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BASIL FERNANDO: FOUR SHORT STORIES OF SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Basil Fernando is a lawyer and poet and short story writer. He was born in October 1944 at Palliyawatte, a village in Hendala, Wattala, Sri Lanka. As a young boy he attended the village primary school. He attended high school at St. Anthony's, Wattala, and St. Benedict's College, Kotahena. In 1972 he graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Ceylon, Colombo. Until December 1981 he was a teacher of English as a second language in the Sub-Department of English at Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda. In 1982 he began his legal practice. Fernando has said: "The practice of law provides a writer with a great deal of information on what is happening in society".

The following short stories provide foreign readers with a great deal of information about what is happening in present day Sri Lanka. Realistic in mode and somewhat ironic in tone, they express Fernando's disturbance at certain unsavory aspects of social life in his country.

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1. THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF GRANDPASS MENDIS\(^1\)

It was a busy man's sick bed. New gadgets all round indicated a newly acquired importance. He seemed to enjoy having to be busy. Visitors came in spite of his sickness, seeking for favours. He was all too eager, not only to assist his visitors but to go out of his way to entertain most of them.

He had a shot-gun injury just below the knee of his left leg. The wound was attended to by the best of doctors in the island. Very high ranking politicians had been in consultation with the doctors over this wound. The wound was one of the casualties of a by-election campaign. This last one had been more violent than earlier ones, and claimed many lives from the winning side. In the campaign of the winning side, Grandpass Mendis played a very vital and a significant role.

On this bright Saturday morning, he sat on his arm chair keeping his wounded leg on the bed and listening to India vs. Sri Lanka Test Cricket match broadcast. Now and then, the telephone rang. It was always some important person who spoke. Less important persons did not dare to speak to him over the telephone. When they wanted a favour, they came personally, choosing a time at which more important persons were not likely to be there. If anyone happened to be there, they would wait patiently, not showing in any way that they were irritated or tired.

One of the persons to drop in early this morning was Sylvester,

\(^1\) Grandpass is a place close to Colombo. In Sri Lanka, criminals and other members of underground society use nicknames including the name of the area the particular "thug" dominates.
an athlete who represented Sri Lanka at the Olympics not long ago. He held National and Asian titles for a number of events. He had applied for Sports Supervisor's job at a University and had been referred to Grandpass Mendis, to get the matter expedited. Sylvester had met Mendis already a number of times over this.

"Come, Lamaya!"2) Grandpass Mendis greeted Sylvester happily. "Why was Lamaya not seen at the by-election?" asked Mendis and, not waiting for an answer, going on: "We had a real fight; see my leg". "Is it really bad?" asked Sylvester showing concern. "No Lamaya, nothing to worry, it is just a very small thing". Sylvester, in the short time he had known Mendis, had noticed a change in the face of Mendis, when he was thinking of his past, when he really wanted to say: "I have seen the worst." He did not talk about his past often, but everybody knew and talked about it. In the long years in the underworld, he had suffered many injuries, being close to death more than once, been to prison, faced many trials, knew many criminal lawyers, had been in hiding, guided many a hireling and, today, had come up to this position, when almost everyone seemed to "need" him. He knew that it is the coward who ultimately wins the underworld game, and lives to enjoy it. A thug who believes in his vocation is doomed to early death. Mendis had known many such. They all helped him to come up, as long survival builds up an aura of strength around underworld personalities. "No, Mendis Aiya,3) I would have come, but what's the use? We went to every-

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2) Literally "boy", lamaya is used to address a younger person or someone in lower status.
3) Literally "elderbrother", aiya is used to address an older person. In the Sri Lankan underworld, the powerful are referred to in this way.
thing, took part in everything but got nothing” Sylvester said, trying
to draw Mendis's attention to the purpose of his visit. “Of course, I
know, I know” said Mendis, as if saying “Well, it’s true there had
been mistakes”. “Ah! Lamaya, do you know?” Mendis brightened, as
if suddenly remembering something, “Yesterday those University
Yakku 4) burnt the Security Posts. The Vice Chancellor Mahaththaya
spoke to me over the phone”, Mendis said, in a matter-of-fact way.
“The Police have not gone there. I spoke to the D. I. G. immediately,
gave him a bit of my mind, told him our boys are in trouble. The
Vice Chancellor rang me up later and thanked me for sending the
Police soon.”

Sylvester recalled seeing in a morning newspaper a news item
about University students burning some Security Posts at Pannipitiya
University, after some students were assaulted. The news item said
that the University was closed down indefinitely after these incidents.
Sylvester had heard earlier from students who came to the Oval
grounds for practice that this Vice Chancellor was not a very much
qualified person but a long-time political activist, who had been ap­
pointed over senior Professors and Lecturers. He had tried to victim­
ize the students on political grounds, provoked a number of student
strikes and, once, even did not come to the University for a few
weeks, for fear of his life.

“The Vice Chancellor is a good Mahaththaya 6) I have known
him for a long time; and in fact I was the one who got his child
admitted to the Queen’s College”, Mendis said, as if to show what he

4) Yakko means “devil”; it is usually used in an effort to intimidate people.
6) Mahaththaya is used in addressing a person of high rank.
was capable of doing. Sylvester needed no proof of this; as he had seen during his few visits to Mendis the number of people who came in very good cars, to plead with Mendis to get their children admitted to some good schools. Mendis always treated these people courteously. There was talk that the money Mendis accepted for such undertakings included the shares of some persons holding high offices.

"Don't worry, Lamaya, your stars are good. The Vice Chancellor might drop in any time today, over these troubles. Get ready to go for your job". Sylvester knew Mendis meant what he said and left assured of his job.

As he left, he thought of the Moscow Stadium, his run for victory. Had he ever thought then that all such struggle for excellence had to end this way ?...

* * * * *

2. "WE SHALL WIN SOME DAY"

The year 1983 was an unforgettable one for Sri Lanka. It was also an unforgettable one for Miskin, the Officer-in-Charge of the Police Station of Rawatte, Soyza the Member of Parliament and Benedict, a Municipal Council Member. This three-man combination was an unforgettable one for all the people of Rawatte.

Miskin was the youngest. He loved pleasure and, like most Police Officers, looked for some opportunity to be rich soon. Benedict, the oldest of the three, was avaricious, cunning, and crude. The Member of Parliament knew the weaknesses of both and was determined to make good use of them when the time came.

The time came in July 1983, when almost all Tamil houses in Rawatte went up in flames. Really, they were set on flames, and it was Benedict who did it with a gang he had gathered round himself
quite some time before, for such purposes as to cast illegal votes, to throw stones at strikers, to remove posters of political opponents, to give nuisance calls and do other similar activities which had an aura of legality by this time. Miskin assisted the spread of this violence by chasing away the victims who came to make complaints to his Police Station, asked subordinates not to answer the telephone calls and indicated loudly that he and his men would take no notice. The member of Parliament was at a safe distance, watching, advising the Tamils who sought his advice to fly to safety.

Meanwhile, at Rawatte, there was a festival of looting. Thousands were on the road. It lasted for two days and two nights, at the end of which there was nothing more to loot and no more Tamils to be seen in the area. Now, Miskin was there on the road to enforce law and order. There were arrests and Miskin’s subordinates were demanding from the looters their share of the loot.

Now, the centre of activity was at the M.P’s house. He was advising the Tamils who gave telephone calls from great distances that action would be taken against all who violated the law. However, he advised them to sell their properties as he could not guarantee that this violence would not recur again. Maybe, they could not get the prices that they might have got earlier but, in time it could be even worse. Of course, he could help to find buyers. He could talk to Benedict, the Municipal Member, who has just started a land sale business. Soyza repeated many similar things all throughout the day.

Meanwhile, rumours were going on at Rawatte that Miskin had taken so much gold that, after giving some to his wife and mistress (everyone talked about this mistress), he had given generously to some of his friends. He had taken so many other things too, ac-
According to the rumours. He now could retire and live the life of a very rich man. One other story said that Miskin had ordered a lorry driver to take a lorry load of looted valuable goods to a place given by him on the very first day of the violence and when the driver had done that, he had shot the driver and thrown the driver's body into one mill that was burning, so as to erase any evidence that might come up at any inquiry which might be held later.

On this very same third day, Benedict was at the house of a Notary most of the time, giving him instructions on the deeds to be written, the monies to be paid and the values that must be mentioned in the deeds.

The day ended after the three met at a large luxurious house in Colombo to drink to the future prosperity of each other.

The fourth day, the Member of Parliament had to get up very early when the door bell of his house was repeatedly being rung. The house was lighted all around all throughout the night for security reasons. Soyza could see from the place, which he had arranged in a way to see who was outside without being seen, that it was one of his very strong supporters who was ringing the bell. There were a few old women from Rawatte standing behind his supporter. Soyza came to the door, opened it and, before he could speak, his supporter was already speaking. "Sir, it is a very funny thing that is happening, our supporters are being arrested by the Police. They are also searching the houses".

"How could that be, I'll ring up Miskin Mahaththaya" and he turned, but before he could take a single step, one of the women was talking.

"We spoke to Miskin Mahaththaya. He says he can't do anything, as orders have come from a very high place".
Soyza pondered for a moment, "I knew, I knew some disaster would happen". Before he could finish, one of the women interrupted. "My son says that if Soyza Mahaththaya and Benedict Mahaththaya did not call them, they would never have done this".

"Now, they say that there is going to be no bail".

"Aiyó, my son has never been in prison".

"My husband will die of shame".

"Only our children will get caught, real rogues are escaping". Those were some of the things Soyza heard. At this, the supporter who brought these women turned to the women: "Don't talk like that. Our Mahaththaya will do something".

"Yes. Yes. I'll do what I can", Soyza said, as if wanting the women to go away.

"I'll come later" the supporter told Soyza and, turning to the women, said: "We'll go now and come later".

"We'll go to Benedict's house" one of the women said and they all turned. Soyza closed the door quickly.

When the group was going to Benedict's they met others too coming to Soyza's and they too joined the group to go to Benedict's instead. When they came to Benedict's house, there was a large crowd already. The doors of the house and even the gate at the entrance were closed. Some person who was kept there said: "Benedict Mahaththaya has gone to Colombo for some important business. It is not possible to say when he'll come back".

"Isn't even Nona there?" someone asked.

"She's not well and gone to her mother's house with the children" was the person's reply.
"Munta maha leda," a woman replied loud.

Meanwhile, there were arrests of hundreds, and it was the poorest that were taken.

During the fourth day, the rumours spread that inquiry was going on against Miskin. Some even said he was already arrested. Some said he was to be questioned about some murders. Another story was that Miskin’s wife had left the country carrying a lot of gold and money.

Fifth day was a happy day for all three. They met at the most luxurious hotel in Negombo, rather early. The Hotel had been arranged by Miskin and every other entertainment to follow was organized by him too.

It was wine, women and song right royally. Benedict was the first to get drunk and he was the most talkative. "I told you, I told you", he said. "We will win some day". He was a Catholic and so was Soyza. He would have heard a similar phrase when he was at school.

Soyza, more discreet, did not like such loud outbursts. He whispered something to Miskin. Soon, Benedict was seen retiring to a room where an attractive woman was awaiting.

Rest of the day was for the other two, in the beautiful sur-

7) "These fellows have got the biggest sickness or they are dead". (Translation given by Basil Fernando).

8) In Catholic schools in Sri Lanka the song "We Shall Overcone" was often sung. Basil Fernando comments: "My point is to show the "culture" of a certain class of people, a class come up in recent times, of people who are not even aware of the significance of the words they use; they use the best of everything for the worst possible purposes imaginable. I am just trying to expose their crudeness."
roundings of Negombo, overlooking the wonderful lagoon and the blue sky. To complete their lustful day, two women were waiting.

It was wine, women and song—all free.

Two days later Miskin was transferred to another Station and some time later interdicted. Most people in Rawatte said that this was just an eye-wash and that he would live rich ever after......

Now, two years have passed since these events. Miskin was allowed to retire with all the benefits and he now carries on a prosperous business. A Notary doing search at the Land Registry discovered a number of transfers of lands to the name of Benedict’s wife. The Member of Parliament, having bought a luxurious house in the capital itself took his family there. He comes to Rawatte now, only once a week or so. It is said that his house at Rawatte will be transformed into a Tourist Guest House. The speculation is that one day he’ll be a Junior Minister or even a Minister.

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3. PORK SELLER’S ADVICE

"Chandra Mahaththaya asked you to come to the police station tomorrow at 9 a.m.". That was what the police constable said. Dhamadasa Mudalali79 pondered over this a number of times on that Monday evening. "What is this for?" he asked himself. All that he know about Chandra Mahaththaya was that he was the Headquarters Inspector of the Navagama Police Headquarters. He had no occasion to meet him personally.

"Is Mahaththa trying to help him in some business deal," he asked himself. There has been a number of such higher police officers

79 Mudalali means businessman, merchant, trader.
who had done that earlier. Most of them used him as a cover to get over some legal problem on their way to some business, such as transport of illicit timber or gems and some similar things. He would always oblige when such requests were made, knowing that their protection was necessary for him.

"Could it be some other problem?" Dharmadasa thought it over rather mischievously. He had done nothing criminal. Of course, all business involves various ways of circumventing the law. He had done everything carefully. It had been a long time now when as a school boy he fled from home at Matara, determined to find his way. Life had been harsh only for a short time, when he did all sort of odd jobs. Soon he had a little shop where he sold hot tea to workmen. He had taken the little shop on rent, but it did not take him long to be its absolute owner, buying it for a song as it were from the previous owner, whose sole desire was to drink kassippu in the morning and in the evening.

Then he made a habit of buying bankrupt businesses such as tailor shops, boutiques, grocery shops and anything else that came his way. He rarely bought straight. He'd first take it on rent. Some problem would always crop up for the owner, who'd ultimately convince Dharmadasa that it was better to buy it completely. Then Dharmadasa would oblige, but of course on his own terms.

By now he had built his world, his connections. He knew now to back all important political parties. He had access to all, almost all important personalities in his area and even some big politicians in national politics.

It would not be all too easy for any Headquarters Inspector to put him to trouble. So he decided to stop thinking about it, had his dinner and then went to sleep.
Next day sharp at 9 a.m. he was there at the police headquarters, waiting outside the door of the H.Q.I's office; he dressed in a white sarong and shirt as he usually did for important occasions.

It was only after he had waited for about half an hour or so that he was called inside. He went in, with a full smile on his face. But the H.Q.I., a dark, tall, fat man, who may have been forty or so, did not even raise his head. Dharmadasa walked up to the desk and waited. The H.Q.I. was writing something without even looking at the visitor. After two or three minutes, the H.Q.I. raised his head and looked at Dharmadasa, as if to ask who the hell are you? (was he pretending? Dharmadasa wondered for a moment). Dharmadasa smiled again, this time purely out of habit. "Why the bloody hell are you smiling". the H.Q.I. yelled. Dharmadasa was taken aback. The smile had already disappeared. "Kneel down you bastard", the H.Q.I. yelled again. Dharmadasa was already kneeling, before the H.Q.I. could finish his shout. 'Now he would either kick or slap,' Dharmadasa thought as the H.Q.I. got up. Slowly the H.Q.I. came close to him. Held him by the ear, "Now look up" he shouted, pulling Dharmadasa's ear. He instantly looked up, saw the white ceiling. It is rather old, Dharmadasa thought. "What do you see?" the H.Q.I. asked pulling the ear harder. In spite of the pain, Dharmadasa thought of an answer that might please the H.Q.I. But he couldn't find any. The H.Q.I. released his ear and held him by the hair. "Can't you talk or are you blind?" he was asked again, while the H.Q.I. shook his head by the hair. Dharmadasa was still afraid to say anything, as it might be a wrong answer.

"Do you see a fan there? Look" the H.Q.I. pulled Dharmadasa's hair again. No, he couldn't see, no there was no fan--was he sure? Dharmadasa wondered.
"Yes or no?" the H. Q. I. asked again.

"No sir, no fan" Dharmadasa replied.

"Good, your eyesight is good" the H. Q. I. said. "Now look round, (which Dharmadasa instantly did) tell me what you see".

Dharmadasa saw two long wooden benches and the floor that had not been polished. Once again Dharmadasa shrewdly remained silent.

"Do you see any chairs?" the H. Q. I. asked, pulling the hair again.

"No sir".

"No, no chairs. Do you call this a Headquarters Inspector's Office?"

Dharmadasa now saw the reason why he had been called.

The H. Q. I. released Dharmadasa's hair and asked him to get up. He went to his chair and sat.

"Ten thousand", the H. Q. I. was showing all his fingers, "Ten. That's what I need to put this place in order. Only ten thousand. "Now, when are you bringing it?"

Dharmadasa remained silent.

"Tomorrow, at this time, here. Did you understand?"

Dharmadasa nodded.

"All right, you can go now".

Dharmadasa left He brought the money the next day.

He kept the story to himself, as he was too ashamed to reveal it to anyone. Then, once a month or so, there was a call, and Dharmadasa always obeyed. On the last occasion, he was called to the H. Q. I.'s house. When he went in he was not even asked to sit down. The H. Q. I. brought a ticket book and handed it over to Dharmadasa, "You see, this is what is called stupidity", the H. Q. I. said. These
School Principals think we Police officers have money”. He paused.

“Twenty-five tickets,” he went on, “Hundred rupees each. A hundred rupees to see a show. What a world we are living in.” Again, he paused. “I can't afford it, I just can't!” He walked up and down. “So, I am giving it to you”. He looked into the eyes of Dharmadasa, who looked down.

“No hurry, you may give the money in a week,” he said. Then, taking the ticket book he tore out three tickets. “This is for three of us, my wife, my child and myself, with your compliments”. Then he handed back the book to Dharmadasa, who put it inside his shirt pocket.

As he walked down, Dharmadasa wondered: “Are there any books to explain this type of thing?”

On the way, he met Kaithan who sold pork at the junction on Saturdays and Sundays and did other business on other days. Dharmadasa invited him for a drink at his house. Kaithan agreed and followed. On the way, and as they took drinks, Dharmadasa told his story to Kaithan. It was the first time he told this to anyone. Kaithan showed no surprise at all at what he had heard. “I'll tell you a story, so that you'll know what to do” Kaithan began. “My twelve-year-old son was selling pork last Sunday at my boutique. Then Chandra Mahaththaya came with his wife. My boy did not know who he was. He was not wearing the uniform. Mahaththaya took five kilos of pork and gave only thirty rupees, just the price of one kilo.” Dharmadasa was listening intently, wearing an expression: “Ho, what to do?. That is how he does.”

“My boy counted the money”, Kaithan continued, “and said to Mahaththaya, I gave five kilos, you have given money only for one my boy said. Mahaththaya was with his wife, as I told you; he felt
ashamed. He left all the five kilos of pork, took his money back and walked away with his wife, angrily.” Dharmadasa was listening with a look in his face as if he wanted to ask, "Did he not assault your boy?.

"Then, after about a half-an-hour or so, he came with a group of police officers, in a jeep. They put all the pork in the jeep and kicked my boy, put him inside the jeep and took him to the police station. There, they again kicked him and put him inside the cell. That urinesmelling dirty cell. That's where they put my boy" Kaithan said, and spat out of the window.

"That's the problem, this is what they do" Dharmadasa said helplessly. "No, no let me finish”, Kaithan continued, “When my elder boy heard about this--he is twenty now--he quietly got on his bicycle and went straight to Chandra Mahaththaya's house. He was there. In a very soft voice my boy said: You release my brother within an hour, or one of you will be dead', pointing his finger at Mahaththaya, Nona and his son, and he got on his bike again and came back home.”

"Didn’t Mahaththaya kick him?" Dharmadasa asked. "No, Mahaththaya released my boy and all the pork too". Kaithan laughed.

"Well, that's what I'll have to do some day” Dharmadasa told himself. He kept on thinking deep into the night, forgetting to sleep.

* * * * *

4. THE WAY TO SUCCESS

"There's a piece of land, very cheap--eighty seven perches, with a little house, nicely built--bricks and tiles, for just one lakh”, Ranjit told Wilbert his friend. Both had some money in hand and wanted to make a little more money out of that.
"But why so cheap?" Wilbert asked. That's in fact what anyone would ask. "It's another case of having taken a loan to go abroad and being unable to pay", Ranjit said. It was such a common story that much explanation was not needed for anyone to understand the situation. But they were both reluctant to take advantage of a situation like that, though they were convinced that something must be done to make a little money, if they were to remain in at least the same station in life.

"No harm just meeting the chap and talking", Ranjit said, knowing the mind of his friend. It was a Saturday morning: they both had nothing to do. So they got on Wilbert's scooter to go and see the property.

As they came to the main road, they passed many cars on the way. Someone driving a Lancer waved at Ranjit and passed. "Isn't that Seneviratne, the A. S. P. "Wilbert asked.

"Yes, yes" Ranjit said, "Those are the people who know how to be successful". Wilbert knew his friend and remained silent, waiting to hear some more.

"You know where he is living now?" Ranjit asked. "No, where's that?" asked Wilbert, "In one of the houses of a Tamil who fled during the '83 troubles" said Ranjit. Though Wilbert could imagine the rest, he wanted to provoke his friend a little.

"So, what's wrong, if someone sells cheap?" Wilbert asked."Sell? What a fool-does this type of officer ever buy?" Ranjit was saying indignantly. "Poor fellow fled to Jaffna-Now Seneviratne has moved there with his family to protect the property". Ranjit laughed loud as if to make Wilbert understand the 'realities' of the Third World as he was fond of saying. "Now even if the Tamil gentleman wants to sell that property to somebody, he will have a hard time in getting vacant
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possession”, Ranjit was saying as if to drive the moral of his story through the skull of his friend. "So that’s the way to success”, he said and muttered slowly, “bloody bastards”, and became silent.

Before long, they turned from the main road, came another half a mile or so and stopped near a statue of St. Sebastian. “Where is Somaratne’s house?” Ranjit asked a middle aged woman who was walking towards the co-operative shop a few steps away. She looked at him as if she did not understand. “Iscola Mahaththaya’s house” Ranjit said. “Oh! that’s just a turn from here”, she said pointing to a byway, “When you go a little distance, you’ll see a jak tree, a huge jak tree, the house behind that. That’s Iscola Mahaththaya’s house”, she said.

Ranjit turned on to the byway and went slowly as it was a sandy road. Soon they saw the jak tree and stopped. At the sound of the scooter stopping, Somaratne came to the verandah of his house, and, seeing Ranjit, smiled.

As they went to the house, they noticed it was a newly built house, in fact part of a house. They could see the foundation of the other part. The small house was kept neat. A little boy of about two years moved with a stick in his hand, trying to hit some imaginary object—“Maybe a bull”, Ranjit thought.

They were asked to come in and to sit. Somaratne said something to his wife and she went out. It was the way wives are asked to make tea. "What are the boundaries of this property?” Ranjit asked Somaratne, pointing out at a few coconut trees some distance away, saying, "Up to that place”, and pointing to a jak tree and a mango tree, he once again said "Up to that place, and up to that well”. He pointed to the opposite side. "It is more than eighty seven perches”,

10) Is cola is schoolmaster.
Wilbert thought.

"Now, tell me frankly" Ranjit said, in his characteristic way, "do you really want to sell this?" At this the teacher looked somewhat embarrassed. He had expected these two prospective buyers to condemn the property, as a preliminary step towards a bargain.

"Really, I don't want to sell, but what else can I do?" he said more to himself.

"Would you mind telling your story to us" Wilbert asked, more like a journalist. Somaratne, who was standing all this time, sat down slowly. To add to the ceremony, his wife, a young woman of about 26 years, brought tea and served them.

"I don't know whether you know I am a graduate", he said. "I passed out five years back. Then I got married, three years back, more or less", he corrected himself, looking at his wife. "I had saved something and I got some money as dowry too. With that, I bought this property. But as we had no money to put up a house, we lived on rent. Then our friends advised us to get a loan from the Mortgage Bank, which we did, and that's how I put up this part of the house". Obviously, being a graduate, he knew the art of stating something briefly.

"So, the problem was when you had to pay back the installments of the loan," Wilbert joined in, as if to say he knew the rest of the story. "Yes, that was difficult, with a little child too, to be brought up", Somaratne said. "Then one of our relatives began to send people abroad for jobs. If he was not a relative, I would not have got caught". Somaratne obviously did not like himself to be rated as a fool. "He said, 'Find twenty five thousand rupees, I'll find you a job, where you can earn that in two months'. He mentioned a number of names of places in Oman where there were a few vacancies for pe-
sons recruited by his Company. He said 'Get the money in a week, I'll send you within a month'. So you see, I had my dreams suddenly awakened", Somaratne said and continued. "Then somebody said there's a person who gives money on ten per cent interest, ten per month and took me there. But I must say this", Somaratne said, "That man was a gentleman. If I got the money from a real money lender, I don't know where this would have ended", he said with some relief. "He explained everything to me: he said don't take money, till you are absolutely sure--he warned me, I must admit. But I went to him a number of times and even approached him through his friends. At last he said, 'O.K. don't blame me later, as you insist. I'll recommend you to a friend of mine. My friend is no money lender. He is a Senior Lecturer in a University, who saved a little money when he went to Europe for his post-graduate studies. So he just wants to make a little money--and that's all. He does not want anybody's property. If you fail to get the job, I'll be in trouble too', he said. Anyway at the end, I got the money" Somaratne said, "and transferred this property in the Lecturer's name, as is the custom now to get it re-transferred when I pay up".

"Yes, that's the way now" Ranjit said, "nobody writes mortgages, except in banks. Anyway to get back to your story, how much have you to pay the Lecturer now?"

"You know, I am lucky" Somaratne said, "really I have to pay thirty six thousand on interest alone, together with the original thirty. But the Lecturer has sent word to me asking me only forty for everything, nothing for future months". He stopped as if happy about the way things had ended. A little later, Ranjit and Wilbert left Somaratne, promising to consider his offer. They both had in their mind one question. "Will they be helping this man by buying this
property?"

They came to the jak tree, got on to the scooter and turned. Somaratne went back to his house silently.

When they came to the main road, where they first met Seneviratne, the A. S. P.,¹¹ a thought suddenly flashed in Ranjit's mind. "If Somarathe took the loan from Seneviratne, instead of the Lecturer, where would Somaratne end? Perhaps in jail, till the property is sold to someone else" he answered himself, keeping both the question and the answer to himself.¹²

¹¹ Assistant Superintendent of Police.
¹² The point of this story, Basil Fernando says, is that "ironically enough, even what the good-hearted liberals (teacher, et al) do to help a poor person is no help at all. The process of impoverishment continues anyway, and the result is that most solutions to poverty (such as going abroad for employment) end in creating worse problems".