

S. DIWAKAR

The Vow

It was not without reason that Thammannappa took that vow. His wife Mahalakshmi died prematurely, leaving behind her only son Krishna, who was not even nine. No native remedies could cure the stomach pains which had afflicted her for four or five years. The doctors who came to the government hospital in Bhuvanagiri only worked there for a few days before disappearing. When she became bedridden, a doctor who had remained at the hospital for a month and a half visited her home to examine her. "She needs to be operated on. Take her to the big hospital in Bangalore immediately," he said helplessly. Thammannappa nearly fainted. Then, regaining his balance, he left his son at his elder brother's home and put his wife in an oxcart to take her to the railway station. If one is unlucky, even God cannot do anything for him, right? They had not traveled by train for thirty minutes when Mahalakshmi suddenly shrieked with pain and died soon after.

Thammannappa began to look after his orphaned son with all his love and care. In those days Mahalakshmi stayed green in his memory. The image of her untimely death haunted him day and night. And there were no days he did not cry for her four or five times. The people of Bhuvanagiri called him a poor soul; they consoled him in their own way. Yet his sorrow only increased. One night while he was tossing and turning in bed, he saw his son's face radiating in the light of the lantern. He began to cry, thinking his wife Mahalakshmi would have lived if only he had the services of a doctor at the right moment. When almost at the same time his son Krishna, tossing and turning in his bed, moaned "Amma. . .", an idea flashed in Thammannappa's mind: that his son should become a doctor. He got up immediately and stood before the picture of the Lord Tirupati Thimmappa in the niche of the hall to pray, "Oh Lord Thimmappaa! From tomorrow on I vow to stand on one leg. Please bestow your grace on my son and make him a doctor."

Well, the next day he began to follow the vow. While sitting, standing, walking, cooking, washing clothes, carrying bundles of corn to the market and even while climbing a tree, he would always

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keep his right leg folded with his heel touching his buttocks. In the beginning it was not easy for him to stand or walk on one leg. For some days he held on to a staff to keep from losing his balance. Later, feeling as if God had given him only one leg, he would stand easily, putting all his weight on the left leg, and would hop like a frog to move forward.

Nothing is impossible for a man with a goal, right? Thammannappa worked like an ox for several years and coaxed his son to study. After completing high school at Bhavanagiri, Krishna went to Bangalore for his higher studies. Living in a hostel, he continued his studies and finally sat for his exams. Soon he became Dr. Krishnamurthy. Thammannappa's happiness knew no bounds. And to insure that his son became a doctor at the government hospital in Bhuvanagiri, he met a member of the legislature and pulled whatever strings were necessary.

Some days later he took his son to Tirupati to break his vow. Once there, ignoring his son's endearments, he jumped and hopped up the hill. Joining the pilgrims' queue, which was miles long, he moved inch by inch and finally had the *Darshan* of Lord Tirupati Thimmappa. He came out of the temple, happy with the realization that his life's ambition had been fulfilled. Just then his son said, "Papa, now that you have broken your vow why can't you walk like a normal person?" Outside the temple walls, Thammannappa held on to his son, transferred his entire weight onto his left leg, and tried to stretch out his folded right leg. But no matter how he tried, it didn't move more than two or three inches. Krishnamurthy told his father to hug a nearby tree. Then, seated behind his father, with both hands he pointed the right heel toward the sky and pulled, holding his breath. Wasn't he a full-blooded young man? His father's folded leg, loosening bit by bit, was about to stand firmly beside the other leg, when it suddenly slipped from his grip and, like a recoiling spring, beat so forcefully against Thammannappa's buttock that he moaned with pain.

So it came to be that Thammannappa walked with one leg even after having completed his vow. This was deeply distressing to his son. True, his father took the vow to educate him. Yet he remained a one-legged man even after his son became a doctor. What a shame! Indeed over time Thammannappa became an object of ridicule for some in Bhuvanagiri. One morning, as though he had

decided something just then, Krishnamurthy said to his father, "Papa, if you want your right leg to work, it should be operated on. Let's go to Bangalore tomorrow." At first Thammannappa did not agree. He was so used to walking on one leg that now he did not want his right leg to be straight. But his son would not leave him alone. Somehow he convinced him to go to Bangalore. The doctors who examined him at the hospital were amazed. After some discussion among themselves, they decided to cut off the folded leg at the joint. Krishnamurthy thought for a moment. He was ashamed to look at his father walking on one leg when he was endowed with two. Of what use was the other leg? Better to cut it off and replace it with a wooden leg. The moment Krishnamurthy said okay, the doctors took up their surgical instruments.

Thammannappa cried and cried, beating his mouth. When the wound at his right knee had healed, Krishnamurthy brought a wooden leg and fit it to the joint. But even after several weeks Thammannappa still would not practice walking on that wooden leg. He sat in a corner with a long face. Some time later Krishnamurthy awoke at an unusual sound coming from the front yard. When he got up he was astonished to see his father, who had removed his wooden leg, playing a kid's game with it, kicking it around as if it were a ball.

All this happened more than thirty years ago. But Thammannappa, a wrinkled old man now, has not stopped lamenting, "I lost my leg. . . I lost my leg. . . ."

Translated from the Kannada by Christopher Merrill and the author