A. V. Suraweera's "The Faithful Wife of a Politician"

By LeRoy Robinson

Alankarage Victor Suraweera is a contemporary Sri Lankan writer of fiction whose work is gaining attention in his homeland and abroad. The purpose of this article is to introduce a previously unpublished story by Suraweera.

First, a brief introduction to Suraweera himself. Alankarage Victor Suraweera, born October 10, 1930, the son of a rural family, grew up near the interior town of Gampaha, about twenty-five miles from Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. He attended the Government English School in Gampaha. He then graduated from the most prestigious high school of Sri Lanka, Royal College, Colombo. In 1954 he graduated from the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. In 1957 he was awarded a Master's Degree and in 1964 a Ph. D. by the same university. He is now Professor of Sinhalese and Chairman of the Department of Sinhalese at Sri Jayawardenepura University, Nugegoda.

Suraweera has published scholarly studies on Sri Lankan cultural and literary subjects. In 1959 his book on the culture of the Anuradhapura Period won him a State Award. In 1968 his critical edition of The Rajavaliya, a classic of Sinhalese literature, won him another State Award. In the 1970s Suraweera, on an Asia Foundation grant, gained experience in creative writing during a year's participation in the writing program at the University of Iowa. On his return to Sri Lanka he organized a similar program at his own university. Recently he spent a year at the University of Kent, Canterbury, U. K., where, on a Commonwealth Fellowship, he did research on the sociology of literature.

Suraweera's creative works include four novels and three volumes of short stories, some in Sinhal, some in English. His last novel, Sada Melesa Puraderene (1980), won a State Award, as did two of his collections of short stories. Some of his fiction has been translated into German and Russian.

As a short story writer, Suraweera may be at his best when he writes about children who discover the nature of evil surrounding them, children who try not to surrender. The following story, "The Faithful Wife of a Politician", is not about a child but about a young woman who discovers the nature of evil surrounding her and hopes that her child will not surrender to it as she has.

"The Faithful Wife of a Politician" provides readers in Japan some insights into the political-social reality of contemporary Sri Lanka, a developing country beset by many problems, among them the problem of corruption.
'Oh what a name, Achlavathie!'.

Even at her name they laughed.

As a newcomer on her appointment as Steno-clerk to the Education Office in Colombo, she was not admitted to the company of the other office girls. Coming from a rural area, being shy of city folks and conscious of her backward qualities, Achalavathie was not disposed to mix freely with her companions. She knew that she was being ridiculed all the time. Yet she was not prepared to shed her genuine nature and embrace new fashions by imitating others just blindly. She continued to apply a lot of oil and comb her hair in the same old style with a parting line in the middle and to let the two long plaits droop from behind. She did not change her pair of plain earings nor did she give up her black lady's umbrella. The only ornament she added was the lady's Roamer Wristwatch in place of the bangle which in turn readily joined the other on the left. And all this offered high fun for the other, talkative office girls, whose preoccupation was finding fault with everybody else but themselves.

"She is still a typical country hussy. No polish at all. God knows when she'll shed those backward ridiculous qualities, the poor thing", they gossipped at the expense of Achala.

"She still wears the Saree short, six inches above the ankles, That's how they are used to, O dear!" giggled Tricksy.

'Nothing like the flared skirt for that thin waist of hers. Not the village Saree, I know for sure', Dalsy was rather sympathetic towards her.

She was very simple and plain and devoid of any sort of make-up in contrast to the others. Yet she was certainly pretty. Naturally there was cause for envy on the part of the other girls. They even went to the extent of calling her names. However all the dingy make-up and diverse imitations noticeable in the other girls failed to attract the attention of many a young clerk in the office when Achalavathie was there. She was very innocent, Yet the other girls envied her.

They sometimes ridiculed her just for the fun of it, yet some others pooh-poohed her through sheer hatred. Achalavathie gave the same innocent smile to everybody. Not that she did not mind their jokes but that was all she could do. Moreover, she was by nature of a disposition to endure anything and everything
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that came her way.

It did not take long for her to get familiar with the office routine and she performed her duties promptly. Not only was she prompt and conscientious in her work but also she willingly participated in most other activities which to her were nothing other than part of the official duties. This was the training Achalavathie acquired even as a School girl.

From the beginning of April that year the subject of conversation that kept everybody enthusiastic was the forthcoming General-Strike. Even the most lethargic elderly clerk who was in the habit of daydreaming most of the time in the office, seated on the chair full of bugs, now shed the lethargy and joined the younger ones to discuss the pros and cons of the strike. Since Wimal Sooriyasena, the President of the All-Ceylon Clerical Union, was attached to the Education office itself, even those who were not in favour of strike action in their heart of hearts were obliged to show sympathy. The Education office was a hive of activity and Sooriyasena knew how to set the ball rolling.

The unexpected circular issued forbidding discussion of Trade Union activities and reminding that everyone should be occupied in office duties during working hours not only irritated but also envigourated them with added momentum.

'This is a trump card to sabotage our movement,' said one with a bitterness he could not control.'

'Why these circulars confined to the lower ranks only? Why are the big-shots exempted?' questioned another.

'They are the people who draw four-figure salaries. What do we get? Why should only we abide by the rules?' was another's query. 'Have patience, my friend. Wait for our Government to come. We know how to deal with them.'

'Our Boss is the Minister's stooge. His only job is to carry tales. How many days of the week is he in his chair for two hours on end?'

'They are all in the same clique. We are being oppressed all the time. There will be no salvation till such time as this out-dated system is shattered. Have patience. Not for long. We know how to deal with them, the reactionaries,' uttered another, quivering in every nerve.

Thus the irritated clerks blew themselves up. Achala listened patiently to all of them. Even on the telephone they talked of nothing but the forthcoming general strike and the mass rally.

The Education Department crowd commanding the largest membership of
the Union marched in a procession to the Galle Face Green, as arranged before hand. This was the first experience of Achalavathie in participating in such a procession and rally. She decided to join them for the simple reason that the organizers could not be disappointed. For good or for bad she considered this as yet another office activity in which her participation was called for.

On seeing the enthusiasm and vigour with which men and women walked in the procession like a troop of soldiers marching to the battle-front, Achala felt as through some new life was injected into her body. She really felt an urge to fight. However scorching the sun was, they walked briskly on the left side of the road in fours or fives carrying banners with slogans written in bold red letters. Achala walked quietly for some time hoping to leave the crowd and to catch the 4.30 train so that she could reach home before dark. But as the procession proceeded, being unable to maintain her quiet disposition any longer, she, too, joined the crowd to shout slogans against the government.

The Galle Face Green was full to capacity despite the blazing sun. Disregarding the fact that Achala’s umbrella was an object of ridicule at one time, some of the girls joined her in order to cover their heads from the sun. When Tricksy joined her to share the umbrella, Achala felt like asking her if it was not too old-fashioned but out of her usual politeness she swallowed the words with a smile. Soon afterwards the sun faded away and signs of rain appeared. When the meeting was about to start it was already drizzling. Without wasting a moment Sooriyasena came running to Achala and asked for the umbrella to be taken over to the stage. He had no time to spare for talking and ignoring the protests of some of those who struggled to rush under the umbrella it was snatched away with a smile from Achala. In fact, Achala was glad that the umbrella was taken away for she thought she herself was able to contribute something to the success of the rally. The girls rushed towards the Ice-cream vendor’s shed near the fence for shelter.

Speeches were made by the Trade Union leaders one after another. Achala would have left earlier had she been alone and had the umbrella not been taken away but her companions were unanimous that they stay behind to listen to Sooriyasena. It was her duty to give their comrade moral support, she herself concluded. And finally came Sooriyasena’s turn. With short sleeves turned up over his muscular fore-arms and the top shirt buttons undone, he was an embodiment of the revolution which he was talking about. Amidst tumultuous applause he
started in a mild tone. In a few minutes he got into his stride and poured forth words like water gushing out through a sluice, distinct and clear. From time to time he paused to cast a glance at the audience to satisfy himself of their reception and to give them time to digest what he said. A real socialist government with the leadership of the proletariat should replace the existing capitalist system …… There could not be any salvation for the working classes under a capitalist government, the main task of which was the exploitation of the masses. Under such a system the only weapon available to the workers was the strike …… Subsequently, he went on to give the history of the Trade Union movement in the country emphasising every little achievement of the past. Time and again Sooriyasena emphasised the sacrifices made by the leaders and mentioned that it was the duty of every citizen of the country to be dedicated to their course. Amidst drizzling rain he was able to keep the audience spellbound for nearly an hour and receive their applause time and again. As for Achala she was certain that such a fluent and convincing speech had never been heard before.

On the following day everyone took the chance of congratulating Sooriyasena on his brilliant performance. Telephone messages flowed too. And Achala on her part did not fail to express her feelings to the hero.

“You made the best speech, Soori. I can remember every word of it, so very convincing. I am sure you could win anybody's heart.’

‘Thank you so much, Achala. And thanks for the umbrella too. It saved us from drowning.’

‘I am glad if it did. I remember how everyone ridiculed me on account of the umbrella at one time.’

‘Don’t take these things seriously, Achala. Are you angry about it?’

She simply smiled without making a comment.

The General Strike which continued for a week was a period of merry-making. But as the strike dragged on the enthusiasm began to fade away fast. Even some of the leaders appeared to be half-hearted. As usual rumours began to spread. Some talked as if with first hand information that some of the leaders had been bribed by the Government, while some others predicted they would be arrested soon. There was no indication of a solution and some were on the verge of returning to work. However things dragged on until the Minister intervened and gave a pledge to the effect that the demands would be sympathetically considered. This was taken to be a victory and the leaders agreed to call off the
Meanwhile, Achala started attending the Trade Union training classes that were held bi-weekly in the T. U. Headquarters. At these discussions she realized how the handful of well-to-do people in her own village continued to exploit the poor including her own relatives. Her hatred towards the land owners of the village, towards the businessmen, Gordiyana Mudalali in particular, increased manifold in course of time. Achala's mother had borrowed money from time to time when she was in difficulties from her cousin Gordiyana. In her old age she had been compelled to mortgage the quarter acre of land, her only possession, to Gordiyana for five hundred rupees in compensation for the debts. When Achala offered to pay back the money with interest and redeem the land to satisfy the mother's only hope it was pointed out that they had no more claims over the land as the time limit had lapsed. That was how Achala left the village after her mother's death and came to live with her only sister. The more she pondered over the past and over the fate of her own relations the more her hatred towards the rich grew. These thoughts made her more and more attached to the Trade Union activities.

Next year Achala was admitted to the Executive Committee of the Education Office Trade Union branch. In fact, her name was proposed by no less a person than Sooriyasena himself. Hence, she had not the courage to decline, though she did not really like to hold any kind of responsibility. She felt as if it was a personal favour conferred on her by Sooriyasena.

'Oh my! I don't know how I could serve as a Committee Member. Such posts should be filled by experienced people and not by novices like me. I felt like refusing, but I remained quiet because I didn't want to let you down,' Achala said shyly when she met Sooriyasena after the meeting.

'I know you are an honest girl. I am sure you could make a useful contribution.'

Though very much pleased and flattered she concealed her feelings. She certainly considered it a personal favour on his part.

On account of her devotion to the Trade Union movement, within herself there grew an unconscious attachment to Sooriyasena too. They often met during and outside office hours to discuss Union matters; they engaged in propaganda work, distributed pamphlets, sold newspapers together. There was no question for her of keeping away from these obligations.
As comrades, Achala and Sooriyasena worked hard together with common purpose and their activities were confined to this alone. However there were those who envied their popularity and even suspected their integrity. Gossipers even took the pleasure in talking of a secret love affair between them. And the girls came forward to tease Achala with congratulations.

'Yes, darling, we know everything. You can hide nothing from us in this office. Congratulations,' one morning Tricksy, the most talkative girl of the lot, broke the ice.

'Oh, yes Congrats ! dear. And good luck.' Harriet offered her hand. Many others tried to shake hands too, all simultaneously. Achala's cheeks turned red and she was almost in tears.

'Don't be silly. Are you mad?'.

'Oh not at all silly. We know. There's nothing wrong in having a love affair. But please don't hide it.'

'Love affair? With whom?' Achala was quivering with anger and shyness.

'You are asking us? Only please allow us to congratulate you,' Tricksy once again tried to shake hands.

'Please leave me alone and get out,' demanded Achala firmly.

'You have given the boot to Satyapala, poor fellow,' said Harriet.

Realizing that she was angry and that she was in tears the girls left her one by one. Achala stayed at her desk and cried for a long time hiding her face under her arm. But the girls would not stop at that. The following morning on arrival at her desk she saw a sheet of paper fixed to the typewriter containing some words in red: 'Wimal Sooriyasena & K. Achalavathie.' Everyone secretly watched how she remained gazing at the typewriter now with a frown and again with a smile absorbed in her own thoughts. And everybody watched how she quietly removed the paper and placed it in the lower drawer under her hand bag.

Achala maintained her reserve for the whole of that day. And she did not attend the T. U. discussion held that evening either. On the following evening Sooriyasena met Achala as usual at the Fort Railway Station, but to his great surprise she looked down blushing. Platform No. 3 was fully crowded with passengers but it was not sufficiently lit. The few dim electric bulbs fixed to the ceiling could not give enough light.

'Why didn't you come for the discussion last evening, Achala?' asked Soori-
yasena. "We were waiting for you."

'I am not going to attend meetings hereafter. I am going to resign from the Committee," said Achala in a rather uncertain tone, still blushing.

'I know what you mean. Don't you understand a joke? Just ignore them. Besides if you keep away our movement will certainly suffer. You must come next time. Right?' Sooriyasena tried to look straight at her face. He saw gloom and disappointment in it. And everybody started rushing forward to squeeze into the compartments of the approaching train.

Now Achala had to decide her own course of future action. She was certain that Sooriyasena was innocent and sincere. She had been admiring many a good quality of his. At the discussion classes he had repeatedly emphasized that one should not be disheartened by false rumours and gossip. She felt as though a part of her body was missing. She was certain that Sooriyasena was not to be blamed. And why should a progressive movement as theirs suffer? 'If you keep away, our movement will certainly suffer,' he had said. These words echoed in her mind time and again.

In course of time everybody appeared to have forgotten that incident and after a few weeks Achala resumed her routine. This incident taught Achala to face society with courage and confidence. She was able to shed most of her timid qualities. She felt as though a new leaf had been turned in her life. Day by day Achala and Sooriyasena began to develop a greater attachment for each other without even being aware of it. Neither knew exactly how their association grew into something more than a mere comradeship. They worked for many hours together and they talked of many things other than Trade Union matters. She talked of her hidden past and he listened with interest. Taking her as his example Sooriyasena explained the meaning of exploitation in the guise of social welfare. Now it was not possible for her to do anything, not even think, without Sooriyasena. And it was the same for him too. She took fancy in admiring Sooriyasena, not only his courageous and straightforward activities but also his speech, gestures, smiles, his good qualities and everything that was his. And as everyone expected, this association which began as Trade Union comradeship culminated in their union in marriage.

It was about this time that a certain fraction of the clerks in the Education Office started criticising the Trade Union. Their attack was mainly directed towards Sooriyasena. Doubts were expressed even with regard to financial matters
of the Union. Sooriyasena was accused of mismanagement and even fraud. Some went to the extent of saying that he even took undue advantage of his position as president in inducing Achala to marry him.

In fact this was an echo of a top-level dispute between the left political leaders. This resulted in the formation of a second Union under a different name.

The December general strike ended in failure because the members of the break-away union returned to work half way through. This was a great victory for the Government, for this was the first time that a strike had to be called off unconditionally. And the Government did not fail to make this a good opportunity to take revenge on Sooriyasena, who was considered to be the man behind all the trouble. However as it was not considered advisable to deal with him directly, they punished him by transferring his wife, Achala, to a distant town. The transfer order could not be altered and taking T. U. action as was customary was out of the question, too, at that juncture. That was something unexpected.

'The A. C. called me today. I was wondering what he was going to say. He talked very nicely to me and at lest said that the transfer could be cancelled. But on condition that you support them. I asked him what he meant by that. He wanted a pledge that you will not lead any strike hereafter...' Achala was impatient to report to her husband what took place earlier that day.

'So what did you say?'

'I was furious. But I controlled myself. I said it was not possible to sacrifice our principles. What else could I say?'

Achala expected a word of praise from her husband. But she found him instead in a pensive mood. It took him some time to utter a word.

'What do you really think we should do, Achala? You sure cannot go away from Colombo.'

'What do I think? How can we act against our conscience, Soori? How can we face society...? I'm going to resign. And then I will have more time to devote to Union work. Isn't that the right thing to do?' She appeared to have decided on everything.

'Resign! I don't know if it's the right thing to do. At times I feel like giving up everything so that we could look after ourselves. I don't see any prospects in this game. I am sick of everything.' 'Are you in your right mind, Soori?,' instantly she retorted and after recollecting her thoughts said firmly. 'Your salary is enough for our living. We cannot give up our principles. I'll tender my resigna-
tion tomorrow itself. That's it!"

Despite the fact that she was expecting a baby, and without a thought for the financial implications, Achala resigned from her job. This was headline news in some of the Newspapers. Leftish papers carried lengthy accounts of both husband and wife with large photographs. When it was realized that her husband's fame and popularity waxed with this turn of events Achala was really pleased with the stand she had taken.

Three months from then, at the General Elections, Sooriyasena contested the Colombo Central Constituency as a candidate of the United Front. As for Achala, she did not want her husband to go in to Parliament. In fact he himself was unable to make up his mind, but on further consideration agreed to do so when he could not turn down the request of the supporters. He was returned to Parliament with a large majority over his opponents.

One left weekly carried an article about the Sooriyasenas attributing the victory mainly to the efforts of Achala. She recalled with much satisfaction the Election campaign, the way she went from door to door of every single poor voter inspite of her pregnancy to canvass Votes. She very much valued the experiences thereby gained. She did not regret at all the fact that her life long savings were withdrawn to the last cent from the Savings Bank.

After the victory they did not fail to revisit every single house and offer thanks. These activities culminated in the Mass reception meeting organized by the supporters. At that meeting the new M. P. was presented with a second hand Morris Minor Car-EY 4885. And Sooriyasena took the opportunity of thanking the voters and pledging once again the selfless dedication to the welfare of the people.

'........ Comrades, this is not a victory of my own. This is a victory against capitalism. This is your victory, a victory of the poor man and the worker. I must mention that our enemies are not only the capitalists. Some of the so-called political leaders-those who disguise themselves as genuine friends of the poor-they are also our enemies. Comrades, beware of them----On this occasion let me pledge that I dedicate my life to the welfare of our brothers and sisters for the liberation of the poor......' Thus he concluded his speech amidst thunders of applause.

The M. P. had to keep himself busy. People flocked round his house bringing all kinds of problems and it was his duty to give a patient hearing to every
single person.

Some came to seek assistance to obtain transfers closer to home, some to obtain jobs, yet others for his recommendation to get an apartment from the National Housing Department or a permit to transfer timber. Some came to complain of the state of Shanties, roads or water services in the area. Many came for such trivial matters as getting a bed for a patient in hospital or a coffin for the dead grandmother at a discount. Invitations flowed for weddings, house-warming ceremonies, opening of schools, laying of foundation stones and so on. And in accordance with their social position and the degree of familiarity they would bring betel, tins of biscuits, packets of cigarettes or some such thing. It was his duty to please everybody.

'Oh, why do you bring these things. Am I not at your service without such gifts.'

'No, comrade, you are not to bring anything hereafter.'

The M. P. would make such an appropriate remark as those articles were placed on to the table beside him. Nevertheless the gifts continued to be brought.

One of the frequent visitors was a timber merchant by the name of Samidhida Mudalali, Although it was not evident that he supported Sooriyasena at the Elections he took advantage of a forgotten distant blood relationship to approach the M. P... In fact the relationship was discovered subsequent to his elevation in social status, but in course of time they were best of friends.

'It appears as if it is a real headache to you, Sir. People don't give you a moment's rest,' the timber merchant suggested at a time when the M. P. was really tired after a day's work.

'That's exactly so, Mudalali. I am sick of this now. You know the story of the good-hearted woman, don't you?' Sooriyasena expressed his disgust.

'A sincere person cannot go very far. These rascals don't appreciate a good man like you, Sir. Ungrateful bastards. Am I not right, Sir?' The Mudalali gave a heartily laugh and continued. 'That won't do, Sir. Pardon me for saying this. I am a very experienced man in life. Don't misunderstand me please. What I have to say is that it is time to think of your own future a little.'

Sooriyasena did not speak out, but his smile indicated total agreement with what was said.

The Mudalali took out the packet of Gold Leaf Cigarettes from his pocket and offered one to Sooriyasena. They both lighted the cigarettes after which the Mudalali relaxed more comfortably in his chair as if he wanted to collect further
courage to speak. First he put on a broad smile and revealed his betel-stained front teeth.

'Times have changed, Sir. Your social position has changed, too. I am one extremely proud of you as a relative. I see people of all walks of life come to you day in and day out - not only the third grade ruffians. I am sure you need a suitable bungalow to live in - neat and spacious. Surely one has to live up to one's social standing. Am I not right, Sir?'

Considering the number of visitors who came to see him there appeared to be some truth in what the Mudalali had said. Even prior to becoming an M. P., Sooriyasena had been contemplating on the desirability of moving into a spacious and decent dwelling not to speak of possessing one for himself. He had even calculated the cost of buying a block of land and building a house. However such ventures had been beyond his reach. Saving so much money was out of the question then. The narrow lane by which he lived did not have space for two vehicles to pass by, let alone a sufficient area for parking. There was no garage for his car either. The verandah of the house could not contain more than six chairs. To be fair to the voters the only alternative was to move into a larger house. It appeared that the Mudalali was quite sensible in making that proposal.

Sooriyasena purposely avoided discussing this matter with his wife for he knew that Achala was quite content with the present house. Having made all prior arrangements he only informed his wife that they were to move into the new bungalow the following Sunday.

'I would rather be content with the present place. We have been living quite happily here since the time of our marriage. Moreover, how can one predict of the future? For how long can we afford to pay a bigger rent, I mean,' Achala expressed her reluctance.

'Times have changed, dear. Don't you consider the number of visitors who come to see me every minute? Shouldn't I live in a place in keeping with my social status? That's what the Mudalali says too. Surely he wouldn't suggest anything bad.' Sooriyasena was rather annoyed that Achala took a different line of thinking. He further retorted. 'It's I who earn the money. Not you. People come to see me and not you.' His expression was so forbidding that she did not venture to express her feelings.

'It's your wish, anyway,' she muttered with a sigh.

Of late, Achala had been dwelling on the painful assumption that she was
being ignored and not consulted on many important family matters. She had shed many a tear alone by herself pondering over these matters. And now he had said 'It's I who earn the money. Not you' as though she was a miserable destitute. These words had pricked her heart terribly and she recollected how all her lifelong savings had been spent for the election campaign. Yet she did not speak a word in retaliation.

Their new residence was a spacious one. Achala subsequently discovered that the house itself belonged to Samiddhidasa Mudalali. Sooriyasena considered it quite a bargain for the monthly rent of Rs. 250.00 was very low. From that time onwards the Mudalali became a more frequent visitor and a very intimate friend of the Sooriyasenas. Their blood relationship, forgotten for over a generation, was revived once again. Also baskets of vegetables, fish, maldive fish, etc. accompanied the Mudalali as gifts on his visits. And Achala often reminded him that he should not bring them, any more.

'Oh forget it, Madame. Rarely do I find such respectable people as you to keep company with. Besides, don't you forget that we are close relatives, Madame.' The Mudalali would give a hearty laugh by way of demonstration of his affection.

In his regular visits the Mudalali would walk boldly into the sitting room and seat himself comfortably on a sofa. Sooriyasena on his part delighted to chat with him for any length of time not paying any heed to the others come on business.

'Now look, Mudalali, these people don’t give me a minute to rest. They come to me for every damn thing. I am sick of all this. I can't talk to a friend!'

'There you are. That's what I have always being saying. You are killing yourself for them, but do you think they are grateful for all this? They want your services even at the labour pains of their wives! If I were you Oh!...'

The Mudalali bit his teeth with anger.

'People voted for you hoping that you would serve them sincerely. The innocent folks want our help,' Achala intervened being unable to bear it any longer.

'Damn the people! As the Mudalali says they would want my services in the labour room and dirty my hands in the arse of every wretched woman,' Sooriyasena retorted with a frown.

'What you should do, Sir, is to instal a dead telephone by your side. I know of a minister who had a thing like that. Then you could please everybody without much trouble. Haven't you heard the story of that telephone, Sir?'
'Yes, I remember something like that. I thought it was a joke.'

'I'll tell you. It's only a matter of fixing a receiver on your table with wires connected to another room in the kitchen. And when you dial a number and talk to some big shot, Madame can give a suitable reply from within. As simple as that, Sir,' The Mudalali observing the interest shown by the M. P. gave a hearty laugh that shook both his shoulders for some time.

'As for me, I don't like the idea at all. I cannot be a party to this nonsense. Why should you deceive the innocent people? We can help them in our own way and not act against our conscience,' said Achala no longer able to listen to their scheming.

'Your sincerity has brought about all this nonsense. It's time for you to realize that you are still not that country lass who married a third grade clerk. When somebody comes here you don't say something to the effect that I am not available and send him away. Can I exert myself so much? Damn your sincerity. I shall get a telephone like that immediately,' Sooriyasena yelled and dashed his feet on the floor with clenched fists.

'Never mind. You blame me for everything. What if the voters come to know? If it leaks out to the Papers?'

'Damn the Papers. What do I care?' Sooriyasena retorted.

Within three days the second telephone was installed with the necessary connections to the kitchen. It was plain sailing after that. Whenever someone came and asked for his intervention in obtaining a job or some such thing, Sooriyasena would mention the name of a person in the relevant department and dial a few numbers. And Achala had to oblige from the kitchen, of course, with terrible heart burning.

'Hello, Education Department——get me the Director——Hello——Is that Mr. Wecrasinghe? This is Sooriyasena M. P. Yes, Yes——'

All particulars about the person would be given with a very strong recommendation. The man would listen with hopes of instant success and a feeling of genuine affection towards the M. P.

'——Next month. O. K. Now remember, this is one of my strong supporters. This must be done somehow or other. Thanks.'

He would leave the receiver with confidence and inform the man that he would be contacted by the Department in due course. The man would bow with much respect and appreciation and leave full of hopes for the future. And simi-
larly with the next person and the next.

Every time that Achala picked up the receiver from within she would tremble with bewilderment. With every word she uttered she was tormented with the guts of miserable dejection. In the absence of an alternative she would however continue to ‘oblige her husband. When the telephone rang it was her duty to pick the receiver up and speak, lest she would let her husband down.

Meanwhile, Samiddhidasa Mudalali showed his interest in obtaining a contract for clearing the jungle in the Polonnaruwa district. Ignoring the applications of two his ardent supporters, Sooriyasena exerted all his influence on the District Land Officer in charge and succeeded in getting the contract for his friend. Sooriyasena considered it his obligation and duty to help the Mudalali. Only the Mudalali knew the amount of money in Lakhs of Rupees that it would bring him within the next two years.

On the very day of signing the documents pertaining to the contract the Mudalali along with his wife visited the Sooriyasenas with a large parcel of gifts. Achala as usual expressed her unwillingness to accept them. The Mudalali gave a hearty laugh much louder than usual and paused for a while to let the walls absorb the echo. Then he coughed softly and looked attentively at Sooriyasena before he broke the Silence.

‘Ah! Madame, you think I am going to stop at that! I am not that ungrateful. I should not hide the fact that this timber contract will bring me a lot of money. It is a mine of gold. I am deeply indebted to our honourable M. P., my blood relation. Now I have to keep my word about the car, the Opel Recard. I have got all the papers here with me,’ he produced a long envelope from his side pocket and opened it. ‘It is a matter or putting your signature, Sir.”

Sooriyasena recollected that the Mudalali had mentioned the gift of his car but was never taken seriously. Anyway with his experience as a politician, he knew how to deal with such situations. The following morning the Opel Recard was found parked in the garage of Sooriyasena. It was on the suggestion of the Mudalali that the Morris Minor presented by the voters of his constituency was thereafter used for hiring purposes. However it was not converted into a taxi in order to avoid derogatory gossip. Achala as usual was not consulted. On hearing that the Morris Minor which she valued so much was being used for hiring purposes, she was thoroughly upset.

‘I can imagine the reaction of those who presented the car. I doubt if this
is the right thing you are doing,' Achala expressed her displeasure when she was no longer able to control herself.

'Who cares the people's reaction? You think I could use this rickety old thing in my duties as M. P.,' Sooriyasena retorted.

Being fully aware of the stubborness of her husband Achala thought it best not to interfere.

However, as wife of the M. P., Achala was called upon to perform a number of duties. She had to see to the upkeep of the big bungalow and the garden. She had to look after the little child. Every now and then the telephone had to be answered. Whenever her husband was away or otherwise engaged she had to receive the people who came to see the M. P. And they expected to be told when and where he could be met. But she really did not know his movements. The days that she was kept informed of his activities had long passed.

He would disappear after breakfast in the Opel Recard and then no one knew where he would be. In her heart of hearts she would have liked to say that she was not aware of his movements. But that wouldn't satisfy anybody. People expected something else. Time and again he would keep away from home for two to three days at a stretch. Even if he were at home he might be not in a mood to meet people. Sometimes he would come home in such a rage that even Achala would not dare to approach him. On such occasions she had to conduct herself cautiously. Occasionally he would come home late in the night utterly drunk. Then she would have to be more careful. On another evening he would confine himself to the office room with Samiddhidasa Mudalali and go on drinking Whisky or Arrack for hours. If Achala showed any disapproval he would retort with such terrible bitterness. 'Get out! I am a drunkard eh! Ooce in a blue moon I take a little drink to entertain a friend. And that too without any expenditure on my part, as you are worried about that?'

By and by rumours that had been spreading to the effect that Sooriyasena was keeping a mistress in one of Mudalali's estate bungalows reached Achala's ears. But she did not dare to question him about that. She was certain that things would take a turn for the worse if she were to do so. It was left to her to embrace the child and shed tears.

'Is Mr. Sooriyasena Home?' enquired a visitor in a rather familiar tone one evening.

'My husband is out at the moment,' she replied boldly.
'You couldn't recognize me, I suppose?' the visitor gave a smile. She thought that his was a familiar face but she could not place him. 'I was hoping to drop in for quite some time. Other engagements prevented me from doing so. Unlike those days I am very busy. Office work, Union work and what not,' the visitor continued.

'Oh how absent minded I am. I could not place you, Mr. Satyapala. Pardon me. You have changed so much. Where are you working? How is life?' She tried to get out of her embarrassment by putting a row of questions. 'Please take a seat. Mr. Satyapala.'

He sat on the chair offered by Achala and took out his pipe from his trouser pocket. Forgetting to light it or not wanting to smoke in her presence he continued talking with the pipe in his hand.

In his appearance and talk Satyapala seemed a completely different man. He wore the same long sleeved shirt which had not been washed or ironed for a long time. The Lenin style beard, long and disheveled hair, half of which had turned grey, and the discoloured teeth—all these features combined to give the appearance of an unsuccessful Trade Unionist. Had it not been for his protruding nose and the shy smile he could not have been recognized.

'Still in the Education. I am the General Secretary of our Union. I am faced with a very big problem. That's why I came to meet Mr. Sooriyasena.'

Satyapala had been transferred to Anuradhapura as a punishment for his Trade Union Activities. It was not his intention to get the transfer cancelled, but he wanted Sooriyasena to raise the matter in Parliament. He explained how it could expose the unscrupulous tactics of the Government. While sipping the cup of tea offered by Achala, Satyapala gave a long account of his Trade Union activities and of Achala's former friends in the office.

Listening to this account, Achala was reminded of the past—her distant past. Every little incident from the day she joined the Education Office as a Steno-Clerk came to her recollection giving her a mixed feeling of joy and frustration. She recollected how she came to be interested in Trade Union work and how the intimacy with Sooriyasena grew. Suddenly her heart was pricked with the thought that Satyapala was the other person who tried to win her love. Then a sudden wave of mental agony overwhelmed and she had to turn towards the wall to conceal her tears.

'I am afraid I have no time to wait. I have to attend a committee meeting
now. Could you please let me know when I should come and see him,' Satyapala rose from his seat.

'Oh! I don’t know, Day and night is the same for him. He is never at home,' she drew a deep sigh.

'No wonder. The life of a politician is like that. But one shouldn’t give up the struggle,' he said emphatically with a smile.

She muttered something which was not quite intelligible to Satyapala.

'Are you married, Satya? These words came out of her lips quite unintentionally. She realized that it was the most irrelevant question one should have asked him only at the sight of his blushing face. It took some time before he could recollect his strength.

'No,' he blushed, 'Yes in a way. I am married to the Union,' and tried to give a smile and rose from his seat.

Leaning against the door frame she watched him stepping out of the house and walking as far as the gate to disappear in the twilight. She heard the wall clock striking six and wondered it was darker than usual. Only then did she realize that a dark cloud had appeared on the sky. She heard the cry of the young squirrels through the flapping of leaves of the mango tree. The big squirrel jumped from branch to branch with its raised bushy tail and crept into the next. Achala knew that the mother squirrel was already in. What a happy family the squirrels were, she thought.

She guessed that it would rain in the night. Flashes of lightning were seen far away in the distant sky and she expected thunder to follow. But to the mother squirrel and the young ones there could be no cause of alarm. They would get the warmth and protection of the big one.

She wondered if her husband would come home that evening. Probably he would but she could not tell. Her eyes ran towards the framed newspaper cuttings which were hung on the wall. She knew that the articles highly praised her contribution towards the success of the political life of her husband. But now? Now things have taken a different turn. All her activities have now been confined to the four walls of the house. She was kept totally in the dark about his doings beyond the four corners of the garden.

Had she not resigned from the job Achala reflected that she could have continued to interest herself in Trade Union Work. There was no doubt of the sincerity of Sooriyasena’s activities then. But she had her doubts about the pres-
ent. Now he did not have the time to think of what was good or bad and what was right and wrong. They were the same to him. The last words uttered by the head of the Department on her resignation echoed afresh in her mind. 'Do you think that all these so called political leaders are as sincere as they make out to be? They are all the time only interested in gaining popularity and safeguarding their position. Even though he be your husband?' He had emphasized the last words and continued, 'And Achalavathie, I am telling you for your own good. You please consider very carefully all the pros and cons before you give up your own job.'

For a moment Achala realized how true the sayings of that old man were. That upholding of principles, dedication and sacrifice—all those ideals had been shattered. Not to speak of anything else, she even doubted even the very love of her husband. He now had no time for family life and did not utter a tender word to his wife or child. It suddenly occurred to her that even in his embrace or his kiss there was a difference characterized by coldness.

Gazing through the window curtain, arrows of darkness pricked her giving a burning sensation within herself and her thoughts again ran towards Satyapala. He has aged himself with a life dedicated to the cause of the workers. He had been a lost rival of her husband in more than one respect. Nevertheless, he had not yet given up the struggle which her husband now in the height of his glory had long abandoned.

It occurred to her that she had sacrificed not only the job but her entire life for Sooriyasena. That sacrifice on her part had not been small. But what of her husband? What has she got in return? Her sister, the only person on earth who would have a tender heart towards her, had long been neglected. Entangled as it were amidst thoughts of the regrettable past and the sickening present she imagined that the only hope for the future was the little innocent child.

Again people who had gathered to see the M. P. were heard talking from a distance.

'Wonder when the fellow would show up tonight. How many days have I wasted in coming here? He has forgotten the fact that we too get a chance once in five or six years. Let the rascal come and beg our votes this time, I sure will get my old woman to use the broom stick.'

'He sure would be sleeping with that prostitute of a woman in the Mudalali's den.....'
'Why can't the lady come out at least and tell us what time he should come?'

'Damn the lady. Don't you know they are all blood-suckers of the poor people?'

She felt it her duty to come out and put in a word to console the people idling away their time. But what was there to be told? Could she honestly ask them not to be deceived by his false promises?

The telephone started ringing again but she did not want to answer. The room was gloomy and frightening. She took the sleeping child and pressed it firmly to her bosom with both hands rubbing her tears in the child's soft hair.

'My dear, my darling, don't follow the footsteps of your Father. Be a completely different person when you grow up. Be good to me and the people,' she sobbed.