

## The Clever Wife

Koman was a very poor barber of Kadalundi, a village not far away from Kozhikode, from where the Zamorin Raja ruled. He was an itinerant barber, visiting the houses of his clients early in the morning and attending on them. Unlike the present day salons which have mirrors on all the three or four walls in which one can easily watch how the barber's scissors and razors worked on the heads or faces, Koman either borrowed a mirror from his client himself or pulled out a small mirror from his bag for him to look at and give his nod of approval or give direction for a 'final touch'.

Most of his younger clients preferred to hold the mirror in their hands to keep a close watch on Koman's fingers and how they worked, snip-snap. He would not wait to be called. He had fixed "routes" and called at the houses on his way, expecting his clients to be ready to make use of his service. Sometimes they would be away or they would be ill, necessitating a visit on a later date. If he failed to go on that day, they would be cross with him whenever he went they would send him away. He would invariably hear them say "Useless!" As he picked up his bag and turned towards the gate. So much so he began to lose his patrons and he would go home without many coins jingling in his pocket.

Koman and his wife Gomathi slowly began to move to days of poverty and hunger. One day he was taken aback when he heard her curse him, 'Useless fellow! How are we going to live?' He kept quiet that day, hoping that she would change her opinion when he come back with enough for two square meals. He picked up his bag and went out without waiting for his daily lunch-packet. He did earn some coins, but knew that they wouldn't be sufficient to buy provisions for even one decent meal for two. There were no more visits that day, and he went back and placed the coins in his wife's hands, expecting her to manage things for the evening and for the next morning. Gomathi took one look at the light heap in her hands and remarked, 'Stupid!'

Days passed and there was not one day when he did not hear some description of him or the other from his wife. One day, he came home rather early in the evening and he did not have much to hand over to his wife. 'You useless fellow! Do you have any idea how we're going to stay alive?' He could not help remonstrating that day. 'What can I do? You're always calling me useless and stupid, saying that I've never done anything right or I shall never do anything right!' He threw his bag into one corner and went out to have a wash. Gomathi waited till he came back from the well. 'You may starve if

you wish, but I've intention of doing so.' 'If you think you're cleverer,' said Koman, 'why don't you think of something?' 'Yes, you can beg,' said Gomathi 'Beg?' asked Koman, horrified at the very thought of himself going about with a begging bowl, instead of his barber's kit. 'Beg, where?' 'Go to the Zamorin's palace,' she said as if she was throwing a challenge. 'His daughter is soon getting married, and I'm sure he'll be in a mood to be kind to everybody. Ask him for something.'

The next morning, he started but without his bag. It was a long walk, but he went straight to the Zamorin's palace and joined the queue of people waiting for an audience. By the time his turn came, he had decided to ask for 'something' just as his wife had suggested. 'Barber Koman!' the palace attendant called out as he was ushered in. Koman bowed low, hands folded. As he raised his head, now slowly opening his palms, and looking at the benign face of the Zamorin, he heard the Raja ask, 'What do you want, Koman?' 'Something, your majesty!' Koman blurted out. 'Something?' The Zamorin had a perplexed look on his face, 'What do you mean? Tell me exactly what you want'. 'Anything, your highness,' said Koman, folding his palms once again in supplication. The Zamorin thought for a moment. He then looked at his minister, who went near him. 'What's your order, Sire?'

The Raja whispered into the minister's ears, 'He's a barber, must be serving many in this land. Give him that five acres lying waste. Let's see whether he can raise a crop on that!' The minister appreciated the Zamorin's wit. Someone who 'crops' heads now to raise a crop! He called one of the attendants and said, 'Take this man to that wasteland on the eastern side of the palace.' He then turned to Koman, 'This man will show you five acres of land. That is a gift from His Majesty to mark the princess's wedding. Come back and tell us what you're growing and how much. Now go, happily.'

Koman had enough reason to be happy. He expected only 'something' from the Raja, and see what he had got! It was something that can be seen and measured. His joy was a little dim when he was shown the wasteland, but it was 'something' with which he could shut the usual foul mouth of his wife. But Gomathi's reaction was unexpected, 'Land? And that, too, wasteland!' she exclaimed, 'What are we going to do with it? We don't have a plough, we don't have bullocks! How then are we going to plough the land, sow the seeds and cut a crop months later? And how shall we eat until then? Go back to the Zamorin and ask for money, that's what we need right now!'

But Koman refused to approach the Zamorin once again. 'You've to think of something to do,' he told his wife. Gomathi thought for a while. 'Come with me to the land, and when we get there, do exactly as I do,' she said as she followed her husband to the plot of the land the king had gifted to him. When they reached the place, Gomathi

began to go around, turning a stone here and stamping the ground there, putting on expressions of disappointment and frustration alternately. Whenever Gomathi saw anyone coming near the place, she would sit down on the ground and pose as if she was wasting away her time. Koman did the same thing, though he had no idea what it would all lead to. When she turned a stone to peer into the ground, he did the same with another stone; he too stamped his feet at different places; when she sat down, he also sat down, sometimes wiping away the perspiration on his forehead. Some passers by would stop for a while, curiously watching the strange goings on for sometime and then go their way.

A group of four men, however, watched the couple for a longer while. One of them went forward and asked Gomathi. 'Madam, what're you doing here in the hot sun? And you look worried?' Gomathi looked up and looked into the man's face for a moment longer, hesitating whether she should disclose her intentions. She slowly said, 'Thank you for asking me, but I shall tell you only if you promise that you won't tell another.' She paused, till she saw the man nodding his head and leaning to hear her softer words. 'We're poor people, though our forefathers were quite rich. My grandfather had this habit of burying pots of gold in this field somewhere, but we just can't find them. The land is so big and we don't know where to dig.' 'That's interesting,' remarked the man, twirling his long moustache. He was actually a thief. 'Well, all good luck to you and your husband. I hope you'll find the treasure before long.' He went back and joined his group, taking care not to utter a word to his friends till they were far away from the couple waiting for their luck in the hot sun. Gomathi waited till they were out of sight and told Koman, 'Come on, we shall go home and come back tomorrow.'

When the couple returned the next morning, they were not surprised to see the place dug up all over. Presumably, the four thieves had not been idle. They must have come back to dig up the place in search of the pots of gold which were supposed to have been lying buried there. 'See, how I managed to get the whole place dug up.' Said Gomathi. 'We now only have to go to the market, buy some seeds and sow. I can foresee days when we'll have not one but three square meals every day. What do you say, my useless husband?' 'Well done, my clever wife!' said Koman, putting on a big smile.