

The Sea Is Bound

An original novel

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CHAPTER 1

The Sea Is Bound

At twenty minutes to one in the morning the sand was cold. It ached in the arches of his feet, and it was the one thing about the work that nobody outside it ever believed — that a man could stand on a beach in the Gulf of Mannar in the third week of February and want his sandals. The heat would come. It came every day at about nine and it stayed until four and it killed two or three people a season, mostly old and mostly in the streets behind the bazaar. But the hour before the fleet sailed belonged to the land breeze, and the land breeze had come forty miles across scrub and salt flat and dead thorn, giving up its heat the whole way, and by the time it reached the water it had nothing left to give.

Anthonimuthu walked down through the boats with his sandals in his left hand. He had worn them from the house and he would put them on again in an hour, and between those two moments he was not supposed to be a man who owned sandals. Nobody had ever told him this. He had worked it out at nineteen, watching where the divers' eyes went when he passed them barefoot, and had never once tested whether it mattered.

Eleven hundred boats lay on the sand and in the shallows in a line four miles long, and every one of them had a lamp. They were not lamps in any decent sense — a tin scooped out, a wick of twisted rag, coconut oil that burned dirty and smelled like a kitchen accident —

but eleven hundred of them made a thing you could see from the Superintendent's bungalow on the ridge, a crooked yellow seam laid along the edge of the black. The smoke got into your clothes. It got into the fibre of the coir rope so that later, out on the water at noon, a man hauling would smell last night's lamps on his own hands.

The noise was not what people expected either. Visitors came for silence, or for chanting. What there was, was the flat clatter of eleven hundred crews stowing gear they had stowed a thousand times: stones going down into the bilge with a knock, baskets, the slap of a wet coir line coiled fast, a man asking another man where he had put the thing he himself had put somewhere. Somebody laughing. Somebody being sick from toddy, quietly, behind a hull. Two men arguing about a number.

Anthoni went through them and they made way for him without ceremony, as men make way for a cart.

At the head of the beach, above the tide line, the tally-clerk had his table and his hurricane lamp and his slate. His name was Fernando, he was from Negombo, he had done this for six seasons and he hated every hour of it. Each boat carried a number painted on the bow in whitewash, and Fernando's job was to write down which numbers went out — which sounded simple until you had watched him do it in the dark with eleven hundred hulls moving and a man at his elbow insisting that boat 704 had gone out already when it had not.

"Fourteen minutes," Fernando said, without looking up.

Anthoni nodded and went past him to the water.

There was a place. It was not marked and it was not sacred and it had been chosen for a reason so practical it embarrassed him: two hundred yards south of the flagstaff the beach shelved a little steeper, so the surf broke closer in and made a shorter, harder noise with a longer gap behind it. In that gap a voice carried. It was the whole art of the thing, and his father had given it to him in one sentence on a night in 1890 when the old man was already coughing blood into a

cloth and had decided to be useful about it. *Don't shout. Wait for the lull and put it in the lull.* A man who shouts sounds like a man shouting. A man who speaks quietly into the exact silence between two waves, and is heard four hundred yards off, sounds like something else entirely.

Anthoni had spent thirty-five years learning the lull on nine different beaches, and it was the only part of his trade he was actually proud of.

He stopped at the edge of the wet sand. He took a mouthful of water from the small brass pot he carried, held it, swallowed it. This was also practical. The fourth movement had four hard consonants close together and a dry mouth cracked on them, and a crack in the fourth movement was the kind of thing men remembered all season.

Forty yards north of him, Muthukaruppan was already standing in his own place with his own pot and his own lamp-boy, and had not looked over, and would not.

They had been doing this beside each other for forty years. The government retained two binders, one Catholic and one Hindu, and both were required, and both were paid out of the same line of the estimates, and there was nothing in the contract about which spoke first. In practice Anthoni always spoke first, because Karuppan's took four minutes and his own took twenty-eight seconds, and if they began together the fleet would have to listen to Anthoni finish and then stand around for three and a half minutes in the dark, which looked wrong.

So he went first, and then he waited. It was the shape of every fishing night of his life: twenty-eight seconds of work and three and a half minutes of standing still on cold sand with his head slightly down.

The divers thought the standing still was prayer.

He watched the swell. Two came in short and hard and then the third ran up flatter and drew back long, and he had it, and he opened his mouth in the gap and put the words in.

"Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and to the sand under it.

"The boundary is the Cheval bank, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again. Nothing crosses that line.

"Inside it there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners, and there are two who bind. Nobody inside it has a name.

"By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun."

Then he shut his own mouth and stood there, and the sound of him went out over four miles of boats, and eleven hundred crews stopped what they were doing for as long as it took, and one man somewhere down the line said *amen* far too loudly and was hushed by everybody near him.

He did not believe any of it.

He had never believed it. Not as a boy holding his father's pot; not at nineteen, three months after the funeral, when the Assistant Government Agent's clerk had written *Anthonimuthu, s/o Sebastianpillai, Parava, of Vaipar* in a ledger and paid him sixty rupees against the season and he had walked home understanding precisely that he had been given money for a noise; not in 1903 when there was no fishery and no money and he had begun to think he might have preferred it to be real; not tonight. The sea was not shut. The sea had no mouth. If there were sharks out on the Cheval tomorrow morning there would be sharks out on the Cheval tomorrow morning, and if there were none it would be for the same reason there had been none last season and the season before — a reason he did not know and had never heard anybody give properly.

None of this was a secret. It was not even interesting. Karuppan had known it for decades and had never once made trouble about it. His own daughter had known it since she was about eleven, from how he changed the subject. Half the older boat-owners on this beach had

a fair idea and did not care, because what they wanted from him was not information.

He had thought once, years ago, that a day would come when he would have to decide what to do about it. That day had not come, and he was fifty-four, and he had begun to suspect it did not exist.

Up the beach, Karuppan began.

His was a different animal — not a translation of Anthoni's, not a version of it, but a separate object made by a separate family for separate reasons, running on another principle entirely. It was sung, in part. It named the water eleven times in eleven ways and it named the sand and the shell and the thing under the shell; it went out and out in long unhurried loops, and in the middle of it there was a passage where he did nothing but list things — in the dark, for a full minute — and Anthoni, who did not believe a word of his own, had never in forty years been able to hear that list without the skin moving on his forearms.

Tonight the fourth loop broke. Karuppan coughed — twice, dry, with a scrape at the bottom of it — took a breath and picked it up again in the right place. Down the beach nobody moved. Fernando's pen went on scratching.

He is sixty-one, Anthoni thought, and put it away.

When it ended there was that pause of about three heartbeats that always came, and then eleven hundred boats went into the water at once and the beach turned instantly into a place of work again. Men shouting numbers. A hull grinding off sand. The tally-clerk's voice going up into a register of pure hatred: *one at a time, one at a time*. Boat 209 nearly took the stern off boat 640 and there was a short exchange about it that would be continued in a toddy tavern in six weeks.

Anthoni stood where he was and watched them go, because leaving early looked bad, and because he liked it.

The land breeze was steady and they did not need to row far. The sails came up in ones and twos and then in dozens, dark on dark, and

the lamps went with them out into the black — a long spreading drift of small yellow lights, thinning, getting lower, until it was not possible to say which were lamps and which were stars, and then there was a period of perhaps ten minutes in which lights stopped existing, one after another, as each boat came onto its bearing over the Cheval and doused, and after that there was nothing out there at all.

They would anchor in the dark and wait four and a half hours for the sun, and at sunrise the gun on the Superintendent's launch would go, and at noon when the water turned dirty it would go again and they would come home.

He put his sandals on.

Karuppan passed him twenty feet off, going up the beach with his lamp-boy, and they did what they did: acknowledged each other with a movement of the head so small that a stranger would have missed it, and said nothing. Forty years. It was not hostility. Anthoni could not have said what it was.

The camp was awake behind him because the camp was always awake — twenty thousand people on a spit of sand that had held nobody at all six weeks ago. He walked up Third Cross Street between the mat huts. The Public Works Department had pegged the streets out in December with a theodolite and a chain, dead straight, thirty feet wide, and had nailed up tin plates with the names lettered in English and Tamil, and the effect at one in the morning with lamps behind the mat walls was of a real town that had been dreamed by a clerk.

At the corner where the government enclosures began he slowed, out of habit, and looked at the *kottu* over its wall: a floor of clean white sand, swept, waiting, with the first day's government share not even landed yet. In ten days you would not be able to stand here. In three weeks the smell would be in the drinking water and in the rice and in his daughter's hair and nobody would mention it any more, and the not mentioning was the strangest part of it.

The house was a hut, twelve feet by eight, mat walls on a coconut frame, and it was the same hut in the same trade every season, and the rent for six weeks was eleven rupees, and it was robbery.

Rasathi was awake. She was always awake; he had given up telling her not to be. She had the accounts book open on the box and a lamp turned down low, and she was not writing in it.

“Karuppan coughed,” she said.

“You could hear that?”

“I can hear everything from here. You know that.” She turned the lamp up a fraction and looked at him. Seventeen and his wife’s face, exactly, and none of his wife’s willingness to leave a thing alone. “Twice, in the middle. He lost his place.”

“He found it again.”

“That isn’t the same as not losing it.”

“No,” Anthoni said. He sat down on the mat and worked his sandals off again, and his arches hurt, and he thought about the thirty-seven years between his own age and hers, and about how she counted things.

“Was it a good sail?”

“It was a fine sail. Land breeze from the east, steady. They’ll be over the bank by three.”

She wrote something in the book that was not accounts, and he did not ask.

He lay down and did not sleep, and lay there doing the arithmetic he did every year on the first night: three hundred rupees for the season, and twenty oysters from every boat, of which some would give twenty and some would give nine and swear it was twenty, and against that the eleven for the hut and the rice and the water at four annas the pot because there was no water within eleven miles of this place, and Vellaisamy, and Vellaisamy, and Vellaisamy.

And under the arithmetic, flat and cold and entirely without drama, the fact he had lived on for thirty-five years and had never said aloud to anybody:

Out there in the dark, four miles offshore, over a bank of shell in nine fathoms of black water, eleven hundred boats were riding at anchor waiting for a gun. And not one man in one of them would have gone if he had not stood on the sand and spoken for twenty-eight seconds.

Not one.

That was not faith and it was not fraud, and he had never in his life found the word for what it was.

CHAPTER 2

Twenty Thousand People and No Water

Rasathi was in the water queue by five past six and it was already the wrong end of it.

The camp had been built in eleven days by men who had never seen each other before and would never see each other again. If you stood at the top of Bazaar Street at seven in the morning with the sun coming flat off the sand into your eyes you could believe it had been there always; if you stood in the same place in six weeks you would be looking at nothing but pegs and rubbish and a smell.

The queue was the important fact about Marichchukkaddi and nobody wrote about it. They wrote about the pearls. There was not a well within eleven miles that would give anything but salt; the fresh water came in carts from the tanks at Kondachchi, forty carts, and each cart carried its casks, and the casks were sold by the pot at four annas, and the price went up the week the population went past twenty thousand and would go up again. So every morning of the fishery about two thousand people stood in lines on the sand and waited, and the entire romance of the pearl banks of Ceylon stood on that queue like a house on its footings.

She had two brass pots and a place forty-third from the cart.

She put her feet in the shade of her own shadow, the only shade there was, and let the breath out of herself steadily until she was empty, and then she took a breath and closed her mouth and began to count.

Counting was not the point. The point was that she had been forbidden the water at nine years old, on a Tuesday, by her mother and then by her father in that order, for reasons that had been given as one thing and were in fact another; and that in the eight years since, nobody had been able to forbid her to be *ready*. So she counted. Standing in the queue, kneading rice flour, walking the eleven-hundred-yard length of the bazaar with a pot on her hip. Her number was a hundred and ten. She had got it to a hundred and ten in December and it had stayed there since, and she knew — she was not stupid about it, she had asked questions of men who did not know they were being asked questions — that a hundred and ten standing still on a beach was worth perhaps seventy in the water with a stone on the line and your ears going and your chest thinking about it. Seventy was still more than most.

At ninety-eight the cart moved and the queue shuffled and she lost it, and started again from nothing, because that was the discipline.

The street she walked back along was called Fourth Cross Street and there was a tin plate at the corner that said so, in English and in Tamil, nailed to a coconut post at the exact height a tall man's eye would find it. The Public Works Department had pegged the whole town out in December with a chain and a theodolite: eleven streets running back from the beach and five running across, thirty feet wide, dead straight, drainage cut on both sides. They had put up a hospital of sixteen beds, a jail which was a fenced square with a roof over one corner, a court, a post office and a telegraph office with an operator from Mannar who had been there since the fourteenth and had not yet been paid. There were licensed toddy taverns, numbered; rice merchants and cloth merchants; and, in a double row on Bazaar Street that had gone up faster than anything else in the camp, thirty-one

jewellers and pearl agents from Colombo and Bombay and Tuticorin, sitting behind small tables, waiting.

The jewellers had arrived before the divers. They always did.

And behind all of it, on the landward side where the wind would take the trouble away from the town most of the year, the government enclosures — the *kottu* — five walls of thorn and mat and beaten earth, floored with white sand, empty. This morning a man was still working on the wall of the fifth, tying thorn, unhurried, and Rasathi looked over into the enclosure and thought, as everyone in the camp thought at least once in the first fortnight: *it is so clean*.

Nobody in the camp was under any illusion about what the kottu was for. The government took two-thirds of every oyster raised, and two-thirds of two million oysters cannot be opened by hand by anybody, so the government did not open them. It put them in the enclosures and left them in the sun with a guard on the gate, and in ten days the shells came open by themselves because the animal inside had rotted, and then the whole putrid mass was washed and washed and sieved down through the stink until the pearls dropped out of it.

It was the most sensible arrangement anybody had ever devised and it meant that the great pearl fishery of the Indian Ocean smelled, for five weeks of every six, like the inside of a dead thing.

“Ten days,” said the man tying thorn, cheerfully, seeing where she was looking.

“Nine,” Rasathi said. “They land the first share this afternoon.”

He thought about it, and conceded it with his chin, and went back to the wall.

Her father was asleep when she got back with the water, flat on his back with one arm over his eyes, and would sleep until nine and then be useless and irritable until two. He worked for twenty-eight seconds a day at forty minutes past midnight and it took him a whole night and half a morning to do it, and she had stopped finding that funny when she was about thirteen.

She swept, she cooked, she filled the small pot and the big pot, she put the rice sack out on a plank because the sand had things in it, and she opened the accounts book.

The book was hers. It had been her mother's, kept badly, in a rounded upright hand with the figures crowded; Rasathi had kept it since 1919 in a smaller hand with the columns properly ruled. It said, at present, that they had nineteen rupees and eleven annas, that the hut was eleven for the season and was paid, that rice was up, that water at four annas the pot for six weeks for two people would come to something between thirty and thirty-five rupees, and that the three hundred rupees of the season's fee would be paid in two instalments, one on the fifteenth day and one at the loosing, less deductions, and that she did not know the size of the deductions, and that when she had asked her father about the deductions in November he had said *there are always deductions* and gone out.

She had left a page blank after that entry. She had a use for the page and had not yet decided whether to write on it.

Mrs. Croos arrived at nine — the hour a woman arrives when she wants to find a household with its face not yet on.

She was somewhere over fifty and had a good white cloth and a bad eye for the value of things, by which Rasathi meant a very good eye indeed, and she sat down on the mat with the manner of someone continuing a conversation she had been having on her own all the way up Fourth Cross Street.

"Your father is asleep."

"Yes."

"Of course he is. It's a hard night." Mrs. Croos said this warmly and with total insincerity and looked around the hut, pricing it. "You keep it very neat."

"Thank you."

"The Vaz family have their nephew here. From Chilaw. The one I spoke of." She let a decent interval pass, half a second. "He has an interest in two boats."

“An interest.”

“A share in two boats, and he is not a diver, which is the point, he is on the shore side of it. A shore man.” Mrs. Croos leaned in a little. “Twenty-six. Educated to the sixth standard.”

Rasathi went on grinding, and said, evenly, “Which two boats?”

There was a pause of a quality she enjoyed very much.

“I would have to ask.”

“If he has an interest in two boats, they have numbers,” Rasathi said. “It matters which. If they’re the Vaz boats out of Chilaw they’re 812 and 813 and they’re new and they’re carrying eight divers each and they’re mortgaged, because a new boat of that size is four hundred rupees and the Vaz family sold land in September, and I know they sold land in September because the notice was read in the church at Mannar and my father was there.” She wiped her hands. “So it isn’t an interest in two boats. It’s an interest in the debt on two boats.”

Mrs. Croos looked at her for a while with an expression that Rasathi would think about, on and off, for the rest of her life: not offended, not defeated. Recalculating.

“You are very clever,” Mrs. Croos said at last, and it was not a compliment, and it was not entirely an insult either. “Clever is a thing a household will pay for once. It is not a thing a household will pay for twice.” She got up and shook out her cloth. “I will speak to your father when he is awake, child, and not to you. And you might think about your hands.”

“What about my hands?”

“They’re a working woman’s hands and you’re seventeen,” said Mrs. Croos, and went out into the glare, and was pleasant to somebody in the street before she had gone four steps.

Rasathi looked at her hands for slightly longer than she wanted to.

Then she took the small pot and went out to buy rice, because it was better than sitting.

The hospital was on the second street back, sixteen beds under a mat roof with the sides rolled up for air, and at half past ten in the morning of the first fishing day there was nobody in it but an apothecary's assistant re-folding bandages that had not been used. That would change, and every year at about the same rate: nothing for four days, then a man with a crushed hand, then heat cases, then dysentery once the camp's own filth caught up with it — and under all of it the divers, who did not come to the hospital for anything you could see. They came in weeks two and three, walking oddly, or not walking, and they said the sea had kept a part of them, and the apothecary wrote *rheumatism* in the book because there was a column for it.

Rasathi knew the phrase and had never heard anybody explain it. She had asked her father once. He had said that some men's bodies did not like the deep water. It was not an explanation, and she had known at the time that he knew it was not one.

At two o'clock the fleet came in.

You heard it before you saw it: the whole camp shifting, the bazaar emptying downhill, the shore-side men going down with the counting boards and the government agents with the tally slates and the divers' side with theirs. The sea breeze was up and the water had gone the flat opaque green it went every afternoon, and the boats came in on it in a broken line with their sails full and hard, and grounded, and the noise went up.

She got herself a place at the back of the crowd on the ridge where you could see along the beach.

The counting was done by hand on the sand, in threes. Two-thirds and one-third is not an accounting principle on that beach. It is a physical action performed by a man's hands, hour after hour, oyster by oyster, in the sun. He takes three. Two go to the government heap. One goes to the divers' heap. He takes three. Two, one. Two, one. Four men to a boat's pile and a government clerk and a divers' clerk standing over them, and by the end of the first week every counter on

that beach had his hands wrapped in rag because live oyster shell has an edge on it like a broken bottle and forty thousand of them will open you to the bone.

The counts were called out and chalked up as they came, and the numbers went along the beach faster than the men who carried them.

Boat 411 — two thousand two hundred.

Boat 78 — nine hundred.

Boat 812 — one thousand six hundred and forty.

Boat 305 — three thousand one hundred.

Nine hundred. Twelve hundred.

A boat from Kilakarai with eight divers in her and a reputation — four thousand two hundred, and a shout went up for it, and then the number after it was eleven hundred and the shout died.

Rasathi stood on the ridge and did the arithmetic in her head, which she could not help doing, and which was the only thing about herself she thought might be worth money one day. Eleven hundred boats. If the average was somewhere near eighteen hundred — and looking at the chalk it was not eighteen hundred, it was nearer sixteen — that was under two million oysters on the first day of the fishery, when the bank had not been touched for four years and the boats were fresh and the men were fresh and the whole camp had been sitting here for a fortnight eating money and waiting.

Nobody on the beach was saying anything about it, out loud, on the first day. But she watched the boat-owners come up off the sand and she watched what their faces did on the way, and she noticed that the thirty-one jewellers on Bazaar Street, who had opened their shutters at two like everybody else, were the only people in the camp who did not look at the chalk boards at all.

She went back up to the hut and lit the fire and found that her father was awake, sitting outside with his back against the post, looking down the hill at the water with an expression of complete neutrality.

“Sixteen hundred to the boat,” she said.

“Fifteen hundred and eighty,” he said.

She sat down beside him. Out on the flat green water the last of the fleet was still coming in, and the counting would go on until dark, and tomorrow at forty minutes past midnight he would stand on the cold sand and say twenty-eight seconds of words that he did not believe, and eleven hundred boats would go out again.

“Is it a bad bank?” she said.

Her father did not answer for long enough that she knew he had one.

“It’s a bad first day,” he said.

CHAPTER 3

Nine Fathoms

Boat 246 came to her anchor a little after three in the morning, and after that there was nothing to do for three hours but be cold.

Sinnappan lay in the bottom of her with his back against the stones and his cloth pulled over his head and did not sleep. Nobody slept. That was the thing nobody told you in your first season: that the fishery was mostly waiting, in the dark, on water, in a boat too full of men to lie down in properly, and that a diver's morning began four hours before he did any diving. The Cheval was four miles out. You could not work it after noon, because the sea breeze got up then and turned the water over and put a haze in it you could not see the bottom through; so you had to be over the bank at sunrise, and to be there at sunrise you had to sail at one, and to sail at one you had to be aboard by midnight. As arithmetic it was unarguable. It made no sense at all to a body.

There were thirteen of them aboard. Five divers, five tenders, the boy Chinnathambi who was eleven and did the water and the baler, an old man called Susai who was both a diver and, when it suited him, the boat's conscience, and Mohideen Marakkayar, who owned her.

Mohideen sat in the stern with his legs crossed and did not speak for the whole three hours except once, to ask whether anyone had put the second basket aboard, and to receive the answer, and to say nothing further about it. He was somewhere over fifty and had owned

boats out of Kilakarai since before Sinnappan was born, and he had a method of counting that Sinnappan had watched for three seasons without understanding. He did not count oysters. He counted the divers going down and the divers coming up and he did it without appearing to look at anybody, and at the end of a morning he would say a number that was within fifty of the true one before a single shell had been touched.

The stones lay along the keel where a man could reach them. They were granite, rounded by the sea and then squared off a little by hand, about thirty pounds each, with a hole bored through and a becket of coir spliced into it — and below the becket, a loop big enough for a foot. The whole apparatus of the deepest work in the Gulf was a stone, a loop, and a rope. The basket lay separate on its own line, a net bag on a cane hoop the width of a man's shoulders.

Sinnappan's stone had a chip out of one corner from a season ago. It was not his stone in any legal sense. It had simply become his.

Down the line — a mile of it, perhaps more — the noise of the beach had stopped, all at once, about twenty minutes before they sailed.

It was how he knew. It was how he had known for three seasons. He had never once heard the binding spoken. He had never even seen it done, because 246 lay off the south end and the binders stood at the flagstaff, and by the time a man was aboard with his stone stowed he was a good half-mile from the place where the words were, and words do not carry half a mile against a land breeze. What carried was the absence. One moment there were eleven hundred crews shouting at each other about rope, and the next moment there were not, and the not went on for a while, and then there was a second stretch of quiet that was much longer, and then somewhere up the beach a man laughed and it started again.

The first quiet was the Catholic. The second, the long one, was Karuppan's, and Sinnappan had heard often enough that it was sung.

He knew the words without ever having been taught them, out of three years of hearing them said near him and never to him. He had them from other divers, who had them from other divers. In the last of the dark, with nothing to do, he ran them through for luck, and got them wrong, and had been getting them wrong for three years.

"Inside it there are no men," he said, half aloud, to nobody. *"Only divers, and tenders, and boat-owners."*

Susai turned his head. "That's not it."

"That's it."

"It's not it. There's no *only*." The old man's voice came out of the dark somewhere forward, unbothered, the tone of a man correcting a boy's grip on an oar. *"Inside it there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners, and there are two who bind. Then he says —"* and here Susai stopped, and when he went on he had flattened his voice out so that it did not sound like his own, *" — Nobody inside it has a name."*

Nobody in the boat said anything for a moment.

"That's the part," Susai said. "The rest is the fence. That's the part."

Sinnappan lay looking up at a sky he could not see. He was nineteen years old and this was his third season and he was quite certain, in the way that requires no thought at all, that the sea was shut. Not because of God, whose arrangements he had never followed closely, and not because of any story about the binder's family. It was a fact of the same order as the tide. Somebody said the words and the mouth of the sea was shut until the second gun, and then men went down into it forty and fifty times, one after another, into water with things living in it, and came up. That had been true last season and the season before and in every season any man in this boat could name. You did not have to believe it. You only had to look at what happened.

What he did not know, and had no reason to think about, was that a mile up the beach the man who had said it had been thinking about the price of hut rent.

* * *

Vellaisamy's clerk had come along the sand at the auction of the boats in December with a ledger under his arm and an umbrella he did not open, and he had found Sinnappan and told him what he owed, and Sinnappan had known already, but there is a difference between knowing a number and having it read to you.

Eighty-four rupees.

The original was forty. He had taken it in the second year there was no fishery, when his father's fever went on into a fourth month and his mother had two girls at home and nothing in the house, and forty rupees had seemed at the time like a wall you could put between your family and the thing that was coming for them. It had been a wall for about nine weeks. His father had died anyway, in the way that made the money look, afterwards, like something Sinnappan had set fire to.

Forty had become fifty-two, and fifty-two sixty-eight, and now it was eighty-four, and the arithmetic by which it did this was never explained to him and was not, he suspected, complicated. Vellaisamy did not shout and did not threaten. He came to the beach at the counting and stood beside the divers' heap with his clerk, in clean cloth, in the sun, and took his portion off the top of a man's share in front of everybody, and was polite about it. It was the whole of his method. He never once had to say what would happen if a man did not pay, because a man who did not pay was not a man he lent to next year, and there was no next year without him.

A good season was forty or fifty rupees to a diver in 246, after the boat's share and the tenders' and the fraction that went to the widows' fund. Two good seasons and he was clear.

There had not been a good season since 1921.

* * *

The gun went at twenty past six and the sun came up behind it.

There was a specific noise the fleet made in the first minute after the first gun, and it was not the noise people expected. It was a knocking. Eleven hundred stones going over the side within a few seconds of each other, and the ropes running out over the gunwales, and the boats knocking against their own gear — and then, underneath all of it, from every direction at once, a fainter version of the same thing that came up through the hull.

Sinnappan sat on the gunwale with his right foot in the loop and his left leg hanging.

He fitted the nose-clip. It was horn, cut and bent by a man in Kilakarai who did nothing else, shaped hot to the bridge of his own nose, and worth precisely nothing to any other man in the boat. Every diver aboard had one and every one of them was useless to everybody but its owner.

Arulappan had the stone-line in both hands and his heel braced. He was thirty-something, from Vaipar, and he tended Sinnappan because two seasons ago somebody had put them together and nothing had gone wrong.

“Ready?”

Sinnappan took three breaths that were not deep, and then one that was, and let it half out, and nodded, and let go.

You do not dive. That is the first correction. A man goes into the pearl water standing upright with one foot on a rock and his hands on a rope, and he does not swim down, he *falls* down, and the falling takes about eleven seconds. In the first two the light goes from grey to green. Somewhere around four fathoms the water stops being warm on the skin and becomes a temperature you do not have a name for, and the pressure gets into the sinuses, and you work the throat — a

hard swallow, twice, three times — and if you have got it right the ears open with a small dull click and you go on down, and if you have got it wrong you are in trouble at seven fathoms with your hands full of rope.

Ignatius had got it wrong for a fortnight.

At nine fathoms the stone struck and Sinnappan stepped off it and the tender felt that through his palms and hauled the stone straight back up, because it was needed at the surface, and it would come down again with him next time. The stone worked harder than the man.

The bottom was flat and pale and stony and there was very little to see because there was very little to be seen: a grey floor, a haze of green above it, and the shell.

He did not pick them. Nobody picks. The oysters were cemented to the rock and to each other in plates and clumps, and a diver went along on his hands with his face a foot from the bottom and got his fingers under an edge and broke it away and swept it into the bag at his neck, and moved, and did it again. It was farm work performed upside down at a depth that would burst a lamp. Within an hour every man on the bank had opened the backs of his fingers in three or four places, and the water went into the cuts and made them white and painless, and the pain would arrive at four in the afternoon and stay all night.

And in the whole of that green place there was the knocking. Stones landing all around him on the bank, near and far, a dozen a second, dull and everywhere. It was the sound of eleven hundred boats working, heard from the only place it could be heard properly, and it was the reason Sinnappan had never in his life been able to explain to anybody at home why the bottom of the sea was not lonely.

Sixty-two seconds.

He did not count. Nobody counts down there; you have other work. His body counted, and when it had counted enough it told him with a small pressure behind the eyes, and he took the basket rope in

his fist and gave it two pulls and Arulappan brought him up hand over hand with the bag, and he came out into the white air on his back with his mouth already open.

The first breath is not a relief. It is a fight. It goes in and turns immediately into three more and then five more, and for about a quarter of a minute a diver hanging on the gunwale of his own boat sounds like something being killed. Then it eases. Then, if he is young, he swears at somebody.

“Eleven,” said Mohideen from the stern, to nobody.

* * *

By nine o’clock Sinnappan had made twenty-two descents and his hands had stopped feeling like his.

By eleven he had made forty-one, and the water had begun to go dull, and the bag was coming up light.

It was the whole grief of the first day and it was in every boat on the bank. The bottom was clean. Not empty — there were oysters, there were plenty of oysters to look at — but they were small and they were thin and there were long stretches of rock with nothing on them but old dead shell and a scatter of spat you could have covered with a hand. Four years the bank had been left. Four years, and a diver who had worked it in 1921 came up off it now and did not say anything, and the not-saying went round the fleet all morning like weather.

Ignatius came up at about ten with blood in his left ear.

He hung on the side and let it come and washed it off with a handful of seawater and did it again, and then hauled himself in over the gunwale and sat down on the thwart with his forearms on his knees and breathed.

“It’s nothing,” he said, before anybody asked.

“It’s blood,” said Sinnappan.

“It’s nothing. It’s been doing it since Tuesday.” He tipped his head over and knocked the heel of his hand against the other side of his skull, twice, the knock a man gives a bottle. “It clears.”

He was twenty-six and he was the best diver in the boat and it was not close. He had a wife at Vaipar called Anjala and a son four months old whom he had seen for nine days, and the son had no name yet, and this was, at that particular point in the history of the world, the most important unresolved question in Ignatius’ life.

“She wants Antony,” he said, going back over the side. “For her father.”

He came up. He went down. He came up.

“My father was Savarimuthu,” he said, some descents later, as though the conversation had not stopped. “Forty years in a boat. Two daughters buried. You know what my wife says? She says Savarimuthu is a long name for a small child.”

“It is a long name for a small child,” Susai said.

“He’ll grow.”

The second gun went a little after noon. The water was already ruined; you could see the haze come across the bank from the north-west like a shadow under a shadow. The stones came up for the last time and the sails went up and eleven hundred boats turned for the beach with the sea breeze behind them, and for about an hour the Gulf of Mannar was the finest place on earth to be alive, and every man on the water forgot what was in the bottom of the boat.

They landed a little before two.

The counting was done on the sand in threes, two to the government heap and one to the divers’, and 246 came out at one thousand four hundred and ten.

Nobody said anything. Mohideen had said fourteen hundred an hour and a half earlier, out on the water, without looking at anything, and had turned out to be wrong by ten, and there was no pleasure in it for anybody.

Vellaisamy's clerk was standing at the divers' heap with the ledger, in clean cloth, in the sun. He was there all afternoon. He was extremely polite.

Up on the ridge above the counting there was a girl with a chalk board's worth of numbers going past her, doing something with her lips that was not speech. Sinnappan noticed her as a man notices anything at the end of a fourteen-hour day, without deciding to, and did not think about it again for four days.

He walked back to the lines with his hands held out from his sides because closing them hurt now, and Ignatius walked beside him with his head tilted so his left ear was uppermost.

"April," Ignatius said. "I'll settle it in April."

CHAPTER 4

The Estimate

The chit came at half past eight in the morning, carried by a peon in a red sash who had walked the whole length of Bazaar Street in the sun to deliver a piece of paper to a man who was asleep, and who waited outside the hut in the shade of nothing at all until Rasathi came out and took it.

The Superintendent of the Pearl Banks presents his compliments and would be glad of a few minutes of Mr. Anthonimuthu's time at his convenience this afternoon.

Anthoni read it at half past nine, sitting on the step with his eyes gummed and his mouth tasting of the night, and then read it again.

“At his convenience,” he said.

“It's manners,” Rasathi said.

“It's four o'clock.”

He went at four o'clock.

* * *

The government camp stood at the north end, off the beach, on the only rising ground the Public Works Department had been able to find, and it was the one part of Marichchukkaddi not made of mats: a kachcheri of sawn timber and corrugated iron with a verandah all round it, a treasury with a padlock the size of a hand, the courthouse, and behind them the bungalows where the officers lived — raised,

floored, screened, with tatties hung on the weather side and a boy whose entire employment was to keep them wet.

Anthoni put his sandals on for it.

Coming up off the sand into that compound was like walking into a different climate and a different century in the space of forty yards. The glare stopped. The noise stopped — you could still hear the camp, twenty thousand people and eleven hundred boats' worth of camp, but it had been moved somewhere behind a wall. Under the verandah the air was ten degrees cooler and smelled of kerosene and hot iron and, faintly and unmistakably, of paper.

The government brought paper to a place with no water.

A clerk sat at a table in the outer room with a punkah cord tied to his ankle so he could work it without stopping writing, and he had a saucer of water beside the inkwell and a rag over the mouth of the bottle, because in that heat and that dryness ink went to gum in a morning and a man could ruin thirty rupees of stationery by leaving a cap off.

"Anthonimuthu," Anthoni said. "For the Superintendent."

"He's on the beach. He'll be ten minutes." The clerk did not look up. "Sit."

Anthoni sat on the bench by the door where thirty-five years of men had sat.

"The first instalment," he said, after a while. "Of the binding fee."

"The fifteenth day."

"That's the sixth of March."

The clerk did the sum on the edge of the blotter, actually did it, with the pen, and looked at it. "The sixth of March."

"Less deductions."

"There are always deductions," said the clerk — so exactly, word for word, what Anthoni had said to his own daughter in November that he sat back against the wall and looked at the ceiling for a moment.

* * *

Ferdinand Wace came in at ten past with his hat already off and a canvas bag in his hand that had wet sand on the bottom of it, and he said, "Ah — Mr. Anthonimuthu. Forgive me. I've kept you," and shook his hand, which not many men in that compound would have done, and then went straight past him to the shelf and put the bag down and washed his hands in the basin, all in one movement, still talking.

"How's your leg? Your knee. Last season you had a knee."

"It's the same knee."

"They're always the same knee." He dried his hands. "Sit down, please. It's cooler by the window and you can watch a man being wrong about a boat."

He was forty-one and looked older in the face and younger everywhere else, sunburned across the nose in a way that had plainly been happening since 1913, and he had been Superintendent of the Pearl Banks for twelve years, which meant he had been out on this water more days than most of the divers.

The room was a marine biologist's room that had lost an argument with an accountant. On one side, the Government Agent's estimate ledgers, the fishery returns, a wire tray of indents. On the other, five shelves of glass jars, each labelled in a neat sloping hand, each with shell in it. Some was full-grown oyster with the shine still on the inside. Some of the jars, at the end, seemed to Anthoni to have nothing in them but grey water.

Wace saw him looking. It was the trouble with Wace. He saw everything except the one thing.

"Spat," he said. "Young oysters. That one's from the Cheval, September. There are four hundred and some in it." He took the jar down and turned it and something in it moved like dust settling. "In September of 1919 I took a sample of the same size off the same ground and there were nine thousand."

Anthoni looked at the grey water.

“That’s not a bad year,” Wace said. “A bad year is normal. I’ve had bad years since I came. That” — he set the jar back on the shelf, precisely, in its own ring of dust — “is a bank that is not making any more oysters.”

“The men brought up fourteen hundred to the boat yesterday,” Anthoni said.

“Fifteen hundred and eighty on the average, and I know, and it is a poor day, and everybody on that beach is telling everybody else that it is a poor start. It is not a poor start. It is the whole of what is there.” He said it without any heat at all, in the voice of a man who has said a thing in four memoranda and one report. “We are fishing an inheritance, Mr. Anthonimuthu. We are not fishing an income.”

He sat down on the edge of the table.

“I’m going out to the Cheval in a fortnight or so with a dredge. Properly, over the whole ground. I’d like you to come.”

“Why?”

“Because you have been on this coast longer than I have and I would like one other man in this camp to have seen it with his own eyes.” He rubbed his eye with the back of his wrist. “Mr. Vereker will read the figures. Reading figures is not the same.”

* * *

Then he pulled the estimate ledger over.

He did it without any change of manner at all, and that was what made it awful: the same courteous, curious, entirely well-meaning attention he gave to a jar of spat, turned now onto a line of an account.

“I have to ask you about this, and I want to say first that it is not an ambush, and it is not my idea. Colombo has asked for a schedule of contingent charges and this one always comes back.”

He turned the ledger round so that Anthoni could see it: courteous, and pointless, because the entry was in English.

“Charges, Pearl Fishery — Contingent. Shark-charmers, two: three hundred rupees each for the season, and twenty oysters from each boat.” He looked up. “Is that correct? Twenty from each boat?”

“Twenty from each boat. To each of us. At the end.”

“Eleven hundred boats.” Wace’s eyes went sideways for a second and came back. “Twenty-two thousand oysters to you and twenty-two thousand to Muthukaruppan. Forty-four thousand oysters and six hundred rupees.”

“Yes.”

“In a year when the whole fishery may not clear the cost of the camp.”

“Yes.”

Wace nodded slowly. He was not enjoying it. It was the strange part: there was no cruelty in the room at all, and Anthoni had sat in rooms with cruelty in them and knew the difference.

“You understand my difficulty,” Wace said. “I can defend every rupee in this book. The hospital, I can defend. The jail, God help me, I can defend. Forty thousand gallons of water a day carted eleven miles — I can defend that in my sleep, it keeps twenty thousand people alive. And then there is this, and a gentleman in Colombo who has never smelled a *kottu* asks me what it purchases, and I have nothing to write in the column.”

And then he asked it.

He asked it leaning forward slightly with his hands loose between his knees, in the tone of a man who genuinely wanted to know and had wanted to know for twelve years and had not, until that afternoon, found a moment when it would not be rude.

“What is it that you do?”

Anthoni was quiet for a moment.

He had been asked before — by a District Judge in 1908, by a Jesuit in 1916, by a Colombo newspaper in 1922 that printed the

answer with three mistakes in it — and he had a form of words for it that was polite and closed and got him out of the room. He heard himself decide not to use it, and was mildly interested in himself for about a second and a half.

“I stand at the water at twenty minutes to one,” he said, “and I say twenty-eight seconds of words. Then Karuppan says his, which is longer. Then eleven hundred boats go out.”

“Yes.”

“If I do not say them, sir, they do not go out.”

Wace waited for more, and there was no more, and he sat back.

“No,” he said. “No, I imagine they wouldn’t.”

He said it kindly. He said it as a man says a thing about *other people* — about a fleet of frightened, decent, illiterate men and the old machinery that got them over the side in the morning — and Anthoni watched him take the one true sentence he had said aloud in that compound in thirty-five years and file it, carefully and without malice, under *superstition, cost of*.

“It’s a remarkable hold,” Wace said. “I’ve seen a man refuse to sail because a crow sat on his mast.”

“That happens.”

“I don’t say it as a small thing. I don’t say it as a small thing at all.” He closed the ledger. “But you see the difficulty. It isn’t that I think you do nothing, Mr. Anthonimuthu. It’s that I cannot get what you do into English.”

* * *

The door went and the Government Agent came in, and everybody stood.

Vereker was fifty-eight and had the grey, well-shaved, permanently slightly tired face of a man who had spent thirty years being courteous in a climate that did not deserve it. He had a folder under his arm and had clearly come to ask one question and go.

“Wace. Are we at two million?”

“One million seven, sir, for the first day.”

“Ah.” Vereker took that like a medicine he had been expecting. “And the second day?”

“They’re still counting. It will be better. It will not be better enough.”

“Right.” He noticed Anthoni then, and did the thing that Anthoni would remember, later, with a very specific coldness: he put out his hand.

“Mr. Anthonimuthu. I heard you on Friday night.” He shook the hand once, firmly, and let go. “From the bungalow verandah. Nearly half a mile. How on earth is that done?”

“You wait for the gap between the waves, sir.”

“Do you.” Vereker considered it, and for a moment looked genuinely pleased, as though a small thing had come out right in a week that had not. “Well. There you are. Wace — half past seven, with the returns.”

And he went out, and the punkah went on, and the clerk’s pen went on scratching.

Wace looked at the closed door for a second with an expression Anthoni could not read and then rubbed his face with both hands.

“He will get his estimate cut,” he said. “Every year they cut it and every year the camp is bigger. There is a man in Colombo whose entire occupation is the difference.” Then, standing, gathering the canvas bag off the shelf: “I asked Muthukaruppan the same question. Some years ago. Did he tell you?”

“No.”

“No.” Wace almost smiled. “I had an hour of it, with my clerk for the Tamil, and after twenty minutes the poor devil put his pencil down. It was not — “ he searched for it honestly and did not find it, “— it was not an explanation. He told me what the water is. He named it about nine different ways and then told me what is under the sand under the water, which I happen to know something about, and

he was wrong, and he was not *stupidly* wrong. And at the end of it I had four pages of notes and no idea whatever what the man does at half past twelve in the morning.”

“He sings,” Anthoni said.

“Yes. Thank you. My clerk wrote that too.” Wace put his hat on. “You are much easier to take a note of, Mr. Anthonimuthu. I have never been sure whether that is because you are clearer or because there is less of it.”

Anthoni stood up and picked up his sandals and then, remembering where he was, put them on again.

“There is less of it,” he said.

* * *

Anthoni walked back down through the compound and out onto the sand, and the heat came up at him off it like the flat of a hand.

He was not angry. He had never in his life been able to get angry at the government, and it was one of the several things his wife had held against him. The government was weather. You did not argue with a wind; you found out which way it was going and stood accordingly.

But he went the long way home, along the top of the beach where the counting was finishing, past the sixth or seventh heap of the government’s two-thirds going up onto the carts for the *kottu*, and he found that he was doing a sum he did not want to do.

Six hundred rupees and forty-four thousand oysters.

He had told the man the exact truth. He had told him the only true sentence there was: that eleven hundred boats did not go out until a fifty-four-year-old man said twenty-eight seconds of words on the sand, and that this was, as far as he could tell, the whole of his function in the world. And the Superintendent, who was a decent man and an honest one and the only European on this coast who could tell

a four-year-old oyster from a six-year-old one by looking, had heard it, and had understood it as a fact about *divers*.

It had never once occurred to him that it might be a fact about the government.

CHAPTER 5

The Widow's Fraction

The church was a roof.

The camp called it that because it was exact: plaited coconut on a frame of poles, ninety feet by forty, no walls anywhere, run up in four days in January by carpenters who would be paid in oysters they would not see until April. The salt got into the coir lashings and slackened them, and Father Rayappan went over them himself every Saturday with a boy holding the ladder, and the camp called that humility or meanness according to what it thought of priests.

On an ordinary Sunday it held four hundred people standing. On the first Sunday of the fishery it held four hundred under the mats and better than two thousand on the sand outside, and the ones at the back could hear nothing whatever and came anyway, because a man who has spent two nights in the bottom of a boat will stand an hour in the sun to be somewhere that is not a boat.

Rasathi was seven rows back on the women's side, where she could hear everything and see nothing but the backs of heads. The heat under that roof was not the heat of the beach. It was made of people: coconut oil, wet cloth drying on the body that wore it, the sourness of men three nights short of sleep, babies, sand that had been damp at six and was steaming by half past seven.

Father Rayappan was forty-four and preached for eleven minutes, and it was not devotion but arithmetic: he had this Mass and two

more. He preached the Gospel of the day and he preached it straight. They went up to Jerusalem and He told them what was going to happen to Him, in order, plainly, with nothing left out — and *they understood none of these things, and this saying was hid from them.* They were told the whole of it in words a child could follow and they carried it out of the room with them and it was no use to them at all. Then, a mile down the road, a blind man on the verge shouting the one question in the chapter that could actually be answered: *Lord, that I may see.*

“Be careful what you ask for,” said Father Rayappan, “because you may be given it in a form you cannot spend.”

He was a good preacher, and it irritated Rasathi to go on thinking so, because by every account she had ever had from a woman in trouble he was no use whatever afterwards: he would come to your hut and sit and be correct at you. The camp liked him and did not go to him.

* * *

The fund did its business afterwards on the sand, under the church’s south eave, because that was where the people were and because there was nowhere else in Marichchukkaddi four men could sit down without paying for it.

It was not church business; Rayappan had said so twice in Rasathi’s hearing, both times with the flatness of a man declining a thing he was relieved not to be asked twice about. The widows’ fund belonged to the divers’ side, and its whole capital came off the beach one oyster at a time: at the counting, before the divers’ third was divided at all, a man went along the heap with a basket and took one oyster in every fifty. That was the fraction. It was taken in the open in front of everybody and nobody had ever disputed it.

What happened to it afterwards was disputed constantly.

Santhiagu the churchwarden was past sixty and had the fund's book on his knees and could no longer read it. Rodrigo, who owned four boats out of Vaipar and was the only one of the four administrators who ever decided anything, sat with his back against a post and his eyes half shut and did not look at the woman in front of him.

Her name was Yesamma. She was about forty-five and she had been asking this same question for three years.

"He fished the Muttuvaratu in 'twenty-two," she said. "Eleven days. He came home to Vaipar and in the third week of April he could not put his foot down, and in the fourth week he was dead."

"Nobody disputes it," said Rodrigo.

"Then it is settled."

"It is not settled, because it is not the question." Rodrigo said it without heat. He had said it before and would say it again. "The fund is for a man lost in the fishery. Your husband, God rest him, was not lost in the fishery. He was at home. He had been paid."

"He was killed by the fishery."

"That is a different sentence."

And it was, and everybody under the eave felt it go by. Rodrigo was not being cruel. He was being *accurate* — and a rule cannot be argued into another shape without somebody agreeing to change it, and the men who could change it were the men it cost.

"Read it out," said Yesamma.

Santhiagu turned the book towards the light out of habit and then held it out sideways without looking at anybody in particular, and that was how he asked; and Rasathi took it, because she had done this twice before and there was nobody else close who could.

The fund's rule had been written in 1908 in a clerk's hand by somebody paid to be brief.

"For a man lost in the fishery: to the widow, her husband's full share for that season, and half a share for each of the two seasons following."

“There,” said Rodrigo, satisfied.

Rasathi did not give the book back. She turned two leaves forward and then four back, and the arithmetic went through her unasked, as it always did, like a sneeze.

“A diver’s share on the Muttuvaratu in ‘twenty-two was nineteen rupees,” she said. “So it is nineteen, and nine and a half, and nine and a half. Thirty-eight rupees.”

Something went through the crowd at the number. Not the size of it. The smallness. Three years of a woman walking up to four men in front of everybody she knew, for thirty-eight rupees — less than the hut rent of four families for six weeks.

“And in nineteen nineteen,” Rasathi said, “the fund paid the widow of Pathinathan of Vaipar, who came home from the fishery and died in the seventh week after it. It is on the page before this one. I read it out to you, sir, two years ago.”

Santhiagu’s face did something unhappy.

“That was a kindness,” said Rodrigo.

“It is in the book with the others.”

“Girl.” He said it pleasantly. He had not moved. “A kindness written in a book is a kindness. It is not a rule. If it were a rule, every man who ever came off the Cheval and died of something inside a twelvemonth has a claim on that basket; and there is not enough in the basket; and then the fund pays nobody at all.”

He was wrong, and she could see exactly how: you set a limit, six weeks, eight weeks, whatever you like, you write the limit into the book, and then the fund pays what it can pay and every man on the coast knows where he stands. It was one clean sentence long and she said it.

Nobody answered her. Rodrigo looked over her left shoulder at Santhiagu and said, “Is there anything else this morning?”, and Santhiagu said no, and the four of them stood up, and it was over — had been over from the moment the person holding the fund’s book

turned out to be a girl of seventeen. They had not beaten her. They had declined to be in an argument with her, which cannot be beaten.

Then Yesamma took the book out of her hands.

“My son is going into Rodrigo’s second boat in April,” she said, very low, not looking at her. “Next year, if there is a next year. Do you know that?”

“No.”

“No.” Yesamma put the book against her chest and turned to give it back to the churchwarden, and stopped, and said the last of it over her shoulder without any particular anger, and the absence of it was worse. “It cost you nothing to say.”

* * *

A collection was taken for her afterwards. Father Rayappan came out and found the shape of what had happened in about four seconds, as he always did, and did the thing that could be done.

There was nothing on that beach to take it in — no plate, no bag — so a boy fetched a net basket off the nearest boat, cane hoop the width of a man’s shoulders, still wet, still smelling of the morning, and they carried it round the crowd and men put coppers in it.

Eleven rupees and four annas.

Rasathi did the only thing she was good at. Eleven rupees four annas against thirty-eight; the difference was twenty-six rupees twelve annas; and it would be made up next year with another basket, and the year after with another basket, and at no point would anybody be owed anything, because a collection is what you do instead.

* * *

Karuppan came up Fourth Cross Street at three with a folded paper in his hand, stood outside and said her father’s name once, and when nobody answered said, “Is he asleep?”

“He is out.”

“Then it is you I want.”

He came in and sat down on the mat with his back very straight and put the paper on the floor between them and did not immediately mention it, and that was manners.

She had seen him at forty yards on a beach in the dark for as long as she could remember and had never once been in a room with him. He was smaller than she expected — Karuppan the shark-binder was a large fact and a small man, sixty-one, upright as a post, with hands out of all proportion to the rest of him and the finger-joints gone square. White stubble on his jaw; he shaved twice a week and this was the fourth day. The rest of the year he mended nets at Kilakarai and sang at the temple festivals up and down that coast, and there was the entire explanation of a voice that carried four hundred yards on a beach, and nobody had ever thought to tell her.

“You read,” he said. It was not a question and it was not flattery.

“Yes.”

“I can read a number,” said Karuppan. “I cannot read a sentence with a number in it. They put them together on purpose.”

She unfolded the paper. It was from the Superintendent’s office, in English on one side with a Tamil hand underneath written by somebody in a hurry, and it said that the first instalment of the fee provided under the estimate would be issued at the kachcheri on the fifteenth day of the fishery, less deductions.

She read it out. He listened with his head slightly down — she had seen him listen like that on a beach, through half a minute of somebody else’s binding — and when she had finished he said:

“How much is the deductions?”

“It doesn’t say.”

“No. But how much is it?”

“I don’t know,” Rasathi said.

She was surprised by how much she disliked saying it. She had asked her father in November and been given a sentence and a departing back, and she had written the not-knowing into the accounts

book in her own hand, where it sat now among the things she knew, in the same column, looking exactly like them.

Karuppan took this without commentary. "Then we will both find out on the sixth of March," he said, and folded the paper along its own creases and put it inside his cloth, and coughed.

It was not the cough from the beach. She had heard that one — twice, dry, with a scrape at the bottom of it, in the fourth loop, on the first night — and everybody within two hundred yards had heard it and nobody had said anything. This one went on for some time and it had water in it. He turned his head away and did it into the corner of his cloth with one big hand flat on his chest as though holding something down, and when it let him go he glanced at the cloth for less than half a second and put it back over his shoulder.

"Sixty-one," he said, by way of accounting for it, and that was all he was going to do about it.

She got him water. He drank it and gave the pot back and looked around the hut for the first time — the swept floor, the rice sack up on its plank, the accounts book squared on the box — and she saw him decide something.

"Ask," he said.

"Ask what?"

"You have been wanting to ask me something since I came through the door, and being polite about it. I am sixty-one and I have a boat to see at four. Ask."

So she asked him what his words were.

And Karuppan, who had been asked this perhaps six times in forty years and had answered every time, said, "Sit down, then," and told her.

* * *

He did not sing all of it. He marked the sung parts at half voice, in the flat hum of a man describing a tune rather than performing it, with his

eyes somewhere on the mat a yard in front of his knees; but twice he forgot, and let it out, and the mats moved, and outside on Fourth Cross Street somebody stopped walking.

Rasathi counted it. She could not help counting it. She started when he started, at nothing, and let it run underneath while she listened, and it came to two hundred and forty-one.

Water.

Water that no man dug and no man owns.

Water between the two coasts: a road for some, a floor for none.

Old water. You were here before the sand. You were here before the sand's father.

Heavy water at the bottom, light water at the top; one water.

Water that carries. You have eleven hundred boats on your back this morning and you have not felt one of them.

Water that takes.

Salt. You are the salt, and the salt is in everything of yours, and a man who is in you long enough is salt himself.

Water with one taste from Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and no man has ever found the join.

Green water at nine fathoms. Black water at thirty. One water.

Water that does not sleep, that has never slept, that will not sleep tonight.

I have called you eleven times. A thing called eleven times is awake.

And under you, the sand; and the sand is yours.

And on the sand, the shell: shell standing on shell standing on shell, and the shell is yours.

And under the shell, the thing that made it — the soft thing, that has no bone and no eye and no name of its own, that sits in the dark the whole of its life building a house out of its own body; and in one of them in a thousand, the stone that is not a stone. Yours. Both of them yours.

And under the sand — I have been told this and I say it — under the sand there is more shell, and under that shell more shell, down further than a well goes, all of it the dead of the same animal lying one upon another since before there were men on this coast to come and take them. The bank is not a place. The bank is a body. It stands on its own dead and it grows the way a nail grows.

He stopped there, in the middle of it, and coughed for a while.

When it let him go he got his breath in through his nose in a way that had clearly been worked out over some months, and said, “Now I go back to the sand. You cannot come into a loop in the middle of it. Nobody can.”

And he went back to the sand and did it again from there, unhurried, exactly as before; and it did not occur to Rasathi until much later that he had corrected himself in front of a girl of seventeen with no more embarrassment than a carpenter re-marking a line.

Then the list. That part was sung.

Now: what is yours.

The weed is yours — the green weed, the red weed, the weed that is only a fur on a stone. The sand is yours and the sand under the sand. The shell is yours: the live shell, the dead shell, the shell ground down to powder. The small crabs are yours, and the big crabs, and the thing that lives in a shell that is not its own and walks about like a crab. The fish are yours: the fish that go in one body, and the fish that go alone, and the flat fish that is the colour of whatever it is lying on, and the fish with the whip on it, and the long fish with the teeth, and the great fish that comes up this coast in the third

month. All of them yours. The turtle is yours. The wood is yours — every plank that ever went down, and the masts, and the iron off them, and the nails out of the iron. The rope is yours: every fathom of rope that has parted since men came here is lying in you somewhere and it is yours. The stones are yours. Every stone that came off a line and was not fished up again is yours, and there are more of those down there this morning than there are boats on your back. The rain is yours. The rivers are yours the moment they touch you. The light down to nine fathoms is yours and the dark under it is yours. The bones are yours.

I have named all of it. There is nothing of yours that I have left out.

Now count what is in you that I have not named.

What I have not named is not yours.

From the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar; the Cheval bank, and the road out to it, and the road home. Inside that line this morning there are men in you who are not yours. Keep your own. Take nothing I have not named.

At the second gun I will not ask you again until tomorrow.

The hair had come up on Rasathi's forearms somewhere in the middle of the list and had not gone down.

She sat with her hands in her lap at half past three on the first Sunday of the fishery and understood, with a completeness that made her feel slightly ill, that she had just heard a whole binding said inside a room, and that in seventeen years of living in her father's houses she had never once heard his.

Not a line of it. Not a word out of place while he shaved. He said it on the sand at forty minutes past midnight two hundred yards south of the flagstaff, and came home and drank water and slept, and the words did not come through the door with him — and it had never

occurred to her that this was a thing a person could arrange, still less that somebody had.

“Two hundred and forty-one,” she said.

Karuppan looked up. “What is?”

“Yours. I counted it. Two hundred and forty-one — a little over four minutes.” She hesitated. “My father’s is twenty-eight seconds.”

“Twenty-eight,” Karuppan agreed, without any expression whatsoever. “Yes.”

“Do you know why his is short?”

And she had it ready, sitting warm and finished in her mouth as Rodrigo’s answer had been sitting there that morning: *because he does not believe a word of it, and a man does not spend four minutes on a thing he does not believe*. She had known it about her father for six years and had never once had anybody to say it to.

Karuppan got up off the mat in one movement, with his hands on his knees, like a much younger man.

“Because his father’s was short,” he said. “And his father’s father’s. It was short before there was anybody in that family who thought about it one way or the other. He had it from Sebastianpillai the way you had that book from your mother.” He put his cloth straight over his shoulder. “You think short means he is doing less. It is the other way round, child. Mine is four minutes because I am asking. Twenty-eight seconds is a man telling the sea what is going to happen, out loud, once, in front of eleven hundred boats, with nothing after it to hide in.”

He went to the door and put his head out to see where the sun was.

“Short is the harder one,” he said. “Tell him I came about the paper.”

* * *

Her father came in at six with sand on him to the knee and asked what Karuppan had wanted, and she said, the paper about the fifteenth, and he said, “Ah,” and sat down against the post outside with his back to her.

She opened the accounts book to write the eleven rupees four annas of the collection in the margin, because it was not their money and did not belong in the columns, and it happened that the page she wanted came directly after the page she had left blank.

She turned past the blank page without looking at it, which took an effort, and noted the effort.

Then she wrote, in a smaller hand than usual, in the margin where nobody would ever look for it, the fund’s rule as it stood and the six words it needed.

CHAPTER 6

What the Sea Keeps

Six days was the outside of what a body would take without arguing, and by the fourth day the week had its shape.

The shape was this: aboard by midnight, sail at one, cold until six, work from the first gun to the second, on the beach by two, eat at three — and you ate more at three in the afternoon than a shore man eats in a day, because it was the only meal there was. Before noon a diver put nothing in himself but water. Sinnappan had gone the whole of one morning in his first season on a piece of jaggery a tender had given him out of pity, and had been sick over the side on his eleventh descent, and had never done it again. Then you slept for four hours in the heat, badly, and got up and went down to the boat.

Nobody in the fleet said the six days aloud in the first fortnight because it sounded like complaining, but every diver knew the number and every boat-owner knew it too, and what they did with it was: nothing. The fishery was six weeks long. There would not be another one for four years.

His hands were the first thing to go and they went on schedule. The backs of the fingers opened on the first morning and by the fourth they were opened everywhere the shell had a chance at them, and the seawater kept the cuts white and clean and entirely without sensation for as long as he was in it. The pain arrived at about four in the afternoon, on the beach, in the sun, all at once, like a debt being called

in, and it stayed until he fell asleep. On the fourth day he began wrapping the two worst fingers in rag before he went down, and lost the rag on the second descent, and did not bother again.

* * *

Kasim tended Ignatius, and Kasim talked.

He was a Moor out of Puttalam, somewhere in his thirties, with a flat unhurried face and the palms of a man who has had rope running through them since he was twelve — a tender's hands, which are worse than a diver's and get no sympathy, horn across the whole width and split at the base of the fingers where the horn ends. He had tended four seasons and had never in that time tended a man he did not talk to.

He talked the entire way down. He talked while the line went out. He talked in Tamil with words in it that were not Tamil, in a low continuous unemphatic stream about nothing whatever — the price of thread in Puttalam, a cousin's roof, an opinion about the boy Chinnathambi's baling technique which he had already given twice that morning — and Ignatius was nine fathoms under the boat and could not hear a syllable of it.

"Who are you talking to?" Sinnappan had asked him, the first morning of the season.

"Him."

"He can't hear you."

"No," Kasim agreed, and went on talking.

It was not a joke and he did not defend it and nobody in 246 found it strange after the first hour. What he was actually doing was in his hands: the whole of a tender's art is in the line, and Kasim read the bottom off the basket rope the way another man reads a page. He would say, in the middle of a sentence about thread, *there's nothing under him, he's walking*, and be right, and go on about the thread.

Twice on the fourth day he said *he's coming* three or four seconds before the two pulls came, and could not tell anybody how he knew.

Ignatius came up at eight in the morning of the fourth day with blood out of the right ear as well as the left.

He sat on the thwart and washed both sides of his head with a scoop of seawater and knocked the heel of his hand against his skull twice, the flat two knocks a man gives a bottle to shift what is stuck in the neck of it, and said, "It's nothing."

"It's the other ear now."

"It's nothing. It's the same nothing on both sides." He turned his head to bring his right ear round, which he had begun doing on the third day and had not noticed he was doing. "Say that again?"

He was still the best diver in the boat and it was not close. On the fifth day, deaf on the left and clearing the right so slowly that Kasim could feel the pause through the line at four fathoms — a hanging, a small stall of the weight, then the fall going on — Ignatius made forty-seven descents and brought up more shell than any two other men aboard. He picked faster than anybody Sinnappan had ever watched. He got his fingers under a plate of shell like a man getting a coin off a table.

And at three in the afternoon, sitting on the sand with his rice, he went round the boat again about the name.

"Savarimuthu," he said. "It has weight."

"It has five syllables," said Susai.

"He'll grow into it."

"He'll be forty before he grows into it."

"Chinnathambi," said Chinnathambi, from the far side, with his mouth full.

The whole boat laughed at him and he went red and pleased, and Mohideen Marakkayar, who had said perhaps nine sentences since Friday, said without opening his eyes, "There is one Chinnathambi. That is sufficient."

“Anjala wants Antony,” Ignatius said, to Sinnappan, privately, in the tone of a man conceding that this was a real position held by a real person and would have to be dealt with properly. “Her father. He’s alive, which counts.”

“Which do you want?”

“I want it settled.” He wiped his hands on his cloth. “April. I’ll settle it in April.”

* * *

The second gun went at noon, or near enough, and Sinnappan had known since his first season what it meant and had learned in his second what it actually meant.

What it meant was: no new descent. The gun did not order a man out of the water. A man already down finished his bottom and came up on his own rope and that was legal and nobody had ever argued about it, and out of that entirely reasonable and humane arrangement the fleet had built the thing it called the last stone.

Because if you go over at one minute to twelve you are a man who is already down.

So the last quarter of an hour before the second gun was the busiest and the ugliest quarter of an hour of the morning across eleven hundred boats. Men who had been coming up slower and slower since ten went over the side one on top of another. Tenders who had been reading their lines all morning stopped reading them and simply hauled. And the last stone was always the deepest and always the longest, because a man who has spent the price of getting down there is not going to come up with an empty bag, and because there is no gun after the second gun.

Susai did not take the last stone. He had not taken it since 1921 and did not explain himself about it and nobody asked him to; he came up at about ten minutes to twelve every day of his life and sat in the bow and coiled rope.

Ignatius took it every day.

Sinnappan took it every day, and on the fifth day he went over at fifty seconds to noon and was still on the bottom when the gun came down through the water at him — which it did, flatly, a knock, not a bang, arriving in the chest rather than the ears — and he stayed there a good twenty seconds after it, working, because the knocking of the other stones had thinned out all round him and that meant the bank was emptying and that meant the next handful was his.

He came up half a minute past noon with his ears ringing and the light on the water gone wrong.

The sea breeze got up and turned the water over, and in about twenty minutes the whole bank went from water you could see nine fathoms through to a flat green plate with a haze in it. You could be on the bottom when it happened. The light did not fade; it *thickened*, from above, and the bank you had been picking over all morning went to arm's length in the space of two descents. It was the most ordinary thing in the world and it happened at the same hour every day and Sinnappan had never once liked it.

Boat 704 out of Kilakarai was working four hundred yards north with a crew of Moors who dived deeper and stayed down half again as long as anybody else and made barely thirty descents in a morning, and got as much as 246 did in fifty. Half the fleet held that they were mad and half that they were right, and the argument was older than Sinnappan and could not be settled, because nobody had a way of counting what it cost. They came in at two with the rest of the fleet, and four of them prayed at the top of the beach while their own counting went on twenty feet away, two-and-one, two-and-one, and the counters did not pause and the men praying did not hurry, and there was nothing in it that anybody on that beach found worth a remark.

* * *

On the sixth day a man called Arumugam, thirty-five or so, of boat 640, took his last stone at four minutes to twelve and was on the surface again before the gun.

Sinnappan was twenty feet away with his own rope in his hands and saw the whole of it and there was nothing in it to see.

Arumugam came over the gunwale in the ordinary way. He had the ordinary fight for his first breath, fifteen seconds of it, the noise a man makes that sounds from a distance like something being killed. He sat down. He said something to his tender that made his tender laugh. He looked at his hands. And then, when the boat was under way and the men were shifting to trim her, he went to stand and did not, and put his hand down on the thwart, and sat again, and there was a pause of about two seconds during which four men understood exactly what was happening and none of them said anything.

They took him up the beach between two of them with his left leg trailing at a wrong and unremarkable angle, past the counting, through the ordinary crowd. He was not in pain, or not much. He was talking the whole way. It was the part Sinnappan would find he remembered: the man was talking, in a perfectly reasonable voice, about the boat, while other men carried him.

“The sea keeps a part of him,” said Arulappan, at Sinnappan’s shoulder, in the tone of a man observing that it was going to be hot again tomorrow.

At the hospital the apothecary’s assistant took his name and his village and his boat number and wrote *rheumatism* in the column, because there was a column for it, and there was not a man on that beach, or in that hospital, or in the government camp on the rising ground at the north end, who could have told Arumugam of 640 what had happened to him in a sentence he could have used.

And here was the thing that Sinnappan noticed about himself that evening, and did not like, and put away: he had felt very little. It happened to somebody every season. It had happened twice in his first season and three times in his second and here it was on the sixth

day of his third, and you carried the man up the beach and you got your rice.

The bank was not shut to him. The sea was not shut to him. The sea had been shut at twenty minutes to one in the morning by a man on the sand and it had held, as it always held; nothing in the water had touched Arumugam; nothing in the water ever touched anybody. Whatever had taken his leg had come out of the work, and the work was not covered by anything anybody said on a beach, and nobody had ever suggested that it was.

Tomorrow Sinnappan would take the last stone again. He had known that from about ten past twelve.

* * *

He saw her twice that week.

The first time was on the fourth day at the counting, up on the ridge at the back of the crowd, where she had been on the first day: a girl of seventeen standing on her own with her arms folded, looking at the chalk boards, and — he was almost certain — moving her lips very slightly: the small movement of somebody adding up.

The second time was on the sixth day in the bazaar, coming the other way with two brass pots, and he stepped out of the road for her, and she went past him without seeing him at all, and he was so relieved that he had to stand still for a moment afterwards.

“Who is that?” he asked Susai, on the beach, as flatly as he could manage, and it was not very.

Susai looked up the ridge and looked back down and went on with what he was doing.

“The binder’s daughter,” he said.

Sinnappan did the arithmetic on himself lying in the bottom of 246 that night with his back against the stones, the only place he ever did any arithmetic.

He was nineteen. He had no boat and no share in one and no shore trade and no father. He was from Kilakarai and he was not a Christian and had never given the matter thirty seconds' thought until this week. He was a diver, which is a thing a man is for about eleven years, and he had watched a man go up the beach that morning at the far end of his eleven years, and he owed Vellaisamy eighty-four rupees which would be eighty-four rupees again next December and the December after unless there was a season, and a good season in 246 was forty or fifty rupees, and there had not been a good season since 1921, and this one was not going to be one either — the divers of 246 had known that since Friday morning, from the bottom, four hours before the chalk boards knew it.

Eighty-four rupees of nothing. It was the sum and it came out the same however he did it.

Overhead the sky did what it did about two hours before the fleet sailed, and got very slightly less black in the east, and up the beach half a mile off the eleven hundred crews were shouting at each other about rope, and at twenty minutes to one all of that would stop, in two pieces, a short silence and then a long one.

He was asleep before the first of them.

CHAPTER 7

The Auction

The auction shed stood at the north end of the camp between the kachcheri and the kottu, which meant that every man who came to Marichchukkaddi to spend money walked the last hundred yards of it downwind of five walled enclosures holding the government's share of six days' fishing. On the seventh day that still cost him nothing. The enclosures had only been filling since Friday and the breeze was off the land until eight in the morning, and the buyers came at seven.

A lot was a thousand oysters. It was counted out on the sand in threes by the same counters who counted for the boats, their hands wrapped in rag by now, and it went into a gunny sack, and a wooden tally with a number burnt into it was sewn into the mouth of the sack by a man from Negombo who had done nothing else for six seasons. Fernando had a needle and a ball of twine and a rate of about forty sacks an hour, and he never once looked into any of them, because there was nothing in them but oysters.

The sacks stood in rows in the sun on the clean sand in front of the shed. There were eleven hundred and sixty-four of them that morning — a number Anthoni noticed for the wrong reason — and the buyers walked up and down between the rows with their hands behind their backs, looking at them. They were not permitted to touch them. Every one of them walked the rows anyway, twice, some of them three times, and there was nothing whatever to see: a sack of

oysters looks like a sack. It was the whole business. A man was about to lay out a hundred rupees on a bag of shut shell and the only thing he could do about it beforehand was to walk past the bag slowly.

The ones who knew their work did not look at the sacks at all. They stood at the counting on the beach in the afternoon, watched which boats came in heavy and which came in with the shell thick and old, wrote those boat numbers in a book, and then in the morning knew which sacks had been made off which pile, because they had stood there while the counters filled them. The government did not tell anybody where a lot came from. About nine men in that camp knew anyway, and eight of them were from Bombay or Colombo.

Anthoni came at eight. His own business would take ten minutes. He stayed until noon.

* * *

Mr. Peiris from the kachcheri auctioned, standing at a table under the mat roof with a hand-bell, a chalk board, a ledger, and an interpreter he did not need for the bidding and needed badly for everything else. He sold in English. The bidding came back at him in English, Tamil, Gujarati and a kind of Bombay Hindustani that everybody in the shed except Mr. Peiris understood perfectly, and twice in the first hour he brought the bell down and said that he would have the sale in one language or he would have no sale, and both times the room agreed with him warmly and went straight back to what it had been doing.

There were about four hundred people in and around a shed built for eighty, and it smelled of hot cloth and hair oil and, underneath that, of the sacks. There was not one man in it who had ever been under nine fathoms of water, and every rupee of the money in it had come out from under nine fathoms of water, and Anthoni had long ago stopped expecting anybody to find that remarkable.

Hirji of Bombay bought in tens. He sat on a chair somebody had brought for him with his hands on his knees and never bid on a single

lot; when Peiris put up a block of ten he lifted one finger, and when the price got past what he had decided that morning he stopped lifting it, and his face did not change at either end of it. He took two hundred and thirty lots before ten o'clock at between sixteen and nineteen rupees the thousand — two hundred and thirty thousand oysters he would never see opened; a man in his firm would see them opened, in a yard in Bombay, in May. He did not care what was in any one sack. He cared what was in two hundred and thirty of them, and that was a different question and could be answered.

Abdul Cader of Colombo bought eleven lots all morning and thought about every one of them. He was a jeweller and not an agent, which meant he was buying with money he had made himself; he bid slowly and stopped early and twice let a lot go for half a rupee over what he had in his head, and went and stood outside afterwards. Here was a man who could not afford to be wrong more than about four times, and knew it, and had come out to the coast anyway because there was no other way in the world to buy an oyster that had not already been opened by somebody else.

And then the others. Perhaps sixty of them, in the shed and around it, not in the trade, with no list, who did not know one boat number from another and had come with a year's living tied in a cloth. Shopkeepers from Mannar. A police constable. A man who had sold a bullock. They bid against Bombay for single lots, in ones, and the room let them and was not unkind about it, and every so often a lot would go past twenty and past twenty-two, and everybody in the trade would put their hands down at once and let it run away from them.

The one Anthoni watched was a woman of about fifty in good white cloth going grey at the shoulders, standing at the back with a boy of nine beside her holding the cloth with the money in it. Her name was Theresammal and she was from Mannar and her husband had owned a boat until 1923 and had then, in the manner of men who own one boat, stopped owning it. Anthoni knew that much from the

man beside him and did not want to know any more. She bid on lot 604 and lost it at nineteen. She bid on lot 611 and lost it at twenty-one. On lot 618 she got in at seventeen and Hirji lifted his finger once out of some private arithmetic about the block he had just missed, and she went to twenty-two, and to twenty-four, and Hirji stopped, and Peiris looked at her for slightly longer than he looked at anybody else and brought the bell down at twenty-six.

The boy carried the cloth up to the table. Anthoni watched the money come out of it, a note and then coin, and get counted twice, and he watched her take the tally slip and fold it and put it away as carefully as a marriage line.

She had done the sum correctly. One pearl of any size at all and she was clear for two years; the whole coast could name four or five people it had happened to, and the four or five were named so often precisely because there were four or five of them. Anthoni's own arithmetic, done without deciding to do it, said that a thousand oysters off this bank this year would go two pearls of seed size and some dust and be worth about eleven rupees to a man with the patience to wash them himself.

He did not tell her that. It would have been true and it would have been the truest thing anybody said to her that morning and it would have taken about four seconds, and she had already paid, and telling her would have done nothing except take away the six weeks she had bought along with the oysters.

It was what he told himself. He was fifty-four years old and he had been telling himself some version of it since he was nineteen, and he could feel the shape of it as it went past, like a familiar stone under the foot in the dark.

* * *

His own business he did outside, in the sun, at the corner of the shed, with Packianathan of Tuticorin.

The binder's fee was three hundred rupees for the season and twenty oysters from every boat in the fleet: twenty-two thousand oysters, delivered at the beach in April, out of the divers' side and not the government's — which meant that on the twenty-sixth of February what Anthoni actually owned was a piece of paper about April. Nobody in the history of the office had ever waited for April. You sold it forward on the first auction day to whichever agent wanted the tonnage; he took the delivery risk and the price of the risk, and you got money in your hand in a season where money in your hand was the only kind there was.

Packianathan had bought the binders' shares in 1921 and in 1922, and he came to the corner of the shed at half past ten with a boy and a bag and no preliminaries.

"Nine," he said.

"Nine," Anthoni said.

"It is April, Anthonimuthu. In April I am carrying twenty-two thousand oysters off this beach in a country boat and half of them are dead and I am paying men to carry them. And the bank is what it is. Everybody in that shed knows what the bank is; they are buying it anyway because they are gamblers, and I am not a gambler, I am a carrier."

"Nine," Anthoni said again, and put out his hand, and Packianathan counted out a hundred and ninety-eight rupees into it in the sun with about a dozen people watching, because there was nowhere in Marichchukkaddi where a dozen people were not watching.

Karuppan had come up the sand while the money was being counted and stood four feet away with his arms at his sides, waiting, as he waited every morning on the beach, and when it was done he said, "Nine?"

"Nine."

"He offered me nine on Monday."

"He offered you nine on Monday," Anthoni agreed.

Karuppan turned to Packianathan and said, pleasantly, “Ten and eight annas,” and Packianathan said something about April, and Karuppan listened to all of it with real attention and then said “Ten and eight annas” again in exactly the same voice, and stood there, and after a while Packianathan paid him two hundred and thirty-one rupees.

Thirty-three rupees. Anthoni did that sum standing there and it came to thirty-three rupees — three months of water for two people — and the difference between the two of them was not shrewdness and was not nerve. It was that Karuppan had eaten that morning and had somewhere to be that afternoon and could have walked away and come back on Saturday, and Anthoni could not, and Packianathan had known which of them was which before he opened his mouth, because it was his trade to know it and he had been doing it since before the war.

Karuppan folded his money away and coughed, once, long, with his hand flat on his chest, and looked out at the water while it finished with him.

“He will make forty on ours,” he said, when he could. “Between the two.”

“Forty-four.”

“Forty-four,” Karuppan said, and seemed pleased with the correction, and went away up the beach.

* * *

Vellaisamy came at eleven, in white so clean it hurt to look at, with a green umbrella furled under his arm that Anthoni had never once seen him open, and a boy behind him carrying the book, because Vellaisamy did not carry the book.

He asked after Rasathi. He meant it; that was the difficulty with him. He had asked after Gnanamma every year for eleven years and

had said the right thing in 1919 and had not been in a hurry when he said it.

Then he said, "The sixth of March."

"The sixth of March," Anthoni said.

"The kachcheri will pay the first instalment at the counter. A hundred and fifty rupees. My assignment is lodged; it is the same paper as before, they will have it out and read it to you. A hundred and twelve rupees, eight annas, comes across to me at the counter, before it is in your hand. Then you sign, and they will pay you thirty-seven rupees eight annas." He said the numbers flatly and in order, like the days of the week. "It will take a little time because the clerk will want to read the whole paper aloud. Bring your own pen if you have one; theirs gums."

"I know what the paper says."

"Of course you do. You signed it." Vellaisamy looked at the sea for a moment, agreeably. "This fishery and the next, whensoever held. I would not want you to be surprised in the shed in front of people."

"I won't be surprised."

"No," Vellaisamy said. He nodded at the money in Anthoni's waistcloth without appearing to look at it. "The oyster share is not in the paper. A man must eat; I have never taken a man's eating. If you would like something against it now, before the sixth, so that you are not thin for three weeks — the rate is the rate, you know what it is, and I would not press you."

"No."

"No," Vellaisamy said again, comfortably. "It does not expire, Anthonimuthu. That is all I came to say. It is not a thing that shuts."

He went off along the rows of sacks with the boy behind him, and Anthoni stood in the sun with a hundred and ninety-eight rupees on him and worked out, for the third time that week, what the season came to: thirty-seven eight in March, thirty-seven eight at the losing, and the hundred and ninety-eight now. Two hundred and

seventy-three rupees for six weeks, out of a fee of three hundred and a share that had been worth two hundred and thirty-one rupees on that beach that morning to a man who could afford to say no. And four hundred and ten rupees still standing in a book carried by a boy.

The arithmetic was not complicated and it did not change and there was no part of it he had not known before breakfast. He had come and done it in the sun anyway, the way men walk past sacks.

* * *

At about a quarter to twelve he saw his daughter at the far end of the rows.

She was standing in the shade at the corner of the shed with a clerk in front of her — not Peiris' clerk; somebody's boy with a paper block — and the boy was writing, and she was watching him write, upside down, as she watched everybody write. Then she said something and he stopped and altered it, and she nodded, and it was over in fifteen seconds. She was seventeen years old and she had a way of standing while somebody wrote that Anthoni had first seen on her mother.

He assumed it was a message for the Mannar shopkeeper's wife three huts down, whose letters Rasathi had been writing since December for nothing.

He could have crossed forty feet of sand and asked her.

He did not, and he was not aware of deciding not to, and the reason — which he would have given accurately if anybody had asked him for it — was that she had her own business and a person is entitled to their own business, and there was no space anywhere in that reason for the fact that a man who has just been told about an assignment lodged at the kachcheri does not particularly want to stand in the sun and be asked what he is doing at an auction.

* * *

She had the book out when he came in at two, sitting on the mat with the lamp not lit because there was still light, and the household column ruled and the pen ready.

“The auction,” she said.

“The share went at nine the thousand. Twenty-two lots. A hundred and ninety-eight.”

She wrote it. “Karuppan?”

“Ten and eight.”

Her mouth did something and she did not say any of it, which he was grateful for and which cost her visibly.

“And the sixth of March,” she said. “The instalment. I want a figure, not a word. I have had the word twice.”

Here it was, then. It had taken her about ninety seconds, as it always did.

“A hundred and fifty rupees,” Anthoni said. “Less deductions.”

“How much less?”

“They take it at the counter. The clerk reads out the paper and takes it there and then, before it comes to me.”

“That is not a figure. That is a description of a table.”

“It is what happens at the table.”

She looked at him for three seconds, a long time in that hut, and then she put her head down and wrote *first instalment, 6 March, 150, less deductions* in her small ruled hand, in the column, on the line, and drew the line under it.

Every word he had said to her was true. He sat down in the doorway with his back to the room and listened to her put the pen in the fold of the cloth and shut the book, and it was some hours before he understood that he had watched his own daughter write a wrong number down in her mother’s book, and had done it without a flicker, as a man does a thing he is good at.

CHAPTER 8

A Hundred and Ten

It came in on the Thursday afternoon while she was carrying water, and by Friday it had the whole camp.

It was not one smell. It was three, arriving in order. The first was sweet and small and almost pleasant, like fruit gone over in a basket, and for about an hour that afternoon people said it was fruit. The second was the meat, and there was nothing small about it: close on seven million oysters shut in the dark inside their own shells, dying at their own speeds, spread over five walled enclosures under a sun that stood at a hundred and four by the hospital thermometer at two o'clock. The third came up underneath the second at dusk and could not be described at all except by what it did: it got into the back of the throat and stayed there and made everything you swallowed afterwards taste of the same thing.

It came down the eleven streets on the sea breeze and it went into the huts, which were mats, and there is nothing in a mat to keep a smell out. It got into the rice. It got into the cloth on the line and into the cloth in the box and into the folded cloth at the bottom of the box that had not been opened since Mannar. It got into her hair, which she washed in a quarter of a pot of eleven-mile water she could not spare, and it was in her hair again before it was dry. It was in the toddy shops and in the jewellers' double row on Bazaar Street where thirty-one agents sat in front of scales worth more than the street,

breathing it. It was in the hospital, sixteen beds, sides rolled up. It was on the priest and on the police and on the money.

By the Friday afternoon it had stopped being a thing that could be mentioned, because everyone had already mentioned it. Two men were sick in the road outside the toddy tavern and nobody thought less of them. The Superintendent's launch went out past the kottu at seven and came back at eleven and the launch smelled of it. Somebody had a theory about lime; there was always somebody with a theory about lime. And underneath all of it, sitting in every hut in the camp like a stone in a shoe, was the arithmetic that it would be ten days on this share and then ten days on the next share and ten days on the share after that, for six weeks, and that the whole of it — the sweet smell and the meat smell and the third one — was the sound of money being made correctly, and that anybody who could not stand it should not have come.

Rasathi had told a workman on the first afternoon that it would be the ninth day and not the tenth, and had been right, and had been pleased with herself for about a week. It came on the sixth and owned the camp on the seventh. Her correction had been exact and had been about the washing, and the washing was not the thing anybody in that camp was going to be counting the days to. Nothing in the enclosures had consulted her. She noted it, and did not enjoy noting it, and put it away with the other things she was keeping — of which there were now four, and she could have listed them in order.

* * *

She had bought a lot on the Thursday morning, at the corner of the shed, in about four minutes.

Lot 118. One thousand oysters, off the beach of the fourth day, out of a Chilaw boat that had come in heavy three days running while everybody else was thin — she had stood at the counting on the ridge every afternoon of that week with her arms folded doing exactly what

nine men from Bombay and Colombo were doing forty feet away, except that they had books and she had her head. Eleven rupees the thousand: two rupees down out of the nineteen eleven, and nine rupees at the loosing, and if it was not paid at the loosing then it was not nine any more, and she had made the boy write the terms out and had made him alter the date because he had put the fourth and the loosing was the third.

The credit was Vellaisamy's. There was no other credit in Marichchukkaddi for a girl of seventeen with no boat and no husband and a father in the trade, and there had been no discussion of the father, because the boy with the paper block did not know whose daughter she was and she had not told him, and Vellaisamy would know by Sunday and would not say a word to anybody, because saying a word to anybody was not how that man made money.

She was not gambling. She had gone through it three times and it came out the same each time: she could not earn nine rupees between now and the third by any means available to her, so nine rupees at the loosing was not a debt she was taking on, it was a debt she was already in, in the form of not having nine rupees. What the lot did was give her a way of being wrong that had a number attached to it. Everything else about her life was a way of being wrong that did not.

She wrote it in the book. Not in the household column — in the back, on a page of her own, in her own smaller hand: *118 — 1,000 — 11 r. — 2 down, 9 at the loosing.* It was the first entry she had ever made in her mother's book that her father would not have been able to understand if he had read it, and she looked at it for a while, and then turned forward past the blank page, without looking at the blank page, which took an effort, and noted the effort.

* * *

At half past eleven on the Thursday night she went north.

The camp was awake all around her the way it was every night, eleven hundred crews going down to the water in the dark, and she walked up the beach against the whole of it with a cloth over her head, past the flagstaff, past the last of the eleven streets, past the kottu wall on her right with the smell coming off it in a slab, and then past the end of everything, where the tin plates stopped and the sand went on.

Twenty minutes' walk. The noise fell away behind her in stages until what was left of it was a low sound with no words in it, and then there was nothing on the beach at all except the water going in and out.

She put her cloth on a stone and went in.

She had been forbidden it at nine years old, on a Tuesday, by her mother first and her father second, and the reasons she had been given were not the reason. She had worked that much out by eleven. She had gone in anyway perhaps forty times in eight years, ten minutes at a time, always alone, always somewhere with no one, and there was nothing else in her life that she had done forty times without telling anybody.

The water at the edge was warm as blood and colder underneath, and she went out until the bottom stopped mattering and then put her face in it and swam.

That was all it was. Her arms went and her legs went and the water came past her ears with a sound in it like a room full of people a long way off, and her body, which spent every day carrying two brass pots eleven miles' worth up a street of sand for a man who came home at six with sand on him to the knee, stopped weighing anything at all. It stopped weighing anything. She could not have said it out loud to a living soul without it sounding like a girl being silly about the sea, and she had never tried, and the not-trying was so old now that it had stopped being a decision. She swam out until the shore noise was gone and turned on her back and lay in the black water under a sky with no moon in it and the whole Gulf of Mannar

underneath her, forty feet of it, then sixty, then whatever it was, and she was not frightened of any of it and never had been, and that — not the swimming — was the thing that had frightened her mother.

Then she rolled over and went down.

She was her father's daughter. There was going to be a number.

Feet first, hands going up past her, into the cold layer, down until her ears went tight and she cleared them the way she had taught herself out of nothing but paying attention, a hard swallow, twice, and then the small dull click on both sides. Sand under her hands. She got hold of a rock the size of her head and held on to it and shut her eyes, which made no difference, and started counting.

She counted at the speed she counted at, which she had checked against the church clock at Mannar when she was fourteen and had checked again in December, and she had 110 standing on dry land in a water queue.

She got to eighty-three.

It came apart at eighty-three: not her lungs, which she could have argued with, but her whole body deciding without her that it had had enough of the arrangement, and she let go of the rock and came up in a rush and made a noise on the surface that she was very glad nobody was near enough to hear. Then she was sick in the sea, twice, and hung there with her hair over her face.

Eighty-three. Against a hundred and ten on the sand. She had estimated seventy with a stone; without a stone, holding a rock, on a night when she had eaten at noon.

She went down again and got seventy-nine.

She stopped after that, because she knew perfectly well what a body was worth on a second try, and there was no one there to be impressive in front of, and the number was not the point. The number was only the part she could write down. She had known that since she was nine and had never once managed to make it stop mattering.

* * *

He was standing at the tide line about thirty yards south of her cloth when she came out.

She saw the shape first and stopped dead in two feet of water with her arms down, and then saw that it was a man on his own, young, with a coil of coir over one shoulder, walking down from the north end where the Kilakarai boats lay. He had stopped walking. He was looking straight at her, from thirty yards, in the dark, with his mouth shut.

She waited for the shout, or the sermon, or the hand held out, or the story that would be in three streets by the counting.

He turned his head to the sea for a moment, as if thinking about the wind, and then he went on walking south along the tide line with the rope on his shoulder, at the same pace he had been walking before, and did not look back at any point.

She came out and put her dry cloth on over the wet one and stood there for longer than she needed to, and she could not have said, then or afterwards, what it was she had just been given. It was not kindness, exactly. Kindness would have said something. Every other man on that coast who had ever caught her at anything had made her a present of his opinion about it inside four seconds, and had generally been about to do her a favour as well, and the favour was always the part that cost.

What she kept was the pause. He had stopped and looked at the sea, which is what a man does with his face when he has decided not to use it on you, and then he had gone on at exactly the pace he came at, neither slower to be delicate about it nor faster to prove he was going. It had taken thought. She turned the whole thing over twice on the walk south and could not make it come out as anything except a person doing arithmetic on her behalf in the dark, quickly, and getting it right.

* * *

She got back to the top of the beach at twenty-five minutes to one and the whole shore was moving, and then at twenty minutes to one it stopped.

She was three hundred yards north of him, up past the flagstaff, at the back of a crowd she was not part of, with salt drying on her and the kottu behind her, and she could hear that her father was speaking and she could not hear one word of it. She never could from here. It was a sound with a shape: a level, unhurried, small noise, going out in pieces into the gaps between the waves, and there was more silence in it than voice, and it lasted twenty-eight seconds. She had known the length of it since she was small and had never once been told the words.

Then the long one. Karuppan, forty yards down from him, four minutes and one second of it, the loops going out and out, and near the end the part that was sung, and eleven hundred boats' worth of men standing in the dark in front of two old men, listening.

Three heartbeats of nothing.

Then the beach came apart into rope and shouting and the fleet went, and somewhere out in the middle of it was a boy with a coil of coir who had seen her in the water and had gone on walking.

She sat down outside the hut with her hair spread out to dry in air that smelled the way that air now smelled, and about a quarter of an hour later her father came up Fourth Cross Street from the water with his sandals in his left hand, and put them on at the corner, and said, "You're up."

"I'm up."

"Mm," Anthoni said, and went in, and was asleep in four minutes, and never knew that his daughter had been in the sea that night, or that she had held her breath at the bottom of it for eighty-three seconds, or that there was a line in the back of her mother's book that had a number in it he could not have explained.

She sat outside until the sky in the east went the colour it went, adding up.

CHAPTER 9

Unmarked

There was no diving on the Sunday, and the Sunday was worse than the diving.

A rest day in the second week rested nobody. It took the work off the water and laid the body's accounts out in daylight, at leisure, where a man had time to read them. Sinnappan woke at eight — four hours later than he had woken for nine days — and lay under the mat with his hands going in a way they never troubled to go at sea, and understood inside a minute that he was not going to be comfortable again until one in the morning, when he would be cold and afloat and it would stop mattering.

The one thing worth walking down for was the fleet. You never saw the fleet. You saw the inside of one boat in the dark and the sterns of forty others at two in the afternoon. On a Sunday you saw the whole apparatus of the trade laid out along four miles of sand: stones in rows, rope flaked out to dry, baskets upside down on their hoops like a crop of something, and eleven hundred hulls sitting over on their bilges with their bottoms showing, which no boat looks well doing. Mohideen Marakkayar had 246's lines end for end and was going along them with his thumb and a knife, and did not want help, and said so, once.

Ignatius came down at four in the afternoon with his hair still wet from the church.

He sat on the sand with his back against 246 and let Chinnathambi pour water over his head out of the pot — Chinnathambi liked doing it and did it badly — and reported on his morning like a man home from a court case.

“I asked him about the name.”

“You asked the priest,” said Susai.

“Who else would I ask? You?”

“You have asked me. Four times.”

Rayappan had given it his whole attention, which Ignatius had not entirely expected and was pleased about. The child could be called Antony. Antony was the wife’s father’s name and it was also a saint’s name, so there was no difficulty in it at all; the priest had been quite clear on the point and had gone to a little trouble to be clear, because he could see the man in front of him had been carrying the question about. Savarimuthu was likewise perfectly good. Both were good. Either was good. And then, because he was a serious man and had been asked a serious question and would not send it back short-weight, Rayappan had added that four months and eleven days was a long while for a child to go, and that it should be seen to, and had asked when he would be at home.

“And what did you say?”

“I said when the season lets go of me,” said Ignatius. “He said that would do. He said God is not in a hurry but the arrangement is that we should be.” He tipped his head to bring the right ear round. “Say that again?”

“Nothing. Chinnathambi is drowning you.”

The boy laughed and poured the rest of it over him at once, and Ignatius sat there with the water running off his chin and did not move, because it was Sunday and the water was cold and there was nowhere he had to be for eight hours. The child had been alive four months and eleven days, of which his father had been in the room for eleven, and still had nothing anybody could call him by.

The fleet sailed at one on the Monday morning into a land breeze that came late and came weak. Sinnappan lay in the bottom of 246 against the stones and heard the beach stop, up at the flagstaff, half a mile off: the short quiet, and then the long one, and then a man laughing somewhere and the whole thing starting again. He had heard it eleven nights running and it had not once occurred to him to attend to it. It was the noise the night made before you went to work.

They came to their anchor a little after three and were cold until six.

The rest day had not made the crews sharp. It had made them slow. The first hour after the gun was ragged everywhere Sinnappan could see — men fumbling stones, a tender at the next boat but one letting a line run and getting shouted at across sixty yards of flat water — and by eight the fleet had found its hands again and it was an ordinary Monday on the Cheval Paar, which is to say it was hot early, and the water had that greenish stillness in it that means nothing whatever, and the shell was thin and old and lay in patches you had to go and find.

By nine Ignatius had made twenty-two descents and had more in his basket than any two men in the boat.

He was going about it that morning the way he went about it every morning. He would stand on the gunwale with his foot in the becket, breathe six times, blow the last one out, and drop, and the stone would take him and Kasim would feel it go and pay out with his palms flat and the line running over the horn of them; and at four fathoms the fall would hang, a stall of half a heartbeat, and then go on. That was the ear. It had been doing that for a week and Kasim had felt it a hundred and fifty times and had stopped mentioning it, because mentioning it did not shorten it.

Seventy seconds on the bottom. Two pulls. Up.

He talked the whole time, Kasim, to a man nine fathoms under the boat who could not have heard a gun at that distance, let alone a Moor from Puttalam being reasonable about baling. On that Monday

he was on the boy again. Chinnathambi baled with the whole of his arm and the whole of his back and got a quarter of the water a man of forty would get with the wrist alone, and Kasim had been laying this out at intervals since the second week of the season, calmly, without heat, as a matter of technique that could be corrected if anybody would attend to it.

The forty-first was at about five minutes past eleven and there was nothing in it.

Sinnappan was on the surface at the time with his own rope in his hands and his own stone at his feet, waiting on his tender to finish coiling, and he saw the drop and the stall and the fall going on, and thought about none of it, because there was nothing to think. Seventy seconds, or near it. The two pulls came. Kasim hauled, and Ignatius came over the gunwale in the ordinary way, and had the ordinary fight for his first breath, fifteen seconds of it, the noise a man makes that from any distance at all sounds like something being killed.

He sat down on the thwart. He put the basket off his arm and Chinnathambi took it, and he ran his palm down his face once to clear the water off it.

“— because he is not wrong,” Kasim was saying, “he is simply doing it as though the boat were on fire, and the boat is not on fire, and by eleven o’clock he has nothing left in the arm and then who bales —“

“The boy’s all right,” said Ignatius.

“He is all right. I have not said he is not all right. I have said he is slow, which he is, and slow is not the same —“

Ignatius put his hand flat on the thwart beside him, and then he was leaning, and then Susai was across the boat over three men’s legs with his hand under the back of his head.

Kasim went on for one more sentence and about half of another. Then he stopped, and it was a beat late, and everybody in the boat heard where it stopped.

They laid him down along the bottom boards and they went over him and there was nothing there.

Susai did it, and Arulappan did it after him, because a thing like that gets done twice. They turned his head and looked at both sides of it. They looked at his arms and the backs of his hands and the soles of his feet, and opened his cloth and looked at him, and turned him half over and looked at his back, and there was nothing on the man at all except what had been on him since Wednesday: the dry brown mark at the left ear and the smaller one at the right, which every man in that boat had seen at breakfast for six days and which meant nothing, because it had never meant anything before.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Then Arulappan said, "There is no mark on him," in the voice of a man reading a number off a board, and Susai said, "No," and it was left there.

By that evening there were four accounts of the forty-first descent going about the camp, and every one of them had something in it: that he had come up too fast; that the stall at four fathoms had run on and on and Kasim had known and had not liked to say; that he had told the boat he could not feel his hands. Sinnappan had been standing eight feet off with his own rope in his fists and had watched the whole of it and did not contradict a single one of them, because by that evening he understood what the accounts were for. A thing with nothing in it will not stay in a camp of twenty thousand people. It has to be given something to hold on to, and if nobody gives it anything the camp will go and get some.

Mohideen Marakkayar stood up in the stern.

He did not shout and he did not signal. He stood up in his own stern at eleven in the morning with his arms at his sides, and stayed standing, and did not sit down, and after perhaps a minute a man in the next boat over saw him and stopped what he was doing to watch, and then that boat's tender stopped, and then that boat was not working either.

It went out across the water like that, from hull to hull, at the speed at which one man can notice another man being wrong. There was no shouting for a long while — that came later, further off, where the news had to be carried instead of seen. What Sinnappan watched, standing in 246 with his rope still in his hands, was diving stopping in a circle, and the circle getting wider, and the flat green water going quiet boat by boat in every direction until the stillness ran out somewhere about a quarter-mile off, where there were hulls he could see plainly and men still going over the side, and beyond that the ordinary morning going on, all the way to the edge of the bank, in the sun.

Some of those men worked until the second gun and did not know until they got to the sand.

The Superintendent's launch came up at half past eleven with its awning rigged and its engine making the only noise on that part of the water. Sinnappan had seen it twice a day since the twentieth of February and had never once been near it. It came alongside 246 and they passed him across, four of them, and it was awkward, because a man is heavier than he has any right to be and a boat is a bad place to lift from, and it took longer than anybody wanted; and then he was under the awning in the shade and the launch went in ahead of the whole fleet.

The fleet came in behind it.

What a man remembered about the second of March was this: eleven hundred boats coming onto four miles of beach at once, an hour early, in company, with no counting going on and the chalk boards blank and the whole shore standing up to watch them do it. It had never happened. It did not happen the following year either, when there was no fishery, or the year after that. The tally clerks stood by their sacks with nothing to write. The counters sat down in threes on the sand where they had been kneeling. Up on Bazaar Street the double row of jewellers came out from behind their tables and stood

in the road in front of their scales, thirty-one of them, looking down the beach at boats.

They brought him up the sand on a hospital cot with two men to each end of it and Father Rayappan walking beside it with his hand on the frame, and the crowd opened and closed behind them.

Kasim came off the launch behind the cot, because they had let him come, and walked up the beach with his hands hanging and said nothing to anybody. He was still saying nothing at four in the afternoon, sitting against 246 with those hands lying in his lap doing no work of any kind, which on a tender is a worse thing to look at than it sounds.

Anthonimuthu was already standing at the top of the beach when the cot came off the launch, which meant somebody had gone up and got him, which meant somebody had thought of it inside the first ten minutes.

Sinnappan had seen him perhaps six times in three seasons and never within forty feet. What he saw now was an old man in a white cloth, gone grey at the head and thin at the shoulder the way they go, standing entirely still with his arms down while everything on that beach moved around him. And on his feet, on the sand, he had his sandals.

The cot went past him. He did not put his hand out to it and he did not step back out of its way. People made room for him and he stood in the room they made.

An old woman had come down out of the huts with everybody else, and she was small and dry and she got in near the front of it because small old women do, and she was not weeping and she did not know Ignatius and had never in her life seen him. She had a cloth over her head against the sun. She looked at the cot going up the beach and then she turned round and looked at the binder standing there in his sandals with his arms down, and she asked him, in a perfectly ordinary voice, the voice of a woman asking whether the post had come in:

“Was the sea bound, or not?”

Nobody answered her.

Sinnappan stood at the back of it with a coil of rope still over his shoulder that he had no memory of picking up, and it went through him with a kind of quiet that he did not like at all that he was waiting for the answer as hard as she was — that he had been waiting for it since the boat went silent — and that whichever one the old man gave, he was going to believe it.

CHAPTER 10

The Doctor's Word

There were more men on the beach at twenty minutes to one on the Tuesday morning than there had been on any night of the season.

They did not crowd him. It was not the custom and nobody broke it. They stood back in the dark at the ordinary distance with the lamps behind them, eleven hundred crews' worth, and they were quiet before he began instead of going quiet when he began, and they stood closer to one another than they usually stood, and they attended. Anthoni had said the words in front of frightened men before — 1911, when two boats went over off the Karativu bank in a squall, and again in 1921 — and he had forgotten how it felt to be looked at like that, and how fast it came back.

He said them the way he always said them, at the same pace, without a syllable's difference, and it took twenty-eight seconds, and the last of it went out over their heads and over the water:

"By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun."

Then he stood there while Karuppan did his, four minutes of it away to the north, and then the beach came apart into rope and shouting and the fleet went, every boat of it, because the fishery is six weeks long and there is not another one for four years.

They buried Ignatius at seven in the morning, before the heat, in the burying ground the Public Works Department had pegged out in

December along with everything else, a hundred yards behind the eleventh street, with drainage cut on two sides of it and a tin plate on a coconut post at the gate lettered in English and Tamil at the exact height a tall man's eye would find it. It had been there since before there was a camp. Nobody had ever remarked on it in Anthoni's hearing in thirty-five years, and there was no reason anybody should have; you do not walk about a town remarking on its arrangements.

Rayappan was eleven minutes, and that was what he was.

Anthoni stood at the back with his sandals in his hand. About four hundred people came, of whom perhaps twenty had known the man, and the rest were divers.

The message from the government camp reached him at nine, brought down by the punkah clerk's boy: the Superintendent's compliments, and would Mr. Anthonimuthu come to the hospital at half past ten.

* * *

The hospital was on the second street back, sixteen beds under a mat roof with the sides rolled up for air, and coming into it out of the glare was like putting your head into a well. It smelled of carbolic and hot mats and iodine and, underneath, of people. Eleven of the sixteen beds had men in them. Four of those men were divers and were lying in the particular way divers lie.

Ferdinand Wace was standing at the far end with his hat in his hand and his sleeves rolled, and beside him a Tamil gentleman of about thirty-five in a linen coat, with spectacles and a very short beard, whom Anthoni had seen twice on the beach and had assumed to be an agent.

"Mr. Anthonimuthu. Thank you for coming. This is Dr. Sathasivam, of the Medical Department; he has been here since the twelfth and I have been keeping him from his dinner all season."

Wace put his hat on a stool. "Doctor, this is one of the two shark-binders."

"I know," said Sathasivam.

Ignatius had been in the ground since a quarter past seven and there was nothing of him in that room. Whatever the doctor had done he had done the previous afternoon, in this same building with the sides rolled down and a lamp lit at midday; and what was left of it was in a small notebook, which he took out and opened and did not look at.

"I will tell you what I told the Superintendent, and I will tell it to you the way I would tell it to a colleague, because Mr. Wace says you will follow it, and because I have spent the morning telling it badly to men who cannot use it." He was not being kind and he was not being cruel. He was being accurate. "The man was not injured. There is nothing on him and nothing broken in him. He died of the diving. Not of the last dive — of all of them."

"Go on," said Anthoni.

"When a man goes down to nine fathoms he takes a chestful of air with him and the water squeezes it. Not a little — to a quarter of what it was at the top, or thereabouts. What is in that air passes into his blood, because that is what air does under a press. Most of it is the part we can none of us use, the nitrogen; and it goes into him, and when he comes up it wants to come out of him again, and it must come out slowly, through the lungs, in the ordinary way, and that takes time." He turned his hand over. "One descent, and there is time. Two, and there is time. Forty in a morning with three minutes on the surface between them, day after day, for eleven days —"

"It does not all get out."

"It does not all get out. It banks up in him. And at some point, in some man, it comes out where it should not — in the joints, which is the leg; or in the cord of the spine, which is the leg for ever; or in the brain and the heart, which is what happened yesterday morning at five

minutes past eleven in a boat, to a man sitting down after his forty-first."

"Like a soda-water bottle," said Wace, and then looked as if he wished he had not, and said it again anyway, because it was the only picture there was. "Opened slowly, nothing. Opened fast, or opened forty times —"

Anthoni had drunk perhaps four bottles of soda-water in his life and had watched a man in Tuticorin take the wire off one with his teeth, and the whole of it arrived at once and sat in him complete: the fizz coming up out of nowhere out of clear water, out of water that had had nothing in it a second before.

"They will tell you in Colombo that it cannot be so," Sathasivam went on, "because a man holding his breath carries down only one chestful and a man in a diving dress is fed air the whole time he is under, and the two cases are not the same case. That is a proper objection and I cannot answer it as I would wish to. What I can tell you is that I have been in this camp four seasons and I have seen it in the legs of about sixty men and in the ground twice, and that it goes with depth and with number and with how little a man rests, and with nothing else at all. Not with the food. Not with the village. Not with the boat." He shut the notebook. "It is the work. There is no other candidate."

Nobody said anything. Out on the second street a bullock cart went by with the water and the whole hospital heard every yard of it.

"Can a man do less?" said Anthoni.

"Less deep, or less often?"

"Either."

"Fewer descents would answer very well," said Sathasivam. "Twenty instead of forty-five. Longer on the surface between. It would answer for most of them."

"And what would he eat?"

"That," said Sathasivam, "is the part I cannot write in the book."

"Have you told them?"

“I have told everyone who would stand still for it. I have told the boat-owners at the north end and I have told a hundred and forty men in this room in the last three weeks.” He took his spectacles off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “They are extremely polite to me. They wait until I have finished, and they say yes, doctor, and they thank me, and they go out, and the next morning they go over the side forty-five times, because it is the eleventh day of the fishery and there is not another one for four years. I do not blame them. I would do the same.”

There was a bed twelve feet away on Anthoni’s left and there had been a man in it the whole time, propped, awake, with his left leg lying under the sheet at a shape a leg does not make on its own; and he had been listening to every word, because a man in a hospital bed listens to everything, and when Anthoni turned his head he was looking straight back at him and was not the least embarrassed about it.

“Arumugam,” he said. “Six-forty.”

“I know the boat.”

“They wrote rheumatism.” He reported it as a clerical error of no importance. “I have never had rheumatism in my life.”

“No.”

“My mother had rheumatism. It came in the wet weather and went off again.” He shifted himself up on his elbows with some trouble and looked at Anthoni frankly and with no complaint in him at all, and asked him for a favour — the first favour anybody had asked Anthoni that season without wanting it in the shape of the sea. “Will you send word to my boat about my stone? I spliced the becket in it myself, in the year of the last fishery, and it has outlasted three ropes. I do not want it going about the beach. Tell Kandasamy it is the one with the two grooves in the top corner and to put it under the bow thwart until I come.”

“I’ll go this afternoon.”

“That is all. Thank you.” And he lay back down, quite satisfied, having settled his business.

* * *

Wace walked him out into the glare at the end of the street where the ground began to rise toward the government camp, and stood there with his hat off, turning it.

“I asked you to come because it seemed to me indecent that you should hear it from the beach,” he said. “The beach will have it wrong by tonight.”

“The beach will have it that a fish did it.”

“The beach will have it that a fish did it, and I shall spend a fortnight explaining that there has not been a shark taken in this fishery in living memory, and I shall not be believed, and I have made my peace with that.” He put the hat on and took it off again. “Mr. Anthonimuthu, I am going to say something to you that I have no business saying, and I would rather say it to your face in March than have you read it in a memorandum in June. I have to write my estimates for the next fishery whenever the next one is. There is a line in them. You know the line.”

“I know the line.”

“*Charges, Pearl Fishery — Contingent. Shark-charmers, two: three hundred rupees each for the season, and twenty oysters from each boat.*” Wace said it without any pleasure whatever. “I have defended that line for twelve years and I have enjoyed defending it, because it is old and because it costs six hundred rupees out of a fishery that turns over eight lakhs and because the men will not sail without it. And yesterday morning a man died on this bank of the work, in the open water, inside the bound hours, and there was not a mark on him. I do not say that to wound you. I say it because a gentleman in Colombo who has never smelled this camp is going to

ask me what that line purchased, and this year I am going to have less to write in the column than I had last year.”

“Yes,” said Anthoni.

Wace waited a moment for something else, and it did not come, and he had the grace not to fish for it. “Well,” he said. “There it is. My regards to your daughter.”

Anthoni went down the rising ground onto the sand and stopped and took his sandals off, and stood for a second with one in each hand.

He had understood every word the doctor said. That was the thing he was carrying down the beach and it was heavier than he had expected. He understood it the way he understood a tide table: air pressed into a man and coming out of him in the wrong place, and the number of times, and the little rest between; he could have drawn it on the sand with a stick. And he understood, standing there with his sandals in his hands, that not one particle of it was of the smallest use to a single man in that camp, and that this was not because the divers were stupid.

Sathasivam had a cause. A cause is a thing you can be told, and then you know it, and then in the morning you go over the side anyway, forty-five times, knowing it. What the men on that beach came down to the water’s edge for at twenty minutes to one in the morning was not a cause. It was a guarantee — a flat statement that the thing would not happen, given by somebody with the standing to give it, so that a man could put his foot in the becket and stop thinking. There was no market anywhere in the Gulf of Mannar for the first article, and there had been a market for the second one for four hundred years, and Anthonimuthu had been the licensed supplier of it for thirty-five of them and could not have written down in one sentence what he thought about that.

He found 640 hauled up at the south end with three men under her and got his answer in about four minutes. Kandasamy was civil and a little wary, the way men were with him. Arumugam’s stone had

gone back in the boat on the Sunday with the rest of them and was being used by the man they had taken on out of a Vaipar boat that had lost its diver, and it had been used on Monday and it would be used tomorrow, and it was a stone; there was no such thing as a man's stone; the boat had eleven and they went down and came up and got put back along the keel where a man could reach them.

He walked back up the beach past the counting, started again at two o'clock with a good afternoon's shell to get through, and he thought about the fifteenth day — Friday — and the counter at the kachcheri, and the paper the clerk would read aloud there in front of whoever happened to be in the room.

He did not go back to the hospital that evening, and he did not go the next day either. It would have taken four minutes and one sentence, and he had it ready, and it was true, and there was nothing in it that a man lying on his back with his leg gone could put to any use whatever.

CHAPTER 11

The Words

For four days she had been carrying water past a man whose name she did not have.

She had three of them and no way of choosing. A woman ahead of her at the fourth standpipe called him Ignasi; the man behind her called him the one out of two-forty-six; and a fellow at the rice shop who claimed to have known the father gave him out as Innasimuthu of Vaipar in a voice that dared anybody to correct it. By Wednesday she had stopped gathering them. She knew a great deal else. She knew the boat and the village, and that there was a wife on the other side and a son of four months whom his father had seen for eleven days — that figure had gone through the camp faster than any of the rest and was the only thing anybody repeated exactly. She knew he had been the best diver aboard, and had gone over the side forty-one times on the Monday morning, and had come up the forty-first time not breathing, and that there was not a mark on him anywhere.

What she did not have was the thing you would have thought came first.

She had four accounts of the descent inside two days, from four people each entirely certain, and on the Tuesday evening a fifth in the water queue, third-hand, from a woman whose husband was in the hospital with a crushed hand and who had therefore heard the doctor with her own ears, or near enough. It came out as *the air of it stays in*

him, which is not a sentence, and the queue disposed of it in about four seconds — a man of sixty observed that a man breathes air on the beach as well and does not die of it, and everybody agreed, and the woman herself agreed, and the queue moved up two pots.

Rasathi carried it home in the dark with the small pot in her right hand and the big one balanced, and did not put it down.

She had no words for what she did with a thing like that. It was only that when something came to her she pushed at the numbers in it to see whether they held, and if there were none she generally stopped being interested. The doctor's account was the only one of the five that had any: the depth, and how many times, and how long a man rested between. The other four had a shark in them or a current or the man's own carelessness, and not one carried a figure that could be checked against anything. She got to the top of Fourth Cross Street having reached no conclusion whatever, set the pots down, and understood on the way through the door that she had believed it somewhere back near the flagstaff and had not noticed herself doing it.

There was one other thing going about the camp that week and it was not an account. On the Monday night an old woman at the north end had asked, out loud, in front of a good number of people, whether the sea had been bound or not; and Rasathi had it three times by Tuesday morning, and none of the three wanted an answer from her. They wanted one from somebody.

Nobody answered it. She did not answer it either, and she noticed that she had a reason for not answering it, and that the reason was not that she did not know.

* * *

Her father came up from the beach at two and ate at three and slept, and got up at six with the grey on him that two short nights put there,

and sat in the doorway with his back to her while she made the fire up.

She had a question ready about the fifteenth day and had had it ready since Sunday. It was four words long and it did not accuse anybody of anything, and she had already worked out what he would say to it, and that was the trouble: a true sentence that was not the answer, in a mild voice, and then he would get up, and she would be where she had been in November with one more true sentence in her hand and nothing in the column.

So she put it away and asked for something else.

“Teach me the binding.”

Her father did not turn round. He went on looking out at the street, where four men with four different plans were getting a bullock cart past a hut.

“There’s nothing to teach,” he said.

“There are ninety words in it.”

“Ninety-one.” He said it before he could stop himself, and she heard him hear it, and that was the first thing she got out of the whole evening: that he had counted them, at some point in thirty-five years, on purpose.

“Then it will take a minute.”

“Rasathi.” He turned round now, and sat with his back against the door post, and he was not angry, and she would have preferred it if he had been. “It goes to a son. It went from Sebastianpillai to me and to him from his father and back before there was anybody in the family who thought about it at all. It is not mine to hand about.”

“There is no son.”

“No.”

“So it goes nowhere.”

“So it goes nowhere,” he agreed, quite readily, and she saw that she had walked straight into a thing he had already been round several times by himself and had made his peace with.

“Then there is nothing to lose by saying it in this room.”

“There is nothing to gain, either.”

“That is a different objection,” Rasathi said. “That is the second one. Which are you making?”

He looked at her with something that on a less tired man would have been amusement. Then he said it again, slowly, and she understood afterwards that he had meant it entirely and had also been hiding behind it, and that these were not two different acts.

“There is nothing to teach.”

“You said.”

“I am telling you what the words are worth.” He put his hand flat on his knee. “I could give you the ninety-one now and you would have them by the time the fire took. Then you would have what a diver in the third boat from the flagstaff has, which is the words, near enough, out of eleven years of hearing them. And what he has is nothing. It is a rhyme he says to himself in the dark and gets wrong.” He was not being unkind about the diver, and that was the worst of it. “There is a place on that beach where the surf breaks close and leaves a longer gap behind it. There is a mouthful of water you take beforehand, for the fourth part, which has four hard sounds in it. There is a way of standing when you have finished that is not the same as waiting. None of that is the words, and none of it is teachable in a room, and I have never met a man who could say what it was, and I am not going to be the first at my age, in a doorway, to a girl who ought to be asleep.”

“I am not asleep because I am cooking your food.”

“I know it.”

“Then say it.”

“No,” said Anthoni.

“Why?”

And there it was, and he did not have anything, and she watched him not have it. He sat with his hand on his knee for a good while. Behind him the four men got the cart past the hut and one of them said something and the others laughed and it went away up the street.

Then he stood up like a man about to say he had to be somewhere, and said he had to see Fernando about the boat numbers before eight. It was true. It took four minutes. He was gone two hours.

He did not tell her that a doctor had explained to him on the Tuesday morning exactly how a man dies with no mark on him, and that he had understood every word. He did not tell her that the Superintendent had stood in the road afterwards with his hat in his hands and warned him, kindly, that the line in the estimate had got thin. He did not tell her what was going to happen at the kachcheri counter on Friday morning in front of whoever happened to be standing there.

She got the shape of all three of them anyway, the way you get the shape of a thing under a cloth, and could not have said which was which, and put them with the rest.

* * *

She got the book out at nine and opened it at the page before the blank one, and wrote down what she had of Karuppan's binding — more than she expected and much less than she wanted: the eleven ways he named the water, though she was unsure of the order of the fifth and sixth; *heavy water at the bottom, light water at the top; one water*; the sand and the shell and the thing under the shell; a bracket where the sung part went, with the word *list* in it and nothing else, because she had heard it once, at three hundred yards, and it was a minute long, perhaps a hundred things in it. She got the ending exactly. She was certain of the ending. *What I have not named is not yours.*

It filled the page and ran into the margin and she was not sorry about that.

She did not use the blank page. Her mother had kept the book badly and had never in her life left a page for anything — you wrote where you were, and when you stopped you stopped in the middle of

a line, and that was what had happened in the July of 1919; the blank page was Rasathi's own idea and it was the only sentimental thing in the whole book, and it had been left for a number that was going to be given to her.

Nothing she took was going on that page.

* * *

She had gone north at five, before he woke, as far as the Kilakarai lines where the boats lay in fours with their gear under them, and asked twice, and found him on his heels in the shade of a hull with a net across his knees that belonged to nobody in that camp and was not going to be used for anything, and that he mended eleven months of the year and evidently could not stop.

Karuppan did not look surprised and did not stand up.

"Say the part about what is under the sand," Rasathi said.

He looked at her for a second and then put the net down and said it, sitting on his heels in the shade, at half the volume of the beach, and it took him about forty seconds:

"And under the sand — I have been told this and I say it — under the sand there is more shell, and under that shell more shell, down further than a well goes, all of it the dead of the same animal lying one upon another since before there were men on this coast to come and take them. The bank is not a place. The bank is a body. It stands on its own dead and it grows the way a nail grows."

She had a folded half-sheet and a pencil, and wrote it while he was still saying it, and got all of it.

"Read it," he said.

She read it back. He listened with his head down and his hands hanging off his knees, and at the end he said, "That is not it," and she waited for him to say why, and he did not, because he could not. Then he said, "Again," and she read it again, slower, and put the small

pause in where he had put it, before *the bank is a body*; and he said, "Now it is nearer," and picked the net up.

"Why do you want it?"

"Because nobody will tell me the size of the deductions," Rasathi said.

It was true. It was so exactly true that he took it whole and nodded and said they would both find out on Friday; and she sat there with the half-sheet on her knee and understood that she had just done her father's trick, in his voice, at the first opportunity, and had done it well.

"You want the words," Karuppan said. "Take them. The words are not the difficulty." She started to say that this was what her father had said, and did not, and it turned out not to be what her father had said at all. "It is long because I am giving things away. Every one I name I have handed over. The weed and the wood and the rope and the bones, all of it, before I ask for anything." He drew the net up over his knee. "So leave one out. Leave out the crabs. See how you sleep."

Then the cough came and took him.

She had heard the first one at three hundred yards on the opening night — twice, dry, with a scrape at the bottom — and had sat two feet from the second in her own hut ten days ago and watched him do it into the corner of his cloth with a hand flat on his chest. This was neither. It went on long enough to stop being a cough and start being something happening to him, and it bent him over the net, and partway through it he put one of those big square-jointed hands flat on the sand to keep himself where he was, which he had not had to do in her hut.

When it let him go he sat back on his heels and got his breath in three stages, and looked at the cloth for rather longer than half a second, and folded that part of it inward and put it over his shoulder.

"Two days," he said.

* * *

At twenty minutes past midnight she went down the beach and did not stop where she always stopped.

She had stood at three hundred yards, up past the flagstaff, at the back of a crowd she was not part of, since she was nine years old. From there it was a sound with a shape in it: a level, unhurried, small noise going out in pieces into the gaps between the waves, more silence than voice, twenty-eight seconds long. She had never heard a word of it in her life.

Tonight she went past it and kept going, forward through the crews with the cloth over her head, past men stowing stones and men arguing about a basket and a boy asleep sitting up against a hull with a coil in his arms; and nobody looked at her twice, because in the last twenty minutes before the fleet sails a person walking is the least remarkable thing on that beach. She got to forty yards, stopped at the shoulder of a knot of Vaipar men, and stood still.

The beach went quiet from the north end down, in about six seconds, the way water goes off a slope.

Then she heard it, every word, for the first time.

"Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and to the sand under it.

"The boundary is the Cheval bank, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again. Nothing crosses that line.

"Inside it there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners, and there are two who bind. Nobody inside it has a name.

"By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun."

It was shorter than she had thought, and it was not a prayer, and there was nothing in it that could not have been read out in an office. She had it after once, and had known she would. That was not the thing she took home.

The thing she took home was that at forty yards, in the light off eleven hundred lamps, she could see him — and he had his back to the water.

He stood on the wet sand at the edge of the sea with the whole Gulf of Mannar behind his shoulders, facing up the beach, into the boats, into the men, his chin a little down and his eyes on nothing in particular about halfway up the crowd; and forty yards north of him Karuppan was already turning to face out — the turn a man makes to speak to somebody — and would stand like that for four minutes.

Nobody around her thought anything of it. It was how it had always been done, and the reason was obvious and practical: a voice must go where the boats are.

Rasathi stood in the dark forty yards from her father with salt on her feet and worked out, in about the time it took the last of the twenty-eight seconds to go out over the fleet, that she had been listening to the wrong end of the thing for eight years. He was not talking to the sea. She had never once, in her life, seen or heard her father address one word to the sea.

Then Karuppan began, out over the black water, and she stayed where she was for the whole four minutes and one second of it, and did not write anything down.

CHAPTER 12

Forty-One Descents

Sinnappan lay against the stones on the Thursday morning in his own place, and it was not his own place.

He had moved forward. It was all that had happened, and it had happened without discussion: on the Wednesday morning he had gone to the bow thwart where Ignatius had stowed his gear for three seasons and had put his own basket down there because there was no reason not to, and Susai had looked at it and looked away, and that had been the whole ceremony. It meant that Sinnappan went over the side first now. The first descent of the day was the bow diver's, and it was worth having, because at the first gun the water still had the night in it and the bottom lay exactly as it had been left the previous noon, and the man who got down into it first got the shell that was lying loose and visible and that everybody afterwards had to dig for.

Ignatius had taken that descent every morning of the season and had never once mentioned it.

There was also a man in the boat that morning that nobody spoke to.

His name was Rathinam and he was about forty and he came off a Tuticorin boat that had gone home a week early and had let him go rather than pay him for sitting. Mohideen had taken him on at the counting on the Wednesday afternoon, in front of everybody, in the ordinary way, and had given him Ignatius' stone because Ignatius'

stone was the one that was loose. He was a fair diver. He put his cloth down folded in a manner that suggested he had been aboard a great many boats and did not intend to lose anything on this one, and he sat forward of the mast in the dark with his arms round his knees and did not say a word to anybody for three hours, and nobody said a word to him, and it was not unfriendliness. There was simply nothing to say to a man that early that would not have been about how he came to be there.

The other thing nobody discussed had happened at about four o'clock on the Wednesday afternoon, on the beach, with the counting going on behind them, when Mohideen Marakkayar said to Kasim:

“You are on the boy now. Bow line.”

Six words. Kasim had nodded. Rasu, who had tended Sinnappan for two seasons and was not a bad tender and was not Kasim, had gone forward to Rathinam without being told, and had made no remark about it either then or since.

* * *

The gun went at twenty past six.

Sinnappan stood up on the gunwale with the stone hanging in the water off his foot and the line running back to Kasim's hands, and breathed six times, and blew the last one out, and dropped; and the whole of it — the going over, the fall, the cold at four fathoms, the strike of the stone in the sand — happened as it had happened four hundred times that season, except that behind him on the line there was a man who was not talking.

He had not expected to notice it as much as he did.

A tender's hands do the work and a tender's mouth does nothing, and Sinnappan had never in his life heard a word Kasim said while he was under, being nine fathoms down and busy. The talk had been for the boat. It had gone on over his head on the surface between descents and he had stopped hearing it about a week into his first season with

the man. Now it was not there and the boat was very loud: the slap of the swell on 246's side, Chinnathambi baling in that furious wasteful way of his with his whole back, the creak of the mat awning, Susai clearing his throat, a boat forty yards off shouting something to a boat beyond it, and a man being sick over a gunwale somewhere out in the fleet, which happens every morning to somebody.

Kasim's hands were fine. Sinnappan could not get past it. He came up on his fourth descent and the line was already coming in before he had made the two pulls, which is a thing a tender either does or does not do and cannot be taught; and Kasim's face when Sinnappan got his arm over the gunwale was the face of a man who had been thinking about something else entirely.

So he was still reading it. Or he was hauling on the count, which any tender can do after four seasons and which comes out the same nine times in ten. There was no way to find out that did not involve asking him, and nobody in that boat was going to ask him anything.

* * *

By eight o'clock the morning had its shape.

The bank had a good patch on it that day, north-east of where the fleet had been working, and 246 had come to her anchor over the edge of it in the dark by luck rather than by judgement, and there was shell there — old shell, thick, the plates lying two and three deep in a bed of them with the weed on top, the kind you get your fingers under and come up with a basket that has weight in the top of it as well as the bottom. Sinnappan filled his basket at fifty-five seconds twice before seven o'clock, which he had not done since the fourth day.

He worked the way he had always worked, and he counted.

Every diver counts. It is not a superstition and it is not a competition, or not only; it is how a man knows what his morning is worth before the counting on the beach tells him, and it is the only figure in the whole trade that belongs to him. Sinnappan counted on

the surface, on the eleven seconds of the fall, at the moment the stone struck: he had three places where the number came up in him and he could not have said which of them was the real one. Ten by ten past seven. Nineteen by a quarter past eight. Twenty-eight by twenty-five past nine, and by then the sun was well up and the water had that hard white glare on it that makes a man shut his eyes for a second every time he comes up, and the first of the day's real thirst had started.

He had eaten nothing since three o'clock the previous afternoon and would eat nothing until three that day. Nobody did. A diver put water into himself before the first gun and nothing after it, and the reason was that a full man cannot get his breath down properly and a full man vomits at nine fathoms, and every diver in the Gulf had either learned this at somebody's knee or learned it the other way, and the other way was worse.

Thirty-five by twenty-five past ten.

Somewhere in there he noticed that Susai had stopped diving. The old man had made nineteen and was sitting in the stern with his hands on his knees, having decided, in his own way, without saying anything to anybody, that nineteen was what there was. Susai had done that on the fifth day too. He was sixty-something. There was no rule about it and nobody looked at him.

Thirty-nine at eleven o'clock.

* * *

He came up off his fortieth a few minutes after that, blew, hung on the gunwale for the time it takes to say two sentences, took his stone from Kasim, and went again.

The forty-first descent lasted seventy-two seconds. He got a good plate of shell out from under a ledge of weed, three-quarters of a basket, and gave the two pulls and came up on the line with the water going warm around him at four fathoms the way it did every time, and put his arm over the gunwale and got his breath — fifteen

seconds of it, the noise a man makes that from any distance at all sounds like something being killed — and sat down on the thwart with his head back.

And the boat was quiet.

Nobody had said anything. Nobody had made a face. Rathinam went on picking over his own basket at the far end because Rathinam had come aboard on Wednesday and had no idea; but Susai was looking at the water off the starboard bow with the particular attention of a man not looking at something else, and Peruman and Savari had both stopped picking over their baskets amidships, and Chinnathambi had stopped baling with the bailer in his hand and had to be told twice, and Mohideen Marakkayar sat in the stern with his legs crossed as he had sat every morning since before Sinnappan was born, counting the divers down and the divers up without appearing to look at anybody, and did not move at all.

Sinnappan understood then that every man in the boat had been counting his descents since the first gun, and had been doing it since eight o'clock without one of them saying a word about it, and that he had been aboard this boat for three seasons and had not once been counted by anybody but himself.

It went on for perhaps four seconds. Then Chinnathambi started baling again, and Mohideen said something to Rathinam about the anchor rode, and Susai spat over the side and remarked that the tide was going to turn early; and it was Thursday morning on the Cheval Paar with a good patch under them and shell to get up before noon.

Sinnappan sat on the thwart with his forearms on his knees.

Nothing whatever had happened. He had been down forty-one times and come up forty-one times and there was a basket at his feet with three-quarters of a basket of shell in it, and the sea had been shut since twenty minutes to one in the morning and was going to stay shut until the second gun, and a man who had been told that and did not believe the plain evidence of his own forty-one ascents was a man who could not be helped.

He took his stone off Kasim and stood up on the gunwale.

* * *

He made forty-eight.

He got there by taking the rest out. There is no other way to add descents to a morning: the fall is eleven seconds and the bottom is what the bottom gives you and the haul is the haul, and the only part of the cycle a man owns is the part where he is lying on the surface with his hand on the gunwale doing nothing. Sinnappan had spent five minutes there all season without ever having decided to. After eleven o'clock he spent four, and then three and a half, and the difference is not a thing you can feel in the moment; it is only that at the top of the forty-fifth the white glare came in at him harder than it had, and at the top of the forty-seventh he had to hang on for a moment longer than usual before he could get his arm up.

Forty-four at twenty past eleven. Forty-six at half past. He came up off the forty-eighth at a quarter to twelve and Mohideen Marakkayar said, without raising his voice, that that would do — the breeze was making and the water was going over. The second gun went out flat and small across the fleet while they were getting the anchor up, and it was over.

Forty-eight was two more than he had ever done in his life.

Kasim coiled the bow line and stowed it, and shipped his own oar, and said nothing.

* * *

On the beach, at the counting, the basket went along the divers' heap before anything else was touched.

The fraction was one oyster in every fifty off the divers' third, taken first, in the open, by a man walking the length of the heap with a cane basket, in front of everybody, before a single shell went to a single man. It had been done that way for longer than anybody could

tell you. Nobody in the history of the fishery had ever seriously argued with it, and Sinnappan had watched it happen two hundred times and had never once done the sum.

He did it now, standing in the sun with the salt drying white on his shoulders, and it took no time at all.

On the third day of the fishery Yesamma of Vaipar had stood up in front of four administrators at the mat church and asked for thirty-eight rupees owed to her under a rule written in 1908, and had been refused, and a basket had gone round the divers standing about and had raised eleven rupees and four annas; and there was not a boat on that beach where the figures had not been gone over that evening. He knew what the fund paid and he knew what it did not pay and he knew, without needing to be told, which of the two Anjala and the boy at Vaipar were going to find out about when the fishery was over.

“Eighty-four rupees,” said Susai, beside him, to nobody, looking at the heap.

“I know what I owe.”

“That is not what I said.” The old man scratched the back of his neck. “I said eighty-four rupees.”

Sinnappan did not answer him, because there was nothing to answer, and because he had decided the thing about an hour and a half earlier, somewhere between the forty-fourth descent and the forty-sixth, without any ceremony at all: that whatever the fund did or did not do, a share of what came to him this season was going across the water to Vaipar, and that he was not going to tell anybody about it, including Anjala, until he had it in his hand. Two good seasons and he was clear. It was now not two good seasons. He had not worked out what it was and did not intend to, on the beach, in the sun, at half past two in the afternoon.

* * *

He sat down on the sand under 246's bow to get a knot out of his own becket where the coir had jammed and swelled, which is a thing you do with your thumbs and your teeth and eight minutes.

He had been sitting perhaps five of them when he noticed that his right foot had gone to sleep.

It was nothing. It was what a foot does when a man sits on his heel wrong, and he shifted his weight off it and went on with the knot and waited for the pins and needles, and they did not come, and after a while he put the becket down and stretched the leg out in front of him and pressed his thumb into the outside of the calf, hard, and felt the pressure of it perfectly well and felt something else that was not quite the shape of his own thumb.

Then he flexed the foot twice and stood up on it and it was entirely all right.

Forty-eight descents. Two more than he had ever done. There was not a man on that beach who had not come off the water at some time or other with something in him that behaved oddly for an hour — his hands after a cold morning, his ears for a day and a half in the second week, the ache that sat in the small of Susai's back all season and went off him inside a fortnight of getting home. The sea kept a part of you and gave most of it back. That was the arrangement and everybody had signed it.

He picked up the becket and got the knot out, and went up the beach to eat.

CHAPTER 13

An Inspection

The counter opened at nine and he was in the outer room at ten minutes to, with his own pen in his cloth, the one part of it he had got right.

There were six other people waiting. The kachcheri paid out on Fridays and the fifteenth day of the fishery had fallen on one, so the room held the contractor who carted the water, a Moor gentleman from Mannar who supplied firewood to the hospital, a works foreman with a chit for nine men, and two men Anthoni did not know who were plainly together and plainly not speaking. Then Karuppan came up the steps at five past and stood at the end of the line with his paper in his hand.

They acknowledged each other the way they had acknowledged each other for forty years, which took about a quarter of a second and would have been invisible from six feet.

The punkah was worked by a boy outside with a cord through a hole in the wall, and moved the heat about without reducing it. The treasury clerk was a Sinhalese gentleman named Wijesinghe, with a green eyeshade and an ink-stained middle finger, and he was not slow; he was exact, which is a different thing and takes longer. The water contractor was done in three minutes. The firewood took a quarter of an hour, because of an argument about a February delivery that both men had clearly had before.

Then Wijesinghe said, “Anthonimuthu. Shark-charmer,” in the flat voice of a man reading the next line down, and Anthoni went to the rail.

The paper came out of a japanned box with a great many others in it, folded in three and opened and refolded enough times to have gone soft at the creases, and Wijesinghe smoothed it on the counter with the side of his hand and read it aloud.

It was the rule where money was paid against a lodged assignment: the whole instrument, in the hearing of the payee, before the payee’s hand touched anything. Anthoni had told his daughter ten days ago that it would take a little time. It took four minutes and forty seconds, in English, at the pace of a man who has read it before, without stumbling, without hurrying, and without the smallest interest.

Know all men by these presents that I, Anthonimuthu, son of Sebastianpillai, Parava, of Vaipar in the Tinnevely District, holding the office of Shark-charmer at the Pearl Fishery, do hereby assign and set over unto Vellaisamy Chettiar of Marichchukkaddi and Tuticorin, his heirs, executors, administrators and assigns, three-fourth parts of all moneys howsoever payable to me in respect of the said office, for this fishery and the next, whensoever held —

Whensoever held. The clerk gave it no more weight than he gave the executors and the administrators.

Every man in the room had somewhere to be. The firewood contractor had gone out onto the verandah to look at his own chit in better light. The foreman had his eyes on the door. Nobody in Ceylon was listening, and that was very nearly the point of the morning: the thing Anthoni had spent ten days quietly getting ready for was, in the room, an item.

The one person there with nothing to look at was standing at the end of the line with a folded chit in his hand, and had been standing there a quarter of an hour, and was sixty-one years old and could hear a man clear his throat at forty yards on a beach.

“One hundred and fifty rupees,” Wijesinghe said. “One hundred and twelve rupees, eight annas, to the assignee. Sign here, and here.”

Anthoni signed twice with his own pen. Wijesinghe counted out thirty-seven rupees and eight annas — notes and a small heap of coin — and pushed it across, and turned the book round for the receipt, and said, “Thank you. Next,” and that was the fifteenth day of the fishery of 1925.

Karuppan’s took longer than his had.

There was nothing lodged against it, so there was nothing to read. Wijesinghe said, “One hundred and fifty rupees,” and counted it, and turned the book round. But Karuppan wrote his name like a man shown one word once and never given cause to learn a second, at about the speed of a man splicing, and he did it twice because the clerk wanted it in two places, and the room waited on him for the better part of two minutes without anybody minding.

Anthoni had put his money away and was at the door before it was finished, and did not go out.

* * *

On the verandah, in the shade, with the glare off the white ground coming up at them under the roof, Karuppan said the land breeze had been failing early all week.

“It failed at three on Wednesday,” Anthoni said. “They rowed the last mile.”

“They rowed the last mile on Monday also.”

“I did not hear about Monday.”

“No,” Karuppan agreed. He looked out over the roofs of the government camp at the water, which from up there was a long blue nothing with the fleet on it as a grey mark. “It will fail earlier when the moon goes.”

That was the conversation. They had been having conversations of about that length since 1885. What Anthoni noticed was that

Karuppan's cloth sat differently on him than it had on the opening night — it went round him now with more to spare, and a man who mends nets eleven months of the year and eats what he is given does not lose flesh in a fortnight for a good reason. Anthoni logged it as he logged the state of a rope. There would have been no form of words in which to say it, and in any case the other man went down the steps and away north without saying goodbye, as it had been done for forty years.

Anthoni went down the hill with thirty-seven rupees eight annas in his cloth and thought about the wind.

* * *

He was home at half past ten. Rasathi was on the floor with the mortar between her feet, and she said the woman from the third street had been about the water again, and he said he would see to it, and put four rupees in the tin on the shelf where the household money went and put the rest away, and drank about a pint of water out of the pot, and sat down against the post outside with his back to the doorway for twenty minutes.

She did not ask him anything.

At noon he ate, and at half past one he walked back up to the government camp, because Mr. Wace had sent word on the Wednesday that the launch was going out on Friday afternoon and had asked, with the formality he used when he wanted something and knew it was an imposition, whether Mr. Anthonimuthu would care to come.

* * *

The Superintendent's launch was forty-two feet, white, with a brass-mouthed funnel amidships and a canvas awning aft. Anthoni came up the ladder at the stern taking the second-to-last rung with his

right foot, which the knee had been getting for eleven years, and stepped down onto the deck.

Four days ago there had been a man lying on that deck under a tarpaulin, aft of the funnel, with the boat crew standing well clear of him all the way in. There was a coil of new grass line there now, and a tin bucket.

Wace had his sleeves rolled and a canvas bag of gear at his feet. Besides the two of them there were the serang, two lascars and the engine boy, and no Vereker and no clerk, and Anthoni understood before they cleared the shallows that this was not an official journey.

It took an hour and ten minutes out. They went up the inside of the fleet's morning track past the flag-buoys the December inspection had laid along the northern edge, and at the fourth one the serang put the helm over and they stood out into open water and stopped.

The engine went off and the whole sea came up at once with the small slop of the swell under the counter, and there was nothing else on it. Nothing. Eleven hundred boats had been anchored on this ground at daylight that morning and had gone home at two, and the water they left behind them was the emptiest place Anthoni had ever stood on in his life.

He had never once been on the Cheval Paar. Thirty-five years of standing in the dark telling a fleet what it was and where its edges ran, and he had never in his life been over it. Binders stand at the water and go home. He had known that bank the way he knew a debt — by its name, its dimensions and its consequences — and this was the first time he had been on top of it.

“Eight fathoms and a half,” said the serang, coming up off the lead.

The dredge was an iron frame four feet across with a scraper bar along the bottom edge and a bag of chain-mesh and net behind it, and it weighed rather more than a diving stone and went over the side on a warp with a splash that was mostly noise. They towed it seven or eight minutes at dead slow with the engine barely turning, and then

the lascars took the warp and hauled, hand over hand, and Wace stood at the rail with his hands on the wood and watched the water where it would come up.

Anthoni heard it before he saw it, and it was over in a second and a half, and it was the whole afternoon.

A dredge coming off live ground makes a noise going over the rail that a man who has stood at the counting for thirty-five years knows as he knows his own name: a hard granular rush, shell on shell, the sound of gravel going into a cart, and it goes on longer than you expect it to because there is more of it than you expect. What came over the rail at ten minutes past four made a wet slap and a thin rattle and then stopped.

Wace turned round. He had seen Anthoni's face and he was too decent a man to pretend he had not.

"Yes," he said.

They spread it on the deck. Worn valves, single, not one with its fellow, tunnelled through by boring sponge until they came apart between your fingers like a wafer; shell grit; sand; a dead crab; three pieces of dead shell with spat on them, thirty or forty transparent things the size of a thumbnail that would be dead before the year was out; weed. And oysters. A dozen, of which eight were two years old and would have been thrown back on any beach in the Gulf of Mannar, and four were of a size worth carrying home in a pocket.

Four. Off eight minutes of dredging on the ground the fleet had worked that morning.

They stood out a cable and did it again, and again after that, and once more with the light going long across the water, and the three of them together made about what the first had made.

"I did this station in December," Wace said. "Six hauls, the same warp, the same speed. A thousand and forty of four-year shell, and I had to get the second bag out. I did it again in January and had six hundred and ten. I have done four hauls this afternoon and I have thirty-one." He was crouched on his heels with dead shell in both

hands and he was not making a case. "It is not being fished out. That is what they will say in Colombo and it is not true. It is not laying down. There is no three-year shell on this bank at all — none, not one in four hauls — and there is no four-year shell coming behind what is on it now, and the spat that sets on it dies. You have seen the jars. Nine thousand off this ground in a sample the size of my two hands, in 1919; four hundred out of the same sample in September."

Anthoni had held both of those jars across a desk in February and had thought at the time that it was a pretty thing to know and none of his business.

He crouched down and picked up one of the worn valves and turned it over. He had handled perhaps two million oysters. There was nothing to work out. A bank that is going on lays down shell in the sizes, and you see the sizes, one behind the next, the way you see children in a family; and what was on that deck was the last of a family with nothing behind it.

"How long will it fish?" he said.

"It will fish out this season perfectly well." Wace stood up and wiped his hands on his trousers and looked at the mess on his own deck with dislike. "That is the thing I have not got a way of saying. There is enough on it now to fish to the end of the fishery and give the Agent a figure he will be pleased with and give Colombo a return that will look like a good year, and I shall have to sign it. And then there is nothing. I shall recommend they let it lie until 1933 and I shall be told that is an extraordinary recommendation, and it is."

"And if they fish it in 1929?"

"Then they will get very little, and it will not come back at all." He said it flatly, and then, because he was a considerate man and had been thinking about the camp all week and had got most of it right and one thing entirely wrong, he added: "It will be hard on them for a season or two. But they are not fishermen only; they have their villages and their boats and their own coast. It is not the whole of what they have."

Anthoni looked at the water.

He had walked through that camp that morning: twenty thousand people on a sandspit that had been empty in December, and the money in it borrowed at rates that assumed a fishery, every rupee — Vellaisamy's book, the Chetty at the north end, the man in Tuticorin who had bought twenty-two of his own lots forward at nine rupees and made his living on the difference between what a thing is worth in February and what a man needs in February. A season or two. He said nothing, because there was nothing in Wace's sentence that was factually wrong, and because he had learned long ago that a man who is right about oysters is not made right about people by being contradicted on a boat.

"Why did you show me?" he said instead.

Wace was some time answering.

"Because I shall write it, and Mr. Vereker will read the summary, and Colombo will read the summary of the summary, and in nine years' time there will be a paragraph in a report signed by a man who was not here." He nodded at the deck. "And I wanted one other person alive to have had it in his hands. That is all it is. It is not scientific and I do not care."

Then he had the lascars shovel all of it back over the side, and it went into eight and a half fathoms of clear water and was gone; and they came in with the sun on the port bow and the sea getting up, and Anthoni sat on the after grating and got a shirt-front full of spray twice and did not move.

* * *

They put him ashore at the north end at a quarter past six.

He came down the beach in the last of it, past the counting, which had finished; and at the top of the third street a man got up off his heels and said his name.

It was Yagappan Rocha of Vaipar, who had come over on the Wednesday with a hired boat and two sons. He was fifty-two, and Anthoni had last seen him at his sister's funeral. They stood in the street and did all of it properly — the wife's health, the crossing, the price of rice at Vaipar against the price of rice here, a scandal — and then Yagappan said what he had got up to say.

"The small one is ten," he said. "Sundari's boy. He is not strong yet but he swims like a thing with no bones in it, and Rodrigo will take him at the next one if I ask now. He would be fourteen." He turned his hands over. "It is four years of feeding him for nothing if I am wrong, Anthoni. You are up at the office. Is it a good bank?"

"They counted two million off this beach on Wednesday," said Anthoni.

Yagappan let out a breath and laughed and hit him on the arm, and said that was what he had heard, and that a man likes to hear it from somebody who is not selling him anything; and asked after Rasathi; and said he would send the boy down with fish on Sunday; and went away up the third street entirely satisfied, at seven miles an hour, to tell his wife.

It had been true. They had counted two million off the beach on Wednesday, and it was in the government book, and anybody could go and look.

He had known Yagappan Rocha since they were both nine years old.

CHAPTER 14

The Refusal

Mrs. Croos came at four in the afternoon on the Monday, and four in the afternoon meant a different thing.

At nine in the morning a woman is calling. At four she is concluding. She came up Fourth Cross Street in cloth got out for it, with a paper folded small in her hand and a second woman half a step behind her, and stopped outside and said Anthoni's name from the street, which she had not done in February.

"Mr. Anthonimuthu. This is Mrs. Dias, the young man's aunt on the mother's side, come over from Alanthalai. I have told her you keep a clean house and she did not believe me."

Mrs. Dias was about sixty, broad, in extremely good cloth, with four gold bangles on her right arm and none on her left. She sat down on the mat put out for her, arranged herself, and said nothing at all for forty minutes.

Rasathi made the tea.

It was her whole part in it, and she understood inside two minutes that it was going to be her whole part in it, because Mrs. Croos did not look at her. Not once — not when she came in with the tumblers, not when she set them down, not when she went out to the fire and came back. In February the woman had priced the hut and priced her hands and told her to her face that clever was a thing a household would pay for once; she had thought about it for a fortnight and come

back having decided to conduct the business as though the girl were a fitting.

It was very well done. Rasathi sat on her heels by the doorpost where she could hear all of it and be no part of it, and found after a while that she was counting her own breathing without having decided to.

“The Vaz nephew is spoken for at Chilaw since Christmas and we will not discuss him,” said Mrs. Croos, disposing of February in nine words. “Emmanuel Motha. Twenty-nine. He keeps his uncle’s books and he keeps them himself; there is no writer. Gabriel Motha’s nephew, and Gabriel Motha has nine boats out of Alanthalai, four of them here this season. The young man is on the shore side of it — the counting, the buying, the papers. He does not go in the water and he will not go in the water. His father is dead. He lives in his uncle’s house and he will not always live in his uncle’s house.”

“I know the boats,” said her father.

“Everybody knows the boats.” Mrs. Croos unfolded the paper without looking at it, which meant she had it by heart and the paper was there to be seen rather than read. “Now. There is no dowry asked. I will say that first because you will spend the next hour waiting for it.”

“There is no dowry asked,” Anthoni repeated.

“There is not. Gabriel Motha has more money than he has family and he is at the age where a man begins to notice which of the two he is short of. What is asked is that it be done here, in the camp, before the loosing, because half the coast is standing on this sand and he would rather feed them here than at Alanthalai.” She let a beat go by. “And there is a thing offered. I will say it plainly, and then I will drink this tea and you may take as long as you like.”

“Say it.”

“He will take up your paper with Vellaisamy Chettiar. All of it. He will pay the four hundred and ten rupees at the betrothal, into the Chetty’s hand, and take the instrument himself, and it will lie in his

box at Alanthalai, and there will be no interest on it, and it will not be called.”

Outside, a bullock cart went past with the evening water and the whole street heard every yard of it.

Rasathi did the arithmetic, and there was nothing to it: four hundred and ten rupees was the price and she was the payment, and the two figures were on the same line and there was no third figure anywhere in the room. She had known it would be something like that. What she had not been ready for was how clean it was. There was no cruelty in it. It was the only offer anybody had made in two years that touched the number.

“That is not a small thing,” her father said.

“It is not, and I did not bring it to you as one, and I will tell you what I told Mrs. Dias in the boat: that you will not say yes today, because you are not that sort of man, and that you will say yes on Wednesday.” Mrs. Croos picked up her tumbler at last. “The house is neat, the girl reads and writes, the mother is dead these six years and the house has been run since, and there is no drink in the family and no litigation. I have said all that. I do not say things twice.”

She drank her tea.

And Mrs. Dias of Alanthalai, who had sat through all of it like a bag of rice, put her tumbler down and spoke for the first and only time, in the tone of a woman making conversation about the weather.

“And my brother would be glad to see the office kept up,” she said. “It has been in your family a long while. It would be a pity if it went out of it.”

Then she got up, and Mrs. Croos got up, and there was a great deal of pleasantness in the doorway, and they went away down Fourth Cross Street in the last of the light.

* * *

Her father sat where he was for a while with his forearms on his knees.

“Well,” he said.

“Say the numbers.”

“You have them.”

“Say them anyway.” She had not moved from the doorpost.

He said them, because numbers were easier to say than anything else, and because he had plainly been saying them to himself since the second minute. Four hundred and ten rupees. The office mortgaged in June of 1923 for a hundred and fifty and again in January of 1924 for a hundred, and the arithmetic by which those two became four hundred and ten was not complicated and was not going to stop. Two instalments of the fee this season, of which he had had the first. Twenty-two lots sold forward in February at nine rupees because he had needed the money in February.

“It was four hundred and ten in February,” he said, “and it will be four hundred and ten in June. What they take off the fee is the interest, and the interest does not touch it. That is the whole machine, and there is no year in it where I put four hundred and ten rupees on a table. I have looked. It is not there. Not out of the fee, not out of the oysters, not out of anything that would still be honest by the time it got to me.”

“And this way it goes into a box in Alanthalai.”

“This way it goes into a box in Alanthalai.”

“With me.”

“With you,” her father said. He did not soften it and did not look away, and that was the worst thing he could have done. “He is not a bad young man. I have watched him at the counting for three weeks. He is quick, he does not shout, and he never once put his thumb on the scale where I could see it. He is on the shore side. In eleven years he will not be dead.”

“That is your case.”

“That is the whole of it, and it is better than any case anybody made for your mother.” He rubbed his face with both hands. “I am not going to tell you to do it. I want you to understand that I could, and that half the fathers on this beach would, and that I am not going to. But on Wednesday I do not have anything else to say to that woman.”

“Then I will say it.”

“Rasathi.”

“No.” She said it once, quietly, sitting on her heels by the post, and her hands were perfectly steady and everything else in her was not. “No. Not to him and not to any of them. I am not going to Alanthalai to keep somebody’s house and count somebody’s oysters and be grateful to a man in a box for four hundred and ten rupees for the rest of my life.”

Her father took it without a sound. He did not shout and did not stand up. He sat in the dark of the hut with the fire behind him and took it as he took a bad price, and after a moment said, not unkindly, in the flattest voice in the world:

“Then we will find four hundred and ten rupees somewhere else.”

It was worse than shouting, because there was no somewhere else and he had just proved it with the numbers, and he had accepted her refusal inside four seconds, put the bill in her hands, and would never mention it again as long as he lived.

She had one thing left and she had not intended to spend it that night.

“You do not need him,” she said. “You need somebody to give it to.”

“Give what to?”

“The office.”

Her father did not move.

“There is no son,” she said. “There is not going to be a son. There is a daughter who has kept your book since she was thirteen and knows what a boat-owner is worth to the anna, and who has heard

those words said on that beach since she was nine years old. You will not teach me. All right. I have taken them.”

“You have taken what?”

“Ninety-one,” Rasathi said.

The fire moved and went down and neither of them touched it.

“You gave me the number yourself,” she said. “In the doorway, on Wednesday, to prove to me it was worth nothing. Then I went and stood in it. Not at the flagstaff — forty yards, in the crowd, on the wet sand, with the Kilakarai lamps behind me. I have every one of the ninety-one, in the order you say them, with the two places where you stop.” She was talking quickly now and could not stop. “And I have something you did not give me. You do not start when the beach goes quiet. You wait, and you let one go, and you let a second go, and you come in on the gap behind the third — because that one runs up further and pulls back longer and there is more room in it. You have done it for thirty-five years and you have never told anybody, because I do not think you know you do it.”

There was a silence of some length.

“That is right,” her father said.

“I know it is right.”

And Anthonimuthu, fifty-four, shark-binder of the pearl fishery of Ceylon in the fourth generation, sitting on the floor of a mat hut on the ninth of March with four hundred and ten rupees on his back and his daughter in front of him with her chin up, put his hand over his eyes and laughed.

It was not a hard laugh. That was the thing she could not get past afterwards, going over it and over it: there was nothing in it she could take hold of. It was not the laugh of a man who has been threatened, and it was not cruel, and it was not the laugh of a man who thinks a girl has been foolish. It went on perhaps four seconds and had affection all through it and something else in it she had no name for, and it stopped, and he took his hand down, and his face was tired and fond and absolutely closed.

“Rasathi,” he said.

“Do not.”

“I am not laughing at you.”

“Do not,” she said again, and got up and went out past him to the fire, and put a pot on it that did not need to go on, and stood there until she could feel her own face again.

He said her name once more from inside and she did not answer, and after a while he went out.

She did the book at nine. The household column took four minutes. There was a figure in it that had come in on Friday morning, a good deal smaller than a hundred and fifty rupees, and she ruled the line under it and wrote nothing in the margin and did not go and find him and ask, and put the book away in the tin box under the mat.

Then she lay down in the dark and got to a hundred and sixteen, six more than she had ever done, and it was no use to her whatever.

* * *

She went north at half past nine on the Tuesday, to the Kilakarai lines, and asked once and was pointed.

He was not on his heels in the shade of a hull with a net across his knees. He was on a mat under the same hull with a cloth over him in ninety-eight degrees of heat, and a boy of about twelve sat at his feet doing nothing whatever, having plainly been told to sit there.

“He is awake,” the boy said.

She went in under the bilge and crouched down. Karuppan turned his head on the rolled cloth and looked at her, and it took him a second longer than it should have to arrive.

“The binder’s daughter.”

“Yes.”

“Sit, then.”

The heat coming off him was dry and quite distinct at a foot and a half; his eyes had the varnished look; and his hands lay on the mat on

either side of him doing nothing. She had known him three weeks and had never seen those hands empty. There was a brass tumbler by the mat with a finger of water in it that had been there some time.

At twenty minutes to one that morning he had stood at the water's edge and named the water eleven times, and the sand and the shell and the thing under the shell and all the rest of it, and it had taken four minutes and one second; and he had come off the beach and lain down and not got up since.

He would do it again in twelve hours.

"You have come for the list," he said.

She had not. She had come with a question carried two miles up the beach — whether the thing could be held by a person the government did not expect, and how, and on what paper — and it went out of her entirely and never came back into that conversation.

"No," she said.

"You should have it. It is the part that goes first." He got his breath. "It goes out of a man before the rest. My father's went. He had the beginning and the end for two years and the middle was gone and nobody knew but me, because I stood where you are standing and put it back into him a line at a time before he went down to the water." He moved one hand about two inches. "I will say it now. You will do a thing for me."

"Yes."

"Stand at the head of the boat," Karuppan said, "and do not let anybody come round it."

So she stood at the stem of a Kilakarai boat in the sun with her arms folded, in front of a twelve-year-old boy and a hull, and kept a strip of shade nine feet long private for as long as it took; and one man came along the line, looked at her, thought better of it, and went away.

And under the boat, on his back, on a mat, Muthukaruppan said the list.

It is sung. It has been sung every time it has been said for as long as anybody at Kilakarai could tell you, and it is the only part that is, and it is the reason a temple singer holds the office and not a priest. He could not sing it. He had not the air in him for four notes and he knew it before he began, and he said it flat, at the volume of a man talking in a room: the weed, the sand, the shell, the crabs and the thing that lives in a shell that is not its own; the fish that go in one body and the fish that go alone and the flat one the colour of what it is lying on; the turtle; the wood, and the masts, and the iron off them, and the nails out of the iron; the rope, every fathom of it that has parted since men came here; the stones; the rain; the rivers the moment they touch you; the light down to nine fathoms and the dark under it. The bones.

He stopped twice — once after the rope and once, longer, after the light — and both times waited without the smallest embarrassment until he had the air, and went on from the right place. It took about two minutes, twice what it takes, and it was not beautiful and there was nothing in it that would have carried nine feet in a wind.

Rasathi stood where she had been told to stand and did not take out the folded half-sheet and did not put a hand near it. She had come up that beach three times now to get something written down, and this time it never once entered her head, and she did not notice that until she was most of the way home.

When it was finished he lay there and got his breath in stages, and said, "Water."

She picked up the brass tumbler and it was warm and had sand in the bottom, and she went and got him fresh from the pot at the near end of the lines — eleven-mile water, carted since four that morning — and came back and got a hand behind his head and gave it to him, and he drank all of it.

"Tomorrow," Karuppan said. "Come at twelve. If I am asleep, wake me."

CHAPTER 15

The Second Gun

Five mornings in the boat and nobody had used his name yet, and at ten minutes past seven on the Wednesday morning he found the patch.

Sinnappan was on the surface off his ninth descent with his arm over the gunwale when he heard Rathinam say something quietly into the stern, in the voice of a man who expects to be told to keep it to himself. He did not catch it. He caught Mohideen Marakkayar's answer, because the answer was a question, and Mohideen had not asked anybody in that boat a question all season.

"Where?"

Rathinam came aft past the mast, stepping over the baskets, and put one hand flat on the gunwale and pointed with the other, not with a finger but with the whole hand, at a place in the water perhaps forty yards north-east.

"The weed is standing up."

Sinnappan hauled himself round on the gunwale to look, and saw water. It was seven in the morning and the sun was still low enough to lie along the surface in a sheet, and there was nothing out there but the same grey-green as everywhere else, with the swell going through it.

"Watch it for a swell," Rathinam said, to nobody in particular. "On sand the weed lies over and the whole patch slides when the

swell goes through. On shell it stands, because it is rooted on plates that are standing on edge, and the top of it wags and the bottom of it does not go anywhere. You can see it from up here if the sun is low. After nine o'clock you cannot see it at all."

Susai leaned over from amidships with his stone between his feet.

"I have been coming to this bank for forty years."

"On this coast the beds are wide," Rathinam said, without any heat in it. "On our side they are narrow. A man finds them from the boat or he goes home in the afternoon with nothing. I have been finding them from the boat since I was nineteen."

Mohideen Marakkayar looked at the water for about the length of time it takes to fill a lamp. Then he told Chinnathambi to get the anchor, and they took 246 north-east on the sweeps forty yards, which is a thing no boat-owner does in the middle of a morning for any reason at all, and let her go again.

Sinnappan went down at nineteen minutes past seven on his tenth descent and came up at twenty past with a full basket in fifty-one seconds.

* * *

There is a thing that happens on a bed like that, and it had never happened to him before, and it took him four descents to understand what it was.

He had stopped looking.

A diver at nine fathoms is a man hunting in a bad light with less than a minute of air in him, and the whole of the work is in the finding: getting the light behind you, reading the weed, running the flat of your hand along under a ledge to feel what the eye cannot see, and coming up half the time with a basket that has nothing in the top of it. On the eleventh descent Sinnappan came down onto plates lying two and three deep in a bed of loose grey shell that ran away from him in every direction he could see, and he did not hunt. He picked.

He filled his basket and there was still shell inside the reach of his arm, and he went up and left it there.

No diver in the Gulf of Mannar leaves shell on the bottom. There is nothing in the trade to tell a man what to do about it, because nobody has ever needed telling.

He came up and gave the two pulls and got his arm over the gunwale and started to laugh, and could not get his breath and had to stop, and that was the only thing he said about it all morning.

* * *

By half past eight the fleet had found them.

That is how it goes: one boat starts sending up baskets with weight in them and the boats to either side see it, and the boats beyond those see the boats to either side, and by nine o'clock there were something over two hundred sail crowded onto a piece of water a quarter of a mile across, anchored so near that a man could have gone from 246 to the boat on her starboard hand without swimming more than four strokes, and the shouting between them was continuous and cheerful and mostly obscene.

Nobody minded. There was enough. It is the only condition under which nobody minds anything, and a diver may go his whole working life without seeing it twice.

Sinnappan was at twenty-one descents by nine o'clock, an ordinary figure; the bank was giving so much to each basket that he had no reason to hurry, and he lay on the surface between them for the whole five minutes and did not once shorten it. Peruman and Savari went down alternately on the starboard side and came up shouting figures at one another that neither of them was counting properly. Chinnathambi baled, and stopped baling to look, and was told to bale.

Susai did not stop at nineteen.

He went past nineteen at a quarter past nine without any comment, and past twenty-five at ten, and at half past ten Mohideen Marakkayar said his name once, across the boat, not loudly, and Susai said, "I know," and went again. He got to thirty-one. Then he sat down in the stern with his elbows on his knees and his chest going and said that the tide was making, and nobody said anything to that either, and Sinnappan, coming up off his thirty-fourth, saw that the old man's eyes were wet and that it was not from the salt.

Kasim hauled all morning without a word. Somewhere about eleven somebody in the next boat threw across a lime, and Kasim caught it left-handed out of the air without appearing to look at it, and put it down on the thwart beside him, and did not eat it, and it was still there at the second gun.

Rathinam made forty-two and had the best basket of the day at his fourteenth, a plate a foot and a half across with nine oysters standing on it in a clump and the weed still on them, and he brought the whole thing up entire instead of breaking it off on the bottom, which is showing off and which cost him about nine seconds. He set it down on the bottom boards and looked at it.

"Rathinam," said Susai, from the stern. "Give us the other side of that."

It was the first time anybody in the boat had used his name.

* * *

The second gun went at four minutes past twelve.

It went out flat across the water the way it went every day, and two hundred boats heard it, and out of the crowd somewhere to leeward a man's voice came across the water asking for one more, in the ordinary way, and Mohideen Marakkayar, who had his hand already on the anchor rode, said no.

They got the anchor and put her head for the beach.

Sinnappan had thirty-nine descents, nine short of his best, and a boat so low in the water that Chinnathambi had to bale twice on the way in, and he sat on the weather gunwale with his feet among the shell and the wind off the land coming at him warm and full of woodsmoke and dust and the smell of the whole camp cooking at once, and he could not make his face do anything else.

* * *

The counting began at two and finished after nine at night.

Two men of the Superintendent's staff came down to 246's place on the sand and squatted at the heap, and they did what they did every day of the fishery, which nobody watches and everybody has watched ten thousand times. Their hands were bound in rag to the second knuckle. Oyster shell at the edge cuts like a bottle, and a counter who works a season unwrapped has no hands by the fourth day and no work by the fifth; the rag goes on before he leaves his tent and comes off at night and is boiled on a Sunday.

They counted in threes.

That is the whole of the government's arithmetic, and Sinnappan had watched it since he was sixteen without ever once seeing it. The counter's hand goes into the heap and comes out with three shell and throws: one and two into the government's pile, three into the divers'. One, two, three. One, two, three. The two-thirds and the one-third are not worked out by anybody. The division happens at the speed of a man's hand and it cannot be argued with afterwards, because it was done in the open in front of the boat's own people at the rate of about three thousand an hour, and any man of the thirteen who thought he saw a hand go wrong could say so and be listened to. Every hundredth shell the counter calls, and a boy sitting on his heels drops a pebble into a brass bowl, and at the end the pebbles are the count.

246's heap came to nine thousand six hundred and fourteen. Three thousand two hundred and four threes, and two over. The two

over went to the divers' pile, because they always do, and it is the only shell in the whole fishery that goes that way, and nobody knows why, and no clerk has ever written it down.

It took an hour and forty minutes. The pair before them had taken longer.

There were eleven hundred boats on that beach and by three o'clock it was plain to everybody that the counting was not going to be finished by dark, and word went up the lines that the staff were going to sit at it by lamplight, and that nobody was to break up a heap or sell out of it before it had been through the threes. So the whole camp sat down on the sand beside its own shell in the last of the afternoon with nothing to do, and waited, and got up occasionally to look at the heap next door.

That is how the toddy got in.

* * *

By six o'clock there were lamps all down the water's edge for a mile and a half and the counting going on under every one of them, and the calling of the hundreds ran along the beach in the dark from north to south, a hundred here and a hundred there and a hundred a quarter of a mile away, all night, like frogs.

The dealers came down onto the wet sand where they had no business, and did business. Hirji's men went along the heaps in a body with a lamp-boy in front and took whole boats' thirds where they could get them, and paid on the sand, in notes, out of a bag, which is not the way anything is done and was done a dozen times that night. A man from Tuticorin walked up and down for an hour offering fifteen rupees the thousand and getting nowhere and went to sixteen at eight o'clock and was surrounded.

Chinnathambi bought an umbrella.

He bought it at half past seven from a man carrying four of them, for two rupees, and he was nineteen years old and had never owned

anything that was not a tool, and he put it up in the dark on the beach with the lamps going and stood under it in no rain at all while 246's crew told him what they thought. A drum started somewhere up by the Kilakarai lines at eight and did not stop. Somebody's grandmother danced. Two men fought about nothing for about forty seconds and then went and got each other toddy.

Sinnappan sat against 246's bow with his share in a sack between his knees.

Two hundred and thirty-seven oysters. The counter had done the division of the divers' third aloud, standing up, in about forty seconds: the fraction off the top first, sixty-four shell into the cane basket in front of everybody, and then the owner's part for the boat and the gear, and then the shares, divers full and tenders half; and the whole boat had checked it in their heads while he said it, and it had come out.

Two hundred and thirty-seven was the largest share he had ever had in his life. His good days ran to about ninety.

He was, that night, the only man on that beach doing sums.

He had two thousand six hundred and forty oysters already, in that sack, under 246's bow thwart, where they had been going since the seventh day of the fishery. He had worked the reason out himself at the first auction, sitting up on the dune with everybody else watching lots of a thousand open at fourteen rupees and go at sixteen and eighteen and, once, at twenty-six. A diver's share sold loose on the sand at the end of a morning fetched what a dealer felt like giving for a double handful. The same shell in a lot of one thousand, unopened, put up at the auction with an agent's name on it, fetched what the room would pay. It was the same shell. The difference was the thousand.

So he had stopped selling, and had eaten what Anjala's brother sent across, and had told nobody, and the sack had been getting heavier at the rate of about ninety a day, and tonight it went to two thousand eight hundred and seventy-seven.

At sixteen the thousand that was forty-six rupees, and he did not intend to sell it at sixteen, and he did not intend to sell it at all until the loosing, and there might be something in it besides shell. Three seasons and he had never had a whole thousand of his own.

Eighty-four rupees.

There were twenty diving days left. If the bank went on the way it had gone that morning the sack would have five thousand in it before the fleet broke up, and five thousand was eighty rupees at the bad price.

He sat with the sack between his knees in the lamplight with the drum going and worked it four different ways, and all four came out the same, and it was the first night since he was sixteen years old that eighty-four rupees had been a number he could get to from where he was standing.

He did not tell anybody. He had decided that a week ago and nothing had changed except the arithmetic.

* * *

He got up at about nine to go and find the toddy, and his right foot was not there.

He had been sitting on it. He stood, and the foot took his weight and reported nothing, and he waited for the pins and needles and they did not come, and then he walked on it, and it walked. By the time he had gone thirty yards up the beach it was his own again, or near enough that he was not thinking about it, and he had a cup in his hand and Savari was telling somebody a lie about the fourteenth descent, and the drum was going.

* * *

Coming in at noon he had seen a girl going north along the beach against the whole camp, walking fast, not stopping for anybody and not looking at any of it. She had been a long way off. He knew the

face from the night of the eighth of March, when she had stood in the shallows with her skirt bunched in one fist, and he had never spoken to her and did not know her name, and did not know that anybody on that beach would have told him if he had asked.

He thought about it for as long as it took to drink the toddy, and then Peruman said something to him and he stopped.

* * *

The number came up the beach at about ten o'clock at night, from the kachcheri, from a clerk, to a peon, to a toddy-seller, to everybody.

Two million nine hundred thousand.

Nobody could check it and nobody tried, and by half past ten it had gone from Karativu to the last tent on the south side and had not changed by a single oyster in the whole two miles, which never happens to a number. Two million nine hundred thousand. A man stood up on a boat at the water's edge and said it out loud to the beach and the beach said it back to him.

Sinnappan went to sleep on the sand at eleven o'clock with the sack under his head and one arm over it. It was the best morning he had ever had in the water, and he had known it while it was happening, which does not often happen to anybody.

CHAPTER 16

A Grey Line

Anthoni's morning had nothing in it, and that was what he was paid for.

He said the words at twenty minutes to one, and the boats went, and he slept from half past one until a little after six in the mat lean-to behind the church with his sandals off and his feet crossed at the ankle, and was on the beach by seven with his hair wet. From seven in the morning until the fleet came in at two in the afternoon there was nothing whatever for the binder of the fishery to do, and the whole of the work was to be visible while he did it.

He sat where he sat every day, on the sand on the north side of the flagstaff, in the shade of the customs shed, where a man coming up the beach from the water could see him from three hundred yards without having to look for him.

At half past seven a boat-owner from Alanthalai came to complain that a Kilakarai boat had taken his place at the anchorage two mornings running, and Anthoni heard him out and said that the anchorage was Mr. Wace's business and that he would say so to the right man, and the boat-owner went away satisfied, having got nothing.

At eight a man wanted to know whether the words could be said again, separately, over his son's boat, and offered him four rupees. His son was twelve and it was the boy's first fishery. Anthoni said

that the words were said once, at the water, for everybody at the same time, and that there was no way of saying them for one boat that would not mean taking them off another, and the man thought about that and said yes, he saw that, and went away with his four rupees. He had asked without any embarrassment and he took the refusal the same way. Three or four men asked every season. The answer had been the same for four generations and Anthoni had never had to think about it in his life.

At nine o'clock somebody brought him tea in a glass, and he drank it.

The halyard on the flagstaff had been slapping since the land breeze died. He got up and put a whipping on the loose end with a bit of twine out of his cloth, standing in the sun with his back to the shed, and it did not hold, and he took it off and did it again and it did not hold that time either. He did it a third time. It was a job he had done ten thousand times on a hundred things and he could do it without looking at his hands, and he stood there for six or seven minutes doing it badly, three times, and then put the twine away in his cloth and sat down again.

Rasathi had gone out at nine without telling him where, and had not been in the hut when he came back at seven, and there was food covered with a plate.

* * *

He saw it at twenty-five past nine and did not understand it for most of a minute.

The fleet on the Cheval Paar lies four miles out and a little north, and from the beach at Marichchukkaddi it is not eleven hundred boats. It is one thing. They anchor in the dark and they all ride the same tide, so by full daylight every hull on that bank is lying the same way with its mast raked the same way, and what a man on the beach sees is a single grey comb laid along the water with the light coming

through the teeth of it. Anthoni had looked at that comb every working morning for thirty-five years and could tell from the shore whether the tide had turned.

What he saw at twenty-five past nine was that the comb had a gap in it.

He looked at it the way a man looks at a word that is spelled wrong, before he has read it. Then a second gap came, a little south of the first, and he stood up.

A boat under way turns across the others and shows her beam, and her sail goes up, and where there had been a tooth of the comb there is suddenly a bright irregular patch. He counted five. Then he counted nine. Then the count went out of any use at all, because the gaps were coming faster than he could take them in, spreading outward from a place about a third of the way along the fleet from the north end, and inside two minutes the comb was gone and there was no pattern on that water at all.

Eleven hundred boats do not break anchorage at half past nine in the morning. They do not break anchorage at all between the guns. He had seen the fleet come in early twice in his life. In 1911 two boats went down off Karativu in a squall and the rest ran for it with the sky black to the west, and in 1921 a Colombo launch came out at ten in the morning with a telegram about the Government Agent and the whole thing was stopped by an order. Both times the reason had arrived on the beach before the boats did.

Anthoni turned and looked at the sky in the west and it was the sky of a hot clear Thursday in the middle of March, and the sea between the beach and the bank was flat and hard and blue and going nowhere.

Behind him the camp had begun to notice.

* * *

It took nine minutes for the first sail to come inside the two-mile mark, and in those nine minutes twenty thousand people came down to the water.

They came off the streets between the tin plates and out of the boutiques and down from the jewellers' lines and out of the government lines and the hospital verandah, and they came without any noise at all, which Anthoni had not expected. A camp of twenty thousand people makes a noise all day and all night that nobody hears until it stops. It stopped. There were people standing on the sand from the customs shed to the kottu wall, six and eight deep in places, looking out at the water and not speaking, and children being held up, and men climbing onto the hulls of the boats drawn up above the tideline to get another four feet of height, and nobody saying anything, so that what he could hear was the shore break and feet in sand.

The Superintendent's launch went out at twenty to ten from the government jetty with a white bow-wave on her, and he watched her go, and did the sum: an hour and ten minutes out to the marks, less if she was pressed, and she would be among the fleet by about eleven o'clock and Mr. Ferdinand Wace would know everything there was to know by five past.

The first boat in the shallows was a Vaipar boat and she came in fast with two men over the side hauling her before she had way off her. They did not get the shell out. Nobody in that boat touched the shell.

Anthoni went down to the water.

* * *

“— from the north, in the open, in the middle of us —“

“Whose boat?”

“Ours, and 903, and the Kilakarai string beyond —“

“How long?”

“It went under us twice. It went under us and came back and went under us again, and there was a hand in the water —“

“Whose hand?”

“Mine. It was my own hand, and it came up alongside as near to me as that post —“

He got the whole of it in fragments, standing in ankle-deep water with a boat’s stem beside his ear, from four men at once who were not answering him and were not answering each other either; and then from a second boat, and then from a third, and by ten o’clock there were perhaps forty boats on that beach and all of them had it, and the pieces did not fit.

Some of it fitted. Nobody was hurt. Nobody had been taken. It had been seen by boats all across the northern end of the bank at nearly the same minute, which no one could explain, and the boats that had not seen it had come in because the boats that had were coming in.

And every man of them, whatever else he said, said the same two things.

That it was big. Not the length of a boat — none of them said that, and any of them could have. A boat’s length is twenty-six feet and a man says it without thinking. They stood in the water and made a measurement against the things they had to hand: from here to that anchor; longer than the sail; and one man, an old man off a Kilakarai boat, put his hand on the stem of his own vessel and said nothing at all, and that was worse.

And that it had come up under them. Not along the surface. It had been below them in the working water, at eight and nine fathoms, in the place where men had been standing on the bottom with stones on their feet since twenty past six that morning, and it had gone from boat to boat under their keels for the better part of a quarter of an hour, and what they had seen of it, most of them, was a grey line going away under the hull.

Anthoni stood in the water with his cloth wet to the thigh and listened to forty boats tell him, in pieces, about something that had been inside the line since first light.

The fleet came in all morning. Before the sun was overhead the beach for a mile was hulls and wet sand and people, and the boats were still coming, and out beyond them the Superintendent's launch was a white speck standing away north-east into the glare.

At twenty past eleven a man off the third boat of a Vaipar string — a young man, not more than twenty, with his stone still on his shoulder because he had carried it up the beach without knowing he had it — stopped in front of Anthoni, and put the stone down, and did not say anything at all, but stood.

And Anthoni became aware that a good part of the beach had turned round.

Not all at once, and not as a crowd: a man here who had been looking at the water looked at him instead, and then the men on either side of that man, and then a woman up by the customs shed, and it went outward across the sand from the water's edge as the gaps had gone along the fleet.

Somebody said, "Binder."

He was already walking. The crowd came apart in front of him without being asked and closed behind him, and the sand was loose and dry above the tideline and hard and wet below it, and there were four men running down past him on the left carrying an anchor between them, and somebody was shouting for Mohideen Marakkayar, and a Kilakarai boat lay at the edge of the water with her bow afloat and three men already standing in her waiting to put her head round.

CHAPTER 17

Into the Water

The crowd came apart in front of him and closed behind him, and he went down the dry sand into the wet without stopping, and the three men in the Kilakarai boat saw him coming and stopped what they were doing.

She was 704. He knew the number and not the men — a Kilakarai boat that made thirty descents in a morning where a Ceylon boat made fifty and came in with as much shell in her at the end of it — and the old man standing amidships with one hand on the mast was the one who had put his palm flat on his own stem an hour ago and said nothing at all. Mira Lebbe. Sixty-five, sixty-six. Anthoni had known that face across a beach for twenty years and had never once in his life been in a boat with him.

“Out,” he said. “Not far. Where they come in.”

Mira Lebbe looked at him for about a second and a half, and then said something over his shoulder with Arabic in it, and the two younger men put their shoulders to the stem and walked her off; and Anthoni got in over the gunwale on his stomach in front of twenty thousand people, which he had not intended.

They poled her out until the pole would not reach and then pulled. Nobody spoke. He sat on the bottom boards for the first fifty yards because his legs had decided that for him, and then got up and

stood, and the beach went away from him at the speed of two men rowing badly because they were watching him instead of the water.

At about four hundred yards Mira Lebbe put his hand up and the oars came in.

They were on the road. Three boats came past them inside the next two minutes, running in with their sails full and their shell untouched under the thwarts, and every man in every one of them turned and looked, and the third one shouted something that was carried away.

“Here,” Anthoni said.

* * *

He had perhaps four minutes, and he spent the first of them on the arithmetic, because the arithmetic was all there was.

If the fleet stayed on the beach tomorrow it stayed on the beach. A fishery is not stopped by an order; it is stopped by two mornings in which nothing happens, after which the Tuticorin boats go home, because a Tuticorin boat that is not fishing is a boat eating its owner, and when the Tuticorin boats go the Kilakarai boats go, and then there is a beach with twenty thousand people on it and no reason for them. Mr. Ferdinand Wace was at that moment somewhere out beyond the two-mile mark in a forty-two-foot launch with a notebook, and Mr. Ferdinand Wace had written in February that the Cheval Paar should be let lie until 1933, and had been overruled, and had gone on being overruled all season in a particular silent way that Anthoni had watched from the other side of a desk. Two mornings of an empty bank would give the man what twelve years had not.

And it would be the right thing. It was in the arithmetic too, and he did not leave it out. He had stood on the deck of that launch six days ago and put his hand into a wet canvas bag and brought up thirty-one oysters of a size out of four hauls where there had been a

thousand in six hauls in December, and there was nothing whatever wrong with letting the Cheval lie.

Against that: three hundred rupees a season, of which he had had thirty-seven rupees and eight annas and would have thirty-seven rupees and eight annas at the loosing, if there was a loosing. Four hundred and ten rupees in a Chetty's book that did not move whatever he did. A paper at the kachcheri that ran for this fishery and the next, whensoever held, and that would begin to mean something very different if the answer to *whensoever* turned out to be 1933. A daughter who had said no on Monday night with her chin up and who had been right to.

There was no year in which a man in his position said *let it lie*. He had looked for it. It was not there.

So the fleet had to go out, and the fleet would not go out on words.

That was the second minute, and it was professional. They had all heard the words. He had said them at twenty minutes to one that morning, one hundred and fifty yards from where he was now standing, in twenty-eight seconds, and at some time between six and half past nine a thing had come inside the line at eight and nine fathoms and gone from boat to boat under their keels for the better part of a quarter of an hour, and every man on that water had taken his own account of it home. To stand on this beach tonight and say the same ninety-one words louder was what a man does who has nothing. They would hear it as nothing. They would be perfectly right.

He had been selling them the same twenty-eight seconds for thirty-five years at three hundred rupees a season, and in the whole of that time it had never cost him anything but sleep.

Today it was going to cost something, and he would pay it in the only currency the beach could see from four hundred yards.

That was the third minute, and there was nothing noble in it anywhere. He knew what he was. He was not going into the water because he believed anything; he was going into the water because he

had a lie to keep and no money to keep it with, and a man who has decided to lie had better be willing to pay the premium on it in body. It seemed to him, standing on the bottom boards of another man's boat with his cloth wet to the thigh, not a fine thought but a correct one, with the correctness of an account.

He was also, in the ordinary way, afraid. He had lived on this coast for fifty-four years and could swim in the manner of a man who has lived on a beach and never worked on the water, and he had not been out of his depth since he was about thirty.

The fourth minute he spent counting.

He had counted the ninety-one when he was in his thirties, deliberately, sitting on the sand with a stick, for no reason he could now recover. He counted the new ones now, twice, going out, and got sixty-seven both times. They were not good. There was no making them good in four minutes in a boat, and the beach would know they were new the moment they arrived, and that could not be helped either: what he needed was for them to know.

* * *

He put his foot on the thwart and then stood up on it, and Mira Lebbe moved without being asked and stood behind him with one hand on his back, holding him, and the two younger men held the boat steady with their oars flat in the water.

He faced the beach, because that is where the people were.

Four hundred yards is too far for a voice. He knew that before he opened his mouth and said it anyway, and it did not matter in the smallest degree, because the sand between the customs shed and the kottu wall was six and eight deep with people who could see a man standing up in a boat, and there were forty boats on the water inside a cable of him and every one of them heard it, and by four o'clock the words would be on the beach in a better condition than he was.

“Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and to the sand under it.

“The boundary is the Cheval bank, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again. Nothing crosses that line.”

Then he stopped, and the stopping was heard, and he put in the sixty-seven.

“A thing came inside the line this morning. It came in and it took nobody. That is what happened, and I will put nothing on top of it.

“Now I go into the water, and I will be in it until the last boat is up. What is inside the line is inside it with me. If the line is broken, it is broken on me first.”

And then, without a pause, in the voice he used every night of a fishery:

“Inside it there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners, and there are two who bind. Nobody inside it has a name.

“By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun.”

He got down off the thwart, and put his cloth up between his legs and tucked it, and went over the side at eight minutes to twelve.

* * *

The water was warm on the top and cold three feet under, and it took his breath as it always had, and he had forgotten that it did.

At four minutes past twelve the noon gun went off at the government battery over an empty bank, as it had gone off every day since the twentieth of February, and it was the loudest thing that happened that afternoon.

He was in the sea for four hours and forty-eight minutes.

There is nothing to say about the middle of it, which is the truth about the whole business and the part that never got told. The sun came over and went down the other side. The water was a good deal

rougher out there than it looked from the sand and lifted him and dropped him about eleven thousand times. He swallowed some. His eyes went first, at maybe the second hour, and after that he saw the beach as a long pale smear with a darker smear on top of it that was people. The cloth chafed a strip raw under both arms and he did not find that out until the evening. His tongue thickened. Mira Lebbe put a brass pot down to him twice and he took water out of it twice, at about two o'clock and about four.

And he held the gunwale.

He held it for most of the four hours and forty-eight minutes, with one hand, low down, in the shadow of the hull where a man at four hundred yards cannot see a thing; and it was that or he would not have lasted ninety minutes, and he knew it when he went in. There were three men in a boat eight feet from him the entire time. Any one of them could have had him out of the water in four seconds.

By the Sunday there was nobody on that beach who said he had touched the boat, and nobody who said he had taken water, and nobody who said there was anybody with him.

He did not correct any of it. He would not correct any of it for the rest of his life.

The boats came in past him all afternoon. He had judged it correctly: they came in from the north end in strings and from the south end in strings, and a boat that could have run in half a mile to the south of him did not, and by two o'clock they were altering to pass him close enough to throw a rope, and the men in them stood up. Nobody shouted. A Vaipar boat went by at about three with nine divers in her standing along the weather side in a row with their hands down, and one of them was a boy of about fourteen, and Anthoni turned his head and watched them go and could not see their faces.

At half past four the last of the far southern string came in, a Tuticorin boat with a patched sail, and passed him, and went up onto the sand.

At twenty minutes to five they got him in over the gunwale, and they had to get him in, because the knee had locked at about the third hour and would not come straight and was not going to.

Nobody on the beach saw that either.

* * *

He walked up the sand himself.

It was not courage and it was not vanity; it was the same arithmetic he had done in the boat, carried out to its last figure. A man who is carried up a beach by four men has been in the water. A man who walks up it himself has been somewhere else. So he put his foot down on the wet sand and made the knee take it, and went up the slope past the tideline into the dry, and it was about ninety yards, and he did it in one go without stopping because stopping would have finished it.

The beach was silent and did not stay silent. They did not cheer — this was not a crowd that cheered — but the noise came back all along it as he came up, the ordinary noise of twenty thousand people, and it came back as it had gone: from the water outward.

People were standing in the sea. He had not been able to see it from out there. All along the tideline for the better part of a mile there were men and women standing in the shallows up to their knees and their thighs, not going anywhere, not doing anything, just in it; and they came out as he came up and let him through.

A man put a dry cloth round his shoulders and he did not see who. Somebody had brought his sandals down from the shed.

A woman he had never seen before came out of the crowd and stood in front of him with a child on her hip, a boy of two or three with a bad eye, and did not say anything, and held the child out at him. She held it out as if it were a paper for him to sign.

Anthoni put his hand on the child's head because it was in his way, and went past her.

By the time he was up at the flagstaff the boat-owners had found him: eight or nine of them, Mohideen Marakkayar of Kilakarai among them with his arms folded, and two Vaipar men, and a very fat Alanthalai man he disliked.

“We are going out tonight,” Mohideen said.

“Yes,” Anthoni said.

They went away up the beach to say so, and it was on the government lines inside half an hour and in the Tuticorin lines inside an hour, and at seven o’clock a peon came down from the kachcheri with a chit to ask, respectfully, whether the fishery would be proceeding, and Anthoni said that it would.

* * *

He said the words that night at twenty minutes to one.

There were more people on that sand to hear them than there had ever been in the thirty-five years he had been saying them, and a good number of them had come down from the camp who had no boat and no man in a boat and no business there at all, and they stood well back in the dark behind the Kilakarai lamps and were absolutely quiet.

He came in on the gap behind the third breaker, as he had done for thirty-five years without knowing it, and said the ninety-one words, and it took twenty-eight seconds.

He did not say the sixty-seven.

Nobody asked him to, and nobody afterwards ever remarked that he had not, and it occurred to him as he walked back up the sand with his knee giving on every third step that not one person on that beach had noticed the difference between one hundred and fifty-eight words and ninety-one.

The fleet went out at ten past one. Eleven hundred boats.

CHAPTER 18

A Miracle

The first one came before six.

Rasathi had the fire going and her father was asleep on his side with his back to the room, and there was a cough outside the doorway that was not a cough, and when she went out there was a man standing in Fourth Cross Street in the half-dark with his sandals in his hand.

“Not yet,” she said.

He did not argue. He went and squatted against the wall of the hut opposite, holding his sandals, and was still there at nine.

By eight there were nine of them and two had brought children, and when she came out with the ash pot they all stood up together and then all sat down again, and they stood up every time she came out after that, and it took her most of the morning to stop finding it unbearable.

Her father had come up the beach at a quarter to six the evening before with a cloth over his shoulders that was not his. She had seen him from forty yards and had known from the way he put the right foot down what the knee was doing, and she had gone in and put the water on and had not gone out to meet him, because he was walking in front of about eight hundred people and would rather have died.

He was burned across the shoulders in a colour that was not red and not brown, with a grey bloom of salt over it, and there were two

bands under his arms where the wet cloth had taken the skin off the width of two fingers. His eyes were bad; he kept them half shut and would not look at the lamp.

She put oil on the bands under his arms and he sat still and let her, and lifted the arm she needed lifted without being asked, and neither of them said a word.

He slept from eight to half past twelve, said the words at twenty to one, and went out again at seven in the morning.

They had not had a conversation since Monday night.

* * *

On the Wednesday she had gone to Mrs. Croos at a quarter past seven, before her father was up, and it had taken eleven minutes.

Mrs. Croos lodged in a room behind a Colombo cloth-dealer's boutique on Second Cross Street with a curtain across the door instead of a door, and she came out from behind it with her hair not done and a brass tumbler in her hand, and looked at Rasathi standing in the lane, and did not seem in the least surprised.

"Does he know you are here?"

"He will know by nine o'clock."

"Then say it."

"No," Rasathi said. "Thank you for the trouble you have taken. The answer is no, and it is mine and not his. He did not send me and he did not stop me."

Mrs. Croos drank some of whatever was in the tumbler and looked down the lane at a man loading a cart.

"I will tell you what I had to sell, because you will never again hear this trade described by somebody good at it. I had four things. The house is clean. The girl reads and writes and keeps a book. There is no drink in the family and no litigation. And the father is the binder of the pearl fishery in the fourth generation and there is no son." She held up the fourth finger and put her hand down. "Three of those get a

girl married in a village. Only the fourth was ever going to get four hundred and ten rupees out of Gabriel Motha's box, and you have just told me the fourth is not for sale, and I believe you. So there is nothing left."

"I understand that."

"You do not, but you will." She turned the tumbler round in her fingers. "I am not angry. You have been standing there getting ready for me to be angry. I am out four days, a boat fare and a woman of sixty with bad knees who came over for nothing, and I will be paid for none of it, and that is the trade. What I am telling you is a different thing. There will not be another one. Not from me, and I am the only person who does this between Mannar and Tuticorin, and there is nobody coming after me at it."

"Yes."

"Yes," said Mrs. Croos, and pushed the curtain back with one hand. "Tell your father he owes me nothing."

It was the one thing she had not got ready for. A woman who is owed nothing does not come back.

She had walked home past the hospital and said to her father in the doorway at half past eight, *It is done*, and he had said, *Yes*, and picked up his cloth and gone out.

* * *

Father Rayappan came at twelve on the Friday and her father was not there.

He had tar on his hands and coir dust in the creases of them, because he re-tied the lashings of the mat church himself every Saturday and had been getting the new coir ready. He accepted tea and drank about a third of it.

"He is on the beach," Rasathi said.

"I know where he is." He set the tumbler down on the mat. "There were two hundred at Mass on Sunday, and the sand is not a

parish, and that is a good number. There were twenty thousand standing in the water yesterday at four o'clock." He said it without any particular tone. "I am not jealous. I wanted to say that to somebody before I said the rest, and you will do. I will say the rest to him, and he will listen very politely and give me nothing, as he has done for three years." Rayappan rubbed his thumb over the tar on his finger. "There is a word for what began on that beach yesterday. *Superstitio*. It does not mean a foolish belief. It is nearer to a thing standing over — something put up on top of what should be there, and taller than it."

"That is not what it means."

"No," he agreed, without a flicker, "and I have translated it that way four times this week, because the right translation takes twenty minutes. What would you do?"

She did not answer.

"A woman came to me at seven this morning with a piece of the cloth that was round your father's shoulders when he came out of the sea, cut into six, and asked me to bless one of them. Her sister's child has something wrong with the bone in its leg." He looked at his hands. "I blessed it. I put my hand on it and said the words in front of her, because if I had refused she would have taken it to somebody else and paid him. I have been looking since seven o'clock for the place where I ought to have done something different, and I cannot find it, and I would very much like to."

"I have nothing against the office," he said. "A Parava priest at Vaipar buried your great-grandfather. Four generations, and it is not idolatry, and I have never preached against it and will not begin. What I have something against is Thursday." He picked the tumbler up. "Does your father believe what he says on that beach?"

The fire had gone down.

"You should ask him," she said.

Father Rayappan looked at her for rather a long moment, then thanked her, said he would be at the church all day tomorrow with the

coir, and went out past the people in the street, and blessed two of them on the way because they asked him to.

* * *

At twelve on the Wednesday she had gone north to the Kilakarai lines against the whole camp coming the other way, and Karuppan had been sitting up.

That took the legs out from under everything she had prepared. He was on his heels in the shade of the same hull with a net across his knees, shaved, a length of twine round his left hand, and he looked at her arriving and said, "It goes in and out," in the tone of a man reporting the wind.

The mesh he had done that morning was wrong — eight or nine rows out of true, the knots crowded to one side. She had watched those hands for three weeks and knew what the work looked like. He did not know. He went on with it while they talked and did four more rows the same.

She did not tell him.

"You came yesterday with something in your mouth and you did not say it."

"No."

"Say it now. I have the time."

So she said it: whether the thing could be held by a person the government did not expect. How. On what paper.

Karuppan laughed, which cost him fifteen seconds and most of the colour in his face, and put the net down.

"There is no paper."

"You had a chit from the Superintendent's office. I saw it."

"That is a chit for money. It is not for the office." He took his time about his breath. "Nobody appoints the binder. There is no examination and no priest and nobody who says yes. In the August of 1899 my father died, and there was a fishery in the February, and on

the first night I walked down to the water at Marichchukkaddi and stood in the place where he had stood, because there was nobody else living who had the whole of it, and I said it. I was thirty-five and I had said it out loud in front of people twice.” He turned a hand over on his knee. “In the morning a clerk came along the lines with a book and asked me my name, and I told him, and he wrote it down. That is the appointment. That was all of it in 1899 and all of it in my father’s time and it will be all of it in yours. They do not choose the man. They write down the name of the man who said it.”

“And the next time?”

“The next time they read out of the book.”

Rasathi sat with her arms round her knees and looked, as she always did, for where the weight actually sat.

“Then it is not the book,” she said. “It is the one minute.”

“It is the one minute.”

“And if the person standing there in that minute is a girl of seventeen?”

Karuppan looked at her with the varnished eyes and did not treat it as a joke, which she had braced for and which would have finished it.

“There is no rule against it. I have looked for one and there is not. There has only never been anybody standing there when there was nobody else, and that is a different thing from a rule, and much harder.” He picked the net up again. “And they will not pay you. Understand it now and not later. The money goes to a name in a book; your name will not be in it; they will still want the words said, and you will still say them, and they will be quite comfortable about it. Now give me back the list from the rope.”

She gave it back to him from the rope, and he stopped her twice — once because she had the rain before the stones, once for a word that was not in it — and then made her do the first two of the namings and told her she was saying them like a person reading.

“Come Friday at twelve,” he said.

She had meant to. At twelve on the Friday Father Rayappan was sitting on her mat with tar on his hands and there were nine people in the street, and she thought: tomorrow.

* * *

Vellaisamy Chettiar came at four in the afternoon, in white so clean it hurt to look at, with the green umbrella furled under his arm and the boy behind him carrying the book.

The people in the street got up for him too, which she thought afterwards was the most instructive thing she saw all week.

“Your father is out.”

“He is on the beach.”

“Yes.” Vellaisamy looked in at the doorway without coming through it. “I would rather talk to you, if you will let me, because you keep the book and he does not, and because what I have to say is arithmetic and he does not like it from me.” He handed the umbrella to the boy. “May I sit in the shade? I will not come in.”

So he sat on his heels outside the doorway in the strip of shade, with the boy squatting six feet off holding the book, and he did not once mention Thursday. Nobody in two days had come to that hut and not mentioned Thursday.

“Your father’s paper with me stands at four hundred and ten rupees. It costs him eighteen rupees twelve annas in the month, it has never come down by one anna, and it is not going to, and you know that, because the household column has been telling you so since 1923.” He paused exactly long enough. “I will lend him four hundred more. Today, in notes, against the same instrument; there is nothing new to sign but an endorsement. And the whole of it — the old four hundred and ten and the new four hundred together — will cost him twenty rupees twelve annas in the month.”

Rasathi stood in the doorway with a wooden spoon in her hand and did the sum, and it was not difficult, and she did it twice.

“Two rupees,” she said.

“Two rupees in the month. Yes.”

“For four hundred rupees.”

“For four hundred rupees.” Vellaisamy folded his hands on his knees. “You want to know why, and I will tell you exactly, because if I lie to you now you will find it out in four years and never take anything from me again. Until Wednesday your father’s name was a name in a book at the kachcheri, and that is poor security: the office can go quiet, the government can decide one binder is enough, there may be no fishery until 1933. Since yesterday his name is the reason eleven hundred boats went to sea. I cannot buy that. But the paper is better than it was, and the rate follows the paper, and I would sooner have eight hundred rupees on it than two hundred on anything else on this coast.”

“It is a good offer,” Rasathi said.

“It is a very good offer. That is why I brought it myself.” He got up and dusted the backs of his legs and took the umbrella off the boy. “I am not asking for an answer today. Tell him the figures, and do not let him get them from anybody else, because he will be told them wrong.”

And he went away up Fourth Cross Street, and the people against the opposite wall watched him go and then turned back and went on looking at the doorway.

She sat down where he had been sitting, in the shade, with the spoon still in her hand.

Four hundred. Ten short of the number, and the ten was the joke, and there was nobody in the world she could say it to. On Wednesday she had refused four hundred and ten rupees and a box at Alanthalai, and her father had said *then we will find four hundred and ten rupees somewhere else* in the flattest voice in the world, and there had been no somewhere else; and the somewhere else had now come and sat on its heels in her shade and been perfectly honest with her.

He would take it. Not because he was weak — because it was a good offer and he could do arithmetic.

And the office would then stand in that book at eight hundred and ten rupees, for this fishery and the next, whensoever held; and what Karuppan had told her on Wednesday would go on being as true as the tide, and be worth nothing whatever against a man with a book.

* * *

Her father came in at dusk.

She gave him the figures standing up, in order, as she would have read out a column: four hundred and ten at eighteen twelve; four hundred more; eight hundred and ten at twenty twelve; no new instrument, an endorsement; no answer wanted today.

He listened with his eyes half shut because of the light.

“Twenty and twelve,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Say the four hundred and ten again.”

“Eighteen and twelve.”

Her father sat down on the mat and was quiet for a while, and then said, “That is a good rate,” in the voice of a man agreeing that it would probably rain, and lay down on his side with his back to the room. He did not say what he would do. He did not ask her what she thought, and she did not tell him, and neither of them said anything about the ten rupees, because to say anything about the ten rupees would have been to say all of it.

Outside, the people were still there. They had got food from somewhere and were eating it against the opposite wall in the dark, quietly, so as not to disturb the house.

She counted them, because she counted things. Fourteen.

Then she lay down in her own corner and did not count anything at all.

CHAPTER 19

The Leg

The bank began going off on the Saturday morning and every man on it knew by nine o'clock.

Nobody said so. There is a way a fleet has of not saying a thing while arranging itself entirely around it. Boats that had lain gunwale to gunwale since Wednesday found reasons to be somewhere else, and three times that morning Sinnappan came up to find 246's rode leading a different way, because Mohideen Marakkayar had moved her twenty yards without asking.

On Wednesday he had filled a basket without hunting. On Saturday he hunted the whole of every bottom he had and came up with the top of the basket showing, and did it forty-four times. The bed had not gone anywhere — that was the part that made a man stupid — it lay under two hundred boats where Rathinam had found it, under the broken shell of everything already taken off it, and a diver went down into a grey fog of his own making and felt about for fifty seconds for what four thousand hands had left.

"Three days," Rathinam said, at about ten, to nobody. "On our side that would be a season."

Susai made nineteen and stopped at nineteen.

They came in at two. Sinnappan's share was sixty-one, and he carried it down the sand past nine dealers sitting on their heels in a

row with their money in their laps, and did not stop, and put it in the sack under the bow thwart.

Three thousand and forty.

* * *

The boy went into the water at about ten past three in the afternoon, four hundred yards south of the kachcheri, where everybody bathed.

He was ten and his name was Thomai and he was not of the trade at all. His father drove one of the forty carts that brought water in casks from the tanks at Kondachchi, and the boy ran with the cart and held the mule at the turn and was, between runs, free.

There were perhaps sixty people in that water. There were always perhaps sixty at that hour, because three o'clock at Marichchukkaddi is when the whole camp is filthy and off work at the same time, and the sea is the only thing for miles that is free.

Sinnappan was sitting a hundred and forty yards north of it with his back against 246's stem, doing nothing.

What he heard first was the noise changing. A beach at three o'clock has a sound to it, and the sound went up in pitch and then stopped, in that order, in about two seconds, and by the time it had stopped he was on his feet, because there is a thing in a diver that stands up before he has been told anything.

Then the shouting started properly and he ran.

He was in the water before he had any information whatever. It was chest-deep and full of people going the other way, and he went out through them shoving, and at thirty yards he saw the water go a colour.

It does not show as it does in a basin. In three feet of sunlit water over white sand it goes brown, and it goes fast, and it is enormous — six or seven yards across before he reached it — and then the sea takes it apart and there is nothing there.

Two men had the boy by the arms. A third had got in under him. They brought him the four or five strokes to where a man could stand and then carried him, and Sinnappan got a hand under the boy's shoulder, and that is how he came out of the water, one of four men and not the useful one.

The right leg was gone above the knee.

They put him on dry sand and a man whose name Sinnappan never learned went at it with somebody's cloth and his fists and knew to put a stick in and twist. He was fast and not gentle and he got it slowed, and bought the boy five minutes, and would think about it for the rest of his life.

The boy was conscious the whole way. He had stopped shouting in the water, and what he did on the sand was breathe, short, very fast, and look at the faces over him one after another, as a child in a crowd looks for the one he knows. He said two things. He said his father's name. A little later he asked whether the cart had gone.

Dr. Sathasivam came at about twenty to four at a flat run, down four hundred yards of soft sand with his bag, and he was forty seconds too late, and it would have made no difference if he had been sitting on that beach all afternoon, and he knew it while he was still running.

The boy died at about twenty-five to four with three hundred people standing round him in a ring.

* * *

Nobody saw the animal.

That is not a way of speaking. It was three in the afternoon in clear shallow water off a crowded beach, and by nightfall there were four accounts. One man had seen a grey back turn over. One had seen the water lift. One had seen a shadow going out. The fourth said, in front of the others, that he had seen nothing, because he had been looking at the boy.

Two boats hunted it until dark, and six went out properly on the Sunday morning, and nothing was found, and nothing was ever found.

* * *

The Sunday was a rest day.

It was the only one left before the end of the fishery and the camp had been walking towards it all week, and it arrived with a boy buried in it at seven in the morning, up at the north end, in ground that had nineteen people in it since February. The father stood through it in a clean shirt somebody had found him.

Sinnappan went, because 246 went, and afterwards walked past the church end, where forty people stood along the wall of a mat house in Fourth Cross Street with children on their hips, waiting to be let one at a time into a doorway. He knew what they were waiting for. He did not stop, and neither did anybody he was walking with, and by that Sunday nobody found the queue remarkable at all.

Then he lay down under 246 with his head on the sack, and had nothing to do for nine hours.

That is how it got him. It would not have got him on a working day.

* * *

What he was waiting for, all Saturday evening and all Sunday, without knowing it, was for somebody to say the thing.

Three hundred people had watched a boy die of a shark in the middle of a fishery. On Thursday the binder had stood in the water in front of the whole fleet for the best part of five hours and had said, out loud, from a boat, so that four hundred yards of beach heard it: *If the line is broken, it is broken on me first.*

And on the Saturday night the beach talked about the boy, and the father, and the man with the stick and the cloth, and whether the

apothecary could have done anything, and a shark taken off Mannar in 1911 with a brass hinge inside it. On the Sunday it talked about the same things more quietly. And in a day and a half Sinnappan did not hear one person say anything had gone wrong with the words.

By the middle of Sunday afternoon he understood that nobody was going to, and that it was not because they were frightened.

* * *

He went at it slowly, on his back, under a boat, with his eyes shut.

The gun. It went at noon or a little past it every day, and what it meant was that the morning was finished; and what the binding said was that the mouth of the sea was shut *until the second gun*; and he had been hearing that sentence every night of every fishery since he was thirteen and had never once heard it.

And the other one. He had stood forty yards from Karuppan at twenty minutes to one in the morning, night after night for three seasons, and had let the whole four minutes of it go over him, and the end of it was:

At the second gun I will not ask you again until tomorrow.

Until tomorrow. It is not hidden. There is no small print, because the thing is under two hundred words long and is said out loud in the open air to twenty thousand people; it says what it covers and where it stops, and has said so since before his father was born.

The boy went in at ten past three.

Nothing had failed. It took him most of an afternoon to get his hands round that: not that the words had broken, but that they had held perfectly, exactly as written, and a boy was dead inside them.

* * *

And then, lying there, the rest of it started arriving on its own, and every piece was something he had known for years.

The last stone. Every day of every fishery, for the last quarter of an hour before the gun, eleven hundred boats put men over the side one on top of another, deeper and longer than at any other hour, because a man already down may finish his bottom and come up legally and there is no gun after the second gun. The whole fleet standing on the edge of the thing with both feet, in the open, cheerfully, with the boat-owners' consent and the government's, for forty years. They had always known where the edge was. They had built a custom on it and given it a name.

And Wednesday. A voice across the water asking for one more, and Mohideen Marakkayar with his hand on the rode saying no — not *we must not*, but no, in the tone of a man refusing a loan.

And Thursday. This one he did on his fingers, twice, because arithmetic was the only tool anybody had ever given him and he was good with it.

Every man on the beach had the times; they had gone round the camp that night with the minutes attached and had not changed in two miles. In at eight minutes to twelve. Out at twenty minutes to five. And the gun at four minutes past.

Four hours and thirty-six minutes.

For four hours and thirty-six minutes on the Thursday afternoon, in front of the largest crowd anybody had ever seen on that sand, Anthonimuthu of Vaipar had lain in the sea inside a line his own words had shut at noon.

He would have known. A man does not say a thing every night of his working life for thirty-five years without knowing where it stops. He had stayed past the gun until the last boat was up, and the whole beach had stood and watched him prove something, and what he had proved was that he was willing to be in the water in the afternoon.

It might mean the man was braver than all of them. It might mean the words were worth nothing and the man knew it. There was no telling from the beach which of those he had been looking at — and

there never had been any way to tell, from the beach, about any of it, ever.

* * *

What went was not the binder.

He had no case against Anthonimuthu. The man had said what he said and it was true and he had kept to the hour of it, and on Thursday he had gone into the water himself, and nobody had asked him to.

What went was the other thing — the thing nobody had ever said aloud and everybody had. That the afternoons were all right. Twenty thousand people bathed off that beach at three o'clock every day of the fishery; women washed pots in it; children were in it from the time they could stand. Nobody had ever got up on a boat and told them the afternoons were all right, because nobody had ever needed to. The camp had made that part itself, out of nothing, every season for four hundred years; it had cost nothing to make; there was nobody at the end of it to hold to account; and it was not even a lie, because a lie has a man behind it.

And the list. He had heard Karuppan sing it and had never thought about a word of it, and now he went through as much as he could get back, and it was all in there. The weed. The crabs. The turtle. *The great fish that comes up this coast in the third month.* Named, and conceded, and given away — *all of them yours* — and then the boundary, and then the men, and the men only ever taken out of it one morning at a time.

They had asked for the morning. Every night of every fishery, for four hundred years, two men had gone down to the water in the dark and asked, very precisely, for the morning, and had been given it. And the camp had heard *the morning* and had lived as though it had been given the year.

He was nineteen years old and he had nothing to tell anybody.

* * *

He saw her that evening, going north along the hard sand with a bundle under her arm, thirty yards off. He was standing at the water's edge with his hands wet and he did not say anything, and neither did she, because she had not seen him.

There was nothing he could have got into sentences. He thought about that afterwards more than he thought about the rest of it.

* * *

On the Monday he went out at six and made fifty-two descents.

His best in three seasons was forty-eight. The bank was giving half what it had given on Wednesday and there was only one way to make that up, and he cut his surface interval to three minutes and then to two and a half and went down again and again into the grey fog, and the boat let him. Mohideen Marakkayar watched him for an hour and then stopped watching him, which is a boat-owner's way of saying two things at once.

The leg went at about a quarter to eleven, on the forty-first.

He had the stone on the end of its line and was sitting on the gunwale with the rope in his hand, and he put his right foot into the loop as he had put it in some thousands of times, and the foot did not go in. He looked down at it. The foot was there and it was his and it was doing nothing he had asked of it. He put it in with his hand, and it came out again as the stone swung, and he put it in with his hand a second time and held it there and went over.

On the bottom it worked. It always worked on the bottom.

Kasim hauled him up and said nothing, because Kasim had not said anything since the second of March. On the forty-second, as the stone went over, Kasim put his own bare foot on the top of it and held it dead still against the boat's side until the loop was on, and then took his foot away, and did not look up, and said nothing about it all morning, and did it again on every descent for the rest of the day.

At ten minutes to twelve Sinnappan went over for the last stone, and the foot would not take it, and by the time he had it in with his hand and his weight on it the rope had run out of the time it needed, and Mohideen Marakkayar said, quietly, "Leave it."

It was the first last stone he had missed since he was sixteen.

He sat in the bow with fifty-two descents in him, four more than any day of his life, and watched Peruman and Savari go down past him.

* * *

Packianathan the agent was at the north end at about three, in the shade at the corner of the auction shed, with a boy holding an umbrella over his ledger.

Sinnappan had rehearsed it walking up and it came out badly anyhow. He said he had a quantity of shell, rather more than three thousand, and would have four and a half by the loosing. He said he wanted it put up as a lot.

Packianathan was not unkind about it. He was not anything about it. He was a busy man being asked a question he is asked four times a fishery by somebody's cousin, and he answered it in about ninety seconds while the boy kept the umbrella over his book.

A lot at the shed is a thousand off one heap, off one morning, off one boat, with the day on the ticket and a name against it that a buyer out of Bombay has seen before. The buyers are not paying for oysters; any man on that beach can have oysters. They are paying for a day and a bank and a name — which is why a lot went at twenty-six rupees on the seventh morning and why nothing had gone above thirteen since Friday. A sack is not a lot. A sack out of a bow is a fortnight of mixed mornings with part of it a week dead and stinking, and no agent puts his name on that ticket, and the man who wants it sold sells it on the sand, to the men sitting on their heels in a row, at the price of the afternoon.

The price of that afternoon was eleven the thousand, and going down.

“Come the day before the loosing,” Packianathan said, without looking up. “You may get twelve.”

* * *

He counted it that night by lamplight with the sack between his knees, because he could not stop himself, and it came out at three thousand one hundred and twenty-eight, the heaviest it had ever been.

Then he did the rest of it four ways, as he had on Wednesday with a cup in his hand and a drum going. Wednesday: five thousand by the loosing, at sixteen, eighty rupees, against eighty-four owed. Monday: four thousand three hundred if the bank held up, and it would not, at eleven, forty-seven rupees. He was good with numbers and he sat there for the better part of an hour and nothing he did moved them.

It was the same shell. He had been right about that from the first day. The difference was the thousand; and the thousand had never been for sale to him; and it had taken an agent a minute and a half in the shade to explain what he had built eight days of his life on.

He put the sack back under the bow thwart, because there was nowhere else to put it, and rolled the neck of it shut, and slept beside the boat.

In the morning he would go out at six with the rest of them and go down, and the water at nine fathoms would be exactly the water it had been on Wednesday. He had worked that out on the Sunday too, lying under the boat, and it had taken four seconds and cost him nothing at all.

CHAPTER 20

Forty Yards

On the Tuesday morning one of Vellaisamy's men came to the house before six with a paper and an inkpot, and Anthoni put his name on the endorsement sitting on the step with the paper on his knee, in about the time it takes to sign a thing, and gave it back, and went down to the beach at seven.

He did not say anything about it to his daughter and she did not ask him. She had ruled it into the book by the time he came home.

His eyes were still bad. He had been keeping them half shut for five days and they were no better than they had been on the Friday, and he could not sit in a room with a lamp in it, and the skin under both arms where the wet cloth had taken it off had gone the wrong way in the heat and was being dressed twice a day. The knee had not come back at all. He went down the beach on it at seven every morning because that is where he was expected to be, and on the way a woman he had never seen put her hand on his sleeve and said something and he did not stop.

There were four hundred fewer boats on the water than there had been a week before. Men were going home. The Tuticorin boats had begun to go on the Sunday and the Kilakarai boats were going in ones and twos, and the fleet that had covered a quarter of a mile of sea on the eleventh was spread out over two miles of it now, hunting.

He had known about the boy within the hour. Three people had told him separately on the Saturday afternoon and all three of them had given him the time of it, because the time was the shape of the thing in their mouths and they did not know they were carrying it. Ten past three. Ten past three. A little after three. He had said nothing whatever to any of the three, and nothing to anybody since, and it was now Tuesday.

* * *

Four men from the Kilakarai end came to him at dusk.

He knew all of them. Mohideen Marakkayar was one, and the oldest was a boat-owner called Sultan Ibrahim who had been bringing four boats to this beach since 1898 and had a voice like a door. They did not come into the house. They stood in the street with their backs to the wall where the people had been standing, and the people had gone for the night, and Sultan Ibrahim did the talking and took a long time about it.

He talked about the fishery. He talked about the state of the bank and about how the Kilakarai boats would stay to the end because they always stayed to the end.

Then he talked about the nights, and slowed down doing it.

Since the tenth they had been carrying Muthukaruppan down to the water. Two of them went in under his arms at about a quarter past midnight and got him the forty yards and set him on his feet at the edge, and he stood there on his own and said the whole of it — four minutes and one second, the namings and the list and the reckoning, in the order, with nothing left out — and then they carried him back. They had done it eight nights running. They did not know how many more there were.

“You want to know whether he will be at the water on the third,” Anthoni said.

“Yes.”

“Have you asked him?”

Sultan Ibrahim looked down the street. “No.”

Four grown men, three of whom had known Muthukaruppan for thirty years, standing in a street at night asking a Christian from Vaipar to go and find out whether their own man was going to be alive in a fortnight.

“I will go in the morning,” Anthoni said.

* * *

He went at eleven o'clock on the Wednesday, up the beach and past the church end and out along the north side, where the Kilakarai people had their boats hauled and their mats between them.

Karuppan was in the shade of the same hull he had been under for a week. There was a boy of about fifteen with him, a grandson of his brother's, called Muthiah, who was doing nothing except being there, and there was nothing across his knees now. The nets were finished, or they had been taken away from him.

Anthoni had seen him at forty yards in the dark night after night for forty years and had never once been within ten feet of him, and the thing he saw when he came round the stem of the boat was not the illness. The illness he had been watching for a month. The thing he saw was that the man had got small.

“Anthonimuthu,” Karuppan said.

“Muthukaruppan.”

“Sit down. You are standing on your right leg like a bird.”

He sat down.

They talked about the wind for some time, because there was a great deal to say about the wind that week, and then Karuppan said that he wanted to go down to the water.

Anthoni looked at the water. It was forty yards, and between them and it there was loose dry sand for twenty of it and then wet sand and then the sea.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a reason?”

“I have not been in it since the tenth.”

So they went.

* * *

It took them nearly twenty minutes to cover forty yards.

The boy took one side and Anthoni took the other. Anthoni had his right arm round the man's back and his hand under the far armpit, and what he registered — flatly, as he registered the state of a rope or a rung of a ladder — was that he was holding almost nothing. The cloth had a shape and inside the shape there was a shoulder blade and a hip and not much between them. Twice Karuppan stopped without saying anything, and they stood in the sun and waited and started again, and once his knees went and the boy took the whole of him for a second and put him back up.

Forty years. Anthoni had stood at a measured forty yards from this man on this sand at twenty minutes to one in the morning for every night of every fishery either of them had worked, and had never once put a hand on him, and he now found that he had had no idea whether the man was heavy or light, and had just been told.

At the edge Karuppan got himself down into six inches of water and sat in it in his cloth with his legs out in front of him like a child, and put both hands flat on the bottom, and breathed. It was the first time in fifty-one years that he had gone into that sea without saying anything to it first, and he did not appear to notice, and Anthoni, who noticed everything of that kind, did not mention it.

Anthoni sat down on the dry sand above him with his back to the sea, because it was easier on the knee.

The boy went and stood ten yards off to be out of it.

* * *

“You have never asked me one question about it,” Karuppan said.

“About what?”

“In forty years.”

Anthoni took his time. Down the beach somebody was hammering a plank and stopping and hammering it again.

“No,” he said. “I have not.”

“I will save you the trouble. I have known about you since 1907.”

Anthoni did not say anything.

“Not from anybody. Nobody told me. I worked it out on this beach in the second week of a fishery and it took me about a minute and a half, and I have never said it to one living person, and I am not saying it now to get anything out of you.”

“How.”

“You have never been late.”

Anthoni turned his head.

“Thirty-nine years of nights,” Karuppan said. “And every night there is something — a boat, a priest, a child, a customs man, a man at your door who will not go. I have been late four times in my life. Once I was a quarter of an hour late and eleven hundred boats sat out there on black water and waited for me, and I have never got the feeling of that quarter of an hour off me, and I am glad of it. Everybody is late. You are never late. You are at the water on the minute, like a man opening a shop at the hour, and you say all of it and you do not leave a word out, and then you go and sleep.”

“That is called doing the work properly.”

“Yes,” Karuppan said. “That is what I thought too, for about a minute and a half.”

* * *

There was a long time then in which neither of them said anything. The water came up to the man’s waist and went back and came up again. He had his eyes shut.

“Then let me ask you one,” Anthoni said at last, and his voice had gone somewhere he had not sent it. “You have stood forty yards from me since before my daughter was born, and you knew, and on every one of those nights eleven hundred boats went out on the strength of the two of us. You knew what one of the two was. And you have said nothing to anybody about it for seventeen years.”

“That is right.”

“Why.”

Karuppan opened his eyes and looked out at the Gulf.

“Because the sea does not ask which of us means it.”

* * *

“You have made a mistake about me,” he went on, after a while, in the flat voice of a man giving somebody directions to a place. “You think I have something in me that you have not got. A feeling. You have been forty years being sure you have not got it and I will tell you now that I have not got it either.”

“You believe it.”

“I say it. Correctly, and completely, and in the right order, and at the right minute of the night, and it takes me four minutes and one second, and I have never once in my life felt anything while I was doing it. I have been cold. I have been frightened about other things. In February I was thinking for part of it about a debt of my brother’s. You are asking me about what goes on inside a man’s head while his mouth is doing a piece of work, and there is no rule anywhere that says the work is the head’s.”

“Then what is it that you think is happening?”

“Nothing is happening,” Karuppan said. “That is not what it is for.”

He moved one hand under the water.

“I tie nets. I have tied nets for men I would not eat with, in a temper, in the dark, when my wife was dying in the next room. The

knot does not know any of that. The knot is the knot or it is not the knot, and the fish come out of the water or they do not, and no man has ever pulled up a net and found that it had let the fish go because he was not sincere when he tied it.”

“A net is a net.”

“And the words are the words.”

* * *

Anthoni sat with his back to the water and could find nothing to put against it.

He had spent thirty-five years knowing precisely what he was not, and had built a life on the inside of that, and had been careful about it, and had never wanted anybody’s pity for it and had never had any. And a dying man sitting in six inches of water had just told him, without any malice at all, that the thing he was not was not a thing.

“Then there is no difference between us,” he said, and heard how much he wanted it to be true.

“There is all the difference in the world,” Karuppan said. “But it is not the one you have been carrying.”

* * *

“What is it, then.”

“It is whether what you are saying is true.”

Karuppan put his head back. The sun was almost overhead and there was no shade at the water and the boy at ten yards had begun to look unhappy about it.

“The words are a list,” he said. “Mine are, anyway. I stand there and I name what belongs to the sea, all of it, and I do not leave anything out, and then I say: what I have not named is not yours. That is all it is. And the whole of it turns on the list being right, because if I name a thing that is not the sea’s I am a liar, and if I leave out a thing

that is the sea's I have stolen from it in front of twenty thousand people."

"And you think it is right."

"I know most of it is right. I have been putting things into it for fifty years and my father put things into it for sixty. The weed. The stones off the lines — do you know how many stones are down there? More than there are boats on the water on the opening morning. The rope. Every fathom of rope that ever parted on this coast is lying down there and it is the sea's." He stopped and got some air. "And under the sand."

"What about it."

"There is more shell under the sand. Under that shell there is more shell. It goes down further than a well goes, and all of it is the dead of the same animal lying one on another since before there was anybody on this coast to come and take them off it." He turned his head, and his eyes were the only fast thing left in him. "The bank is not a place, Anthonimuthu. The bank is a body. It stands on its own dead and it grows the way a nail grows."

The hammering had stopped down the beach. The water came up and went back.

"You go out on the government's boat," Karuppan said. "You have been on it twice this season. You have seen what they bring up."

"I have."

"Is it true?"

Anthoni looked at the sand between his feet for about two seconds.

"There is dead shell out there under the sand deeper than a man can dig," he said. "I have had it in my hands."

Karuppan nodded slowly and let his head go back again, satisfied, and said, "Then I have been saying a true thing," and shut his eyes.

Twelve days earlier Anthoni had stood on the deck of the Superintendent's launch with four hauls of the Cheval Paar spread out

on the planking in front of him: worn single valves bored through by sponge that came apart between the fingers, grit, weed, a dead crab, and thirty-one oysters of a size worth putting in a pocket. He had heard it explained to him there, in the manner of a man who is right and knows he will not be listened to, that the bank was not being fished out but had stopped laying down, and that there was nothing at all coming behind what was on it.

He had not said so to Yagappan Rocha, who had asked him straight out and had a boy of ten. He did not say so now.

* * *

They got him up and back across the forty yards, and it took longer going than it had taken coming, and at the top he sat down against the hull with his cloth running water into the sand, and the boy went for a dry one.

“A hundred and twelve rupees and eight annas,” Karuppan said.

Anthoni did not move.

“Take your foot off my mat,” Karuppan said. “It is the only one I have got.”

Anthoni moved his foot. Nothing further was said about it, then or ever, and in a minute or two Karuppan began to talk about the wind again, and about how it had got round to the north-west two days early, and what that meant for the last week.

* * *

He had come with one question and he went away without asking it.

He got halfway back along the north side before he understood that he had not asked it, and by then there was no going back to ask it, and standing on the hard sand with his eyes half shut against the glare he found that he could not have said what the words would have been. *Will you be at the water on the third.* Four men had put it into his mouth in a street at night and had not been able to say it themselves,

and he had walked forty yards down a beach and forty yards back with the man's ribs under his hand, and had not said it either.

The four of them were waiting at the top of the beach by the flagstaff with the look of men who had been waiting a while.

"He will be at the water at the loosing," Anthoni said.

Sultan Ibrahim let his breath out. "Good. Good."

"Yes."

They thanked him, and went off down the sand to their boats to tell their people, and Anthoni stood by the flagstaff with the halyard ticking against it in the north-west wind and watched them go, and he was the man who would know.

CHAPTER 21

The Share

At ten past one on the Thursday morning nine boats out of Vaipar were still on the sand with their gear in them.

Rasathi counted them twice, because the first time she thought she had counted a boat that had simply not got off yet. The rest of the fleet was going out as it went out every night, black hulls sliding one after another into black water. These nine lay above the wet sand with their gear aboard and nobody was arguing, and that was what made her stop. When men on that beach meant to have a fight they had it standing up and everybody within forty yards took a side; these men sat on their own gunwales in the dark with their hands between their knees.

Her father had said the words twenty-five minutes earlier and gone up to sleep. He never looked back along the beach afterwards; he walked the shortest line to the hut and was asleep inside ten minutes, which for years she had taken for a hard kind of discipline and had lately begun to suspect was something else.

She got three hours and was up at five, and the first of them came at half past six.

* * *

His name was Savari and he had been in the water eighteen years and he came with two others and stood in the street and would not come in.

“They said you write.”

“I write.”

“We want a letter to Rodrigo.”

“Then you should have a letter to Rodrigo,” Rasathi said. “Wait.”

She brought the mat out and put it down, because four people were already sitting against the opposite wall waiting for her father and a woman with a child on her hip had stood up when the door opened, as they all did. Then she went in for the ink and the pen, and for paper, and there was no paper.

There was paper on that beach in one form only, and her father’s box had twenty-two of them: auction tickets, printed at the Government Press in Colombo, a lot number on the face in a heavy black figure and the rest blank. The backs were stiff and the size of two palms. She took nine and sat down with the box on her knees for a table.

“Say it.”

Savari said it. It took a long time, and most of it was true, and none of it was any use.

Every boat paid the boat’s part before the shares were touched: five hundred shell a morning for the hire of her, the stones, the ropes, the baskets, and the tow out from Vaipar in February. It had been five hundred since before Savari was born and nobody had ever thought about it, because a Cheval boat in an ordinary week brought two thousand to the divers’ side and the five hundred was gone off the top before anybody was interested in it. On Wednesday the bank went off in the middle of the morning, and Savari came up the sand at two o’clock with his hands cut and his share of an entire working day tied in the corner of his cloth.

He untied it and held it out.

“Nine oysters,” he said.

One of them was broken.

“And the five hundred went to Rodrigo whole,” said the man behind him.

“It goes whole or the boat does not go out,” Savari said. “We know the boat costs. He paid the tow in February and he has fed us since the twentieth, and none of that got smaller when the bank got smaller. We are not saying he is a thief.”

“What are you saying?”

Savari stopped. He had come down the street with it whole in his chest, and she had asked him for it in six words, and he could not get it out of himself in any shape at all.

“We are saying it is not right,” he said.

“Yes. It is not right.” She ruled a line down the ticket with the edge of the pen. “That is not a letter.”

She had not said it unkindly and it went into him like a splinter anyway. She saw it go, and did not look up for a while.

Then she wrote.

She spoiled the first one. She wrote it as Savari had said it, with the eighteen years in it and the nine oysters, and read it back and heard what it was: a thing a man could agree with and then put down, and be sorry, and do nothing, and be honest the whole time he was doing nothing. She turned it face down and took a fresh ticket.

The second one had four lines.

The first said what the boat’s part was, and that it had been five hundred shell a morning in 1903 and in 1921 and in 1922 and was five hundred shell a morning now. The second said what the divers’ heap had come to on 246 and on Rodrigo’s four boats on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and she left three of the six figures blank, because she did not have them and would not guess in front of a man she wanted to be believed by. The third said what was left after the five hundred on each of those mornings. The fourth asked for one thing, and it was small, and it could be answered with the word yes.

The boat's part to be five hundred shell, or one shell in four of the divers' heap, whichever is the less, for the remainder of this fishery.

She read it out.

"One in four," said Savari.

"Yesterday it would have given you sixty-two instead of nine. It is not a great deal of money — three rupees off the boat in a morning at the price the sand is paying, perhaps a hundred and fifty off Rodrigo before the end, which he will not like and can find. That is all the money there is in it."

"Then why will he not give it?"

"Because of where it will be written."

They did not follow that and she did not explain. She sent the younger man off at a run for the three figures she did not have, and while they waited she wrote the same four lines on eight more tickets, one for each boat that had not gone out, because a letter on behalf of nine boats is a petition and a letter from one boat is a question, and nine questions are harder to put down than one petition.

At the foot of each she ruled three columns: the mark, the boat, and the witness. Not the name. A man will deny a name, and a name in that camp is three names anyway; a boat is thirty feet long and lies on the sand where anybody can walk up to it. And a mark is worth nothing unless somebody who cannot gain by it says he watched the hand make it, so she sent for Santhiagu the churchwarden, who owned nothing and could no longer read a word, and he sat on the sand for two hours and put his own mark under forty-one others.

It took until noon. It should have taken until three.

Somewhere in the second hour she noticed, with a kind of embarrassment, that she was enjoying herself.

* * *

At half past twelve a man she did not know came up the street and said he wanted a word with her father.

“He is on the beach.”

“I know where he is.” He had a good cloth and the hands of a man who had not held a rope in ten years. “I have a boat going out tonight with my sister’s two boys in her. First fishery for the younger one. I would like the words said over her.”

“They are said over everybody.”

“I know what is said over everybody. I am asking for my boat.” He looked at her, and then at the people against the opposite wall, and did the arithmetic without any embarrassment at all. “Before the twelfth I would have offered four rupees and he would have said no and I would have gone away. I am offering forty.”

The sentence came up in her without being sent for.

“The words are said once, at the water, for everybody at the same time,” she said, “and there is no way of saying them for one boat that would not mean taking them off another.”

The man went away.

She stood in the doorway with the ink on her fingers and heard her own voice still going in her head, and it was not her voice. She had never had an opinion about it in her life. She had heard him say it twice, both times from inside the hut with her back turned, and it had come out of her at a stranger with the cadence on it and the small pause before *another*, and she had believed it while she said it.

Forty rupees was four months.

* * *

Rodrigo read all nine.

He read them on the sand by his second boat at four in the afternoon, with the nine boats’ people standing in a half circle at a distance that was almost polite, and he read every one, and squared them on his knee and looked at the ruled columns at the foot.

“Who wrote these?”

“I did,” Rasathi said.

“I know you did.” He put them down. “Who told you to.”

“Nobody told me to.”

He had been making decisions on that beach for twenty years and had a way of not being in a hurry that was worth four boats to him. He picked the top one up and read the fourth line aloud, slowly, in the voice of a man reading a thing he intends to be heard agreeing with.

“One shell in four. Yes. That is fair.” He said it as though the matter were closed, and in a certain sense it was. “I will do that from tomorrow morning and the other owners will do it, because I will tell them to, and because we are a fortnight off the end and I am not going to spend it with nine boats on the sand. Tell them.”

Something went out of all of them at once, and one of the younger men laughed.

“Write it in the book,” Rasathi said.

Rodrigo looked up at her.

“It is not a thing for the book.”

“It is exactly a thing for the book. One line. It takes four seconds to write, and the man who comes after you has it, and the man who comes after him.”

“No,” said Rodrigo.

“Why?”

And he told her, courteously, with the papers in his hand, in front of everybody, because he had nothing whatever to hide and knew it.

“Because a kindness in a book is a kindness. It is not a rule. Put it in the book and it is a rule, and in ‘thirty-three, when the bank is fat and a boat’s heap is four thousand shell in the morning, one in four takes a thousand off me instead of five hundred, and I pay twice over for a boat that costs what it costs. You have written a thing that is good for you in a bad season and good for you in a good one, in four lines, and you have written it very well.” He held the tickets out, and when she did not take them he set them on the thwart. “I am giving

you what you asked for. I am not giving you the book. You may have the one, or stand here about the other until your people have another morning like Wednesday.”

She had said it herself in the mat church on the third day of the fishery, with the fund’s book in her hands, to this man: you write the limit into the book, and then every man on the coast knows where he stands. He had not answered her then. He had used it now.

There was an answer. It was behind her teeth, and it had to do with a rule that cuts both ways not being a trick but the only kind there is. It would have taken a minute. She had the minute.

Nine boats.

“Thank you,” she said. “From tomorrow morning.”

It went round the Vaipar lines before dark, and at ten past one on the Friday morning there were no boats left on the sand, and her name was not on anything.

* * *

Sinnappan came at eight in the evening with a slip of paper.

She knew him by sight as she knew four hundred people by sight, and had never spoken to him. He had been on the beach at eight o’clock on a morning at the end of February when she came out of water where she had no business being, and neither had said a word about it to anybody, including each other.

“Mohideen Marakkayar’s man sent this.”

It was the three figures off 246 for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, in a counter’s hand. She had asked for them at noon.

“They are eight hours late.”

“Yes,” he said.

“It does not matter. It is done.” She put the slip in the box.
“Thank him.”

He did not go.

Two lamps were burning in that street and one of them was hers, and the people against the opposite wall had gone home, and he stood at the edge of the light with his weight all on his left side, which she noticed and thought nothing about.

“The boy,” he said.

“What boy?”

“On the Saturday. Thomai. The water-cart man’s boy.” He stopped, and started again somewhere else. “The second gun that day was four minutes past twelve. I was in the boat. I heard it.”

“Yes.”

“He went in at ten past three.”

He had it in the wrong order and was making a bad job of it, and she was there before he was halfway, because she had every one of the ninety-one words of her father’s since the fourth of March, and the fourth movement of it went through her at once.

By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun.

And she had most of the other one, taken down over three weeks in the margins of an accounts book in a hand that got smaller as the pages went on, and the last line of the other one was *At the second gun I will not ask you again until tomorrow.*

“It was three hours after,” she said.

Sinnappan stood still.

“Both of them stop at noon. They have always stopped at noon. It is in the last line of each, and it is not hidden, and nobody put it there to be clever. So nothing failed on the Saturday. The words did what they say they do, and a boy is dead inside them, and there is no morning that has ever happened and no morning that is ever going to happen on which anybody could stand up on that sand and say they did not work.” She heard herself going and did not stop. “That is the part you have not got to. It cannot be tested. There is nothing in it that could fail.”

The sea came up and went back, four hundred yards off, twice.

“I have had it since Sunday week,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I got it under a boat.” He was looking at the sand. “It took me the whole day.”

She understood then, about a second and a half too late, exactly what she had done, and that she had done it in the time it took him to say three sentences, and that it could not be put back.

“Who else have you told?”

“Nobody.”

“Then tell nobody.” This was right too, and she knew it, and could hear precisely what it sounded like. “You are a diver in a Kilakarai boat in a season where four hundred boats have gone home. The man who says out loud that the binding is a matter of what o’clock it is does not get another stone.”

“I did not come here to be told what to do with it.”

He was not angry. That was the worst of it. He said it as he would have said the tide was making, and shifted his weight to go.

“I know the words,” Rasathi said.

He stopped.

“Both of them?”

“His entirely. Ninety-one. Most of the other — the naming and the reckoning and two thirds of the list.” She was talking too fast. “Nobody taught me. I took them.”

Sinnappan considered this with what looked very much like politeness.

“Then you know it says until the second gun,” he said.

He picked up his sandals.

“Do not tell your father I said it.”

He went off up Fourth Cross Street past the woman who had come back and settled against the opposite wall for the night with her child asleep across her knees.

Rasathi went in and put the box down and stood there.

It cost you nothing to say. Yesamma had said it over her shoulder on the third day of the fishery, holding the fund's book against her chest, without any particular anger, and that was what had made it stick. It had taken her three weeks and a boy of nineteen to work out that it had not been a complaint about her manners.

She lay down at ten and did not sleep, and somewhere past midnight, without deciding to, she began to count, and got to a hundred and twenty-one before she noticed she was doing it, and let it go.

CHAPTER 22

Karuppan

The two men who carried him down came at a quarter past twelve as they had come every night since the tenth, and at twenty past they were still in the hut.

Anthoni was at the water by then. He was always at the water by then. He stood on the wet sand north of the flagstaff with the lamps going up the beach behind him and six hundred and forty boats lying off with their people aboard, and he did what he did in the four minutes before he began, and it was nothing at all: he stood and let the noise of a fleet getting ready come up the beach and go past him.

At half past twelve Muthiah came along the hard sand at a run and stopped eight feet short of him, because you do not run up to a man at that hour, and said, "He is dead."

"When?"

"I do not know. He was asleep at eight." The boy's voice went and came back. "He is cold at the shoulder and not at the middle."

Anthoni looked past him up the beach at the Kilakarai lines, where there was now a lamp moving that had not been moving, and then at the water, and then at nothing.

"Go back to him," he said. "Do not let them put him on the sand."

The boy went. Anthoni stood where he was for a while longer with his cloth pulled over his shoulders against the wind, because the

salt bands under his arms had gone bad in the heat and Rasathi was dressing them twice a day and the cloth had to sit in a particular place.

At twenty to one he said the ninety-one words, in twenty-eight seconds, facing the beach, as he had said them every night of every fishery for thirty-five years. The beach went quiet for it as it always did. Nobody on it knew anything yet.

Then he stood and watched the fleet go out, and the thing he noticed was not the silence from forty yards to the north, because a man cannot notice an absence at forty yards in the dark with a thousand— with six hundred boats getting under way. What he noticed was that about forty of the Kilakarai boats were not going.

They lay there with their crews aboard, not making any fuss about it, while the rest of the fleet went out past them. Nobody had decided anything. There had been no time for anybody to decide anything; the word had got that far down the lines and no further, and the men who had it did not go, and the men who did not have it went, and the difference between them was where a boy had happened to run.

The fleet sailed at ten past one and had an ordinary morning and came in at two with an ordinary poor catch, and nothing whatever happened to anybody.

* * *

They took him home at first light in Sultan Ibrahim's own boat, with the sail up and nobody fishing out of her, and it would have him at Kilakarai a little after dark.

Anthoni was at the water when she went. There was no reason for him to be; he did not go down to the boats in the morning as a rule, he sat on the sand north of the flagstaff in the shade of the customs shed from seven o'clock until two, where three thousand people could see him doing it. He went down to the edge instead. He stood with his feet in the wash and the light coming up off the water straight into his

eyes, which were still bad and which he kept half shut and would for another week, and he watched the boat go out and round and take the wind.

What he had of the man was two days old and it was in his right arm and his right side.

Forty yards of beach on the Wednesday, with a hand under the far armpit and an arm round the back, and there had been nothing in it. Nothing to hold. He had carried coils of rope with more in them. It had taken nearly twenty minutes and they had stopped twice and once the knees had gone entirely and the boy had taken all of him, and that had been the first time in forty years either of them had put a hand on the other, and it was the only thing he had.

They had never been friends. He had said that to Rasathi in so many words in about 1919 and had never had any reason to revise it.

He went back up the sand and sat in the shade of the customs shed and was visible until two.

Rasathi was not in the hut when he came home at noon. She came in a little after one with sand on her to the knee, and did not say where she had been, and he did not ask her, and she got the rice on.

* * *

They came at six, at the hour when a thing like that gets done, and there were five of them, and Mohideen Marakkayar did the talking because he was the one who could.

“Monday morning,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Nobody is asking you tonight. Nobody dives tomorrow.” Mohideen looked at the mat rather than at him. “Monday morning there are boats that will not go.”

“How many.”

“I do not know. Forty on Saturday because they had heard. On Monday everybody will have heard. I have four boats of my own and

I will put them in the water and my people will go out in them, and I am telling you that I have no idea at all what the Vaipar side does, and no more has Sultan Ibrahim, and there are only so many days left in this.”

“You have the boy.”

“We asked the boy. On Saturday morning, before we put the old man in the boat.” Mohideen’s face did not move. “He has the beginning. He has about a minute of it and then there is nothing, and he cried, and I am not going to ask him again and neither is anybody else.”

“There will be somebody at Kilakarai.”

“There is nobody at Kilakarai. There was his father and there was him.” Sultan Ibrahim said it from the doorway, in the voice like a door. “You know that as well as I do. You have been standing forty yards from it for forty years.”

Anthoni let that sit for a moment.

“I have heard it,” he said. “Hearing a thing is not having it. I have heard the priest say the Mass three thousand times and I could not say the Mass.”

“You are not being asked to say the Mass.”

“I am being asked to say a Hindu man’s words over a Hindu fleet, and I am a Christian from Vaipar, and it is not mine, and it is not yours either — it was his, and it was his father’s, and it is theirs at Kilakarai and they have not asked me.” He heard how reasonable it sounded. Every part of it was true. “Ask them.”

“They will say yes,” said Sultan Ibrahim.

“Then ask them and come back.”

“I am not going to spend two days asking a question I know the answer to.” Sultan Ibrahim came a step in. He was seventy if he was a day and he had had four boats on that beach since 1898. “You told us he would be at the water at the loosing.”

Nobody in the room said anything.

“You went down and sat with him and came back up and told us. I went and told my people. I have been telling my people for three days.” He said it without any anger whatever. “Well.”

“Yes,” Anthoni said.

“So.”

“I cannot do it,” Anthoni said. “I am sorry.”

They did not argue. They got up and thanked him for his time, because that is what men do, and went out past the people sitting against the wall opposite, and the people stood up as they came out and then sat down again.

* * *

On the Sunday nobody dived and the camp had its day.

There were nine outside the hut before six and by noon there were something over twenty and they had brought four children between them. He went out and came back twice and they stood up both times and he put his hand where it was wanted and said nothing and got past them. A woman held out a girl of about six with a cloth wrapped round her forearm and asked, when he had done it, whether the other one dying would make any difference to the water.

“No,” Anthoni said.

She thanked him. Not one of the twenty mentioned it again, and he understood, standing in his own doorway in the glare with his eyes half shut, that not one of them had heard the name of the man who had stood forty yards from him for forty years, or would ever hear it, and that this had been true on Thursday as well and he had simply not been looking at it.

He went to Mass at seven and sat at the back and left before the end.

He spent the afternoon doing the arithmetic, which took him about four minutes, and then sat with it for six hours.

He had a hundred and fifty rupees coming at the loosing and a great deal less than a hundred and fifty rupees coming at the loosing. The boats would sail or they would not sail. If a third of the fleet stayed on the sand on Monday the other two thirds would be on it by Wednesday, and a fishery that stops does not start again, and a fishery that never finished would be a very different thing at the kachcheri afterwards than a fishery that had. He did not let himself off any of it. He set it all out and looked at it and said to himself, in the voice he kept for accounts, that a man who does a thing for those reasons had better know that he is doing it for those reasons.

And under all of it, not moving, was the other thing, and it was not a reason and would not go into the column. There was nobody else. There had been nobody else since half past twelve on Saturday morning and there was not going to be anybody else, and every hour that went past with nobody saying it was an hour in which it was not being said.

At eight he sent the boy who fetched water to the Kilakarai lines with four words.

Tell them I will.

* * *

At a quarter past twelve on the Monday morning he went down to the water and said his own.

Then he walked the forty yards north.

He had been past that place perhaps twenty times in his life and had never once stood on it. The sand there was no different. He turned and faced the sea, because he had heard the thing for forty years from behind and over his right shoulder and there was no getting it out of himself the other way round, and behind him six hundred boats and about nine thousand people were making no noise at all.

He said:

Water. Water that no man dug and no man owns. Water between the two coasts: a road for some, a floor for none. Old water. You were here before the sand. Heavy water at the bottom, light water at the top; one water. Water that carries. Water that takes. Salt — you are the salt, and the salt is in everything of yours. Water with one taste from Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and no man has ever found the join.

I have called you eleven times. A thing called eleven times is awake.

He went on. The sand, and the shell standing on shell standing on shell; and then, because it came to him in that order and he had no means of checking the order, the thing under the sand before the thing under the shell — the dead of the same animal lying one upon another down further than a well goes, the bank that is not a place but a body, standing on its own dead and growing the way a nail grows; and then the soft thing with no bone and no eye and no name of its own, sitting in the dark the whole of its life building a house out of itself.

Then the list.

Karuppan sang it. He had mended nets most of the year and sung in a temple the rest of it, and it came out of him for a minute in a voice that went to the back of a crowd of twelve thousand people without appearing to try. Anthoni had a voice for speaking to nine hundred men in the dark and no voice at all for anything else. He said it. He said it flat and level in the voice he used for the other thing, and it went faster than it had ever gone in his life.

The weed is yours — the green weed, the red weed, the weed that is only a fur on a stone. The sand is yours and the sand under the sand. The shell is yours: the live shell, the dead shell, the shell ground down to powder. The small crabs are yours, and the big crabs, and the thing that lives in a shell that is not its own and walks about like a crab. The fish are yours: the fish that go in one body, and the fish that go alone, and the flat fish that is the colour of whatever it is lying on, and the fish with the whip on it, and the long fish with the teeth, and

the great fish that comes up this coast in the third month. The turtle is yours. The wood is yours — every plank that ever went down, and the masts, and the iron off them, and the nails out of the iron. The stones are yours: every stone that came off a line and was not fished up again is yours, and there are more of those down there this morning than there are boats on your back. The rain is yours. The rivers are yours the moment they touch you. The light down to nine fathoms is yours and the dark under it is yours. The bones are yours.

I have named all of it. There is nothing of yours that I have left out.

It was the first sentence he had said on that beach in thirty-five years that he believed when he said it.

Now count what is in you that I have not named.

What I have not named is not yours.

From the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar; the Cheval bank, and the road out to it, and the road home. Inside that line this morning there are men in you who are not yours. Keep your own. Take nothing I have not named.

At the second gun I will not ask you again until tomorrow.

It took two minutes and forty seconds and he had no idea whether that was right. He knew the number of his own to the second and had known it for twenty years and had never in forty years thought to count the other man's, and there was nobody left on the coast he could ask.

He stood there afterwards facing the water for about four seconds, longer than he had intended, and then turned round and walked back down the forty yards with his weight going onto the right leg as it had been going since the Thursday, and the beach opened and let him through.

Six hundred and thirty-one boats went out at ten past one. Nine did not, and they were Vaipar boats, and their reasons had nothing to do with anything that had been said.

He walked up the shortest line to the hut and was asleep inside ten minutes.

* * *

At half past seven on the Monday morning a clerk came along the top of the beach with a book under his arm, working down the lines and putting his head into things, and stopped where Anthoni was sitting in the shade of the customs shed.

“You said the Kilakarai one this morning.”

“Yes.”

“Who is that? Is there a name?”

“Anthonimuthu,” Anthoni said. “Of Vaipar.”

The clerk looked at what was already written on the page, and then wrote it in the second place, and asked him how the end of it went, and Anthoni told him, and the clerk wrote that too and blotted it with the side of his hand and went on down the line.

CHAPTER 23

Five More Days

By the Thursday he had said both of them four times.

He went down to the water now at a quarter past twelve instead of twenty to one. His own took twenty-eight seconds and the Kilakarai one took whatever it took, and between them lay the forty yards, and the forty yards had begun to take longer than it used to. Nobody had said anything about the order. On the first night he had done his own first because it was his own; on the second he had done the Kilakarai one first, to see whether anybody would speak, and nobody did; on the third he went back to his own and stayed there. Six hundred boats were lying off in the dark on each of those nights and not one man in any of them was thinking about the order.

What had gone was his voice. Twenty-eight seconds a night for thirty-five years had cost him nothing; three minutes a night cost him something, and by the Wednesday there was a place low in his throat that woke when he started and did not go back to sleep until about eight in the morning. He drank a great deal of water and it made no difference. Rasathi had begun putting the pot where his hand would find it in the dark, and neither of them mentioned why.

The rest of him had not mended either. The eyes, the bands under his arms, the knee: each was where it had been a week ago, and he had stopped waiting on them and begun arranging the day around them.

The fleet was five hundred and forty-eight boats on the Thursday morning. It had been twice that and more on the opening night. Tuticorin had been going since the fifteenth and Kilakarai had started after the old man went home in Sultan Ibrahim's boat, and neither of them went in any way that could be argued with. A boat was not there in the morning, and somebody said the name of the owner, and somebody else said that his brother had a field.

At about eleven a peon came along the top of the beach with a chit and stood in front of him until he took it. It was in English on one side and blank on the other, and he could not read English. He held it while the peon told him what it said. The Government Agent would be obliged if he would come to the kachcheri at three.

"Obliged," Anthoni said.

"That is the word on it," the peon said, and went away.

* * *

The Government Agent's room was at the back of the kachcheri and had a wooden floor, the only one between the sea and Kondachchi, and a punkah that a boy pulled from outside the door with a cord round his foot. Anthoni had been past the door of it perhaps twenty times in thirty-five years and never inside. There were three chairs. A chart of the Gulf was pinned flat to the table with a brass weight on each corner, and the weights were the kind used for scales.

Vereker stood up when he came in. Nobody had ever done that.

"Sit down," he said, in Tamil that had been learned properly and used for thirty years and was still not good. "Mr. Wace you know."

Wace was at the other side of the table with his hands behind him and did not sit down when Anthoni did. He looked as he had looked on the launch, like a man carrying about a thing he had worked out and nobody would read.

A servant put a glass of water down. Anthoni drank all of it. The punkah came over and went back and came over.

“You have been saying two of them,” Vereker said.

“Yes.”

“Since Monday.”

“Since Monday.”

“I am told the Kilakarai people are satisfied.” He said it as a man says a thing he has checked. “I did not want it from the clerk only. I asked Mohideen Marakkayar, and he told me the boats went out, and that this was the answer to my question.”

He took up a paper, looked at it, and put it down where he could reach it again.

“The fishery was put into the estimates at three and a half lakhs of rupees. To the twenty-fifth day the government’s share has realised a little over one lakh fifty. That is the whole of my difficulty and I have no other.”

He waited to see whether Anthoni would say anything. Anthoni did not.

“The Cheval is done,” Vereker said. “Mr. Wace has held that opinion since before the fishery opened and I am now of it myself, which I say to you plainly because you will have it off the beach by Saturday in any case. I propose to close the Cheval on the twenty-eighth.”

“Yes,” Anthoni said.

“And then to work the Periya Paar for five days.”

The punkah came over. Anthoni put his hand flat on his knee and kept it there.

“Mr. Wace.”

Wace leaned over the chart and put one finger down without any ceremony, north-west, well outside the pencilled ring in which the whole of Anthoni’s life had been conducted.

“Thirteen fathoms,” Wace said. “I dredged it in January — fourteen hauls. There is shell of size on it and there is a good deal of four-year and five-year shell, which there is not on the Cheval, and it lies scattered and not in beds. I would put five days at two hundred

and fifty to three hundred thousand oysters of size, and I would not be surprised by a hundred thousand, and I would not be astonished by nothing at all." He straightened up. "And I have said in writing, and I say it here, that thirteen fathoms is not nine fathoms, and that the men who work it will not be able to work it the way they work the Cheval, and that some of them will attempt to anyway. That is not an opinion about oysters and I have no authority for it. I give it to you because it is true."

"Thank you," Vereker said, and meant it, and wrote nothing down.

And that, Anthoni thought, is how it is done. A man says the true thing in a room and is thanked for it and it becomes one of the things the decision was taken with.

"Three hundred thousand oysters," he said.

"At the government's two-thirds, and at what the lots have been fetching this month, perhaps thirty-five thousand rupees." Vereker turned his hand over. "It is not the money."

"No," Anthoni said.

"I am glad you see it. A fishery that was worked to the end of the banks is one paper. A fishery that stopped on the twenty-eighth because there was nothing under the boats is a different paper, and it is read by men who have never been on this coast and never will be, and what they read in it is that the Gulf is finished. Mr. Wace believes the Gulf is finished for the present and wants it let alone until nineteen thirty-three." He said this without any edge at all. "If I go up next month with a fishery that stopped, nobody will let it alone until thirty-three. They will send somebody down in November to see whether Mr. Wace is a pessimist."

Wace said nothing whatever, and his face did nothing, and Anthoni understood that this had been said between them before and that Wace had not been able to answer it either.

“So there are five days,” Vereker said. “The thirtieth, the thirty-first, and the three after. The loosing on the Friday instead of the Saturday before it.”

He put his fingers on the paper he had set down.

“The boats will not go.”

“No,” Anthoni said.

“I asked three men separately what would take them out to thirteen fathoms in the last week of a bad season, and I did not tell any of them what the other two had said, and all three said the same thing, and two of them said it in the same words.” Vereker looked at the paper rather than at him. “They said: if he puts the words over it, we will go.”

The punkah came over.

“I am not asking you whether it is true,” Vereker said. “In twenty-nine years I have not asked anybody in this island that about anything, and I am not going to begin at fifty-eight in a tent. I am asking you for a thing that is in your gift and in nobody else’s, and I am asking for it in the ordinary way, which is to say that I expect to pay for it.”

He turned the paper round with two fingers and slid it across the chart.

It was a page out of a clerk’s book, copied. There was a column and there were two lines in it, and Anthoni could not read the English but he could read a list, and he had watched the second line being written at half past seven on the Monday morning in the shade of the customs shed.

“Your name is here twice,” Vereker said. “Once for the Vaipar office and once for the other. It is one line of my estimate and it has one man against it.” He put his finger below the second entry. “And here the clerk has written down how the end of it goes. He asked you and you told him. I have had it read to me.”

He read it out himself, slowly, in his thirty-year-old Tamil, off a clerk’s English.

“The Cheval bank, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again.”

Anthoni sat still.

“The Periya Paar is not the Cheval bank,” Vereker said. “It is fourteen miles north-west of it and nobody has ever gone to it out of this beach. So what I am asking for is not the same words. I am asking you to say the words over the Periya Paar and the road out to it.”

There it was, on a wooden floor, under a punkah, in the third hour of a Thursday afternoon, set down as reasonably as a man setting down a cup.

“It cannot be done,” Anthoni said.

“Forgive me,” Vereker said, “but I am told that it can.” He did not say it unkindly; he said it in the tone of a man who has looked something up so as not to waste another man’s time. “On the twelfth of this month you found it possible to say something additional. I have that from four people and one of them was in the boat. It was not the usual words and you put it in among them, and the fleet went back down and the day was worked. I have no view about any of it. I mention it because it seemed to me that you would not want me to come and ask for a thing you had already shown could be given.”

He was pleased with himself for the courtesy of it. It was a real courtesy. He had thought about it on Anthoni’s behalf and had decided not to make him argue from nothing, and he sat back with his hands loose, having removed the only obstacle he could see.

What came up in Anthoni had no place in that room.

It was a man in good cloth with his sandals in his hand, three or four of them a season, standing at the edge of the customs shed shade asking for the words over one boat. Four rupees. A son of twelve, first fishery. And the answer he had given that man and his father had given and his grandfather had given, in the same shape every time, without ever once in his life having had to think about it: the words are said at the water, at one time, for everybody who is inside them,

and there is no way of saying them over one boat that would not be taking them off another.

Nobody in that room would have understood it. It was not an argument; it was a thing about a beach. In here it would have sounded like a man refusing to work overtime, and Vereker would have been patient with it, and he would have been right to be patient with it, and the patience would have been the end of it.

So he sat with it in his mouth and did not put it down on the table, and the punkah came over and went back.

“The second fee,” Vereker said, when enough time had gone by. “Three hundred rupees is against the other name and the other name is now yours. I see no reason why it should not be paid at the loosing with your own. That is not a favour and I should be obliged if you would not take it as one; the work is being done and the vote exists.”

Six hundred rupees, then, and twenty oysters from every boat twice over.

He did the sum where he sat, because he could not help it, and it took him no time at all. The assignment lodged at the counter was drawn in English and had been read out to him at four minutes forty seconds in a room with nine people in it, and it said *for this fishery and the next, whensoever held*. Whether it reached across into a dead man’s fee was a question for a clerk. He knew what the answer would be at that counter. It would be yes, because there was nobody at the counter whose business it was to say no, and because Vellaisamy’s man would be there on the morning and he would not be.

He was being offered three hundred rupees to say a sentence over deep water, and the three hundred rupees was already somebody else’s, and it would cross the counter in a hand he could not read.

“I would want to speak to the boat-owners,” he said.

“Speak to anybody you like. It is proclaimed tomorrow morning or not at all — the Tuticorin boats that are left go home on Saturday if nothing is said to them.” Vereker stood up, and the meeting was over.

"I need an answer in the morning. I am sorry to put it to you in that shape. It is the shape I have."

"Give me tonight," Anthoni said.

"Of course."

At the door Wace said something in English and Vereker rendered it into Tamil with a small movement of his head, as a man translates for a servant who is present.

"Mr. Wace says he is sorry about the old gentleman from Kilakarai."

"Yes," Anthoni said. "Thank you."

* * *

He came down the kachcheri steps into the glare and stood at the bottom of them for a while with his eyes almost closed.

Fourth Cross Street was full of people taking down a toddy shop. Below it the beach ran away south, the boats in their lines with gaps in them, the sand blown flat where hulls had stood for a month.

Three boats up from the flagstaff a knot of men were doing something with rope, and he went and stood at the edge of it because his legs took him there.

They had a coil down on the sand and one of Rodrigo's tenders was walking it out in fathoms, arms wide, counting, and the count was the thing they were arguing about. Every rope on that beach was cut for nine fathoms and a little over — enough for the swell and enough for the man's arm — because every rope on that beach had been cut for the Cheval by men who had never worked anything else. There was no new rope at Marichchukkaddi in the last week of March. So it was two ropes or nothing, and two ropes meant a splice, and a tender does not count seconds. A tender counts rope. He knows where his man is by what has gone through his hands, and a splice is a thing arriving in the palm that he did not put there, and for the first hundred descents it tells him something that is not true.

The tender walked it out again. Somebody said that you could do it if you marked the splice, and somebody else said that a mark is a mark on the day you tie it.

Anthoni stood and watched them and did not say anything, and none of them looked at him, because men working do not.

Nobody here had been told anything yet. It would be a paper on the kachcheri wall in the morning and a shouting match by noon, and the boat-owners would stand in his street with their hands behind them, and it would be settled by four on the Friday in the usual way, which is nobody deciding anything and everybody knowing.

The rope went out, nine fathoms and a little over, and came back in over the tender's arm.

He walked home the long way for the first time in thirty-five years, up past the hospital and along the eleventh street, and it took him twenty minutes, and the knee did not like any of it.

The lamp was lit when he came in, which meant she had been sitting with it since before dark, and she had the book open in front of her and her hands flat on both pages, and she was not writing.

"They have sent for you," Rasathi said.

"Yes."

"What did they want?"

CHAPTER 24

The Night

He told her.

She did not understand for some minutes how strange it was. He sat down on the mat with his back against the post and told her the whole of it in order, from the peon on the beach at midday to the kachcheri steps at four, and left nothing out, and did not arrange any of it to be easier to hear. The Cheval to close on the twenty-eighth. Five days on the Periya Paar. Thirteen fathoms. The Superintendent's own figures said two hundred and fifty thousand oysters and might say nothing at all, and thirty-five thousand rupees to the government, and it was not about the thirty-five thousand, it was about a paper going up to Colombo next month with a fishery in it worked to the end instead of one that had stopped.

"And what did they want from you?"

"The words over the Periya Paar."

"It is not in the words."

"No," he said. "The Agent read it to me off a clerk's book. He knew it before I did."

She had turned the lamp down when he came in, because of his eyes, and the light was low enough to see him by and not his face.

"They will pay," he said. "The Kilakarai three hundred. It is against the other name and the other name is mine now. Six hundred rupees for the season."

“Six hundred,” Rasathi said.

She had the book open already; her hands had gone to it while he was still talking. She ruled a line under the month and wrote 600 at the head of a column, and then sat and looked at it, because by itself it was no use to her.

“The instalments are a hundred and fifty each,” she said. “So now four. What comes off them?”

He did not answer at once, and she thought she had asked the wrong thing, and then understood that she had asked the only thing and that he was deciding.

“A hundred and twenty-four rupees and eight annas,” he said.

She put the pen down.

She had kept that book for four years, and it went back to 1921 in three hands — her mother’s, her own, and one page of her father’s from a season when she had been ill. She knew what rice cost in the third week of a fishery and what it cost in the fifth, and to the anna what the thatch had cost, and the oil, and the two cloths at Christmas. She had a whole page of monthly figures from Vellaisamy, eighteen rupees twelve annas and then twenty rupees twelve annas, and she had written the endorsement in herself on the morning of the seventeenth with the ink he had left open.

“Say it again.”

“A hundred and twenty-four rupees and eight annas,” he said, “off each hundred and fifty. It was a hundred and twelve and eight until the seventeenth.”

“So you receive twenty-five rupees and eight annas.”

“Yes.”

“Twice.”

“Yes. And the twenty oysters off each boat, which I sell forward in the first week. A hundred and ninety-eight this year, because the price went before I did.”

“And now forty from each boat.”

“Now forty.”

Rasathi sat with both hands flat on the book and did not move them.

Four years of a book with a hole in the middle of it the size of the thing it was for. She had balanced that page every month of her life and never once had the figure, and she had not had it because she had never asked, and she had never asked because she had been keeping the accounts of a man and not of an office, and the two had turned out to be the same.

“How does it happen?” she said. “At the counter.”

“You stand in the line. A clerk reads out the assignment. Four minutes and forty seconds, in English. Then he counts out a hundred and fifty on the counter and puts a hundred and twenty-four and eight of it to the left and the rest to the right, and you take up the right-hand one and he takes up the left and puts it in a bag for the man standing next to you. Nobody in the room thinks anything about it. It is not a thing being done to you. It is the second item of that man’s morning.”

“Was anybody with you?”

“Karuppan was there.”

“Then he heard it.”

“He heard it,” her father said.

* * *

“Why are you sitting here with it?” she said, after a while. “You have said no to people about the words since I was born. You said no to a man for four rupees. Why is this one taking all night?”

“Because the bank is dead,” he said, “and I have known it since the sixth of this month.”

She heard the date before she heard the sentence.

“The sixth.”

“I was out on the Superintendent’s launch. They put a dredge over on the Cheval four times and brought up thirty-one oysters of a size between them, and I had them in my own hands, and I have

handled shell off that bank since I was nine years old.” He was looking at the floor to one side of the lamp. “There is nothing under those boats. There has not been since before the fishery opened. What has been coming up since the fourteenth is the last of it, and the reason the boats are going home is that the men in them can count.”

“Twenty days,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Who did you tell?”

“Nobody.”

“Yagappan Rocha stood in this street that evening with his two boys. I heard him ask you.”

“He asked me straight out and I did not answer him.”

She waited. There was more: his hands had gone still on his knees and his hands did not do that.

“And the old man asked me,” he said. “In the water. On the Wednesday, when I took him down. He asked me whether it was true, the thing he says about the shell under the sand going deeper than a well. And I said a true thing to him that was not the answer to what he had asked, and he was satisfied with it, and he shut his eyes, and he was dead on the Friday night.”

The lamp made its small noise.

“And you are telling me tonight,” Rasathi said, “because tonight you want the sum done.”

He did not say anything to that, which she took, correctly, for yes.

* * *

“There will not be another offer,” she said. “For me. Mrs. Croos told me so on the eleventh, standing up, in a lane, and she is the only one who does it between Mannar and Tuticorin and there is nobody coming after her. I did not tell you. I am telling you now because you

are putting things on the mat and I am not going to sit here and let you put them all.”

It cost more to say than she had expected, and the cost was not the marriage. The cost was that she had counted it — had refused a thing and then gone home and worked out, carefully, what she had refused, which is not what a person does who is finished with it.

Her father took that the way he took weather.

“I am not sorry about it,” he said.

“Nor am I.”

“I know.”

“Then say the rest of it,” she said. “You have been at the edge of it for an hour.”

* * *

He took the office at nineteen. His father had died three months before, in the November, of nothing anybody named. There was a fishery proclaimed at Marichchukkaddi in the following February and the family had been in it four generations and there was no one else, and there were three hundred rupees in it and twenty oysters from every boat, and in 1890 that was a house and a year.

“I went down to the water at twenty to one in the morning,” he said, “with the words in me the way a hymn is in you, and I said them, and the fleet went out, and I came up the beach and lay down and could not sleep, because I had been waiting all the way up to feel something happen, and nothing had happened, and I understood that nothing was going to.”

“And then?”

“And then I said them again the next night.”

“How many times?”

“Nine hundred and something,” he said. “I have counted it. Forty nights to a fishery when there is one, and there was none in twelve of

the years, and the Muttuvaratu was a fortnight. It comes out at something over nine hundred.”

Nine hundred was the wrong size. Rasathi had carried a number for it since she was a child without ever putting it into figures — a number like the number of waves, a thing you did not count. Nine hundred was a number she could have counted herself, where she sat, with a pencil, in an evening.

“Not once,” she said.

“Not once. Not the first time and not the ninth hundred. I have never believed it for the length of one of those mornings.”

“Does anybody know?”

“Everybody who knows me at all knows,” he said, and shrugged with one shoulder, which hurt, and stopped. “It is not a secret, girl. It is not the kind of thing I could have kept. Karuppan knew it by 1907 and never once mentioned it to me until last week.”

She turned a page and turned it back.

“In the year of the marriage,” she said. “When I told you I had the words. You laughed at me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He looked at her properly for the first time that night, his eyes half shut against a lamp already turned down.

“Because you came to me,” he said, “with the one thing in the world I have known to be worth nothing since I was nineteen years old, and you put it on the mat like a purse. You had got it by yourself. You got the ninety-one off a beach at forty yards in one hearing, which nobody has ever done, and you got the rest of it out of an old man who would not have given it to a priest. It was the best piece of work anybody in this family has done in my lifetime and it was done on a purse full of sand, and you were standing there with your chin up waiting to be told what it was worth.” He moved his hand. “And you are exactly like me, and I could not say any of that to you at the time

without saying the rest of it, so I laughed, and I have been sorry about it since."

* * *

"Say it here," Rasathi said.

"No."

"You have never said it in this house."

"No."

"Why?"

"There has never been any reason to," he said.

"There is one now."

He sat a while, then got up off the mat, which took him time because of the knee, and stood in the middle of the floor with his back to the door and his hands at his sides, and there was not room for him to be more than four feet from her, and he said it in his ordinary voice, not the beach one, and it took twenty-eight seconds.

"Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and to the sand under it.

"The boundary is the Cheval bank, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again. Nothing crosses that line.

"Inside it there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners, and there are two who bind. Nobody inside it has a name.

"By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun."

In a hut it was nothing. That was the first thing, and she felt it on her skin before she understood it: in a hut, four feet away, with a lamp turned down, it was ninety-one words of a man talking, and it had no more in it than a man saying where he had been.

"Sit down," she said.

He sat down.

* * *

“It is shut until the second gun,” Rasathi said.

“Yes.”

“The gun goes at noon. The boy went into the water at ten past three.”

“I know what time the boy went into the water.”

“Then it was not broken,” she said. “It did exactly what it says. It has never once done anything it does not say.” She put her finger on the line in the book where she had written the ninety-one words in her own hand on the fourth of March. “There is nothing in it about the afternoon. There has never been anything in it about the afternoon, and there is nothing in the old man’s either — he says at the second gun I will not ask you again until tomorrow, in so many words, out loud, every night, for twenty-five years. Nobody hid it. Nobody said the afternoon was covered. The camp made that part out of nothing at all and then stood in the water in it every day at four o’clock.” She heard her own voice going and brought it back down. “And it is not even a lie, because a lie has a man behind it.”

Her father did not answer.

She waited for him to. She had been waiting since Sinnappan said it to her badly in Fourth Cross Street a week ago, and she had put it away and carried it about and got it ready, and now it was out on the mat and the man it was for had nothing.

“Nobody inside it has a name,” she said.

“That is the middle of it.”

“Why?”

“It is what I was given.”

“No. You have counted the words in it. You know why.” She had both hands on the book. “It takes the names off. Eleven hundred men go into that water and none of them is anybody, so there is nobody for the sea to choose. That is the whole middle of yours.” She turned the page over. “His does the other thing. He names it all. The weed, the stones, the wood, every fathom that ever parted, the bones — everything in the water that is the sea’s own, down to the last thing he

can think of, and then he says: what I have not named is not yours. He gets the men out by leaving them out and you get them out by rubbing their names off, and the two of you have been standing forty yards apart doing the opposite things for forty years and the boats have gone out every morning either way.”

“The sea does not ask which of us means it,” her father said.

“Where did you get that?”

“He said it to me. On the Wednesday.”

“Then he was not talking about the sea either,” Rasathi said, “and neither are you.”

And there it was in the middle of the floor between the lamp and the post, and she had not had it a moment before she said it.

“When you say it,” she said, “you stand with your back to the water.”

He did not move.

“I saw it on the fourth of March, at forty yards, the first time I ever got past the flagstaff. He turns round. He is a sick old man who cannot stand up and he turns himself round to face the sea to say it. You put your back to the sea and you say it into the men. You have done it every night of my life and you did it on the night before last and you will do it again in an hour and a half.”

“It is easier on the knee,” he said.

“It was easier on the knee for thirty-four years before the knee.”

He sat quite still with his hands on his knees and did not say anything, and she understood that he was not refusing to answer. There was nothing there to come out. A man with an answer looks for it; this was a man being shown a thing in his own house that had been in front of everybody for thirty-five years, at a distance of four feet, by a person with his own face.

“Then it was never the sea you were binding,” Rasathi said.

The lamp made its noise. Out on the beach somebody was calling somebody in from a long way off, twice, and then not again.

“I went down on the Saturday morning,” she said. “When they put him in the boat. He had told me to come on the Friday at twelve and I did not go, and I thought there would be another Friday. I stood at the top and watched them get the sail up and I did not go down to the water. That is all of it. I am saying it once.”

“Yes,” her father said.

He stayed where he was until a quarter past twelve.

Then he got up and put his cloth over his shoulder and felt for the pot and drank a long time, and at the door he stopped with his hand against the post, and she thought for a moment he was going to say what he would do about the Periya Paar in the morning.

“Put the lamp out,” he said. “You are burning oil for me and I am going out.”

She heard him go down the street and onto the sand, and she sat with the book open in front of her, and at about twenty to one she counted her breath without having decided to, and lost it somewhere past a hundred, and did not begin again.

CHAPTER 25

What He Said at the Water

The rope came off the drying rack at eleven o'clock at night and Kasim laid it out on the sand in the dark, and it was nine fathoms and a little over, the way every rope in that camp was nine fathoms and a little over, because that was how deep the Cheval was and had been since before any of them was born.

Sinnappan brought the second one down from the boat. There was no new rope in the camp. There had not been a coil landed at that beach in twelve days and there would not be one now, with the fishery closing on the Saturday, because a dealer who has cordage to sell in the last week of a bad fishery takes it somewhere else and waits.

They walked the two ropes out on the sand and put the ends together. Kasim went down on his heels over the join and began to open the lay with his thumbnail.

A boat that is going to work thirteen fathoms wants four ropes for one diver: the stone rope, which is the one the man rides down and which the tender hauls back empty; and the basket rope, which comes up with the shell in it; and then the same two again for the second diver working the other side, because a boat with one line over is a boat with half a crew idle. Boat 246 had five ropes for six divers and had been getting away with it since the twentieth of February by

working her men in pairs off the same stone, which is illegal, and which the Superintendent's inspector had walked past twice.

So the arithmetic that Mohideen Marakkayar had done in the middle of the Thursday afternoon, sitting on his heels with his back against the boat and saying nothing to anybody for a long time, was not about oysters. It was: five ropes, four of which have to become two.

Kasim put the splice in.

Sinnappan watched him do it because there was nothing else to do and because it was worth watching. A long splice, not a short one — a short splice makes a lump twice the thickness of the rope and a lump does not go through a tender's hand at any speed, and a lump does not go over the gunwale, and a lump is where a rope parts. A long splice takes about four feet of rope and leaves it the same thickness it was, and takes a man twenty minutes, and cannot be done in a hurry and cannot be done in a boat.

And Kasim put it at the top.

It was the part Sinnappan would think about afterwards, a long time afterwards, when there was time to think about things. Kasim measured off the bottom rope from its own end with his forearm — he did not use the marked rope, he used the one that had the stone on it, the one whose length he had had in his hands every morning for thirty-five days — and he arranged the two so that the whole of the lower nine fathoms, the part that lies in the water and runs through a tender's fingers and tells him where his man is, was one unbroken rope, the old one, with its own stretch in it and its own two worn places and no join anywhere. The splice went up in the last four fathoms, the part that lives in the boat, coiled, dry, under a man's foot.

A tender does not count seconds. There is no watch in the boat. He counts rope: he knows his man is down when the mark goes over, and he knows he is coming when the weight changes, and everything in between is the length of rope standing in the water, read off against

the third worn place and the dip and the feel of it. A spliced rope has two stretches in it. Wet hemp gives and a new splice gives differently from ten fathoms of rope that has been under water since the twentieth of February, and the mark arrives in the hand a half a second early, and a half a second is nothing at all, and for the first hundred descents it tells him something that is not true.

Kasim had taken that out of the rope with his forearm and his thumbnail and twenty-two minutes on the sand, and he had not said one word about it, and he had not said one word about anything since the second of March.

Sinnappan held the ends where he was shown to hold them. Twice Kasim moved his hand an inch without looking up.

“That will do it,” Sinnappan said, when it was done, because somebody had to say something over a thing like that.

Kasim coiled the rope.

* * *

The talking had started again before midnight, the way it had been starting and stopping since the paper went up on the kachcheri wall on the Thursday morning.

Five hundred and forty-eight boats had sailed on the Thursday. On the opening night there had been twice that and more. The paper said that the fishery on the Cheval Paar would close at the second gun on Saturday the twenty-eighth, and that the Periya Paar would be opened for five days from the Monday, and that all boats registered for the fishery might work it, and it gave the government’s share as two in three, unchanged, and it was signed by the Assistant Superintendent, and it was in English and in Tamil and the Tamil was better than usual.

What the paper did not say was how deep the Periya Paar was, because the paper was about the fishery and not about the sea, and it

never once occurred to any of the four men who had made it that there was anything to say.

The camp had got the depth off a Kilakarai boat by Thursday noon. Eleven fathoms, some of them said. Twelve. One man had it at nine and a half and was listened to for about an hour.

“There is a man in this camp who has been out there,” Rathinam said, at about a quarter to twelve, to nobody in particular, lying on his back with his hands behind his head. “There is one. He came up in fifteen and he was carried home and he is at Vaipar now in a chair, and he is forty-one years old, and he has been in that chair since he was thirty-two.”

“Where is fifteen?”

“Off Karativu. It is not the Periya Paar.”

“Then he has not been out there.”

“No,” Rathinam agreed. “He has not.”

Nobody put it together with anything. It was one of about forty things said on that beach that night, and Sinnappan heard it and made nothing of it, and it stayed in him for the rest of his life.

* * *

He went down at ten past twelve with the others, and the leg was quiet.

He had slept from eight. He had not been in the water since two o'clock in the afternoon. There was no cause in it anywhere and he looked for one, walking, with the sand cold under one foot and nothing at all under the other — and the thing he could not find was not the cause but the shape. In the first week it had come and had lasted about ten minutes and had gone. On the best day of his life it had come and gone over thirty yards of walking and he had had a cup in his hand and had not cared. This did not come. It was there when he stood up off the mat and it was there at the water and at some point in the next two hours it stopped being there, and he could not have

said when, and he found that he could not say when the previous one had stopped either.

He was nineteen. He did not think the word, because the word belonged to men in chairs at Vaipar and he had a splice in a rope and forty-six descents behind him from the Thursday and a share of thirty-eight, and he had three thousand one hundred and twenty-eight oysters in a sack under 246's bow thwart, held since the seventh day on an arbitrage he had worked out himself and now worth less than the bad price he had been avoiding.

At the top of the beach, where the lamps stopped, Rasathi was standing with the fund's book under her arm, and she saw him, and he saw her see him, and neither of them did anything about it at all. He had asked her, eight days before, to say nothing to her father, and she had not, and the arrangement held.

* * *

The Kilakarai binding was said at a quarter past twelve, forty yards to the north, where the dead man used to stand.

Sinnappan was on the sand in the middle of five hundred boats' crews and he heard it the way the whole beach heard it — as four minutes of a voice coming down the wind over the tops of people's heads, in a language he had a hundred words of, and the hundred words were the ones about water. Nobody near him listened to it. Men stood with their arms folded and their heads down and let it go over them.

But he heard the voice, and the voice was wrong.

Not weak. It went the distance; it went over five hundred boats and up the beach past the lamps, and the men at the back got every word of it who wanted one. It was lower than it had been a week ago and there was a scrape low down in it that came in at the end of the long lines, and twice it stopped where the words did not stop, and took a breath, and came back on.

The man next to Sinnappan noticed nothing. Six thousand people on that beach and he would have taken an oath that not one of them heard it, and he was probably wrong, and not wrong by much.

Then it ended and there was the walk back, forty yards, and the crowd opened for it and closed again, and a boy ran out with a pot and ran back.

* * *

“Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and to the sand under it.

“The boundary is the Cheval bank, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again. Nothing crosses that line.

“Inside it there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners, and there are two who bind. Nobody inside it has a name.

“By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the second gun.”

Twenty-eight seconds. Sinnappan had heard it thirty-six times and he could have said it himself and so could every man standing on that sand, and nobody in the history of that beach had ever once said it along with him, and the thing was over before a man had finished arranging himself to hear it. Every night it was this: you stood, and it was said, and you went to your boat.

Nobody went to his boat.

Because the voice did not stop. It came back — after a gap of about four seconds, and nobody on that beach had ever heard a gap in that place before, and it was long enough for two hundred men to lift their heads — and it had changed. It had come down out of the beach voice into the other one, the one a man uses at four feet, and it was pitched to carry anyway, and the scrape was all through it now.

“That is the words,” Anthoni said. “I have said them. What I say now is mine and it is not part of them.

“On Monday morning I will stand here and say them over the Periya Paar. They will be the same words and the boundary in them will be that bank and the road out to it.

“The Periya Paar is thirteen fathoms. There is shell on it of four years and five years, which there is not on the Cheval, and it lies scattered and not in beds. Five days of it may be three hundred thousand oysters and it may be a hundred thousand and it may be nothing at all; a man who has dredged it fourteen times told me all three of those in one breath and was thanked for it.

“Thirteen fathoms is not nine fathoms. A man cannot work it the way he works the Cheval. Some of you will go out there and work it the way you work the Cheval.

“I have said it. It is not part of the words.”

And then he stood there, and the thing that was wrong with his voice caught him, and he coughed twice into his shoulder, and it was only a man clearing his throat, and nobody said anything about it, then or ever.

* * *

Nothing happened.

That was what Sinnappan could never afterwards make anybody at Vaipar understand. Nobody shouted. Nobody went up the beach after him. Six thousand people took a piece of information at twenty minutes to one in the morning and stood in the dark holding it, and what came out of them, after about fifteen seconds, was arithmetic.

“Thirteen,” the man beside him said. “He said thirteen.”

“Four year and five year,” said somebody behind. “On the Cheval there is no four year.”

“Scattered. What is scattered?”

“It means you hunt for every one.”

“Then it is not three hundred thousand.”

“He did not say it was.”

“He said the man said it.”

It went that way all down the lines, two and three men deep, in the flat voices of people doing sums in public: what the depth does to a descent, and what four-year shell is worth against three-year, and what a thousand fetches on that beach this week and what it fetched at the peak, and whether a bank that has never been fished in the memory of anybody standing there has been paying interest all that time or has been standing empty. A boat-owner from Kilakarai went past Sinnappan at a fast walk with two men behind him, going to find Rodrigo, and he was not angry. Somewhere off to the left a man was explaining, wrongly and with total confidence, that thirteen fathoms was only four fathoms more than nine.

And not one man in the six thousand argued with the figures.

Sinnappan stood in the middle of it and understood something, and he understood it in about the time it takes to understand that a rope has parted. Nothing had been done over them. Nothing had been asked of them and nothing had been promised and nothing had been kept off them. A number had been put into their hands — three of them, and the worst one last — by the one man on that beach who had nothing whatever to gain by it, and the government had it, and the church did not have it, and now five hundred crews had it at twenty to one in the morning with the tide turning and their boats afloat.

You could not pray about a thing like that. You could only price it. The accounts are the argument.

He thought, for about a second and a half, that the words had a gun at the end of them and this had none, and then he stopped, because it was a quarter to one in the morning and he had a boat to get to.

* * *

Four hundred and ninety-seven boats sailed for the Cheval before two o'clock, fifty-one fewer than the Thursday, and every one of the fifty-one had made her decision about Monday and not about Friday.

Mohideen Marakkayar was standing in 246 with his hand on the mast when Sinnappan came up over the side.

"Well," Mohideen said.

"Well."

There was no more of it than that. Susai came aboard, and then Rathinam, who had been talking to the Vaipar boats and had nothing to report, and the two who were never named got the sail up.

Kasim was already in the bow with the spliced rope coiled between his feet and the four dry fathoms of it under his heel. He had been there since before the binding. He had not gone down to the water at all and nobody had asked him to and nobody had noticed, except Sinnappan, who noticed everything about Kasim now and reported none of it.

They went out on the last of the land breeze with five hundred boats' lamps going out one after another behind them, and at the top of the beach, where the lamps stopped, somebody was still standing.

At the bank they anchored in nine fathoms and a little over and waited for the gun, the way they had waited thirty-six times. There was one more day of it after this one. Then there was the deep water.

Sinnappan sat on the thwart in the dark with his right foot flat on the bottom boards, feeling the cold of the wet wood come up into it, and it came up into it, and he did not remember afterwards having checked.

CHAPTER 26

Consequences

The peon came for him at nine o'clock on the Saturday morning, early for the kachcheri and late for the beach, and said that Mr. Wace would be glad if he would come up, and that there was no hurry.

There was a table in the room and two chairs and a window with the shutter half down against the light. Anthoni sat in the second chair with his eyes half shut, as he had been sitting in rooms for sixteen days, and found he could look at the white paper without his eyes filling, which he had not been able to do on the Monday. Something was coming back. Under his arms the bands sat where they had to sit, and he kept his arms still.

Wace had a pen in his hand and a sheet of foolscap in front of him with about a third of a page on it, and he put the pen down.

"I am sending this up on Monday," he said, "and I wanted you to have it from me first, because you will have it off a clerk otherwise and it will be wrong."

"Yes."

"The fishery closes on the Cheval at the second gun today. The Periya Paar is Monday to Friday." Wace turned the sheet round on the table so that it faced Anthoni — a courtesy, and no use — and then, understanding that, read it. *"It is recommended that the item Ceremonial charges, banks, at present six hundred rupees, be*

discontinued as an item of expenditure from the close of the present fishery."

Somebody was sweeping the verandah with a short broom and stopping every few strokes.

"Six hundred," Anthoni said.

"Six hundred. It stood at three hundred in every estimate from the year I came, and this year it stands at six hundred, because it was written twice against your name on one line in March and nobody up the line asked why, and when a figure doubles in one year somebody in Colombo asks." Wace turned the sheet back towards himself. "I would have had to write something about it in any case. I am not going to pretend to you that I would have written something else."

A clerk came in with a chit, waited, had it signed without its being read, and went out.

"And the second reason," Wace said, "is on the paper and I would rather say it to your face. You stood at that water on Friday morning and you told five hundred crews the depth of the Periya Paar and the state of the shell on it and what would happen to men who worked it the way they work the Cheval. That is the whole of what the department could have told them, and it is more than the department did tell them, and I have said so in this. It took you about fifty seconds and the department has been paying three hundred rupees a season for the other twenty-eight since before I came."

Anthoni put his hands on his knees and left them there.

"I have written that a printed notice in Tamil, posted at the kachcheri and read out at the lines by the inspectors on the first morning, would do everything that is of any use to the fishery, and would do it more fully, and would cost the government nothing beyond the printing. And I have written that I believe the man who has held the office to have acted, this season, in the interest of the divers and against his own." He picked the pen up again. "I do not know whether you will think that a good thing to have in a paper."

"You believe it," Anthoni said.

“I do. It is the only part of this I am pleased with.”

Two carts went past the window, and a man on the second was shouting at somebody a long way behind him.

“Mr. Wace,” Anthoni said. “The three hundred that was written the second time. That was for the Kilakarai binding, from the twenty-first day, because there was nobody else.”

“Yes.”

“Then the paper says that the office is worth nothing and that it was worth doing twice.”

Wace looked at him for a moment with an expression Anthoni had seen on him twice before, on the deck of the launch in March with the dead shell coming over the rail: the look of a careful man who has been handed a true objection and has already, without any trouble, put it where it does not obstruct anything.

“It says the charge is not required,” he said. “It is not the same thing as saying the man is not.”

“No,” Anthoni said. “It is not the same thing.”

He got up. The knee took a moment about it, as it had been taking a moment about it since the twelfth.

“There is one other matter and it is not mine,” Wace said. “The assignment lodged against the item will be discharged when the item goes. The Superintendent’s office will write to the party. I do not know what arrangement you have with him and it is not my business to know.”

“No.”

“I am sorry about it,” Wace said, and he was, and he had already blotted the third line and set the sheet aside to dry, and on Monday it went up in a bag with nine other papers, and in September it was allowed, and Ferdinand Wace was a careful and honest officer and went to his grave in 1946 having been right about the Cheval Paar, and the Cheval Paar was never fished again.

* * *

He stood at the same counter for twenty minutes behind a boat-owner arguing about a registration, and then it was his turn, and the clerk was the Tuticorin one with the bad arm, who had been there nine years and had read the assignment aloud to Karuppan and to him in the same voice on the sixth of March.

“There is a paper coming down about the item,” Anthoni said.

“It has come down.” The clerk had it already; it had come down at half past eight, before the peon had gone for him, and it was a slip and not a letter. He turned the book round on the counter so that Anthoni could see the line, and there was no unkindness in it at all; the clerk had been turning that book round for nine years for men who could not read what was in it and had found that they liked to see it.

Ceremonial charges, banks. 600. — Instalments: 150 paid 6.3.25. 150 paid 20.3.25. Balance 300.

And through the words *Balance 300* there was a single line in a different ink, ruled with a ruler, and to the right of it in the margin the word *Discontinued* and a date and two initials.

“The two that are paid are paid,” the clerk said. “The balance is struck. There is nothing else.”

“What is written against my name?”

The clerk looked at the line, and then looked at the next page, and then turned back, and did a thing with his mouth.

“Your name is on the line twice,” he said. “It is the item that is struck. There is nothing to write against a name.”

He waited to see whether that was going to be a difficulty, in the way of a man who has had difficulties at a counter before, and Anthoni stood and looked at the ruled line and did the arithmetic, because there was nothing else in the room to do.

One hundred and fifty on the sixth of March, of which thirty-seven rupees eight annas had reached his hand. One hundred and fifty on the twentieth, after the second instrument, of which twenty-five rupees eight annas had. Three hundred struck: of which two hundred and forty-nine would have crossed that counter into

Vellaisamy's book without his hand touching it, and fifty-one would have been his.

Fifty-one rupees. He had given the words to that beach thirty-six nights this season, both sets of them for the last five, and there was a place low in his throat that woke when he started and did not go back to sleep until about eight in the morning, and what was not coming was fifty-one rupees, and what had come was sixty-three.

Nobody had dismissed him. It had not occurred to anybody to. There was no letter, and no form for a letter, and nothing had been said to him about the loosing on the third, and it came to him standing at that counter that nothing would be.

"Thank you," he said.

"It is nothing," the clerk said, and turned the book back round, and called the next man.

* * *

Vellaisamy's was the cool room off Bazaar Street with the two almirahs and the picture of a jetty at Colombo, and Vellaisamy had had the Superintendent's letter for an hour and a half and had already made the entries.

He did not ask him to sit down and he did not fail to; the chair was there and Anthoni took it.

"You have come about the assignment."

"Yes."

"It is discharged. There is nothing to discharge — the security was two hundred and forty-nine rupees a fishery off an item, and the item is gone, and a charge on nothing is not a charge." He turned a page over. "The principal stands. Eight hundred and ten rupees, at twenty rupees twelve annas a month, from the tenth of next month. The instrument is dated the seventeenth of March and it says *this fishery and the next, whensoever held*, and it was a good instrument

on the seventeenth of March and it is a good instrument this morning. An office shuts. A debt does not.”

Anthoni said nothing.

“You will want to know what I intend to do,” Vellaisamy said. “I intend to send a man on the tenth. He will come on the tenth of the month after that as well. I am not going to talk to you about the hut, because the hut is not worth eight hundred and ten rupees and you know that better than I do, and I am not in the business of taking huts.”

“No.”

“Mr. Motha’s people were at four hundred and ten in the second week of March. That would have closed the June instrument entire and left you with the January one at a rate you could carry on a fishery a year. You did not take it and you gave me no reason and I did not ask for one.” He said it without any weight at all, in the voice he used for the interest table. “Then on the seventeenth you came to me for four hundred more, and I gave it to you at a better rate than the first one, against an item in the estimates. And on the twenty-sixth the government offered you three hundred rupees to say a dead man’s words over a bank at thirteen fathoms, and you were at this counter on the twenty-seventh at eight in the morning putting the assignment over it, and now the government has struck the line.”

“Yes.”

“I have no complaint of you. You have never once been late.”

He reached over and moved a second book an inch, the small one, and opened it at a place he already had a finger in, and made a mark in it while he was talking, because a man at that desk does not stop working while he talks.

“I shall be on the beach on the third for the loosing in any case,” Vellaisamy said, “because I have fourteen small lots out against credit and they settle that day. The one at the top of the page is a thousand oysters at eleven rupees, two down and nine at the loosing, and if the washing is what I think it will be I shall not see the nine, and I shall

not go to law about nine rupees.” He shut the small book. “Come on the tenth and we will see what can be done about the twenty and twelve.”

Anthoni got up.

“It was a good instrument,” he said.

“It was the best I have written this year,” Vellaisamy said. “Mind the step; the boy has washed it.”

* * *

The mat church had a roof and no walls and stood ninety feet by forty at the top of the fourth street, and the coir lashings had been re-tied that morning, Saturday being the day Father Rayappan re-tied them himself with a boy to hold the ladder. He came down off the ladder when he saw Anthoni and stood wiping his hands on the front of his cassock.

They walked to the end of the mats where there was shade and the smell of the kottu came up the street on the land breeze, which it had been doing for six weeks.

Anthoni told him. It took about a minute and a half and he left out the arithmetic.

Rayappan listened with his head down and his hands together, and when it was finished he did not say any of the four or five things Anthoni had spent the walk up the street preparing himself to hear.

“The church never paid you,” he said.

“No.”

“And the church never gave you anything to say, and in thirty-five years no bishop has written a line about it either way, which I have thought about a good deal and have decided is not cowardice and is not approval and is something else that I have no word for.” He looked out at the street. “So I have nothing to take away from you. You understand that I am telling you I have nothing in my hand.”

“I understand it.”

“Then I will tell you the other thing, and I do not know what it is worth, and I want you to know that I do not know.” Rayappan turned round. “I was on that beach on Friday morning. I have been on that beach every night of every fishery for nine years and I have heard you say those words about three hundred times, and I have never once been able to tell you what I think of them, because I do not know what I think of them, and I bless cloth on Thursdays for the same reason and cannot defend that either. But what you said after them was the first thing anybody has said at that water in nine years that I could have said again inside a church without changing a word of it.”

Anthoni stood in the shade with his eyes half shut.

“That is not absolution,” Rayappan said. “I am not offering you any. You have not asked me for any and I have noticed that in thirty-five years you never have, and I have decided not to think about that either.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“I will say a Mass on the third,” Rayappan said, “at six, before the loosing, for the men that went down this season. There were four.” He picked up the ball of coir twine off the mat and turned it over in his hands. “Come or do not come. It makes no difference to the Mass.”

And he went back to the ladder, and it was impossible to tell, walking away from him down the fourth street, whether the man had comforted him or had simply told him the truth twice in five minutes and gone back to his lashings, and Anthoni turned it over for the length of the street and then stopped.

* * *

The second gun went at four minutes past twelve and shut the Cheval Paar for the season, and for the last time in its history, though nobody on that beach thought so and Anthoni, who had had it from the launch

on the sixth of March, thought so and said nothing, as he had said nothing to Yagappan Rocha in the street and nothing to a dying man in six inches of water.

He walked home down the eleventh street in the middle of the day with the salt drying on the top of the sand.

Boats were coming in all along the beach and there were dealers on their heels in a row and a smell of shell, and two boys went past him at a run with a basket between them, and a Vaipar tender he had known for twenty years lifted a hand at him from forty yards and Anthoni lifted one back.

And nobody stopped him.

Not one of them. Not a mother with a child on her hip and a strip of cloth in her hand; not a boat-owner wanting to know about the third; not a man with a bad shoulder; not one of the eight or ten people who had stopped him every single time he had walked the length of that beach since the twentieth of February. They had all been down at the water at a quarter past twelve that morning and they had all heard him and there was nothing they wanted.

It took him nine minutes to get home and the knee did not like it.

Rasathi was on the mat with the book open and the accounts of the fund on the left-hand page, and she looked up.

“Fifty-one rupees,” he said, “is not coming.”

She did not ask him anything. She turned the book round on the mat so that it faced him, and picked up the pencil, and ruled a line under a figure, and wrote the new one underneath it, and he stood over her and read it, and it was right.

CHAPTER 27

Thirteen Fathoms

The thing nobody in the camp had thought about until the Saturday was the anchor.

A boat lying over the Cheval in nine fathoms rode to about twenty fathoms of cable, and every cable on that beach had been worn down and re-spliced to that figure over years by men who had never anchored anywhere else. At thirteen fathoms a boat wants three times her depth down or she does not hold, and forty fathoms of cable is not a thing a man finds on a Sunday in the last week of a fishery.

So the Sunday was a market in rope.

Three hundred and more boats had come off the Cheval on the Saturday and were not going out again, and their gear lay on the sand in the open where anybody could walk along it: cable flaked out, stone ropes coiled on their own ends, baskets upside down on their hoops. At seven in the morning that rope was worth nothing, because a fishery was over. By one in the afternoon it was worth whatever a man who wanted to sail on Monday would pay.

Mohideen Marakkayar bought four stone ropes and twelve fathoms of cable off a Tuticorin boat whose master wanted to be gone by Tuesday, and did not say what he had paid. Sinnappan carried the cable up the beach on his shoulder, stiff and grey and somebody's for a long time.

Four ropes and the five 246 already had made nine. Two nine-fathom ropes spliced end to end make one long enough for thirteen fathoms with enough over for the swell and a man's arm, and a station takes two of them — the stone rope and the basket rope — so nine made four long ropes and left one over. Two stations, where the boat had worked three at nine fathoms, and six men who dived.

Kasim had done one of the splices on the Thursday night in twenty-two minutes. Three more had to be done before one o'clock on the Monday morning, by lamp, on the sand, and a long splice takes twenty-two minutes and a short splice ten, and there were three pairs of hands, four hours, and a great deal else to do. Two went in long. The last went in short, in the stone rope of the second station, at about half past ten at night, with Susai kneeling on the end and the lamp held wrong, and it came out tight and fair and twice the thickness of the rope for the length of a hand.

Nobody said anything about it. It was that or one station.

* * *

A hundred and eighty-six boats sailed for the Periya Paar on the Monday morning, out of the four hundred and ninety-seven that had sailed for the Cheval on the Friday and the eleven hundred and forty that had lain off the beach on the opening night in February.

The camp had done the sum for three days and come to the same place from twenty directions. The bank lay fourteen miles beyond the Cheval — four hours more going out and four and a half coming home — so a boat that went was at sea from one in the morning until five in the afternoon and her men got their food standing up. A boat from Tuticorin or Vaipar had a two-day beat home at the end of it against the season's wind, and every day she stayed was a day she was not starting. And a thousand oysters were fetching eleven rupees and had fetched nothing above thirteen since the middle of March, so

a boat that worked four days out there for four bad thousands had made the price of her own rope.

None of that was fear and nobody on that sand pretended otherwise. Men who had decided not to go said so in the voice of a man deciding not to buy something, and went on mending gear they would not use.

Anthoni said the Kilakarai binding at a quarter past twelve and his own at twenty to one, as he had every night since the twenty-third, and the hundred and eighty-six crews stood for it on a beach with a great deal of empty sand behind them, and went to their boats.

There was one difference in the whole night and nobody thought it worth mentioning. For thirty-six mornings a boat had sailed at ten past one, come on the bank at half past two, and lain over her anchor in the dark for four hours while a man slept on the bottom boards with his cloth over his face, or did not sleep, and waited for the gun. On the Monday 246 came onto the Periya Paar at ten past six in a grey light with the wind dying under her, and there was no waiting at all, and Sinnappan did not know what to do with his hands.

The lead went down over the bow and Mohideen Marakkayar read it and said, "Thirteen and two feet," and the cable went out and out and kept going past the point where every man aboard expected it to stop, and that was the first thing that morning to feel wrong in the body.

* * *

The stone took sixteen seconds to reach the bottom.

At nine fathoms it was gone and down and standing on the sand almost before a man had finished making up his mind about the water. Here there was a stretch in the middle of the fall with nothing in it, after the ears and before the bottom, going down through a green that was going out, past a depth he knew and into one he did not, on a rope running between his fingers at the speed it had always run. That

stretch was four seconds long. Sinnappan thought about it on every descent he made on that bank and never once managed not to.

The bottom, when it came, was not much like the Cheval. The Cheval was a floor a man knew, three-year shell in beds thick enough that you worked a patch on your knees and filled the basket off two square yards. Here it lay scattered, four-year and five-year, big and heavy and crusted and grown into the ground with weed on them, and you did not work a patch, you hunted: sixteen paces of nothing and then two together under a ledge of dead coral and a third a yard off, and a man with thirty seconds in him going at a walk with his basket dragging and his hand out.

Thirty to forty seconds, not the sixty and seventy of the Cheval. He could not get sixty out of himself down there and neither could anybody, because the way down had cost him and the way up would cost him again, and the body did its own arithmetic without asking.

And the haul took twenty-two seconds instead of thirteen, and that was Kasim's shoulders and not Sinnappan's lungs, and nothing could be done about it by anybody.

So a descent, over the side and back on the thwart, took a hundred and ten seconds where it had taken ninety, and a man raised eighteen oysters where he had raised sixty, and it was worth a third of what it had been and cost him half again as much. Sinnappan did the sum between his fourth and his fifth and got it right, and so did every diver in a hundred and eighty-six boats, and not one of them had got it right on the Friday night in the dark with the tide turning. On the Friday the beach had priced it as fewer descents at a better price, and nobody had put the basket in it.

* * *

There was one other thing and it took him most of the morning to place it.

On the Cheval, from the moment the first gun went until the water turned at noon, the bottom knocked. Eleven hundred stones going over in the same minute, and then, down there, the whole green floor of the world clattering quietly in every direction, near and far, a dozen a second — other men's stones landing, other men's hands working shell off the ground, the trade audible from the only place it could be heard properly. He had never been able to explain to anybody at home why the bottom of the sea was not lonely.

On the Periya Paar there was a hundred and eighty-six boats' worth of it spread over a bank nobody had a chart of, four hundred yards between one boat and the next, and thirteen fathoms to come up through.

It was silent. Not quiet. Silent, the whole morning, every descent, his own breath stopped in him and the weed moving and nothing else.

He did not tell anybody and nobody asked him.

* * *

Twenty-four descents on the Monday. On the Cheval he had done forty-six on the Thursday and fifty-two on his best day. The boat's heap at the second gun was thirteen hundred and eighty against three thousand and better on a fair day in March.

They came onto the beach at twenty past five and the dealers were there, and Periya Paar shell was fetching fifteen the thousand against the Cheval's price, and that was more money, and every man who had spent the Friday night proving it would be worth doing had been right about the price and wrong about everything else.

He ate standing up and slept from eight to half past ten.

* * *

A hundred and seventy-one boats sailed on the Tuesday. Fifteen had done one day of it and had their answer.

By ten o'clock the rotation in 246 had come apart. Two stations and six men who dived is every man's turn coming round third, and on the Sunday that had looked like the one mercy in the arrangement. Instead, by the fourth hour, men stopped taking their turns. Susai did nine and sat down in the stern with his back against the transom and his eyes open and offered no account of himself and was not asked for one. Peruman went down twice after nine and then stood on the thwart a long time with his hand on the rope and came back inboard. Savari was going, but slowly, taking six and seven minutes on the surface between, saying nothing about it, looking at the horizon over the bow and not at it.

A station standing idle in a boat fourteen miles from the beach on the second of five days is money lying on the water, and everybody aboard knew it without discussing it.

So Sinnappan took the turns.

Nobody stopped him. Mohideen Marakkayar counted him down and up from the stern with his legs crossed as he had every morning since before Sinnappan was born, and at about half past ten said, "You are going a good deal," in the voice he used for the weather, and Sinnappan said, "There is nobody on it." Nobody made any more objection than that.

He had three thousand one hundred and twenty-eight oysters in a sack under the bow thwart and eighty-four rupees owing to a house at Vaipar that nobody living knew he meant to pay, and a Periya Paar thousand was fetching fifteen.

He went over twenty-nine times on the Tuesday.

The rope he was working was the stone rope of the second station, and the short splice was in it, four fathoms down from the top, and it came through Kasim's hands twice on every descent — a lump the length of a hand arriving in a palm that had not put it there, at a depth that meant nothing. A tender knows where his man is by what has gone through his fingers, and a mark that is not a mark is half a second of a lie every time it passes. Kasim hauled him up nine times

on a rope he could not read and then began to allow for it, and by the twentieth he had it, and the boat never knew there had been anything to have.

* * *

It came up in him on the thwart after the twenty-ninth.

He had come up clean, handed the basket in over the gunwale and been taken under the shoulder by Chinnathambi as he had ten thousand times, and sat down with his feet in the bilge and his chest going. There was nothing in the descent. He had been down thirty-four seconds and had brought up nine oysters, and one of them was a five-year shell the size of his two hands, and he was pleased about it.

And then his right leg was not under him.

Not asleep. Not the foot with nothing in it, and the thumb pressed into the calf finding something not the shape of his own thumb. It had gone at the hip, and the hip had a thing in it he had no name for, deep and turning and not like a blow, and it came up through him faster than a man can stand, and took his breath, and he made a sound he did not know as his.

Susai got to him first off the transom, an old man moving fast.

“He has taken cold on the bottom,” Mohideen Marakkayar said from the stern, already coming forward. “Get him out of the wet. Get him into the sun.”

They got him out of the bilge and onto the bottom boards amidships in the sun, and Savari put his own shoulder cloth over him, and somebody went for the arrack, and Susai took the leg in both hands above the knee and began to rub it hard, up towards the body, because that is what is done and every man in that boat had seen it done twenty times, and Sinnappan heard himself from a distance saying something about his hip.

“It comes out of a man,” Susai said. “It has to be brought up out of him.”

They gave him the arrack and he took it. The pain went round: out of the hip into the knee, then into the other knee, which nobody had touched, then into both shoulders, and the shoulders were the worst, and there it stopped being like anything and became only itself. They rubbed the shoulders. Chinnathambi held the pot. The boat lay over her cable with one station working and the second gun still an hour off, and the men came up and looked and went down again.

“He must be got on his feet,” Mohideen said, after a while. “Lying is the worst of it. Walk him.”

Peruman and Savari got him up between them, one under each arm, and the deck of a boat is nine feet of clear going, and they turned him at the mast and got him three steps back towards the thwart, and the sound came out of him again, louder, and he had not done it on purpose.

“Leave him lying.”

Kasim had said it. He was in the bow with the rope over his forearm and had not got up, and he said it once, flatly, in a voice nobody in that boat had heard since the second of March, and said nothing else.

They put him down. They put him down at once, without anybody looking at anybody, as men do a thing they were about to stop doing anyhow, and Mohideen Marakkayar said he must be kept warm, and Savari went back to the station, and the second gun went, and they got the anchor up and started the long reach home with him lying on the boards under two cloths with his eyes shut.

Nobody said anything to him about Kasim, that day or any other. Nobody appeared to have heard it.

Something a man had said on a beach on a Thursday night, lying on his back with his hands behind his head, came up whole in him off the Cheval at about three in the afternoon, and he put it away again, and it was the only time in his life he did anything with it at all.

* * *

He walked up the beach.

That was the fact he held onto for the next four days and told people, and it was true. They came in at half past four and he would not be carried, and they got him over the side into the water and he stood up in it, and Susai took one arm and Rathinam the other and he went up ninety yards of wet sand and forty of dry on his own two legs, and sat down at the top against a hull.

The right leg had come with him. It had done what it was asked and had not done it properly and was never going to do it properly again, and in that afternoon and in the four days and in the fifty-one years after it nobody ever put a word to the thing, because the word belonged to men in chairs at Vaipar and to a doctor in a room with sixteen beds who was not on that beach and was never sent for.

He was nineteen years old.

Kasim brought the sack up.

It took him four journeys with the shell basket on his head — three thousand one hundred and twenty-eight oysters held since the seventh day of the fishery on an arbitrage a boy had worked out for himself — and he stacked them on a mat beside where Sinnappan was sitting and squared the corners with his foot, and did not say what it was for, and went back down the beach to the ropes.

CHAPTER 28

The Kottu

They opened the first of the enclosures on the Wednesday morning at seven and the camp found out what it had been living next to.

For six weeks the smell had been a fact about the air, like the heat, and people had stopped putting words to it somewhere in the first week of March, and after that it was simply in the food and the cloth and the hair, and nobody mentioned it because there is no use mentioning the air. What came off the kottu when the gate came down was not that. It was a thing with weight in it. It went up the fourth street against the land breeze, which the smell had never once done, and a water-cart bullock at the top of the street put its head down and would not go on, and the man had to lead it round by the burying ground.

Rasathi was there at seven because she had never seen one opened and because, after March, she did not expect to see another.

Five enclosures, walled with palmyra and coir six feet high, each of them fifty yards by thirty, and for six weeks nobody had gone in except the watchers. The government's two-thirds of every morning of the fishery had gone in through those gates on the heads of women at ten annas a day: something near seven million oysters by the second week and a great deal more since, laid out on the sand in beds a foot deep and left in the sun with the flies over them.

What ten days in a Ceylon March does to a pearl oyster is that it stops being an animal. The shells come apart at the hinge on their own. What is inside goes to a black liquor with a skin on it, and the skin is what holds the smell, and a rake going through a bed breaks the skin at every stroke.

She watched a man do the first stroke. He was a labourer of about fifty in a cloth and nothing else, with a wooden rake, and he went in with his face perfectly ordinary and drew it through, and nine men followed him down the bed, and none of them made any sign at all. It was the fourth or fifth season for most of them and they had worked out long ago that there is no arrangement of a man's face that improves the situation.

* * *

Then the washing, and the washing was the part people did not picture.

The mass was raked into wooden troughs set on trestles in the open, and water was carted from Kondachchi and poured in, and the women stood along both sides of the troughs with their arms in to the elbow and worked the black through their fingers.

That is the whole of the operation and it took two hundred women three days.

A pearl is small. Most of what comes out of a thousand oysters will go through the eye of a needle and be worth annas, and what a washer is doing is feeling for grit in a liquid that is mostly liquid, all day, in the sun, with the flies on her face and shoulders. The government had an overseer to every twenty women and a fence round the yard and a gate they came out through one at a time in the evening. Nobody made anything of the gate. It had been there every fishery since before any of them was born and a woman going through it held her arms out from her sides without being asked.

Theresammal was on the second trough from the wall.

She had given twenty-six rupees for a thousand oysters on the seventh day, the highest price anybody paid that season, for a lot of shell Rasathi's father had valued at eleven. She was washing the government's now at ten annas a day, as about sixty of the small buyers were, because three days' work is three days' work, and a woman with a lot of her own to open has a use for a place at a trough. She had her sleeves knotted up and she was talking to the woman beside her about a child's fever at Karativu.

Rasathi went past her twice that morning and did not ask, and nobody in the yard asked her either, and it is not recorded anywhere what Theresammal's thousand made.

* * *

She did the fund's accounts on the Wednesday afternoon sitting in the shade of the auction shed with the book on her knees, because there was nowhere else in the camp with a wall and no people.

The fund is one oyster in fifty off the divers' heap, taken first, in the open, and by the rule written in 1908 a man's widow has a full share for the season he died in and half a share for each of the two seasons following. She had read that rule aloud to Santhiagu twice in her life and could have said it in her sleep.

Anjala of Vaipar. Widow, one child, four months and eleven days old on the second of March. A diver's share of this season came out at nine rupees four annas, which she wrote in, and then she sat with the pencil in her hand.

Half a share for each of the two seasons following.

There was no fishery in 1926 and there was no fishery in 1927, but nobody on that beach knew it on the first of April 1925, and what Rasathi had instead was a bank that had gone off in three days in the middle of March, and a launch that had been out dredging and had come back with nothing anybody talked about afterwards, and a man on a beach on a Friday night giving the fleet three plain figures in the

dark. She left the two half-shares standing with nothing beside them. They were owed and they would be owed and they would be paid out of something that might not take place, and the book had no column for that and never had.

She ruled the page and went on to Rodrigo's nine boats and the one-in-four.

The abatement was for the remainder of this fishery. It had been granted in the open on the nineteenth of March and refused a place in the book on the same afternoon, and it ended on the Friday with the loosing, and the next fishery would begin again at five hundred shell a morning off a heap of whatever size. Rasathi was the only person who had that fact in one piece. She entered the boats' figures and did not enter it.

* * *

At home on the Wednesday evening she went through her father's.

Eight hundred and ten rupees at twenty rupees twelve annas in the month, running from the tenth of April, with nothing standing behind it, because the instrument had been against a fee and there was no longer a fee, and the man who held it had not troubled to pretend that was a loss. Sixty-three rupees had come in this season, in two payments, two weeks apart. Fifty-one was not coming.

Twenty rupees twelve annas a month is two hundred and forty-nine rupees a year against a household that had run for four years on something under a hundred and ninety a year. She had the book to prove the hundred and ninety. She had nothing at all to put against the two hundred and forty-nine.

Her father came in at eight and lay down with his back to the room and was asleep almost before he was down, and would be up at midnight, as he had been up at midnight for thirty-six nights, and would walk down to the water and say both of them over a bank

fourteen miles beyond the Cheval, for nothing, in front of people who had not been told and were not going to be.

Two of the four or five human beings who knew the office no longer existed were in that hut.

A woman from the second street had stopped her at the standpipe that evening to ask whether the loosing was at four o'clock on the Friday, as it always was, and whether a person could bring a child. Rasathi told her five, because the boats would not be in off the Periya Paar before five, and yes.

* * *

The plates came up on the Thursday morning.

A Public Works overseer with a list, two men, a crowbar and a bullock cart, going down from the north end. The tin plates had been lettered in Colombo and set on iron pegs driven into sand in the second week of February: BAZAAR STREET, SECOND CROSS STREET, FOURTH CROSS STREET, in English on the top half and Tamil under it, and they had stood over four miles of a town of twenty thousand people for six weeks.

A peg takes one man about forty seconds with a bar. The plate comes off the peg by two bolts and goes flat into the cart and the peg goes in after it, and the overseer marks his list, and the number is on the back of the plate in paint, because they are put up again.

Rasathi stood in the doorway of the hut with her arms folded and watched them do the fourth street, and the fourth street was full of people. A woman was cooking eight feet from where the peg came out. Two boys were fighting over a piece of rope. Nobody stopped, and nobody looked up much, and the overseer said "Fourth Cross" to his man and his man said it back to him and marked it, and they moved along.

She asked him what the years on the backs were.

He turned one over and read it off. This one had been up in 1906, 1907, 1912, 1922 and this year, and the paint went down the back of it in a column like a page out of a book kept by somebody with no interest in the matter whatever.

* * *

Her own thousand — lot one hundred and eighteen, off the beach of the fourth day, out of a Chilaw boat — had been rotting since the twenty-sixth of February in a pit behind the hut with boards over it. It had never been in the household column. It was in the back of the book on a page of her own in an entry her father could not have read if he had turned to it, and he never had turned to it, and she had never once had to decide whether she would have told him.

She washed it on the Thursday with two women from the third street in a trough borrowed off a Jaffna buyer, and it took them from eight in the morning until four, and it was exactly the work she had watched two hundred women do at the government yard except that there were three of them and no fence.

What came out went into a brass sieve of four grades that she borrowed with the trough.

The buyer came at five. He was a Bombay man's agent who had been on the beach since the fourth day and had seen six hundred lots, and he sorted hers on a strip of white cloth on the sand with the flat of a knife, and told her what he was doing while he did it, because she asked him and because he had nothing else to do.

Nine that would not go through the third grade. Two of the nine off-colour and one of those badly. A quantity of the fourth grade, sound. And the seed, which is sold by weight and not by count and goes to be ground up or strung, and hers weighed what it weighed.

He gave her thirty-one rupees for the nine, thirty-eight for the fourth grade, and twenty-seven for the seed, and told her, without being asked and without any particular expression, that a thousand

oysters that season had averaged about fourteen rupees of pearl, and that hers was a good lot, and that a good lot is a good lot and is not a skill.

Ninety-six rupees.

* * *

She went to Vellaisamy at half past six.

He was in the cool room off Bazaar Street with the two almirahs and the picture of the jetty at Colombo, and the small book was open on the desk and turned away from her, and she could read a page upside down at four feet and had been able to since she was nine, and she did not.

Nine rupees against lot one hundred and eighteen, settled, being the balance of what she had bought it for on the seventh day.

Then eighty-four rupees against the account of Sinnappan of Kilakarai, settled.

Vellaisamy wrote both, and blew on the second, and looked at her for slightly longer than he needed to.

“That is not your debt.”

“No.”

“Does he know?”

“Not yet.”

“You understand that I would have carried it,” he said. “He is nineteen. A young man’s debt is a good debt. I would have carried it for four years and he would have paid me a great deal more than eighty-four rupees, and that is not a threat, it is the reason I am sorry to see it go.”

“I know why you are sorry to see it go.”

“Yes,” Vellaisamy said. “You would.” He closed the book.

She had gone through it four ways on the Wednesday night and it came out the same way every time. Ninety-six rupees against eight hundred and ten at twenty rupees twelve annas in the month buys four

months and nineteen days and leaves the debt standing exactly where it stood. Ninety-six against eighty-four ends a thing. There was no third column and no version of the sum where sentiment got a hearing, and she had not gone looking for one.

Three rupees left. She put them in the cloth with the household money and wrote the figure in and ruled under it.

* * *

She found him at the top of the beach at eight o'clock with his back against the same hull.

He had been carried down to the boat that morning and had sat in her all day and had not gone over the side, and the arithmetic of a man who cannot dive was going to be worked out by somebody at Kilakarai in about a fortnight, and everybody knew it.

She gave him forty rupees ten annas in a knotted cloth.

"Three thousand one hundred and twenty-eight at thirteen."

He turned the cloth over once. "Packianathan said twelve."

"Packianathan was buying. I put it into two lots that were short — one of Rodrigo's and one off a Vaipar boat — so it went onto two tickets with a day and a boat and a name on them, and nobody had to put his name on a sack."

He was quiet for a while.

"That is what was wrong with it," he said.

"Yes."

"And it was four rupees."

"It was four rupees."

Then she told him about the eighty-four, in the fewest words it could be put in, with the figure and the date and the name of the man who had written it, and she did not say why.

He did not thank her. He looked out at the water long enough that she thought he was not going to say anything, and then he started, and he was slow and had it in the wrong order and was going to arrive

somewhere she had been since four o'clock that afternoon, when she had watched him lifted out of a boat.

And she waited.

She sat on the sand with her hands round her knees and let him go the whole way round it — the hip, and what the hip did on a ladder, and what a boat is like to get into, and a thing about his father's brother who had a bad shoulder — and she did not say the end of it for him, though she had it, and could have said it in nine words, and it cost her something to keep it behind her teeth that she had never before in her life been asked to pay.

"I am not going to be in a boat again," he said.

"No."

"I am nineteen."

"Yes."

She did not tell him it would be all right, because it would not be; and she did not tell him what he should do, because she did not know; and he did not ask her to come to Kilakarai and she did not ask him to come to Vaipar, and neither of those things was ever said by either of them, then or afterwards.

After a while he said, "Your father is at the water at a quarter past twelve."

"Yes."

"I will be down."

"You will not get down there on that sand in the dark."

"I will be down," he said.

* * *

She walked home up the fourth street at nine with the pegs out of it and the pots still going in the doorways.

The wind had come round off the land and was pushing at the top of the camp, and from somewhere behind her, in the dark, a man said

to another man that it was going off at last, and the other man agreed that it was, and said it was the wind.

It was the first thing anybody in that camp had said about the smell since the first week of March.

CHAPTER 29

The Loosing of the Sea

He came down to the water at ten minutes past twelve on the Friday with the pot in his hand and put it on the sand at his feet without drinking out of it, because the pot had stopped being any use on the Tuesday and he had gone on bringing it.

A hundred and sixty-eight boats were going out. Fernando's boy had chalked it on the board outside the kachcheri at half past ten, and in any case a hundred and sixty-eight boats is a number a man who has been looking at that beach for thirty-five years can very nearly take off the shape of the gaps.

He said his own first. Twenty-eight seconds. The place low in his throat came awake on *Sea of Mannar* and stayed awake, and by the third movement he was working two inches under where he wanted to be and putting the difference out through his chest; and it carried, and nobody along that water knew anything was being done about it.

Then he walked the forty yards north and stood on the other man's place and said the Kilakarai one, and it took him two minutes and fifty seconds, ten seconds longer than the first time, and he did not know why and had nobody left to ask.

He had it better now than on the twenty-third. The sung minute had become a low even delivery that was not singing and had stopped pretending to be, and the boats were used to it. A Kilakarai boat-owner had told him civilly, in the first week of it, that it was a

great deal of work for one man, and that was as near as anybody came.

He did not know he had left the rope out. He had said *I have named all of it. There is nothing of yours that I have left out* every night since the twenty-third and he had meant it every single time.

The fleet went, in a fifth of the time it had taken in February. Nobody shouted about the order of the hulls, because there was nothing to be out of order; the beach had room in it. The lamps went out in threes and fours and were gone inside four minutes, and the water came up over his sandals and he stood in it.

Thirty feet up the slope behind him a man was sitting against the stem of a beached boat with one leg out in front of him. He had been there before Anthoni came down and did not get up, and he was still there when Anthoni went past him going home, and neither of them said anything.

* * *

At six o'clock he was in the mat church.

There were thirty or forty people in it and most of them were women. Rayappan read four names and said the Mass for them and it was over by twenty past, and Anthoni walked out into the light and went down to the beach and did not think about it again that day.

* * *

The camp had about a day left in it. The Tuticorin boats had been gone since the middle of March and the Kilakarai ones since the body went home, the streets had come up on Thursday, and what was left was a grid of mat walls with nothing written on it, coming down at the rate of a hut every ten minutes all morning. A hut is four hours to put up and forty minutes to take down. The mats go flat in tied stacks of twenty; the poles have their coir cut off and are stood in bundles,

because there is no timber anywhere on that coast and a pole is worth more than the mat it held up; the coir is not saved.

He walked down through it at eight and it was not sad. It was busy. Men were working at a good rate in the cool of the day at a job with an end to it, and there was money moving — small money, last money, a rupee at a time — and a man from Chilaw went along the fourth street buying cooking pots at a price that made two women laugh at him in the road.

Vellaisamy was under an awning at the north end with his table and his book and his clerk, because fourteen of the small lots settled that day. Anthoni went past him twice, and the second time Vellaisamy looked up, put two fingers to his forehead and went back to the book.

He had been to him on the Thursday. What stood in the book now was eight hundred and ten rupees at twenty rupees twelve annas in the month from the tenth of April, against nothing whatever, on his name.

He did not know that four lines above it, on a page his daughter had never seen the front of, lot 118 stood entered in the same hand with a figure beside it. He was never going to know it. The two entries sat in that book for nine years until it was thrown away.

* * *

The Periya Paar fleet would be in about five, and that was the whole shape of the day. Between eight and five there was nothing for him to do, and he had never once in thirty-five years had nothing to do on a last day, because a last day had always had a second gun in it at noon, and a count on the sand at two, and a beach to be seen walking about on afterwards.

At about ten they began laying out the ropes.

It cannot be done any other time. A rope that has been six weeks in salt water is sold in the week it comes out of it or it is not sold at all; four days ashore and it goes hard from the middle out and stiffens

in the lay, and then it is a rope for tying up goats. So on the last day every tender lays his rope out full length on the dry sand above the tide — twenty fathom, twenty-five, thirty, stretched straight and not coiled — and walks backwards down the whole length of it with the rope running through both hands, feeling for where it has gone soft or where a strand has lifted; and a buyer walks the other way down the same rope doing the same thing and disagreeing with him.

By noon there were four hundred and some ropes laid out parallel down the slope of that beach with men walking backwards along every one of them, heads bent, and there was no crossing the sand in a straight line between the kachcheri and the south end.

Anthoni sat at the top of it with his back against a hull in the shade of a propped sail and watched them for the better part of three hours, and that is where he answered the Superintendent's question.

He had been carrying it since the second day of the season. *What is it that you do?* Wace had asked him that over a table in the government camp with real curiosity and no malice in it, about a trade he had decided to find interesting; and Anthoni had given him an answer that was true and let him hear the other one, and Wace had gone away content and would be wrong about it for the rest of his life.

He had known since the hospital what he sold. The doctor had a cause, and a cause is a thing a man can be told, and a man who has been told it goes over the side forty-five times in the morning knowing it and is not helped. What the beach came down to the water for at twenty minutes to one was a guarantee, given by somebody with the standing to give it, so that a man could put his foot in the becket and stop thinking. He had had that much for a month and it had seemed complete.

It was not complete. It was one step short, and the step was this.

Every morning of a fishery, twelve hundred men have to decide to go into water that has killed men they knew — not once, but every morning, each of them alone with it in the dark at half past twelve with his own family behind him on the sand. No man can make that

decision forty times in six weeks. It is not a thing a person is built to do fresh each day; it wears through, and then he is no good in the water, and then he is hurt, and the boat carries him up the beach.

So the trade had found a way to make the decision once — out loud, in one place, at one hour, by one man with a name on a government paper — and after that not one of those twelve hundred had to make it again that day. They had to get up and go to work, a different thing entirely, and men can do that every day of their lives.

That was what he did. He did the deciding. Thirty-five years of it, at twenty minutes to one in the morning, in twenty-eight seconds, for eleven hundred boats, and it had never once had anything to do with sharks.

He sat with it a while under the propped sail.

It did not make him feel better and he had not expected it to, and he would never say it to anybody, including his daughter, who had come at it from her own side and arrived at a different sentence. But there was one part he made himself finish, having got this far, because there was no sense stopping where the view was comfortable.

If a man does the deciding for twelve hundred people, then the day somebody comes to him courteously in a cool room and asks him to decide yes about thirteen fathoms of water, what is bought is not his opinion and not his blessing. It is the twelve hundred.

And he had sold it, and told them the truth in fifty seconds afterwards as though that squared it; and a hundred and sixty-eight boats were out there on the Periya Paar at this minute working shell that was not worth the rope it came up on; and one of the men who had gone out on the Monday had come off his twenty-ninth descent at nineteen years of age and was on that sand behind him now with his leg out in front of him.

He looked at that for some time and did not find anything to put on top of it.

* * *

The first sails came in sight at twenty past four.

By half past, the beach knew, and the rope-walking stopped where it stood — four hundred ropes left lying out on the sand exactly as they were, and nobody minded, because there were three hours of dry light left and the loosing does not wait.

They came in slowly with the sea breeze behind them and the first keels touched about ten minutes to five, and for a quarter of an hour that beach was as loud as it had been in February, because a hundred and sixty-eight boats coming in together is a hundred and sixty-eight boats whatever else is true.

The people came down for it.

He had done the number in the morning out of habit and made it about six thousand: four hundred and some huts still standing at dawn, the government camp, the hospital, the police, the last of the buyers, the washing women, the carters. On the opening morning there had been twenty thousand people on this beach and the noise of it had carried to Karativu.

Nobody said anything about that. It did not appear to occur to one person on that sand that there was anything to say.

They came down as they always came down for it, a crowd that knows exactly how long a thing takes: the crews first, wet, off the boats, standing in the water to their knees; then the boat-owners; then the women and the children and the old men in a band up the dry sand, and a few people out on the beached hulls for the view, and somebody's small boy on a mast crosstree until he was shouted down.

The woman from the second street came down with her child on her hip. She had asked at the standpipe on the Wednesday whether a person could bring a child, and had been told yes.

At five o'clock he walked down.

He had never once in his life had to think which way to stand, because the beach had always settled it: the boats are on the water and the men are on the sand, and a man talking to men stands with his back to the water and talks into them. This evening there was no

water in front of him without people standing in it — on three sides of him and in it to their knees, with more coming along the edge from the south end — and the only quarter with nothing in it was straight out.

So he turned and faced the sea, and about nine hundred people behind him understood that to mean he was about to begin, and went quiet, and he had not meant it as anything at all.

He let two breakers go, and came in on the gap behind the third.

"Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the point at Kalpitiya to the head of Mannar, and to the sand under it.

"There is no boundary on you from this evening. The Cheval bank is yours again, and the road out to it, and the road home.

"There are no divers. There are no tenders. There are no boat-owners and there is nobody who binds. From this evening every man on this water has his own name back.

"By the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the mouth of the sea is open. It is open until it is shut again."

It took nineteen seconds. He had never counted the words of it and did not know what they came to, because nobody had ever asked him for the loosing and there had never been any reason to have a number ready.

Then he walked the forty yards north and said the other man's loosing on the other man's place. It is nine lines long and has no sung part in it, and he had heard it four hundred yards off at the end of every fishery since he was a boy and had taken it off a dying man in the third week of March. It went cleanly, and it was over by four minutes past five.

There was no sound for about three heartbeats, as there always was.

Then somebody at the back shouted a name and got an answer, and the beach turned over into work again all at once, and men went up the sand past him to get their ropes in before the light went.

* * *

He stood in the water a minute longer because his feet were in it and there was no hurry.

A boat-owner from Vaipar whose name he had known for forty years put a hand on his shoulder going past and said it had been a hard season and they would see him at the next one. A woman told him God would keep him. Two men argued eight feet away about whether the second gun had gone at four minutes past noon or at eight, and neither of them looked at him.

Not one person on that beach knew the line had been struck out of the estimates on the twenty-eighth of March with one stroke of a ruler in a different ink, and that there was nothing to write against a name. Vereker knew, and Wace knew, and the clerk at the counter knew, and Vellaisamy knew because Vellaisamy makes it his business, and Rasathi knew. There is no form for telling six thousand people that an item of expenditure has been discontinued, and no reason to; and in four years' time when there is no fishery, and in five, it will not have come up.

He had done the whole of it for nothing and had never in his life done a piece of work he was surer of.

He was not forgiven anything. Nothing had been given back and nothing settled, and in a minute he would walk up that beach to a hut with three rupees in it and eight hundred and ten rupees against his name and a throat that would not be right by August. He had sold twelve hundred men for five days on a bank that took a nineteen-year-old's leg off him at the hip without touching him, and he had known what he was selling when he sold it, and nothing said at that water in the last four minutes altered a line of it.

And the sea was not open, because the sea had never been shut, and there was no mouth, and there was nobody out there listening and never had been. He stood in six inches of the Gulf of Mannar at four minutes past five in the evening, as certain of it as he had been at nineteen.

He picked his sandals up off the sand and went to find his daughter.

CHAPTER 30

The Sea Is Bound

The chank boats went out of Vaipar at four in the morning, which is three hours later than a pearl fleet and a different life altogether.

There were forty-one of them in March of 1927, drawn up in two ragged lines on a beach two hundred yards long with no streets on it and no government on it and no wall anywhere to put a smell behind. The chank ground lay off the point in four and five fathoms. A man could work it all day if his ears would let him and come home with three hundred shells and a back he could not straighten, and the buyer's house at Tuticorin would pay him by the hundred and argue about the size, and that was the whole trade. Nobody from Colombo had ever come and looked at it. There was no gun.

Rasathi was at the water at half past three, and she had not once been late. She was nineteen.

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She had gone in first, up to her waist, in the dark, before anybody else was down, which she had done every morning of that season because the water off that point is cold at the top for about twenty minutes after three and it woke her throat up. She put her face in and counted and got to a hundred and thirty-one. It was the highest she had ever had and it was of no use to anybody. Then she came out and dried her

forearms on her cloth and walked up to the dry sand to wait for the boats to finish loading.

Forty-one boats had asked her, one at a time, over two years, beginning with three.

The first three had come to the house at Vaipar in the second week of 1926, when there was no fishery at Marichchukkaddi and was not going to be one, and had stood in the doorway and asked for her father; and her father had said, in front of them, without any particular expression, that his throat had gone and that he had nothing to sell them; and one of the three had said, after a pause of about four seconds, *Then the girl*. Nobody in that doorway pretended to be surprised. The beach at Vaipar had known since the summer of 1925 that Anthonimuthu's daughter could say both sets of words, because Anthonimuthu's daughter had never been able to keep anything to herself except the one thing she had decided to keep.

They paid her twenty chanks from each boat and no money.

She had worked out what that came to before she agreed to it, and it came to about a hundred and forty rupees across a season if the boats were honest, and they were honest about it in the way men are honest about a thing that costs them nothing they can feel. The old man who had told her how this would go had been right about every part of it but one. *They do not choose the man*, the old man had said to her, mending a net he could no longer see straight. *They write down the name of the man who said it. It is the one minute. And they will not pay you.*

There was nothing to write her name on. There was no line, no item, no estimate, no clerk, no paper of any kind anywhere in the world with her name and that office on the same sheet, and there never would be. In that one particular he had been wrong and she had been better off than her father ever was, and she had worked out why in about a week: the government had paid her father three hundred rupees a season for thirty-five years and had put his name on a line, and had struck the line out in nine seconds with a ruler, and the

forty-one boat-owners of Vaipar could not strike her out of anything, because there was nothing to strike.

She had never written a word of it down. Not the list, not the ninety-one, not the order of the namings. She had stopped writing it down on a night in March of 1925 and had not noticed for three hours, and after that there had been no point starting again.

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She had made three changes in two years and she could account for all of them.

She had taken the Trinity out of the fourth movement in the first week and had not put it back. She had not decided anything about God in doing it. The sentence was shorter without it and it went better into the wind off that point, and she had thought about it once since and left it.

She had changed the boundary, because there was no Cheval bank here and no road out to one.

And she had put the chank into the list.

That one had taken her most of a month. The old man's inventory named the sand and the shell and the soft thing inside the shell, and it named the weed and the crabs and the fish and the wood and the iron and the rope and the stones and the rain and the bones, and it did not name the chank, because there are no chanks worth a boat's morning on the Cheval and the list had been made by men who had never worked this ground. So she had gone to two old divers at Vaipar who had been in that water since the nineties, and asked them what was down there, and written nothing, and listened for a long time, and added four lines. Then she had said the four lines to both of them separately and made them tell her where she had it wrong, and they had, twice.

It was not a ceremony to her. It was a list, and a list is either right or it is not right, and there is no third thing it can be.

At twenty minutes to four the loading stopped, and the beach went quiet as a small beach goes quiet — not all at once but in patches, from the water upward, as people noticed.

There were perhaps two hundred and sixty people on that sand. She could have counted them.

She went down to the edge and stood where she stood, side-on: the water on her left hand and the boats and the men on her right, and her face out along the line of the beach toward the point. She had settled that in the first week too, and for a plain reason. Her father spoke with his back to the water because he was talking to the men. The old man turned and faced the sea because he was talking to the sea. She had both to say, one after the other, and a person who turned round in the middle of it would look like a person doing something.

Her father was sitting on the dry sand about thirty feet behind her with his hands on his knees.

He was fifty-six and had come down to the water every morning of both seasons and had never once said anything about any of it. He had told her exactly one thing, on the evening after the first three boats came to the door, and it was this: that the men would forgive her a mistake in the words and would never forgive her being late, and that she should find out what the tide did at that point at half past three before she promised anybody an hour.

She let two of them go, and came in on the gap behind the third.

"Sea of Mannar. I speak to the water from the head of Mannar to the point at Vaipar, and to the sand under it.

"The boundary is the chank ground off this beach, and the road of the boats out to it, and home again. Nothing crosses that line.

"What is inside it is yours. The sand is yours and the sand under the sand. The weed is yours. The shell is yours: the live shell, the dead shell, the shell ground down to powder.

The crabs are yours, and the fish, all of them. The wood is yours — every plank that ever went down, and the masts, and the iron off them, and the nails out of the iron. The rope is yours: every fathom of rope that has parted since men came here is lying in you somewhere and it is yours. The stones are yours. The rain is yours. The bones are yours.

”The chank is yours. The chank that is buried and the chank that is walking. The thing inside it that has no bone and no eye, that builds a house out of its own body and carries it, and the one turned the wrong way in a thousand. Yours. All of them yours.

”I have named all of it. There is nothing of yours that I have left out.

”Inside the line this morning there are no men. There are divers. There are tenders. There are boat-owners. Nobody inside it has a name — except one. There is one name inside it and it is mine.

”The mouth of the sea is shut. It is shut until the boats are up.”

It took her a minute and fifty seconds. She had counted the words of it once, on the first morning, and never again.

Behind her, her father did not move.

The rope went by in its place, between the wood and the stones, where it had stood in that list since before either of them was born. Nobody on that beach knew it had ever been anywhere else, and nobody ever did.

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Until the boats are up was hers, because there was no gun at Vaipar to end anything, and she knew precisely what it did not cover. It did not cover a man walking into the water at three in the afternoon. It did not cover a child. She had been asked about it four times in two years

— twice by boat-owners and once by a woman with a child on her hip and once by a diver of sixty who wanted to know whether it ran to a man getting out of the boat at the beach — and she had answered all four of them the same way. She told them what it said, in the words it said it in, and stopped there.

It was not much, and on a beach two hundred yards long with forty-one boats on it and two hundred and sixty people standing in the dark, it was not nothing either — which she had found out in a hut at Marichchukkaddi at one in the morning, when a tired man said ninety-one words four feet from her face and they turned into a man saying where he had been.

She did not believe the sea had a mouth either. She had been over that ground with her father exactly once, on a mat by a lamp turned down, two years ago, and neither of them had ever needed to go over it again.

What she believed was that the list was accurate, and that a man who has heard an accurate thing said out loud by somebody who will stand at that water at half past three every morning of a season and be found there afterwards can put his foot in the becket and stop thinking, and go to work, and come home; and that this was a real article, and that she was now the person in the Gulf of Mannar who supplied it, and that nobody had given it to her and nobody could take it away.

The boats went. Forty-one of them, in no order at all, off a beach with room on it.

A man came down the sand from the top with a hip that made him put his weight through a stick, because he bought chanks now for a house at Kilakarai and had been counting since two, and he stopped beside her for as long as it takes to say six words about the wind, and went on. Nothing had ever been arranged between them and nothing ever was.

Up by the boats, a boy of about fourteen who had come in late off the road and had missed the whole of it took hold of his uncle's arm and asked him whether it had been said yet.

"It is said," the man told him, not unkindly, already moving. "The sea is bound. Get in the boat."

THE END