothing was obvious. The man came closer. Up there, on that low branch above him, ... another giant bat was hanging upside down! Quickly, he stretched his hands out and plucked that vampire bat off its perch. He had a good idea!

As soon as the man with the torch took another step and came closer, Thirumalai threw the vampire bat at him. The torch of twigs fell to the ground. The light dimmed. The man, his face beaten by the strong wings of that huge bat, started screaming. The noise of several men coming closer, running closer, could be heard. Azlvar-adiyan also began running. He ran deeper into the forest and soon disappeared.

Several shouts, "What?" "What happened?" could be heard. The man who had held the torch began a protracted explanation of how the vampire bat attacked him! These noises were audible for quite sometime as Thirumalai ran further away.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 21 -- The Curtains Parted

Can two minds function at the same time in one body? Yes -- Vandiya Devan knew the answer because of his experiences that day!

He was travelling through the most fertile of the bountiful Chozla lands. It was the season of new floods in all the rivers and streams. Fresh water rushed through canals, conduits and waterways into the lush fields; water was everywhere.

How appropriate, to call the Chozla land bounteous and its monarch the king of bounty! Thoughts of the dangers surrounding the Chozla monarch immediately followed. What is my duty in this situation? Shall I keep quiet after delivering the letters sent by Prince Karikala to the Emperor and think that my duty is done? Why should I interfere in this discord and hostility between royal cousins? How does it concern me, whoever sits on the Chozla throne? In some ways, if I think of it, these Chozlas are my ancestral enemies. Did not the Chozlas, Gangas and Vaithumbas join together to destroy the very existence of my forefathers of the Vanakapadi Kingdom? Can I forget all that injustice just because Prince Karikala befriends me today?

No, no! -- How can I consider that old history as injustice? It is natural that kings fight and oppose each other. Victory and defeat are both natural. What is the use of the defeated group resenting the victorious? When they were powerful, weren't my forefathers ruthless towards the kings they vanquished? Did they not try to completely destroy their enemies? Ah! What was that poem? I can remember a poem about such activities of my clan:-

With countless armies made into leaf-mulch,
With the flowing red of battlefields stored for irrigation,
In a dirt field ploughed by the war elephant,
That Vaana, the best of kings on this earth,
He planted the heads of the three kings: his enemies.

My ancestors also committed such dreadful deeds in the battlefield! The lot of those defeated in battle is lamentable. Can all kings be merciful like Rama and Dharma of the epics? Because of their merciful nature they were driven to the forests to suffer! Those epic heroes suffered even though they were brave and were befriended by gallant men. There should be no mercy shown in matters of politics! If one thinks about it, we should consider these Chozlas as being more tolerant and merciful than any other such monarchs. If possible, they make friends with their enemies. Didn't King Arinjaya marry the Vaithumba Princess? Isn't it because of that famous beauty, the Princess Kalyani, that Sundara Chozla and his children are so handsome? Ah! ... when I think of beauty, the face of that maiden of Kudanthai, that lady on the banks of River Arisil, comes to my mind! She is not coming into my mind suddenly from somewhere ... her presence has been lurking in my heart all this while...

While his outer mind considered the complications of Chozla politics and enjoyed the beauties of Chozla land, his inner mind dwelt upon that maiden. Now the inner mind and outer mind began to consider the same object, frankly. He began to compare any beautiful sight to her enchanting personality. He recalled her lovely shoulders when he saw the grace of slender bamboos swaying in the breeze. The profuse blooms of creek-side water lilies were example of her dark eyes. He doubted if the lovely lotus could equal her golden face. Can he liken the sweet melody of bees humming in flower groves to her pleasing voice?

Poets can imagine such nonsense -- how can they be reality? How beautiful she was! The very memory of her face makes my heart beat faster! I am not enthralled like that by these flowers and bees. Oh! Oh! I have forgotten all the advice given by my elders! There is nothing more impermanent in this world than the allure of women. Those who wish to succeed in life should never be enticed by the charm of women. If one falls prey to their enchantment it is the end! The story of Kovalan is a good example of that -- Why think of Kovalan? Look at Lord Pazluvoor! That most powerful personage, the bravest of soldiers -- aren't people making fun of him because of such a predicament? -- but the people do not know the truth! No

one knows about who travels in the closed palanquin with Lord Pazluvoor. They talk in ignorance. Still, Prince Madurandaka need not demean himself in that fashion. Why should he hide in a closed palanquin under the guise of Lord Pazluvoor's queen, and go from town to town? Is this commendable in any man? Should he acquire his kingdom in this manner? Can he safeguard his gains obtained in this fashion? He will have to trust Lord Pazluvoor and his cronies and rule dominated by their power. On that issue -- what Sundara Chozla does is also not commendable; he should not have given such prerogatives and powers to persons like the Lords of Pazluvoor. That too when he has two such capable, exquisite sons. And when he has a daughter whose intelligence and skill is praised by the whole nation...

That maiden -- whom I saw at the astrologer's house and met on the banks of the river -- whom does she resemble? ... Could it be possible? -- absolute foolishness! It can never be so! But, why not? If it is so, there is none more ill-fated than me. How did I behave?-- so uncivilized -- towards a lady admired by one and all from the Vindhya Mountains to Lanka Island. It is not possible... How can I face her tomorrow when I deliver the Prince's letters?

With such disconnected thoughts crowding his mind, Vandiya Devan came along the Cauvery to reach the town of Thiru-vai-ar. He stood on the southern banks of the Cauvery, looking across the river to see the town on the northern bank. The fertility and beauty of that country overpowered his heart. He asked a passerby and confirmed that it was indeed Thiru-vai-ar. All that he had heard about that place seemed to be paltry compared to reality.

The description of that town by Gnana-sambanda in his Thevaram poems could be recognized in the actuality. There was no change in three hundred years.

Look at those luscious groves of trees on the Cauvery bank. How big are the fruits hanging from the trunk and branches of the jack-tree! There is nothing like this in the dry Thondai region! Look at those monkeys gathered in these fertile lands. How delightful to see them jump from tree to tree! I remember the descriptions in Gnana-sambanda's poems:

Maidens dance on the stages set in the street-corners of Thiru-vai-ar. Song and music accompany that dance with melodious drumbeats; Monkeys hearing those drums (mattalam) think that the skies are thundering with an approaching storm: they climb to the top of palm trees and look up at the skies waiting for the rains!

How appropriate that description is even now? Look at those long-tailed monkeys scampering among tree-tops. I can hear the sounds of music and dance from the town! Along with the melody of the veena, flute and other such instruments, I can hear the sounds of dancing feet and ankle bells! The dancers here are not frenzied like the gypsy dancers of Kadamboor. This is classical dance --

decorous Bharata Natyam in full dignity. The music is from established classical culture. I can even hear the tap-tap of dance teachers beating time as their students practice!

Teachers keep time, while beguiling damsels dance;
Poets speak enchanting verse, making every sculpted stone come alive;
Such accomplished people stroll in the streets of Thiru-vai-ar.

Aha! Gnana-sambanda was a good devotee of Shiva but, more than that he was an connoisseur of the arts! This town is exactly as he described it! I must stay in this town at least for tonight and enjoy this music and dance and I must worship at the shrines of the Lord of the five-rivers and the Lady who nurtured justice. Look at all those devotees at prayers on the banks of the Cauvery. How elegant they look with their foreheads adorned with broad ashen marks! Their chants of "Namasivaya" drown the sounds of the music and dance. Look, someone is singing the Thevaram songs so exquisitely. This town seems to be created by the Gods just for music and song! I must stay here tonight. What is the use of hurrying to Tanjore? I don't know if I can even enter the fort? Even if I manage to go in, will I be able to meet the Emperor? The two Lords of Pazluvoor are said to guard the Emperor as if in prison ... Let me cross the Cauvery and go north.

When Vandiya Devan came to this conclusion, something happened. A palanquin was approaching along the Cauvery from the west. Footmen and guards walked in front and behind the palanquin. A suspicion crossed Vandiya Devan's mind. He waited at the same spot till the palanquin came nearer. His surmise was correct. He could see the sign of the palmtree emblazoned upon the outer screens of the covered palanquin.

Yes! This palanquin must be coming from Kadamboor! They must have come by some other route, while I came through Kudanthai. But, there is no sign of Lord Pazluvoor! Maybe he is delayed somewhere on the way.

The palanquin turned south on to the Tanjore road. That decided it -- Vandiya Devan abandoned the idea of tarrying at Thiru-vai-ar. He decided to follow that palanquin. Why did he decide to do so? Even he did not know at that time! He was sure that Prince Madurandaka was seated inside the palanquin. His feelings of disgust about the Prince increased. Still, he might find some good opportunity if he followed the palanquin. The bearers might put down the palanquin or the Prince might emerge for some reason or other. He could make his acquaintance and it might help him in entering the fort at Tanjore and meeting the Emperor.

I must speak and put up a pretense suitable to achieve my goal. If I don't use such strategy and conniving I cannot complete my assigned task; particularly in such political matters.

Therefore, he let the palanquin and its guards go ahead and then followed them at a little distance. But no expected opportunity arose. They had already crossed the remaining four rivers between Thiru-vai-aruru and Tanjore. The palanquin was not put down. The bearers walked steadily. He could soon see the ramparts and gates of the outer fort of Tanjore in the distance. Once the palanquin enters the fort, nothing can be done. He must do something bold and fearless.

What can happen? Will they chop off my head? It's alright if they do so -- there is no point going back with my life if I am unable to complete my assigned task. As a basis for all this thought, Vandiya Devan had a certain anger and disgust about the prince in the palanquin. His hands itched to tear apart the curtains of the palanquin and expose the fact that the person inside was not a woman but a full grown man! His heart was agitated!

While he was considering various options to execute his intentions, one of the men in the retinue of the palanquin hesitated. He stared at Vandiya Devan seated on his horse.

"Who are you Sir? You have been following us from Thiru-vai-aruru?" he asked.

"I am not following you Sir! I am going to Tanjore. Doesn't this road lead to Tanjore?"

"Yes. This is the road to Tanjore; but, only important persons can use this road. There is another road for commoners," said that man.

"Is that so? I too am quite an important person!" said Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan.

The man smiled upon hearing this, "Why are you going to Tanjore?" he asked.

"My uncle lives in Tanjore. I heard that he was not keeping good health and am going to visit him."

"What does your uncle do in Tanjore? Is he in service at the Palace?"

"Oh, no! He is an inn-keeper."

"Ah! Is that so! Then, why don't you go before us? Why do you follow us?"

"My horse is tired Sir. That's why. Otherwise what pleasure do I have, to see your backsides?"

In the course of this conversation, Vandiya Devan came very close to the palanquin. An idea had occurred to him. He pulled in the reins, pressed both his legs against its flanks and pushed his horse towards the bearers carrying the end poles of the palanquin. They turned in fear and surprise.

Vandiya Devan immediately started shouting "Oh King, My Lord! My Sire! Your bearers are pushing against my horse! Help! Help! Oh dear!"

The screens shook and parted.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 22 -- Velaikara Battalion Of Velirs

First, the outer screens emblazoned with the palmtree symbol parted; next the silken inner curtains were pushed aside. The golden hand seen by Vallavarayan once before, the hand which had stunned him, could be seen once again. Thinking that it was no longer polite to be seated on his horse, Vandiya Devan climbed down.

He ran up to the palanquin saying "Prince! Prince! Your bearers ..." and looked inside. He looked again; he blinked his eyelids and looked once again! His eyes were dazzled! His tongue tied itself into knots! Suddenly his throat felt parched. "No. No! Princess! Princess of Pazluvoor! ... Your Ladyship, Princess of Pazluvoor! ... Your bearers and their horses dashed against my palanquin ..." came the flustered blabberings.

All this happened within the blink of an eyelid! By now the guards carrying the long spears ran up and surrounded Vandiya Devan. He realized that the men were around him; his hand automatically reached for his sword. But he could not take his eyes off the dazzling face of that enchantress behind the curtains!

Yes; unlike his expectations, this time he unquestionably saw the beautiful figure of a young girl seated inside the palanquin! Girl means what a girl! Vandiya Devan hadn't known that such beauty, which could madden those who beheld it, could exist in this world.

Fortunately, some nerve in his brain became active at that moment. An amazing idea rose in his mind. He decided to make use of that idea. He made a tremendous effort and cleared his throat, bringing back speech to his tongue. "I beg pardon! My Lady, aren't you the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor? I came this far to make thy acquaintance!" spoke his tongue.

A smile blossomed on the gentle face of the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. A lotus bud, which was closed shut till that moment, opened slightly to reveal a string of tiny pearls. The radiance of that smile mesmerized our young warrior and absolutely bewildered him.

The footmen surrounding him seemed to wait for the commands of their mistress. The Lady made a sign with her finger; they moved away a little and stood apart. Two men caught hold of the horse and waited.

That jewel among women, seated in the palanquin, looked at Vandiya Devan. Two sharp spear-points pierced his heart!

"Yes! I am the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor," said that Lady. What is that intoxicating stuff mixed into her voice? Why is my head spinning with such dizziness upon hearing her speak?

"What did you say just now? You appealed to me about something? About my bearers?"

Can the softness of Benaras silk, the intoxication of country liquor, the sweetness of forest honey and the flash of monsoon lightning blend like this into the voice of a young maid? It seems quite possible here...

"You said they dashed my palanquin against your horse?"

The mocking smile playing upon her coral red lips indicated that she was enjoying the joke. Vandiya Devan gained some courage because of it.

"Yes. Great Queen! These men did that; my horse was petrified."

"You also look petrified! Go to the priest at the temple of Goddess Durga and ask him to exorcise you! You will overcome this terror!"

By now, Vandiya Devan had overcome his fear and even laughter came back! The Pazluvoor Queen's expression had now changed: a smiling full-moon turned into blazing anger!

"Stop jesting. Tell the truth. Why did you push your horse against my palanquin and stop me?"

He had to give a plausible answer. If not... Luckily he had already concocted a story. In a soft voice, a deliberately soft voice, he spoke as if he did not wish others to hear his words: "My Lady! Madam Nandini Devi! He... Mr. Azlvar-adiyan, that is ... Mr. Thirumalai, he ... he asked me to meet you! That is why I connived this strategy. Please forgive me. I beg pardon!"

As he said the words he examined her face carefully. He waited anxiously, to see the effect of his reply. It was like throwing a stone at a fruit tree. Will a ripe fruit fall? Or, would it be raw? Or, will the stone fall back on him? Or, will some unexpected thunder descend?

The dark brows of the Pazluvoor Queen shot up -- surprise and fear filled her intoxicating eyes. The next instant, she seemed to have come to some decision.

"Fine! It is not safe to stop in the middle of a road and talk. Come to my palace tomorrow. You can explain everything there."

Vandiya Devan's heart filled with bliss. His intentions were about to be fulfilled, but there was no use in leaping across three fourths of an open well! He must leap across the remaining quarter.

"Madam! My Lady! They will not let me come inside the fortress! Neither will they let me enter the palace! What shall I do?" he asked with some agitation.

The Young-Queen of Pazluvoor instantly turned aside and picked up a silken purse lying next to her. She opened the bag and took out an ivory signet ring. Saying, "If you show this they will let you into the fort and permit you to enter my palace," she gave him the ring. Vandiya Devan received it eagerly. For a second, he glanced at the ring with the sign of the palm tree. Then, he looked up to thank the lady. But, the screens were pulled shut once again.

Ah! An eclipse swallows the full-moon slowly, bit by bit. But these silken screens have covered that eloquent radiance in one moment!

"Do not follow me anymore. It may be dangerous. Wait and come later," said that silken voice from inside the drapes.

The palanquin moved on. The guards walked ahead, around it like before. Vandiya Devan stood by the roadside, holding the reins of his horse. His eyes noted that the Pazluvoor footman who had stopped to talk to him looked back several times; the message reached his inner brain. His outer brain revolved around the enchanting face of the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. Did all this truly happen? Was everything a pleasing dream? Can there be such beauty, such a ravishing form on this earth?

Myth and fable talk of divine maidens -- heavenly beauties called Ramba, Urvasi and Menaka. There are tales about how those beautiful maidens disturbed the penance of ascetics who foreswore all worldly pleasures. But in reality! ... There must be truth in the rumor about the Elder Lord Pazluvoor being a bonded slave to this ravishing lady. There is no surprise if it is true. What contrast between Lord Pazluvoor -- old and grey, with a body disfigured by scars of several battle wounds -- and this soft, gentle, dazzling maiden? What deeds will that old man perform, to obtain one smile from her?

He waited for a long time by the roadside, mulling over such thoughts. Finally, he mounted his horse and slowly rode towards the gates of Tanjore.

By sunset, he neared the main entrance to the city fort. The city extended for some distance before the fortress walls and gates. Market streets offering several kinds of goods for sale, residential streets of people engaged in various trades -- these successively surrounded the outer boundaries of the fort. All the streets were busy with the hustle and bustle of a large town: people going hither and thither, merchants haggling over the price of goods they

sold, carts and wagons drawn by hefty, well fed bullocks, horse drawn chariots, palanquins and litters filled the streets.

Vandiya Devan was eager to enter those streets and experience the sights and sounds of the new capital of the Chozlas; he wished to make the acquaintance of these city folk and become familiar with their ways. But, there was no time for all that now. He must first complete the assignment on which he had journeyed so far. Sightseeing must wait. With this determination he neared the main gates of Tanjore.

The massive doors of the main gateway were closed shut at that time. The guards and gatekeepers outside were trying to maneuver the people making them stand in an orderly fashion on both sides of the street. The people complied and stood aside. Yes; instead of going about their own business they stood by the roadside as if in anticipation of some procession or parade. Men, Women, children and elderly -- everybody waited.

For a short distance the street in front of the gateway was empty. The guards stood near the doorway. Vandiya Devan wished to find out what was happening. He did not wish to entangle himself with the gatekeepers when everyone else stood aside. Unnecessary dispute and trouble might come of it. The job on hand was more important than a joust. It was not the time to pick an unwanted quarrel.

Therefore, he stood to one side at a spot where he could keep an eye on the gateway. The heady fragrance of flowers rose by his side. He looked around. A youth, wearing the symbols of a Saiva devotee, such as rudraksha beads around his neck and ashen marks on his forehead, stood by his side carrying two large baskets of flowers in both his hands.

"Thambi, why has everybody moved to one side of the road? Is some procession or something coming this way?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Are you not from these parts, Sir?"

"No. I come from the Thondai Territories."

"That's why you asked! It may be better if you also dismount and stand aside."

Vandiya Devan jumped off his horse, thinking it would be easier to converse with that youth. "Thambi why did you ask me to dismount?"

"All these people are standing aside because the Velaikara Battalion of Velirs is about to emerge from the fort after presenting arms to the Emperor."

"Just to watch?"

"Yes."

"Why shouldn't I watch while sitting upon my horse?"

"You can. But, it is dangerous if the men of the Velaikara Battalion see you."

"What danger? Will they abduct my horse?"

"They will abduct the horse; even carry away men! Wicked fellows!"

"Will they be allowed to carry away horse or man?"

"What can one do but allow it? The word of those men of the Velaikara Battalion is law in this city. There is none to question them. Even the men of Pazluvoor do not interfere in the affairs of the Velaikara Battalion of Velirs."

At that time, a loud commotion and noise could be heard inside the fort. The sound of kettle-drums, blowing conches, pipes being played, horns being blown and marching drums being beaten mingled with loud, cheering, shouts raised by hundreds of men.

Vandiya Devan had heard much about the brave warriors of the Velaikara Battalion. It was an important organization in the ancient Tamil nations, particularly in Chozla dominions. 'Velaikaras' were the personal bodyguards of the ruling monarch. But there was an important difference between them and ordinary bodyguards. The men of this battalion had taken individual oaths to "Personally guard the life and person of the king, giving up their own life if the need arises." If something untoward happened to the king or his life, because of their carelessness or in spite of their guard, they had sworn to cut off their heads with their own sword and offer themselves as a sacrifice to the Goddess Durga. It was natural that such men, who had sworn such terrible oaths, were given certain privileges.

The two large doors of the gateway opened with a loud noise. Two horsemen emerged first. In their right hands they held aloft two narrow pennants flying high. They were curious in design. The red cloth of the banner was painted with a leaping tiger and a shining crown below it; underneath the crown was a sacrificial altar with a severed head on it and a huge sacrificial sword lay next to it. The pennant was quite terrifying to behold.

A huge bull, carrying two immense war-drums followed behind the horsemen. Two men walking by its sides beat the reverberating drums. About fifty men in formation followed the bull; they carried small and large kettle-drums, cymbals, bells and chimes -- beating them and banging then loudly.

Fifty others followed them, blowing "Boom, boom, boom" upon long curved horns and pipes. About a thousand

soldiers followed these men. They raised the following cries and cheers as they marched out:

"Long live Emperor Paranthaka of the blessed earth."
"Praise to him! Long life! Long life!"
"Long live Sundara Chozla!"
"Long life! Long life!"
"Long life to the Rooster King!"
"Long life! Long life!"
"Lord of Tanjore!"
"Long life! Long life!"
"Long life to the Lord who vanquished Veera-pandiya!"
"Long life! Long life!"
"Long life to the Monarch who took Madurai, Lanka and Thondai!"
"Long life! Long life!"
"May the clan of Karikala Valava live long with fame!"
"Long life! Long life!"
"Victory to Goddess Durga, the Greatest, the all powerful!"
"Victory! Victory!"
"Let the brave tiger-flag fly worldwide and win!"
"Victory! Victory!"
"Victory to our spears!"
"Victory to the brave spears!"

The loud cheers raised by hundreds of strong voices, hypnotized those who heard them. While the shouts rose near the fortress gateway, they echoed and thundered in all directions. Many of the people standing on both sides of the road joined the cheering.

Thus, everything was one big commotion while the men of the Velaikara Battalion of Velirs emerged from the gateway, marched past the long street and disappeared in the distance.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 23 -- Amudan's Mother

The Velaikara Battalion wound its way through the main market street. Some of the men walking towards the end of the parade performed certain audacities in that marketplace. One fellow entered the shop of a food vendor and carried out a basket of sweet-cakes; he distributed the cakes to his friends. When he crowned the vendor with the upturned empty basket, all his friends laughed uproariously "Ha ha ha haha ha."

Another gallant fellow plucked the flower tote from the hands of an elderly woman. Scattering the flowers in all directions he shouted "Hey friends, its raining flowers!" Two soldiers trying to catch the flowers shouted gleefully and raised a hue and cry! Yet another fellow stopped a bullock cart on the road and unyoked the beast from the cart; he drove the animal into the crowd by twisting its tail; the terrified animal ran helter skelter in the crowd,

plunging against innocent bystanders. Gleeful laughter followed this endeavor!

Vandiya Devan was watching all this. Aha! These fellows also tease and play pranks just like the men of Pazluvoor. Their pranks are irksome to others. How fortunate that I escaped their sight by standing aside. Otherwise, a little conflict would have taken place! My venture would have been wrecked, he thought. But one difference was obvious to him. The people on these streets did not resent these activities of the Velir men very much. Some of them even joined in their pranks and enjoyed the merriment and laughter.

When he turned around to ask about this, the youth with the flower baskets was nowhere to be seen. He had vanished somewhere in the crowd and commotion. Perhaps he had gone on his business.

On approaching the gate, he found that no one was allowed inside the fort after the Velaikara Battalion left for the day. Only members of the royal household, the ministers and generals had the right to enter or leave the fort at all times of night or day. Vandiya Devan heard that the households of the Lords of Pazluvoor also had that privilege.

He changed his intentions of entering the fort that very night. He did not wish to show the signet ring in his possession and try its powers. It is better to spend the night outside the fortress, do some sightseeing and enter after sunrise tomorrow. Even if I go in tonight, it is not possible to gain entry into the royal palace and meet the Emperor to deliver my letters.

Vandiya Devan rode slowly along the streets surrounding the outer ramparts of Tanjore Fort enjoying the various sights presented around him. His horse, which had crossed several leagues that day was very tired. Soon he must give it some rest. Otherwise, tomorrow, when the need arose the horse may become useless. He must soon find a comfortable place to spend the night.

Tanjore was at that time a new, growing, spreading city. It was evening time. Hundreds of street lamps had been lit throwing brilliant light everywhere. All the streets were noisy with crowds of people. Travellers from far and near, who had come to the city on various businesses walked here and there. People from other Chozla cities and countryside were there. Persons from nations taken into the Chozla fold recently were also there. Several folks crowded to that capital city from nations spreading across the lands between the North Pennar river and the southern Cape, and between the eastern seas and the western ocean. In that crowd he could also spot foreigners, dressed curiously from the distant lands beyond the Vindhya and across the seas.

People crowded to the shops of vendors selling sweet-fritters, roasted meats and rice-cakes -- like flies hovering around sugar syrup -- as they bought the foodstuffs. Fruits

like banana, mango and jack were heaped in mounds outside the shops. Words were not adequate to describe the elegant flower kiosks. Gardenia and jasmine, fragrant frangipani, oleander, chrysanthemum and marigold, champaka and iruvatchi, hibiscus and trumpet lilies were heaped in baskets; maidens flocked around them like bees buzzing over flower groves.

When he saw the flower shops, Vandiya Devan remembered the youth with the flower baskets who had stood next to him. If I could meet that young man again, how useful it would be! Perhaps he would have helped me find a comfortable place to spend this night in this city... As he was thinking, as if to give life to his thoughts, he saw the youth walking down the street in front of him. Vandiya Devan hurried forward to accost him again.

"Thambi, your baskets seem to be empty. What happened to all the flowers? Have you sold them all?"

"I did not bring the flowers for sale. I brought them for worship and decoration at the temple. I have delivered them at the place I serve and am now going back home," said that youth.

"In which temple do you serve, delivering these flowers?"

"Have you heard of the temple of Tali-kulattar?"

"Oh! The name Tanjore Tali-kulattar seems familiar. Is it the same? Is it a large temple?"

"No; it is a modest place. For some time now, only the temple of the Goddess Durga has been enjoying favor in Tanjore. Special worship, food offering, sacrifice, festivities, ceremony and carnival all take place there. The royal family and the Pazluvoor households have been patronizing that Durga temple. There are no such important patrons for the temple of Tali-kulattar. Not many people come to worship there..."

"You are in service to deliver flowers. Do you get paid well for this?"

"My family has subsidies for this service. From the times of my grandfather our family had grants from Emperor Gandara Aditya for delivering this flower-service. My mother and I have been continuing the practice."

"Is the temple of Tali-kulattar built in brick, or has it been renovated in granite?" Vandiya Devan asked the question because he had seen several small brick-work temples being renovated in stone and decorated with granite sculpture.

"It is still brick-work. I have heard that it is soon to be renovated in granite. Apparently, the Elder Pirati in Pazlayarai wishes to begin the renovation work as soon as possible. But, ..."

"But what? Why did you stop?"

"What is the use of repeating idle gossip? One must look around in all directions before talking in the daytime; at nighttime do not even open your mouth. This is a public square where four roads meet! So many people around us..."

"We can stand in such a spot and talk bravely of any secret. In this crowd and noise nothing we speak will be heard by anyone."

"What secrets do we have to talk about?" asked the youth, eyeing Vandiya Devan with some suspicion.

Aha! This young man is very intelligent. It would be very useful to make friends with him. I can learn about several things from him. But I should not raise useless doubts in his mind, thinking such thoughts, Vandiya Devan said, "Yes, what secrets do we have? Nothing. Thambi, tonight I need a place to rest and sleep well. I have journeyed a long way and am very tired. Where can I stay? Can you help me by guiding me to a good rest house?"

"There is no dearth of places to stay in this city. There are several inns. In fact there are many government rest houses for the use of foreign visitors. But, Sir, if you would like ..."

Before the youth could finish, Vandiya Devan interrupted, "Thambi, what is your name?"

"Amudan; Sendan Amudan."

"Oh! What a sweet name! My mouth tastes the sweetness just by hearing it. (Amudu meaning nectar.) Were you about to say that I could come to your house if I was willing?"

"Yes; how did you know Sir?"

"I have magic skills; that's how! Where is your house?"

"Our gardens are in the suburbs, a little beyond the city limits. Our house is in the middle of the flower gardens," said Sendan Amudan.

"Ah! I must surely come to your house. I cannot rest in peace in this city commotion tonight. Moreover, I would like to make the acquaintance of that good woman who is mother to a good son like you!"

"She who gave birth to me is indeed a good woman; but she is unfortunate..."

"Dear, dear! Why do you say that? Perhaps your father is...?"

"Yes, my father is dead. But that is not the reason. My mother is unfortunate from birth. You will know when you see her. Come Sir, let us go."

They walked for about half an hour and reached the flower gardens beyond the city limits. The fragrance of night blooming flowers made Vandiya Devan's head swim with uncommon exhilaration. The noise and din of the city was not heard in that pleasing grove.

He could see a small tiled house in the middle of the flower garden. Two thatched huts were also seen close by. Two families who helped in the garden lived in those huts. Amudan called out to one of those men and asked him to feed and water Vandiya Devan's horse and tie it to a tree after grooming it.

He then led his new friend into the house. As soon as he saw Amudan's mother, Vandiya Devan realized her misfortune. She was mute without any speech; she was also deaf without any sense of hearing. But he saw her gentle, good looking face filled with a kindness and love. Her eyes shone bright with a keen intelligence. Was it not the caprice of nature to endow a superior intellect on those with some bodily handicap?

That elderly woman understood that her visitor had come from foreign parts by the signs made by Amudan. Her expressive face showed welcome and concern for him.

Soon, she placed platters of fresh banana leaves before them and served a meal. First came string-cake accompanied by sweetened, freshly squeezed, coconut milk. Vandiya Devan felt that he had not eaten such delicacies in his lifetime! He ate about ten or twelve cakes and drank a liter of coconut milk. Sour sauce with tubers and steamed millet flour followed. He did them justice. Even so, his hunger was not satiated. In the end he partook of a quarter measure of cooked rice and a liter of yogurt! Only then did he rise from his platter.

While eating, he asked about and gleaned several facts from Amudan. He enquired about who besides the Emperor and his retinue lived in Tanjore Fort.

The mansions of the Elder and Younger Lords of Pazluvoor were inside. The officers and clerks who were attached to the treasury and granary lived inside because the royal treasury, counting house and granary were inside the fort. The confidante and friend of Sundara Chozla, his Prime Minister, Honorable Aniruddha Brahma-raya as well as the Chief Clerk of edicts and proclamations also lived in the inner fort. Soldiers guarding the fort of Tanjore under the command of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor, lived inside with their families.

Besides this, the streets of the goldsmiths, silversmiths, jewelers and dealers in precious gems and coin merchants were inside the main fort. Hundreds of clerks and writers working for the Tax Ministry under the Elder Lord

Pazluvoor were also provided accommodation within. In addition to all this, the famous Temple of the Goddess Durga Nisumbasudhini was in one corner of the interior fort. The temple priests, servants, dancing girls and musicians attached to the temple and their families, lived inside near the temple.

Hearing about all this, Vandiya Devan asked, "Are all the ministers and officials inside the fort today?"

"How can everyone be inside? They will be going out and coming back in the course of their various duties. For sometime now, the Honorable Prime Minister, Aniruddha Brahma-raya, has not been inside the fort. It is said that he is gone to the Chera Kingdom. The Elder Lord of Pazluvoor went out four days ago. Rumor says that he has gone to the central provinces beyond the Kollidam."

"He might be back now. Do you know?"

"The palanquin of the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor came back this evening. I saw it near the gates myself. But there was no sign of Lord Pazluvoor. Perhaps he is delayed somewhere and will come back tomorrow."

"Thambi! Does Prince Madurandaka also live inside the fort?"

"Yes, his mansion is next to the Pazluvoor Palace. Isn't he the bridegroom married to the daughter of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor?"

"Oh! Is that true? I did not know that till now!"

"Not many people know it. Because of the Emperor's ill health the wedding was not celebrated with pomp."

"Good. Is the Prince inside the fort tonight?"

"Must be. However, Prince Madurandaka does not emerge from the fort very often. People cannot see him commonly. It is said that he is involved in his devotions to God Shiva and that he spends his time in meditation, yoga and worship."

"But he has entered into matrimony after all these years."

"Yes, that was somewhat surprising. People also say that the mind and intentions of the bridegroom transformed completely after the marriage! Why should we bother about that? Better not gossip about the nobility."

Vandiya Devan desired to learn of several other things from Sendan Amudan. But he did not wish to pry too much and raise his suspicions. The friendship of such an amiable youth would be very useful to him. It was his good luck that he found such a convenient and comfortable place to stay in Tanjore. Why should he spoil the good fortune? Moreover, tiredness of the long journey joined forces with the sleeplessness of the previous night. His

eyes were drowsy with sleep and exhaustion. Realizing his state, Amudan quickly made up a bed for him.

In the drowsiness of sleep, towards the end, Vandiya Devan's mind glimpsed the glamorous face of the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor.

Oh God! What beauty! What scintillation! His experience of being tongue tied and immobile upon suddenly seeing that ravishing, enchanting face reminded him of another experience.

As a child, once when he was walking through some woods he suddenly spied a cobra swaying its raised hood. Its beauty was incomparable. The attraction was beyond description. Vandiya Devan had not been able to take his eyes off the swaying hood of the snake. He could not even blink his eyelids. He stood there as if hypnotized; the snake continued its swaying dance. As the snake swayed, his body began to sway in rhythm -- what would be the result, no one knew. Suddenly a mongoose pounced upon the snake. A furious contest between the two started. Using the chance the boy ran to his escape...

Dear me! What a comparison! How can I equate the majestic beauty of this maid without equal in the world, with a swaying snake? Her gentle, tender face will quell all hungers of those who catch a glimpse of it! ... I am going to meet her tomorrow! How sweet her voice! Her beauty is extraordinary. But, how about the other maid whom I saw at the astrologer's house and on the banks of the Arisil? ... Her face too, was radiant. It too glowed with a loveliness. Both are exquisite beauties; but what a difference! That has dignity and decorum; while this has allure and glamour.

Thus, while his heart was comparing the two attractive women he had met recently, a third maid intervened. That merciless tyrant, the Empress of Sleep took charge of him completely.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 24 -- A Cuckoo And A Crow

Vandiya Devan slept through the night like a log and woke up only after sunrise in the morning. Even after waking, he was lying down without the will to get up. The light breeze blew briskly, leaves of the creepers and trees rubbed against each other making a swishing murmur. With that background drone, a young voice was melodiously singing a pleasing Thevaram poem composed by the Saint Sundara Murti.

O Lord of golden hued body with a tiger skin draped around the waist;
Upon matted locks, burnished red, you wear the shining crescent!

On hearing the song, Vandiya Devan opened his eyes and looked out. Outside, in the garden he saw tall konnai trees

(the bignonia family) draped with wreaths of golden yellow flowers! Sendan Amudan held a large flower tote in one hand and a long bamboo pole in the other. While he sang, his hands plucked the yellow flowers with the harvest pole. He appeared neatly dressed, having risen and bathed early, his forehead was adorned with broad ashen marks making him appear like another ever youthful Markandeya, that ardent devotee of Shiva.

Vandiya Devan rose from his bed thinking about Amudan's unfortunate mother who could not hear the melodious song of her son. He wondered why he too should not cultivate a pleasant garden, serve in temples and lead a calm and quiet life. Why should he bear sword and spear and wander from place to place? Why should he roam about in readiness to kill or be killed by others? -- such thoughts jostled his mind.

But soon, his heart cheered up. Can everyone in the world be meek and gentle like Sendan Amudan? There are many who are thieves, robbers, and conniving evil-doers who harm the guileless folk. A government was needed to control such people and establish some law and order. Kings and ministers were essential to form such governments. Velaikara Battalions were essential to protect such kings. Messengers like himself to carry letters to such kings were also needed... Yes, today I must somehow or other meet Emperor Sundara Chozla. I must present myself before the Elder Lord of Pazluvoor returns; if the old man gets back I may not have an opportunity.

Vandiya Devan went to the lotus pond in the garden for a swim and bath. He came back refreshed and dressed himself neatly with clean cloth and correct ornaments. He was going to present himself to the Emperor -- shouldn't he be attired properly? Perhaps it was that thought that made him dress carefully; or, maybe it was the idea that he was soon going to see the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor once again, which occupied his thoughts! None can tell.

After the early morning meal, Sendan Amudan was ready to depart with his baskets to deliver the flowers at the temple before the morning service. Vandiya Devan went with him with the idea of meeting the Emperor. Both friends walked.

Vandiya Devan had already decided not to take his horse to the fort. It was important to let the horse rest completely. Soon he may have to use it for some hurried journey. Who knows? It was better to leave the horse behind, in the garden. Till they reached the main gateway of the fort, he talked to Amudan and found out several other pieces of information.

When Vallavarayan had asked, "Do you have any other family besides your mother?" Sendan had replied, "I do have some. An elder sister and an elder brother of my mother. Her elder sister died some time ago. Her brother is headman of a small community attached to the Kuzlagar temple at Kodi Karai. My uncle is also the keeper of the

lighthouse on that coast. In the nights he lights the fire atop the tower and is in charge of other such things. He has one son and one daughter. That daughter, ..." Amudan hesitated.

"That daughter? What about her?"

"Nothing. There is something peculiar about members of my family. Some of them are born dumb while others are blessed with a most pleasing voice for they sing very well."

"Your uncle's daughter is not dumb I hope?" enquired Vandiya Devan.

"No. Not at all."

"That means she can sing very well! Can she sing better than you?"

"Ridiculous! Your question is foolish -- like asking 'Can the Cuckoo sing better than the Crow?' When Poonkuzlali sings, the Ocean King will stop throwing his noisy waves and listen quietly. Sheep and cattle will listen spellbound..."

"Is your cousin called Poonkuzlali? What a pretty name!"

"Is it just her name that's pretty!"

"She must be ravishing. Otherwise, will you be so captivated?"

"The spotted deer and the gorgeous peacock must beg at her feet for beauty. Divine maids like Indrani and Rathi must perform penance for several births to become as lovely as her."

Vandiya Devan realized that Sendan Amudan was not fully involved in service at the temple. "That means she is a suitable bride for you. If she is your maternal uncle's daughter, you have all the rights for her hand? When is the wedding?"

"I will never say that I deserve her. In no way am I qualified for her. If, like the olden days a competition was arranged to select a groom for her, all the kings of the world will compete for her hand. Divine beings might come forward seeking her hand like they did for Princess Damayanti of the myths. Such things may not happen these days."

"So? Are you saying that you will refuse even if she is willing to marry you?"

"Quite silly! If the God I worship appears before me and asks 'Will you come with me to the heavens just as you are, like Saint Sundara? Or, will you remain on this earth with Poonkuzlali?' -- I will say that I would stay back with Poonkuzlali. But, what is the use of my saying it?"

"Why not? When you wish it the marriage is almost settled, isn't it? Does everyone arrange marriages after asking the bride? For example look at Elder Lord Pazluvoor -- he has married a young maid after his sixty-fifth year! Was that marriage performed with that lady's consent?"

"My friend! Those are affairs of nobility. Why should we discuss it? More important, let me give you a warning hint. You are about to enter Tanjore. Do not utter anything about the Lords of Pazluvoor inside the fort. It may be unsafe to do so."

"Why Thambi, you are thoroughly frightening me!"

"I am telling you the truth. Really, nowadays it is both those Lords of Pazluvoor that rule the Chozla Kingdom. There is no authority higher than theirs."

"Even the Emperor is not more powerful?!"

"The Emperor lies on his sickbed. People say that he does not cross the lines drawn by those men of Pazluvoor. They say that he does not even listen to the words of his own sons!"

"Is that true?! The domination of the Pazluvoor Lords must be quite strong. They were not so powerful even two years ago?"

"No; after the Emperor came to Tanjore, the power of those fellows has gone beyond limit. There is no one to question them. Rumor has it that even the Honorable Anirudda Brahma-rama left in disgust and went away to the Pandiya Kingdom."

"Why did the Emperor move to Tanjore from Pazlayarai? Do you know Thambi?"

"I can tell you what I have heard. Three years ago, Veera-pandiya died in the battlefield. It was reported that the Chozla armies committed several atrocities in the Pandiya lands at that time. War means anything can happen; Madurai is now under Chozla rule. But, it is said that some of the men loyal to Veera-pandiya have sworn vengeance; they conspire together. The Lords of Pazluvoor felt that they would not be able to guard the Emperor from such assassins at Pazlayarai. They asked him to move to Tanjore. The fortress here is stronger. Its guard and safety is more efficient. Besides, the doctors felt that Tanjore was a better place than Pazlayarai to treat the Emperor's illness."

"Everybody talks about the Emperor's ill health! But no one says what is wrong with him!"

"Why? It is well known. The Emperor has paralysis; he has lost the use of both his legs."

"Oh! Can he not walk at all?"

"He cannot walk, neither can he ride upon a horse or elephant. He is bed ridden. They can carry him from place to place in a palanquin or litter. Even that, I believe is very painful. Therefore, the Emperor never leaves the palace. Some say that for the past few months even his mind is deteriorating"

"Oh! What a pity!"

"Don't feel pity, my friend! The Pazluvoor men may think it to be treason and put you in prison!"

Pazluvoor! Lord Pazluvoor! Men of Pazluvoor! Everywhere, to whomever I talk, their name crops up. However capable they are, why has so much power been given to them? The treasury, the granary, Tanjore City guard, policing and information gathering in the nation, taxation -- everything seems to be under their control. The Emperor should not have let that happen. Because of all these powers, they have started scheming against the Emperor! How long will their plots be successful? I must do my best to thwart their plans. If possible I must also warn the Emperor.

By now they had come to the main entrance of Tanjore Fort. Sendan Amudan parted from his new friend and walked towards the temple of Tali-kulattar. Vandiya Devan neared that fort with several dream castles of his own!

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 25 -- Inside The Fort

The signet ring with the palmtree emblem had miraculous powers like the magical rings in fairy tales!

In that morning hour, various people -- vendors of milk, curds and other dairy products, fruit and vegetable sellers, butchers, farmers, others engaged in various trades, clerks and accountants, petty officials and others -- were trying to enter the fort. The officious gatekeepers were letting them in, one by one, through a small wicket gate placed on one of the big doors. The guards stood around with cocky insolence.

But, as soon as our young hero showed the palm tree signet ring, they became very reverent; they even opened one of the large doors to let him enter. Vandiya Devan entered the fort of Tanjore.

Oh yes! We do not know the auspicious moment in which he set foot in that great fort, but we do know that several significant events followed that entry. We could even consider that moment as one of the most important moments in the history of South India!

For some time after entering that fort, Vandiya Devan was immersed in astonishment. Kanchi City (from where he came) was the capital of the ancient Pallava Empire. It had withstood the attack of several enemies. The buildings, mansions and palaces in that city were now badly maintained, dilapidated ruins. Of course many of them were well sculpted, architecturally beautiful. But several parts of that city were in ruins. After Aditya Karikala took over, he had renovated some of the public buildings and palaces. These new structures looked like isolated sprigs of fresh shoots on a dying tree. In fact they made the dilapidation more obvious. But this Tanjore!?

Tanjore was quite the opposite thing. Everything looked new. New palaces, new buildings, new temples. The white-washed mansions interspersed with buildings of brick baked of red earth shone like some jewel, set with a cluster of rubies enhanced by pearls and diamonds. Trees in the gardens and by the roadside had grown luxuriously tall, nourished by that fertile red-dust. Coconut and areca nut palms; ashoka cypress, laurels, spreading banyan, fig and sacred ficus; jack, mango and neem -- they painted a picture of varying hues of emerald. That greenery was pleasing to the eye and joyous to the heart. A new city built by an architect of illusion. I feel new excitement when I enter this new city; my heart fills with unexplainable pride!

Vandiya Devan who had seen the fuss and fret in letting people enter inside had surmised that the inner city would be empty. But it was quite contrary: all the streets were crowded with hustle and bustle. Horses, and chariots yoked with horses rushed past noisily. Bells -- tied around the necks of elephants which walked slowly, gracefully like tiny, black, moving hillocks -- tinkled all around. Vendors selling flowers, fruit, milk, fish and other edibles called out their wares and raised a huge din. Huge drums boomed and large bells tolled periodically announcing the passing hours. The gentle breeze carried the melody of musical instruments and voices of young men and women raised in song. Everything was festive like one big carnival.

This is a city! This is the capital of an empire that is growing and spreading day by day! Vandiya Devan did not wish to let anyone know that he was a newcomer to that exquisite city. If he asked the way of anyone they would look him up and down and ask arrogantly, "Are you new to this town?" -- They may even think him to be an uncivilized villager if he asked the way to the royal palace. Therefore, he should somehow find his way without asking anyone and reach the palace. It may not be difficult.

Wherever he looked he could see mansions festooned with bunting and crowned by high flying pennants and flags. The flags fought the swift breeze and raised a "Chat, pat" noise. Tiger-flags and palmtree- flags were more profuse. He saw one huge flag emblazoned with a rampant tiger, flying sky high, rising above all the others. That must be

the Emperor's palace, thought Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan as he began walking in that direction. He thought of what he must do next.

The first, important task is to present myself to the Emperor and personally deliver the letter and the verbal messages conveyed by Prince Aditya. It may not be possible to see the Emperor without the Younger Lord Pazluvoor's permission. How can I obtain that permission? God helped me enter the fort. But, can I be complacent, thinking that God's grace will aid me till the end? I must connive something to manage entry into the palace to meet the Emperor. What is the strategy to adopt? Oh my clever brain! Descendant of generations of illustrious Vaanar's! Think of something! Polish up your imagination. Get to work! Imagination is essential; not just for writers and poets. Fellows like me entangled in such political turmoil also need plenty of imagination. Let me think...

He had already made sure that the Elder Lord Pazluvoor had not returned to the fort. As soon as he come in he had asked one of the gatekeepers, "Why man, has Lord Pazluvoor come back?"

"Whom are you asking about, Thambi? The Younger Lord is in the palace!"

"Don't I know that! I am asking about the Elder Lord who had journeyed to the central provinces."

"Oh! Was it to the central provinces that the Elder Lord went? I didn't know that! The Young-Queen's palanquin returned last night. The Elder Lord has not returned yet. We got word that he will probably return tonight," said the gatekeeper.

That was good news. He must somehow meet the Emperor before the Elder Lord Pazluvoor returns. How ...? An idea occurred to him. The worry lines vanished immediately and a mischievous smile and joy blossomed on his face.

He did not have to wander much to reach the Emperor's palace. He kept walking in the direction of the large tiger-flag. Soon he reached the portals of the large palace. What a wonderful building. A palace comparable to that of the King of Gods; a palace like that of legendary Vikramaditya of Ujjain! How exquisite is the carving on these portals? The horses with raised forelegs, carved on the pillars, seem to be ready to leap forward!

Several roads from all directions came to meet in a large plaza in front of that palace. At the head of each of these streets two horsemen and two footmen stood guard. People walking about the streets turned back without coming near them. Some persons stood near them to stare at the palace portal and the big flag before they turned back. If the people crowded around too long, the guards made signs to disperse them. Even those who gathered in groups talked softly, whispering to each other. Vandiya Devan did not hesitate like these others. He walked forward with pride

and confidence. As soon as he stepped into the plaza two horsemen barred his way. The horses stood nose to nose and long lances crossed in front of him. The footmen came near him.

Vandiya Devan showed them his magic ring. That was it; the lances parted and the horses moved away. But three men examined the ring, one after the other. Finally the man who seemed to be in charge said, "OK, let him in." Vandiya Devan walked in cockily.

Now what? How many other guards like this? Where would I find the Younger Lord Pazluvoor? Should I ask? Whom shall I ask? -- Can I manage to see the Emperor without his permission? Where would I find the Emperor on his sick bed in this huge mansion! ...

Catching sight of a group of men behind him, he turned around. Yes; about ten to fifteen men came in a group to hesitate in front of the guards. Those men wore scarves of rich silken cloth. They were dressed in pearl necklaces, golden anklets and eardrops. Some had adorned their forehead with horizontal ashen lines. Others wore marks of sandal paste, red kumkum powder or aromatic civet spots. Oh! Don't these men look like poets and bards! Yes they were a group of bards!

One of the guards, their leader, was saying, "The bards and poet kings have come; let them enter." He then ordered one of the footmen: "Lead these people to the audience chamber of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor."

"Masters! Poets! if you receive any presents or rewards please come back this way -- and remember me! If you do not get any awards you can leave by the other gate!" Everybody laughed at these words of the guard.

Vandiya Devan who had hesitated on the steps to listen to this conversation felt "The fruit has slipped into the cream!" He decided to follow the poets and get to the presence of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. He did not have to ask anyone. Then comes my cleverness; my goodluck will surely help, he thought. He quietly mingled into that group of poets.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 26 -- Danger! Danger!

Vandiya Devan entered the audience chamber ahead of the poets. He guessed that the stately person seated on the high throne was the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor. Several persons stood around him in deferential postures with hands folded and lips sealed. One person stood with several bundles of palm-leaves, letters which had arrived that day. The accountant waited on the side with his books to render the previous day's accounts. Leaders of the guard patiently awaited his orders for the day. Servants lingered

in readiness to execute any order that was given. A couple of maids stood behind the throne waving the white-whisk fans. Another fellow stood ready with the box of betel leaves and condiments.

Even Vandiya Devan, who had no dearth of self-esteem or pride, approached the Younger Lord Pazluvoor with some humility and timidity. The younger brother seemed even more imposing than the elder. Upon sighting our gallant, he asked with a cheerful face, "Thambi, who are you? Where have you come from?"

The usually harsh mein of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor always brightened upon seeing brave young men. He was eager to recruit fearless young men from all over the country into his company of guards.

"Commander! Sir! I come from Kanchi. The Prince has sent me with letters." Vandiya Devan answered in a deferential voice. Upon hearing the word Kanchi, the Commander's face darkened.

"What? What did you say?" he asked again.

"I have come from Kanchi City with letters from the Prince."

"Where are they? Give them here!" he commanded with contempt, but his face showed some disquiet.

Vandiya Devan drew the letters from his waist pouch, but still reverently, said, "Commander, the letter is for the Emperor!"

The Younger Lord Pazluvoor did not care about that, he snatched the roll of palm leaves from him and looked at the seals eagerly. He then gave the roll to a subordinate, asking him to read it.

After listening, he mumbled, "Nothing new!" He seemed involved in his own thoughts.

"Commander! The letters I brought," started Vandiya Devan.

"What about the letters? I shall give them to the Emperor."

"No! Sir! The Prince asked me to deliver them personally into the hands of the Emperor."

"Oh! You don't trust me? Did Prince Aditya tell you that?" asked the Commander of Tanjore with anger clouding his face.

"The Prince did not say anything like that. Your elder brother ordered it."

"What? What? Where did you see the Elder?"

"I stayed in the house of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya for a night on the way. I met him there. He sent me, with this signet ring..."

"Ah! Why didn't you say so in the first place? Did you stay the night at Kadamboor? Who else had come?"

"Several dignitaries from Mazluvoor, the Central Provinces, Thiru-munai-padi and elsewhere had come..."

"Wait! Stop! I must talk to you at leisure. First, you can go in and deliver this letter to the Emperor and come back. Those Tamil poets will be here soon and if you give them a chance they will not stop their blabberings. Come back here. Hey! Who is there ...? take this man to the Emperor's bed chamber!" ordered the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor.

Vandiya Devan followed the servant into the inner courtyards of that palace.

For some time now, the throne of the Chozla Empire -- bound by the roaring seas on three sides -- had been transformed into a sickbed. Emperor Paranthaka Sundara Chozla was reclining on that bed. Though he had delegated all affairs of the state to his officials and ministers, oftentimes he had to receive particularly indispensable persons on certain important occasions. These days he was mostly under the care of his physicians. But, it was essential for the welfare of the empire that his ministers, army generals, captains, and the leaders of the Velaikara Battalion should come to his presence daily.

When Vandiya Devan saw the emaciated, sickly appearance of the Emperor -- who had performed celebrated deeds of valor in various battles and acquired fame as a brave warrior, who was called 'Sundara Chozla, the Handsome One' by all the country and nation, who was renowned to be like the God of Love in looks -- he could not utter a single word. His eyes filled with tears. He approached closer to the bed and bowed low; then submitted the letter.

The Emperor began opening the letter as he asked in a faint voice, "Where are you coming from? Whose letter is this?"

"My Majesty! My Lord! I come from Kanchi City; I bring this letter from Prince Aditya." Vandiya Devan spoke the words with a trembling tongue.

Immediately, the Emperor's face brightened. The Empress, Vanama Devi, daughter of Thirukovalur Malayaman, was seated near him. He looked at her saying, "Devi, your son has sent a letter!" he began reading.

"Ah! The Prince has built a Golden Palace at Kanchi! He wants me and you to come and live there for a while!" saying this, the Emperor's face became sadder than before.

"Devi, look at this activity of your son! My grandfather, that famous Emperor Paranthaka, collected all the gold in the palace vaults to cover the roof of the temple at Chidambaram making it a Golden Temple! No person born in our clan built a golden palace for their personal dwelling! They considered the building of temples to be more important than the building of palaces. But look at what this Karikala has done? Ah! How can I atone this outrage against the Gods?" said the Emperor.

Devi's face, which had cheered up on hearing that there was a letter from her son, now became more melancholy than before. She could not give any reply.

At that instant Vandiya Devan gathered courage and boldness. "My Lord! There isn't anything so very wrong in what your esteemed son has done! He has done the right thing. Are not his mother and father the first Gods for a son? So, is it not right that your son should build a Golden Palace for your dwelling?" he asked.

Sundara Chozla smiled, "Thambi, who are you? Do I know you? You seem very intelligent. You talk very cleverly. Even if his parents are Gods to their son, they are not that for others! Golden temples should be built only for Gods worshipped by one and all!"

"My Lord! His father is God to the son; the king is God to all his subjects. The religious texts says that a monarch possesses the qualities of God. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to build a golden palace for you."

Sundara Chozla looked at his wife, Malayaman's daughter, once again, "Devi! Look at this boy; see how resourceful he is? If our Aditya has the council of such men we do not have to be so concerned about him. We need not worry about his heedless nature," he said.

He then looked at Vandiya Devan, "Thambi, Whether it is right or wrong about building the Golden Palace at Kanchi, one thing is clear. It is not possible for me to come to Kanchi now. You are seeing my condition. I am completely bed ridden like this. It is not possible to undertake a long journey. Aditya must come here to see me. We too wish to see him. Come back tomorrow. I shall have a letter prepared in reply," said the Emperor.

Vandiy Devan, could hear the noise of several people coming down the corridor. Oh yes! That group of bards and poets is coming here. The Younger Lord Pazluvoor is perhaps coming with them. Then, I may not be able to disclose to the Emperor all that I have to narrate to him. I must briefly tell him everything right now. Vandiya Devan made this decision within a few seconds; "My Lord! Sire! I seek your grace, please listen to my petition. It is important that you leave Tanjore. Danger surrounds you here. Danger! Danger!" said Vandiy Devan.

As he was speaking these words the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor entered the chamber. The bards and poets followed him.

The last few words uttered by Vandiya Devan fell in the ears of the Commander of Tanjore. Anger flashed brightly on his face.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 27 -- Court Poets

Watch out! Watch out! Here come the great poets! The best of the bards! Those who have swum the great oceans of Tamil literature! Those who have followed in the tradition of Agastya! They who have drunk the essence of Tolkappiyam and other such ancient works of the Sangam Period! They who have read great epics such as Silappadikaram, from back to front! They who know the ins and outs of Thirukural, the cannon of Tamil culture! They who know the grammar of all literature. They who know how to compose verse with originality! Think of this: The rolls and rolls of palm leaves used up by each one of them would feed millions and millions of hungry termites for years and years to come!

The whole group of the great poets came into the chamber of Emperor Sundara Chozla.

"Long life! Long life! Long live Emperor Sundara Chozla who rules all the seven worlds under one canopy. Long life to the Lord who `Brought down the fever (passion) of the Pandiya'. Long live the patron of the bards. The benevolent Lord of the poets, Long life to him. Long live the honored grandson of that great Paranthaka who loved poets!" They cheered as one man in praise of the monarch.

Sundara Chozla did not seem to appreciate the cheering or the commotion too much. Nevertheless he hid his feelings and unmindful of his ailment he tried to rise and welcome them. The Younger Lord of Pazluvoor came forward immediately, saying, "My Lord! These poets have come to greet you and honor you, they have not come here to trouble you. Please do not try to rise and trouble yourself."

"Yes; yes! Oh King of Kings, Oh best among Emperors! We have not come here to trouble you in the least bit!" said the chief of poets, Nallavan Sattanar.

"I am happy to see you all after all these days. Please, won't you all be seated? I shall be glad to hear some of your verses before you go!" spoke the Emperor who was fond of Tamil literature.

All of them sat down on a rich, jewelled carpet spread on the floor. Thinking it to be a good opportunity, our dauntless Vallavarayan also sat down in their midst. He did not feel like leaving before he had stated all his

thoughts to the Emperor. He sat down hoping for another opportunity to be private with the monarch.

The Younger Lord of Pazluvoor noticed him. His moustache twitched. He considered throwing the fellow out. But then he decided that it was better to let the fellow remain right under his watchful eyes. Therefore, he pretended ignorance of the fellow hiding amidst the group of poets. The Commander decided to drag him out after the bards had left and find out what the fellow had been saying to the Emperor. His words "Danger! Danger!" were still reverberating in his ears.

"Dear Poets! It has been a long time since I heard some Tamil verse. My ears are hungry for Tamil poems. Have any of you brought any new poems?" asked Emperor Sundara Chozla.

One of the bards stood up, "My Lord! I come from the monastery named in your honor, Sundara Chozla Perumpalli which is in Ulaga Puram. All the buddhists in this nation commend your benevolence to a buddhist monastery though you are of the Saiva sect. The monks and abbots are concerned about your ill health and we offer prayers for your welfare and good health. I have written some verses in this connection. If permitted I would like to recite these."

"Please! Do repeat them. I am waiting to listen."

The bard then sang some verses beginning with the following lines:-

Oh ye good soul, who found enlightenment under the Bo tree!
May you bless Sundara Chozla, monarch of growing Nandipuri, *
May he grow in prosperity, benevolence and in good looks and health,
To live with fame on this good earth.

* Nandipuri was another name for Pazlayarai

After hearing the poem all the poets showed appreciation with words like "Good, good, well done!"

"It is surprising that the buddhists are so thankful about the help!" said one of the poets who was a fanatic Saiva.

"Yes, it is quite a surprising thing. My service to the monastery at Ulaga Puram was very meager. Do I deserve such praise for that?"

"Who among those who have enjoyed the benevolence and kindness of the Emperor will not praise his name? Even Indra the King of Gods, Surya the Sun and the Great Lord Shiva have enjoyed his generosity!" said another poet.

With a smile playing upon his lips Sundara Chozla asked, "How is that? The King of the Gods and the Sun God? Even Lord Shiva? Why should they be beholden to me?"

"Permit me to repeat a verse to that effect," said the poet.

When the monarch nodded assent, he opened the leaves of the book in his hand and started reading the following poem:-

An elephant he did present for Lord Indra to mount;
Seven horses did he give, for that flame-bodied Lord, creator of the day;
A palanquin for that good Lord Shiva and his gentle spouse;
Such is the benevolence of Sundara Chozla
With whom on this earth can we compare his glory?

After the poet had recited these lines everybody in the group applauded, by clapping their hands and by saying words like "Aha! Aha! Good! Good!"

With a pleased expression the Emperor asked, "Can any of you explain this poem in detail?"

Several of them rose at the same time. Seeing the chief poet Sattanar the others sat down. Nallavan Sattanar then explained the poem as follows:-

"Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a war between the King of the Devas and the Demon Vritta. In that war the great elephant named Iravatha which belonged to Lord Indra died. Indra was looking around for another elephant comparable to that great beast. Finally he came to Emperor Sundara Chozla of Pazlayarai and begged for 'An elephant comparable to Iravatha.' The monarch replied, 'I do not have any elephants comparable to Iravatha but I have several better ones.' After saying this he took Indra to his elephant stable. The Lord of the Gods saw the thousands of beasts standing there like little hillocks and was confused, 'Which one shall I choose?' Seeing his bewilderment, Sundara Chozla selected one good elephant and presented it to Indra. 'How am I going to control this rogue elephant. Even my weapons the thunderbolts, may not be sufficient!' thought Indra with fright; on seeing that, the Emperor presented him with a good ankush (elephant goad) for controlling the new elephant given to him.

"Later at one time, there was a terrible battle between the God Surya of the radiant red rays who spreads light over all the world and the Demon Raagu, who causes eclipses. Raagu tried to swallow the creator of day and night; but he could not do so: the brilliant light of the Sun God consumed his body. However the seven colorful horses yoked to the Sun God's chariot were killed by the poisons spilt by the demon. While the Sun stood still, wondering how he could resume his daily passage across the skies, Sundara Chozla considered his helplessness and presented him with seven new horses. 'Please yoke these horses to your chariot and spread the grace of your brilliance to all living beings' prayed the monarch. The Sun God acclaimed the earthly King who was a descendant of his clan i.e. Surya Vamsa (Sun Kings).

"Several years ago the wedding of Lord Shiva and Parvathi Devi was celebrated with pomp in the mountains of Kailasa. The friends and relatives of the bride had come with several costly presents. But they had forgotten to bring a palanquin for the wedding procession. They

whispered amongst themselves `There is nothing but this bull available to carry the bride and groom in procession. What can we do now?' Sundara Chozla heard this and ordered his servants to bring his ivory palanquin inlaid with pearls, from the carriage house. He then offered it with much devotion, as a present at the wedding of the great God Shiva.

"Who else is there in this wide world surrounded by the seas, to compare with such a benevolent, gracious monarch?"

Sundara Chozla who was listening to all this, burst out laughing. The Emperor who had been suffering with illness had not laughed like that for a long time. On hearing his laughter and seeing his mirth even the Empress Vanama Devi smiled; the maids in the palace and even the doctors in the chamber smiled.

The Commander of Tanjore, Younger Lord Pazluvoor, had been standing apart all this time. Now he came forward saying, "My Lord! I have committed a grave crime, please forgive my mistake and pardon me!"

"Is it the Commander? What crime did you commit? Why should you be forgiven? Perhaps you seized the elephant and horses that I gave to the Gods and brought them back? Did you confiscate the palanquin given to Shiva? -- Because these things were not properly accounted for? Ah yes! You are quite capable of doing that!" said Sundara Chozla with a voice chocking with laughter. The poets laughed with the Emperor. Vandiya Devan laughed louder than everyone else. The Younger Lord Pazluvoor noticed his laughter and looked at him with blazing eyes.

The Commander then turned to the Emperor and said, "King of Kings! My mistake was just this: I had been preventing persons like these poets from coming to your presence all these days. I followed the orders of the palace doctors. But now I realize my mistake. These poets have made you cheerful. You have laughed loudly after listening to their poems! Smiles blossomed on the faces of the Udaya Pirati, (Queen Consort) and even the maids upon seeing your mirth. Wasn't it my mistake to not let such people who could cause such happiness into your presence?"

"You said the right thing Commander! Do you realize it at least now? I keep telling you don't bother about the doctors."

The palace doctor tried to mumble some reply in a reverent manner, Sundara Chozla made a sign to stop him and then looked at the bards. "Does anyone here know who composed this exquisite verse? If anyone knows, please let me know!" said the Emperor.

Nallavan Sattandar replied, "King of Kings that is what we do not know. All of us have been trying to find out that! If we knew, we would crown that poet with the title

`Emperor of Poets' and carry him in procession around the city. We have not been able to find that poet's identity."

"There is nothing surprising about that. I am sure that the great poet who can stuff that many untruths in four lines will hesitate to come forward!"

When the Emperor said these words, all the bards felt totally dejected; their faces fell as if swallowed by an eclipse! None of them knew a reply for this comment! At this point, our hero Vandiya Devan stood up boldly and said, "My Lord! We should not dismiss this verse completely as absolute untruth. When common folks utter words that are not factual, we call them lies; when people involved in the conduct of nations say such things, it is known as political shrewdness; when poets say such things, it is imagination, creativity, alliteration, prosody, meter, rhyme, lyric."

All the poets now turned to him, saying, "Well said, Good! Good!"

The Emperor also looked at him, scrutinizing his face: "Oh! Aren't you the messenger who brought letters from Kanchi? Clever! Well parried argument! Good rebuttal!" praised the Emperor.

He then looked at the group of poets and said, "Though it was a good poem, there is no need to find its author and crown him with titles. I know the poet who wrote this verse. He is already burdened with the weight of the jeweled crown of the Chozla Empire. Titles such as `Emperor of the Three Worlds', `Emperor of the Good Earth and the Seven Worlds' are already being borne by that King of Poets."

And if this author says that the poets who heard his words drowned in the ocean of surprise and struggled -- readers should not disregard it as lies. It is the author's imagination, lyric, comparison, rhapsody. You must accept it as some such grammatic convention of literature!

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 28 -- Iron Grip

When he had survived from the flood of surprise that drowned him, the court poet Nallavan Sattandar said, "My Lord! Does it mean ...? The poet who wrote these verses is..."

"It is this Emperor of the earth who lies on this sick-bed without the use of his legs," spoke the Emperor.

Several exclamations of surprise rose among the poets as they talked and whispered quietly amongst themselves. They moved their hands and heads in an agitated manner, not knowing how to express their thoughts; others sat

perfectly still immobilized by the declaration they had heard!

Sundara Chozla continued to speak. "Dear poets! Long ago some poets and bards came to see me in Pazlayarai. Some of you may have been in that group. Each of them sang verses in praise of the benevolence of my clan, my forefathers. Some of them sang a few lines about me also. They praised me saying, 'I gave this to that one and that to this person.' My young daughter Kundavai, the Younger Pirati was also seated beside me. Soon the poets left after receiving gifts and awards. Kundavai kept singing their praises commenting on the excellence of their poetry. I challenged Kundavai, saying that I could compose much better verse, more imaginative and extravagant than any of those poets. And I composed those lines playfully at that time and asked Kundavai for a reward. My darling child clung to my back and pinched my cheeks saying 'Here is your reward.' I can remember that incident as if it was yesterday. But it must be more than eight or nine years now."

"Great! Remarkable! Surprising! Astounding!" rose several voices from the group.

As soon as he heard the name Kundavai, Vandiya Devan's whole body became attentive. He had heard much about that Princess of the Chozla clan: about her beauty, her intelligence, her ability and learning. Here is the fortunate father who gave birth to that astonishing Princess and her mother is seated close by. The Emperor speaks of his daughter with such pride! His voice quivers when he mentions her name...

Vandiya Devan's right hand searched in his pouch hidden in his waistband. The palm leaf roll of letters that he was carrying for Kundavai, were in that pouch. His searching palm halted in startled alarm. He was appalled.

Dear me! What is this? I cannot find the letter! Where is the letter? Where could it have fallen? Could it have fallen accidentally when I took out the letter meant for the Emperor? Where would it have fallen? In the audience chamber ... Perhaps it will fall in the hands of the Commander! Is there any danger if that happens? Oh! What a blunder! What a great mistake! What shall I do ...

He could not remain in that place patiently after he realized that he had lost the letter meant for Kundavai. He did not hear any of the conversation in that room. Whatever he heard his mind did not comprehend.

Sundara Chozla was still talking to that astonished group of poets. "Kundavai must have repeated the verse I composed in playfulness to some one. Perhaps she recited it to her teacher, the Priest Esanya Bhattar of Pazlayarai. He has spread it all over the nation and made me the object of mockery!"

"My Lord! So what if the poem was written by you? It is a wonderful poem. There is no doubt about that! Besides being the Emperor of the Nation, you are also an Emperor among Poets!" said the court poet.

"However, if I had sung this poem now, I would have added one more line. I would not have stopped with giving an elephant to Indra, horses to Surya and a palanquin to the Great Shiva. Remember Lord Shiva kicked the Lord of Death to protect his favorite devotee Markandeya? When he was kicked, that fearsome Lord of Death escaped with a few wounds. But Death's vehicle, the water-buffalo fell down dead right there. The Lord of Death suffered without a proper vehicle to execute his duties... Sundara Chozla of Pazlayarai saw his problem and presented Yama, the Lord of Death, with a huge water-buffalo! Yama now rides upon that beast comfortably and is fast approaching me. Even my able Commander of Tanjore cannot stop Yama riding on his buffalo from coming to me."

When she heard these words, Vanama Devi seated next to him, looked at her lord with tears streaming down her face. Even the poets were moved, filled with a tremendous sadness. Only the Younger Lord Pazluvoor seemed unshaken. "My Sire! In your service, I shall be ready to wage war even with death!" he declared.

"I have no doubt about that, Commander! But no human being has the power to fight death. We merely have the power to pray and ask the God's to give us the ability to not fear death. Perhaps one of you remember those verses of one of our Tamil saints who sang, 'We shall not fear death.' Does anyone know that poem?" asked the Emperor.

A poet rose up to repeat that verse:

We are bondsmen to none; nor do we fear the Lord of Death;
We shall not suffer the horrors of hell;
Neither are we at all times incapable
To overcome the misfortunes of ill health.

The Emperor intervened at this line to say "Ah! Who but a great soul who has seen the vision of the Lord could sing this daring verse so fearlessly? Saint Appar had suffered with fearful consumption. But he overcame that ill health with the grace of God. That is why he sang the line about 'Overcoming the misfortunes of ill health.' My dear poets! Please stop composing verse in praise of me or my clan. Sing such poems about divine grace from now onwards. Appar, Sambanda and Sundara Murti have sung thousands of such exquisite devotional poems in sweet Tamil. How wonderful it would be if we could collect all those verses in one anthology? One lifetime will not be adequate to read and enjoy all of it!"

"King of Kings, with your permission we are ready to begin that task right away!"

"No; it is not a task that can be completed in my lifetime. After me ... " the Emperor hesitated and became immersed in his own thoughts.

The palace physician came close to the Younger Lord Pazluvoor and whispered something in his ears. Sundara Chozla seemed to recover from his contemplation as if startled from a nightmare. He looked around, his eyes searching for something. He seemed to be a man returning from a different world; as if he had glimpsed at the world of the Lord of death.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Commander, asked, "My Lord! You had expressed a wish to hear some verses composed during the Sangam Age. Can these poets leave after they recite one such poem?"

"Yes, yes. I had forgotten. Not only my body, even my mind seems to be deteriorating. Let me hear the poem."

The Commander made a sign to the chief poet Nallavan Sattanar. Upon that sign, the poet stood up and began speaking the following words:

"My Lord! One of the most famous kings of your clan was Karikala Valava of the Sangam Age. He was the brave warrior who placed his tiger-flag on the Himalaya Mountains. During his reign, the capital of the Chozla Kingdom was Poempuhar or Kaviri-poom-pattinam. It was the port where goods and produce from various foreign nations came in ships. One of the poets of that period composed several verses in praise of that town describing its wealth and prosperity. Here are a few lines describing the various goods that came into the port of that famous town:

Horses of noble gait came by the sea;
Bagsful of black pepper brought in carts;
Gemstone and gold from the northern mountains;
Fragrant sandal and myrrh, forest produce of the Kudagu hills;
Pearls from the southern seas, corals of the western ocean;
Wealth of the Ganga and yield of the Cauvery;
Food from Lanka and manufactured goods of Malaya...

Sundara Chozla made a sign and stopped the poet when he came to this line. The poet stopped; silent.

The Emperor looked at his commander and said with some harshness, "Commander, the poem speaks of the times of Karikala when food came to us from Lanka. You brought these poets here to tell me this. Is it not so?"

"Yes, My Lord!" the words of the Commander came faintly.

"I understand. Please send these poets away; give them appropriate gifts," said the monarch turning his face away.

"Poets! Sirs! You can all take your leave now." The Commander announced firmly. The whole group rose and

departed through the door. But, they did not forget to raise cheers and blessings for the Emperor as they left.

Vandiya Devan who was quite agitated at not finding the letter he had brought for Kundavai, tried to mingle with that group and escape. But, his intention did not succeed. Near the doorway a vise like grip took hold of his left hand. Vandiya Devan was quite strong. But that iron grip shook him from head to toe and made him stand still. He looked up and his eyes confirmed that the iron grip belonged to the Commander, the Younger Lord Pazluvoor.

By now, the poets had left the inner bed chamber.

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Chapter 29 -- "Our Guest"

After the poets had departed, the palace doctor mixed a medicinal potion and brought it to the Emperor. Malayaman's daughter, the Queen Consort received the goblet in her hands and gave it to her lord the Emperor.

The Younger Lord Pazluvoor, who waited patiently till the Emperor had finished, did not let go of his vise like grip on Vandiya Devan's hand. The Commander dragged him closer to the Emperor's bed. "My Lord! Do you see any improvement after this new medicine?" he asked.

"The doctor says that there is some benefit and Devi also believes it. But somehow, I do not feel any hope. Commander, I feel that all this is wasted effort! My fate beckons me. Yama, the Lord of Death must have gone to Pazlayarai in search of me. When he knows that I am not there he will arrive here in search of me..."

"My Lord! You should not talk in this depressed fashion. You should not distress our hearts like this. The ancestors of your clan ..."

"Ah! You are about to say that my forefathers were not afraid of death! If I too am fortunate like the forefathers of my clan, to go into the forefront of a battlefield and give up my life, I shall not fear such death. Nor will I despair. I shall welcome death with enthusiasm. My elder uncle Raja-aditya fought in the battle field at Takkolam from atop an elephant and lost his life while fighting. He established the fame of Chozla bravery for ever in that battle of Takkolam. He became famous as the 'Lord who reposed atop an elephant.' What fame will I acquire? Will I come to be known as 'Sundara Chozla who reposed atop his sickbed'? My other elder uncle, Gandara Aditya was involved in his devotions and had overcome the fear of death. He travelled to the nations on the western ocean on pilgrimage and died on the seashore. He is known as 'The Lord who reposed in the west.' I am not devout like him; nor am I capable of embarking on a pilgrimage like him. How long can I lie upon my bed like this? A burden to all

those near and dear ... But something tells me in my heart, I shall not remain on this delightful earth much longer..."

"My Majesty! The palace doctor says that there is no danger to your life. The astrologers also say that there is no danger. But this youngster talked to you about some danger ..."

"Ah! Isn't he the young man who came from Kanchi City? Yes, he was saying about some danger about something. What were you saying Thambi? Were you talking about my situation?" asked the Emperor.

Vandiya Devan's mind worked at lightning speed. If I own up to having warned about danger, suspicions about me will rise and I will surely be in danger. I must escape from this plight. Good, let me try one tactic. Let me secure the help of grammar and prosody to turn a mountain into a molehill!

"My Majesty! Who am I to warn about danger! What danger can approach you when you have the brave Commander, Lord Pazluvoor, the palace doctor and the Empress who looks like the Divine Savitri (mythical queen who saved her husband from the Lord of Death) next to you? I petitioned to you as a stranger -- a stranger! I, an ignorant, lone youth, I alone am left to represent the ancient clan of Vaanars. I have been serving the Chozla Empire to the satisfaction of your elder son the Crown Prince. I beg your grace to return to me at least one tiny portion of the lands of my ancient kingdom. I am a stranger! This stranger seeks the protection of you the King of Kings!" Vallavarayan spoke quickly without any hesitation.

The Commander who heard his words, frowned. Sundara Chozla's face brightened once again. Kindness filled the face of the Empress.

"As soon as he was born, Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, must have written on this boy's tongue. His command over words is quite remarkable!" said the Empress.

Making use of the opportunity, Vandiya Devan turned towards her and said, "Thaye! I Beg your grace to put in a word on my behalf! I am an orphan without mother or father. I have no other patron or sponsor. I myself have to petition on my behalf. Just like the Goddesses Lakshmi and Parvathi speak to their Lords Vishnu and Shiva on behalf of devotees, I beseech you to speak on my cause. I beg to be given back at least ten villages of my ancient kingdom. I shall be very satisfied with that."

Sundara Chozla was filled with surprise and happiness as he heard these words. The Emperor called his Commander and said, "Commander, I am becoming very fond of this youth! Look at Devi's face: she seems ready to adopt him as her third son! Why not fulfil his petition? There should be no problem about that? What is your opinion?"

"What place does my opinion have in this matter! Should we not consult the opinion of Prince Karikala?" asked the Commander of Tanjore.

"Your Majesty! If I ask the Prince he says that he has to consult Lord Pazluvoor! Lord Pazluvoor says that he has to ask the Crown Prince. Between the two of them my petition ..."

"Young man, don't worry. We shall ask them both at the same time," said the Emperor.

He then said, "Commander, this youth has brought a letter from the Prince. About my going to Kanchi. Like before, Aditya wants me to come to Kanchi. Aditya writes that he has built a new Golden Palace there. He wants me to go over there and live in it at least for some time."

"We shall act according to thy wishes," said the Commander.

"Ah! You will act according to my wishes! But my legs refuse. It is impossible to journey to Kanchi. The very thought of travelling in palanquins with drawn screens, like women of the palace, disgusts me. We must write a reply asking Aditya Karikala to come here ..."

"Is it advisable to ask the Prince to leave Kanchi at this time to come here? Our enemies in the north continue to be strong!"

"Parthiban and Malayaman can stay back and take care of that. Something in my heart tells me that I must have the Prince here beside me. And that is not enough; we must send a message to the younger Prince who has gone to Lanka -- ask him to come back here immediately. I wish to consult both of them and come to a conclusion about an important matter. When Arulmozli is here we can talk to him about your objection in sending rice and foodstuffs to the Lankan campaign."

"Your Majesty! Forgive me! I do not object to sending foodstuffs to Lanka. Neither does the Officer of Resources & Food Supply object. The citizens and countrymen of the Chozla nation object to it. The last harvest in our country was poor. When supplies are limited to meet our needs, people object to sending shiploads of foodgrains to Lanka. Now they murmur and complain in words. After a while their complaints will become louder. Their shouts will be heard even inside this palace, disturbing your health!"

"Arulmozli will never wish to undertake anything to which the people and citizens object. Anyway considering everything it is best if he comes here at once. After the Elder Lord Pazluvoor returns we shall decide about sending a messenger to Lanka. When is he coming back?"

"He will definitely return by tonight."

"We can write the letter to Kanchi also tomorrow. Can we send this young man back with that letter?"

"This youngster seems to have journeyed from Kanchi without any rest or stop. Let him stay here and relax for a few days before he returns. We can send the letter with some other messenger."

"Do that. Perhaps he can remain here itself till Karikala arrives."

At this point Malayaman's daughter stood up. The Commander spoke up, "I have spoken for a long time and disturbed you today. Please forgive me for extending this interview till being warned by My Lady!"

The Empress spoke, "Commander, this youth is our guest. Make all arrangements for his comfort. If the Emperor had been keeping good health we could have accommodated him in this palace itself."

"I shall take care of that, My Lady! You need not concern yourself about it. I shall take care of him very well!" spoke the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. The fingers of one hand twirled his thick moustache as he spoke these words.

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Chapter 30 -- Art Gallery

The Younger Lord Pazluvoor dragged Vandiya Devan to the audience chamber along with him. The explanation given by the youth about his conversation with the Emperor had not completely satisfied him. Perhaps it was a mistake to have permitted him to meet the Emperor in privacy. It is routine to suspect him since he is a messenger from Aditya Karikala. But there is no room for suspicion since my brother has sent him with the signet ring. Ah! No one has to advise the Elder about caution in such matters.

Howsoever, the sight of the youth hesitating with a fear-filled expression, as he entered the bed chamber came before the Commander's eyes. He remembered very clearly that the youth had spoken the words "Danger! Danger!" -- Is it possible that the words "Stranger! Stranger!" could have sounded like "Danger! Danger!" in his ears? Considering all possibilities it is better that I do not send him back immediately. After the Elder returns, I must find out details about him and do the appropriate thing. I must try and recruit such capable young men in my secret police corps. He would be useful in times of need. Perhaps I can procure part of his ancient lands for him. Such young men will remain beholden and loyal to me if I help them once. Ah! But if it proven that he is an enemy, I must make appropriate arrangements. Anyway, for all things, let the Elder return. Let us see.

Upon reaching the large audience chamber, Vandiya Devan began looking about here and there anxiously. He peered again and again at the spot where he had taken out the letter to give it to the Commander.

Perhaps by accident the other letter, the important letter has fallen there. If I cannot retrieve that letter there is no greater fool than me! I shall never be able to meet the world renowned Princess Kundavai. I shall not be able to complete half the task assigned to me by Prince Aditya Karikala.

The Younger Lord Pazluvoor looked at one of his servants and said, "Lead this young man to our palace. Take him to our guest house and make all arrangements for his comfort -- look after him. Wait there till I come."

Vandiya Devan and the servant left. Another servant approached him and respectfully extended his hand with a palm leaf roll in it. "This was lying in the corridor on the way to the Emperor's bed-chamber. It might have fallen from the waist-belt of the youth who left just now."

The Commander accepted it eagerly and examined it. His eyebrows shot half way up his forehead in a frown! A dreadful expression came upon his face.

"Ah ha! A letter written to the Younger Pirati by Aditya Karikala. In the Prince's own handwriting: -- `... .. you had asked for a retainer -- a capable, courageous youth for use in confidential matters; I am sending him to you for that purpose. You can trust him completely regarding all affairs and entrust any task to him. He will personally give you my message and details of the situation here...' -- Ah! There is some mystery in this! I wonder if the Elder Lord knows about this letter. I must be more careful in handling this youngster!" The Commander of Tanjore muttered these words to himself as he read some parts of the letter. He beckoned to the servant who had picked up the letter and whispered some words in his ear. That man immediately left the audience chamber.

All courtesies and comforts were shown to Vandiya Devan in the palace of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. They led him to a luxurious bath and helped him wear new clothes. Vandiya Devan who was fond of wearing new fashionable clothes, dressed himself in the fresh garments with enthusiasm. He almost forgot his worry about the lost letter. After he had dressed in the new raiment, they served him courteously and elegantly with a tasty meal of many courses. Being hungry, Vandiya Devan did justice to the meal. Later they led him to the art gallery in that palace.

"Till the Commander returns you can enjoy the beautiful pictures and art-works in this gallery," said the servant. After saying this, three men -- guards -- sat down outside that chamber, near the doorway and began a game of dice.

In those days, Tanjore, the new capital of the Chozla's, was famous for its art and painting. Just as music and dance

were nurtured in Thiru-vai-arū, painting and sculpture were encouraged in Tanjore.

The art gallery attached to the palace of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor was famous. Vandiya Devan entered that art gallery now. He looked again and again at the several large pictures painted on the walls of that chamber and was enthralled. He forgot himself in that happiness; he forgot the task for which he had come.

The portrait gallery on one side, depicting the pictures of ancient rulers of the Chozla clan and important events in their history attracted his attention. A large part of that gallery was given to depict the history over the last hundred years of the Chozla nation. Those were the pictures that aroused the greatest interest in Vandiya Devan.

At this point, the author wishes to briefly remind our readers of the history and genealogy of the Chozlas who ruled for hundred years before the times of this story, from Pazlayarai and Tanjore. It would be very useful to know these details to understand further incidents in this tale.

We have mentioned earlier about Vijayala Chozla who bore ninety-six scars of battle wounds like ornaments on his body. Chozla kings customarily bore the titles Parakesari and Rajakesari one succeeding the other. After Parakesari Vijayala, his son Rajakesari Aditya Chozla came to the throne. He was a deserving son to his father. In the beginning he fought on the side of the Pallava monarchs to defeat their common enemy, the Pandiyas and establish the Chozla entity. Later he engaged in battle against his former ally the Pallava King Aparajita. Pallava Aparajita entered the battlefield seated on a howdah atop an elephant. Aditya jumped onto that war elephant and fought his enemy, killing him and thus captured all of Thondai for the Chozlas. Later the Kongu Kingdom came under Aditya's rule. Rajakesari Aditya I, was an ardent devotee of Shiva. He constructed several Shiva temples along the banks of the holy Cauvery -- from the Sahasya hills where the river rose till it entered the seas in the east.

After Rajakesari Aditya, Parakesari Paranthaka ascended the Chozla throne. He ruled for forty-six years. Next to Karikala of the ancient times who had established his tiger-flag over the Himalayas, this Paranthaka was the greatest of Chozla kings. He had several honors and titles like "Veera-narayana", "Lover of Poets", "Best among Wrestlers", "Jewel among the Braves", etc. He was also known as the 'Chozla who took (conquered) Madurai and Lanka'. Even during the times of this Paranthaka I, the Chozla nation spread from the shores of Cape Comorin to the banks of the Krishna-Tungabhadra rivers in the north. For some time the tiger-flag flew over Lanka also. He was the same Paranthaka who became famous for having covered the roof of the temple at Chidambaram with gold. Towards the end of his reign several dangers seized the Chozla Empire. In those days, the Rashtrakutas who were very powerful in the north tried to contain the growing

powers of the Chozlas. They led an army against the Chozlas and were successful to some extent.

Paranthaka had at least three sons. The eldest among these sons was Raja-aditya. Expecting an invasion from the north, this Raja-aditya waited with a very large army for several years in Thiru-munai-padi. He constructed the large Veera Narayana Lake in the name of his father.

A terrible war was fought between the Chozla forces and the Rashtrakuta armies at a place known as Takkolam near present day Arakonam. In that battle, Raja-aditya fought valiantly and showered havoc upon the enemy forces. But, he lost his life in the battlefield and went to the heavens meant for braves. He too fought from the howdah of an elephant like the Pallava Aparajita. Since he died while riding the battle elephant he was referred to as the 'Lord who reposed atop an elephant' in latter day stone-inscriptions.

If Raja-aditya had not died in the battlefield, he would have ruled the Chozla nation after his father Paranthaka I. His descendants would, in the normal course, have ascended the throne after him. But since he died before ascending the throne and without any offspring, his brother Gandara Aditya was crowned as king with the title of Rajakesari according to the wishes of their father.

Like his father and grand-father, Gandara Aditya was a devotee and follower of Shiva. In addition, he was fond of Tamil literature. In fact, he did not have much interest in ruling his nation for he was more involved in worship at temples and in enjoyment of poetry. Following the tradition of the Saiva Nayanmar saints, he composed several devotional poems on God Shiva. In an anthology of these poems known as Thiru-isai-pa he refers to himself towards the end:

Like his noble Sire who covered
The roof of the dancer at Chidambaram with red gold,
May Gandara Aditya, monarch of flourishing Kozli,
Lord of the people of Tanjore, expert in exquisite Tamil verse,
May he attain everlasting greatness and happiness.

Though the kings after Vijayala Chozla ruled from Pazlayarai and Tanjore, they did not forget their rights to their ancient capital Uraiyoor, which was also called Kozli (rooster). Chozla monarchs styled themselves as 'Rooster Kings.'

Though Gandara Aditya sat on the Chozla throne and ruled in name, his younger brother Arinjaya took care of the governing of the nation. Arinjaya had been stationed in the northern provinces helping his eldest brother Raja-aditya. He fought bravely in the battles against the Rashtrakutas. He was the instrument for turning the terrible defeat of the Chozla armies at Takkolam into a victory by stopping the invading forces at the northern banks of River Pennar.

Therefore, Rajakesari Gandara Aditya chose his younger brother Arinjaya as the Crown Prince and designated him

as his successor to the throne. There was another important reason for this decision of Gandara Aditya. His first wife had died several years before he came to inherit the throne. After her death, Gandara Aditya had not married again for several years. However, his younger brother Arinjaya already had a handsome, capable and intelligent son.

That son named after his grandfather Paranthaka, was known as Sundara -- the name bestowed on him by the people. Gandara Aditya willed that after him his brother Arinjaya, and after Arinjaya, Sundara should succeed to the Chozla throne. He obtained the approval of all the leaders of the land, the chieftains, the commanders, the chiefs of the cities and guilds, and announced his intentions publicly.

After all such arrangements were made, a surprising incident occurred in his life. He happened to meet the young daughter, of a petty chieftain named Mazlava-raya. The beauty, modesty, virtue and piety of that jewel among maids, Sembayan Madevi, attracted him. In his advanced age he married that young maid. As a result of this marriage a child was born in due course. They named the child Madurandaka and cherished him. But, both the King as well as the Queen did not wish to change any of the arrangements they had made earlier about the kingdom. The couple were both involved in piety, devotion and renouncement of the world; they wished to raise their son in a similar ascetic fashion. Once again the King proclaimed his wish that after him, his brother Arinjaya

Principal Characters in Ponniiyin Selvan

Aditya Karikala -Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire, Sundara Chozla's eldest son.

Amudan's Mother -A deaf-mute, garden keeper on the outskirts of Tanjore.

Anirudda Brahma-raya -The Prime Minister and confidant of Sundara Chozla.

Arinjaya Chozla-Sundara Chozla's father, King Gandara Aditya's younger brother, died after ruling for merely one year.

Arulmozli Varma -Sundara Chozla's younger son.

Astrologer of Kudanthai- An astrologer patronized by Kundavai, a spy of sorts.

Azlvvar-adiyan Nambi, Thirumalai Appan - A follower of the Vaishnava faith, step brother of Esanya Bhattar, a spy.

Esanya Bhattar -A priest of Pazlayarai, elder brother of Azhvar-adiyan Nambi.

Gandara Aditya -Sundara Chozla's elder uncle, a devout follower of the Saiva faith, ruled before Arinjaya Chozla.

Idumban Kari -A footman from Kadamboor, a conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of a gang sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Kalyani of Vaithumba- Widow of King Arinjaya Chozla, a famous beauty, Sundara Chozla's mother.

Kandamaran- A young man, son of Sengannan Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor.

Kundavai, Younger Pirati - Sundara Chozla's daughter.

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Elder, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari - An important chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Commander of Chozla Armies in Lanka. Elder-uncle to Vanathi

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Younger, Paranthaka Vikrama - Younger Lord of Kodumbalur, Vanathi's father who lost his life in a battle in Lanka.

and Arinjaya's descendants should have the right to ascend the Chozla throne.

Thus, bypassing the two lines of the elder brothers Rajaditya and Gandara Aditya, the line of Arinjaya Chozla became heirs to the Chozla throne.

Parakesari Arinjaya who ruled after Gandara Aditya, did not live for a long time. Within one year he followed his elder brothers to the heavenly abodes.

After him, the citizens, chieftains, leaders and guildsmen happily crowned Prince Sundara as their king. Rajakesari Paranthaka Sundara Chozla was an able ruler of the kingdom that came to him by good fortune. In the early years of his reign he performed various deeds of valor and once again acquired the lost Pandiya and Thondai Territories. He drove away the Rashtrakuta armies from the banks of the Pennar.

Aditya Karikala and Arulmozli Varma, the two sons of Emperor Sundara Chozla, were able warriors and worthy sons of their father. Both sons cooperated and helped their father with complete devotion. These sons had experienced battlefield and war at very young ages. In every campaign they participated, the Goddess of Victory stood on the side of the Chozlas.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Elder, - Ambalavan An important and powerful chieftain, - Officer of Taxation, Food Supply and Finance for the Chozla Empire, elder brother of Kalanthaka, Nandini's husband, about 65 years old.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Younger, Kalanthaka - Commander of Tanjore Fort, Captain of the Guard Corps.
Madurandaka Deva -A Chozla Prince, son of Gandara Aditya and Sembian Madevi, a few years older than Aditya Karikala.

Malayaman Milad-udayar of Thiru-kovalur -A nobleman and petty chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Empress Vanamadevi's father and thereby grandfather to Karikala, Arulmozli and Kundavai.
Manimekala - Kandamaran's younger sister and daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya.

Mazlava-raya - A nobleman, Sembian Madevi's brother.

Munai Raya - A nobleman, not very confident in Lord Pazluvoor's schemes.

Nallavan Sattanar - Court poet at Tanjore.

Nandini, Young-Queen - An extraordinarily beautiful Pazluvoor woman with a mysterious past, Azhvaradiyan's adopted sister, raised by a priest's family near Madurai.

Parthiban Pallava - A nobleman of the Pallava clan, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's confidant.

Poonkuzlali - Daughter of the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai, Sendan Amudan's cousin.

Ravidasa, the Sorcerer - Leader of the Pandiya conspirators, a former retainer of Veera-pandiyai, had a mysterious hold over Nandini.

Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor - A nobleman and crony of Lord Pazluvoor.

Sembian Madevi, Elder Pirati - Widow of King Gandara Aditya, Madurandaka Deva's mother, fond of Sundara Chozla and his children, devout.

Sendan Amudan -A flower vendor of Tanjore, lived with his deaf-mute mother in the outskirts of the city.

Soman Samban - A conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of Ravidasa's gang, sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Sundara Chozla Paranthaka - Emperor of the Chozla Kingdom.

Vanamadevi of Thiru-kovalur - The Queen Consort, wife of Sundara Chozla, mother to Karikala, Kundavai & Arulmozli.

Vanathi Devi - A young noblewoman of the Kodumbalur clan, Kundavai's friend, in love with Prince Arulmozli.

Vandiyai Devan Vallavarayan - A scion of the Vaanar clan of Vallam, Aditya Karikala's messenger.

Vasuki - Nandini's maid.

Veera-pandiyai - Pandiyai King vanquished and killed by Prince Aditya Karikala.

Glossary

A adi A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-Aug

Aavani A month of the Tamil calendar, about Aug-Sept

Advaita A philosophy, belief in the non-dual nature of God

Akka Elder sister, a respectful greeting for an older girl

Amma Mother, a respectful greeting for women

Ankush A goad used by elephant drivers

Anna Elder brother, respectful address for older men

Araya, raya, arasa King, chieftain, Raja

Ayya Father, mode of address for an older man
 Bharata Natyam Classical dance style
 Chakra Discus
 Champaka A fragrant flower
 Chanakya A medieval personality of political cunning, a Machiavelli
 Devi, Deva Lady, Lord
 Iruvatchi A fragrant flower
 Jaamam A period of time 3 hrs long;
 1 Jaamam = 7½ Nazli; 1 Nazli = 24 minutes
 Jaggery Unrefined or brown sugar
 Kaadal Love
 Kaadam A league or about 10 miles
 Kaavi Reddish, ocher dye
 Kadal Sea
 Kadamba A flower
 Kama Love, Passion
 Karadi 1. A musical instrument 2. Bear
 Karagam Folk dance with balancing decorated pots
 Karaiyar Coastal, fisherfolk
 Karppu Sanctity of a married woman. Chastity
 Kavi 1. Poet 2. Monkey
 Konnai A flowering tree
 Kumkum Red powder, used to decorate the forehead
 Kummi A folk dance of women circling while clapping hands
 Kunrimani A tiny red-black berry or bead
 Kural Ancient Tamil couplets
 Kuravai Koothu Gypsy dance or dance by maidens
 Malai Mountain
 Mariamman A village deity, a pagan Goddess
 Marudai A shade giving tree, a colloquial name for Madurai City
 Mattalam Drum
 Maya Illusion, Deception, unreal
 Moringa A leafy tree
 Mu-ttholl-ayiram A collection of romantic verse in Tamil
 Muzlai Cave
 Naadu Country
 Naamam A vertical, make-up like, caste mark worn by followers of Vishnu
 Nanal A sedge like grass
 Nandavan Garden
 Netri-chutti Forehead ornament
 Padai Vedu Army Housing
 Padinettam Perukku Eighteenth day flood
 Palli Padai Memorial temple
 Panchayat Council of Village Elders, often five persons
 Parai A kind of country drum, an announcement
 Perumal Lord, God
 Pirati Lady, Royal Princess
 Pitam Monastic seat
 Punnai A tree with yellow flowers
 Rudraksha A multifaceted bead, a sacred berry

Saelai Loose pleated garment of women worn with one loose end thrown over a shoulder
Saiva A sect of Hinduism, follower of Shiva
Salli A musical instrument
Selvan Beloved, Darling (masculine)
Selvi Beloved, Darling (feminine)
Silappadikaram A Tamil Epic
Sindhu Folk song
Puli -Tamarind A shade giving tree bearing a sour fruit
Thambi Younger brother, mode of address for young men
Thaye Mother, mode of respectful address for women
Thaazlai A fragrant cactus
Thevar-aalan, Divine man, dancers
Thevar-aatti Divine woman, dancers
Thevaram Devotional Poems
Thiru-vai-mozli Devotional Poems
Thinnai A raised platform or dias on the front porch of houses in South India. Often used like a living room; for family gatherings, seating visitors, and sleeping in the night.
Udukku Small palm held drum
Uriyadi A game to get the prize-pot tied to a pole similar to the Maypole
Vaetti Loose lower garment of men
Vaishnava A sect of Hinduism, follower of Vishnu
Vamsa Dynasty
Veena A musical stringed instrument
Velan Attam A semi-religious dance, usually by a man
Villu-pattu Folk songs accompanying a string instrument, story telling
Vinnagara Vishnu temple