

The Miscreant · *Victor Rangel-Ribeiro*

LAZAR, THE ENTIRE VILLAGE of Tivolem knew, was a bad lot. Not just ordinary bad, like Lallu, the cobbler's son, who had taken to drinking coconut-palm toddy and to general shiftlessness, but bad bad. Even when they used the diminutive, and referred to him as Lazarinh', dropping the final o, the villagers did not use the tender tone of voice that so closely ties in with the diminutives of first names; instead, it came out with the kind of rasp that generally precedes the act of exhortation.

Although there were some who held that Lazarinh' had been bad from birth, others swore he did not run afoul of the law until he was fifteen. Now that needs some explaining—not the discrepancy in recollection, which after all is only natural, but the bit about the law. Here as everywhere the mills of justice grind slowly, and our people too wonder that felons go free while lawyers grow fat. The police? There's the rub. With not much serious crime around, and perhaps one murder in sixteen years or so—well, fourteen, if you must insist—police stations are few and far between. The nearest one is in Mapusa, eight kilometers away! By the time we get a messenger out there, and the police arrive over here, do you think—?! So our people have their own way of discouraging petty crime, and it is this law that Lazarinh' ran afoul of, beginning when he was about fifteen.

Indeed, those were trivial incidents he was involved in, the first two at least—a thirty-pound jackfruit stolen from a garden in the middle of the night, a basket of mouth-watering mangoes lifted from a landowner's front steps in broad daylight (the angry *bhatkar* mistakenly beat his servant boy for that one)—and the villagers let them pass while making mental note. But a brood of fledgling chickens being terrorized and scattered, while the anguished mother hen fluttered and squawked about in futile rage—ah, that was something else again. There, in that one incident, one could see the incipient seeds of badness, because one cannot grow up in a place such as Tivolem without knowing that on the care and love bestowed on helpless creatures depends the life and well-being of the village. The scattering of tiny helpless baby chicks, so they could be swooped down on and carried off by crows and shrieking kites, was a no-no, and a passerby took note of it, and smacked Lazarinh' soundly about the ears.

Mind you, the chicken incident was five years ago, maybe six, and Lazarinh' had indeed gone on to bigger things. Just last year hadn't he, the people of Tivolem asked rhetorically, hadn't Lazarinh'—shamefully, on the anniversary of Goa's emergence as India's twenty-fifth state—hadn't the rascal Lazar stolen the piebald calf belonging to Govind the carpenter? Govind's wife had seen him driving the frightened animal up the lane that led over the north hill to Goregaon, and she tried to chase him but she had a child at the hip and by the time Govind himself had been found and had started up the lane with a friend for company and protection, the sun's shadow had lengthened a full meter to the east. And they had followed the same lane over the hill a good four kilometers into Goregaon, using what short cuts they could, scrambling over rocks while keeping the path in sight; and they had been told that yes, Lazarinh' had been there, had been seen spending money in the village market, and in the tavern, but that he had entered Goregaon alone, sans calf. Sans calf, mind you, but certainly with money—three, four hundred rupees, more or less, in a wad of purplish ten-rupee notes.

All this Govind recounted to his wife upon his return, asking rather wistfully, for he was the kind of man who does not lightly think ill of another, whether she might not have been mistaken? Was it really Lazarinh' she saw rustling their calf, and not some no-good migrant worker heading home to the jungle-covered Ghats?

“Wouldn't I know a *Ghantti* if I saw one?” she retorted. “And since when do you doubt my word, the mother of your five children?” And she threatened to feed his rice portion to the pariah dog outside if he persisted in his questioning.

“So where is our calf?” she had shrieked at Lazarinh' when she saw him come limping home later that night. “What have you done with it, son of the devil?”

“What about your calf, woman?”

“I saw you driving it over the hill this afternoon!”

“You saw me?! Did you see the dog?”

“What dog, liar? There was no dog!”

“Is this the thanks I get,” said Lazarinh', “to be called a liar, just because you have defective eyesight, and you saw no dog? Here I was coming home tired from work this afternoon, really tired, what can I tell you, and I see a calf running up the hill lane with a strange black dog barking after

it, and I've never seen that dog before but I know that calf, I see at once that it is your calf, that is like a second child to you, and I shout out as loud as I can, 'Ho, Govind! Ho, Govind's wife!' But you are nowhere to be seen, not you and not your husband, so I chase after the dog and the calf, over the hill, halfway to Goregaon, and the dog turns away when I finally get to throw a stone at it, and rushes at me to bite me, and it's a big dog, so I jump on top of a wall for safety, and fall over on the other side, which was a good thing or else the dog would have bitten me and it would all have been over your no-good calf, but when the dog is gone and I climb on the wall again, your calf is nowhere to be seen. Now here it's night, and I return limping, my toes bleeding from stubbing them on rocks, my ankles swollen from falling off the wall, and you ask me where is your calf as though I, Lazarinh', whom the entire village knows from childhood as an honest man, as though I had stolen it?"

"The whole world knows you for a thief," she shrieked, but he stood his ground.

"Where is your proof, woman?"

Although Govind's wife was rendered temporarily speechless, other people remembered the further case of Mottu, the village postman, who swears that on the night of the full moon he had gone into Forttu's tavern—the one with the sign on the wall that says "McDowell's, the Measure of a Man"—for only a second or two, and merely to inquire whether Forttu was expecting any important mail or packages in the next day or so, and had emerged fortified by only a single complimentary drink—just one, mind you, not the four that certain slanderous tongues proclaimed was his daily quota, God forgive them, Mottu said, or they would surely fry in Hell—he had emerged he said to find his bicycle, his sole source of income, gone, missing, stolen, and a figure much like Lazarinh' pedalling far down the road, shirttails flapping in the wind.

Well, the bicycle, besides being Mottu's means of livelihood, was also Government property, so Mottu went to the police in Mapusa, who sent a constable who placed himself on a barstool in Forttu's tavern, which like the forts and castles of old commanded the main entrance to the village. Alas, alas for Lazarinh' when he staggered up that road at eleven that night, or at 23.05 hours as the official records would soon show. The preserver of law and order showed no compassion even though Lazarinh' was carrying no loot and singing a raucous love song.

“What kind of miscreant do you take me for?” asked Lazarinh’, as the handcuffs closed around his wrists right in the middle of the heart-rending finale to “Mariquinh’, my Love.” And turning to Mottu he said: “Do I look like the kind of heartless evildoer who would steal the bicycle of a well-loved, much-honored public office-bearer like you?”

“You look like the kind of evildoer who would sell his own sister,” interjected the policeman. “Luckily for your sister, you have no sister.”

“My sister, if I had one, would have been deeply hurt to hear you speak of me in such intemperate terms, o unbemedalled great one,” said Lazarinh’. “You are the one who’s truly lucky that I really have no sister, for if I had had one, and you had hurt her feelings by speaking ill of me in or out of her presence, I would have had to hurt your feelings in turn, possibly by kicking your noble posterior in public.”

This metaphysical exchange might have lasted much longer had not, by an unfortunate accident, the policeman’s truncheon at that very moment become disengaged from his belt, and his hasty lunge to retrieve it only caused the stick to bounce rapidly off Lazarinh’s shins and buttocks, rat-tat-tat thud-thud-thump, thu-thump, not once but several times. Fortunately the stick itself suffered no dents or bruises, no irreparable damage. The policeman therefore returned it smoothly to his belt, but not before carefully testing it twice again against Lazarinh’s buttocks—thwack! thunk!—to make sure it still had its resilience.

The above version was pure speculation, you understand, mere scuttlebutt. A far clearer light on what happened is shed by the official chronicle, the police log, which reveals that on the night and at the time in question, one Lazar, aka Lazarinh’, member of the public and palpable miscreant, while in a drunken state did enter into a loud, vehement, and prolonged argument on civics with a wandering water buffalo, and after refusing to yield the right of way, and further becoming verbally and physically abusive, the said member of the public and known miscreant Lazar alias Lazarinh’ got behind the said beast of burden and twice endeavored to push it off the road, whereupon the said evildoer i.e. Lazar was soundly and repeatedly kicked by that otherwise docile and even-tempered animal, giver of milk, plower of fields, friend to all mankind. The log does not note the policeman’s reactions when next morning the magistrate dismissed the complaint against Lazarinh’ for lack of evidence, ignoring the affable buffalo that had been brought into court to buttress the story, and now stood to one side placidly chewing the cud.

But Mottu's wife was not one to give up. "We must tie up our statue of St. Cornelius," she said to her husband.

Mottu winced. "For heaven's sake! Tie up a saint?"

"He's the patron saint of our village," she persisted, "and he's also the patron saint of reformed criminals, and he's not called St. Cornelius the Contrite for nothing. I've heard my grandmother say, bless her long-departed soul, that each time one ties up the statue of St. Cornelius, stolen goods are mysteriously returned. In fact, the one time we had a robbery at our house, when I was a child, the good saint remained tied up for days, until everything was returned."

Mottu looked dubious.

"Bad things happen to thieves who do not return their loot when St. Cornelius wants them to," his wife said. "The longer the saint remains tied up, the greater his anger, the more his wrath is to be feared. Tell the baker we've tied up the saint, and swear him to secrecy; then he's bound to tell the entire village. And spread the word yourself as you make your rounds with the mail."

So it was, on the second night of St. Cornelius's bondage in the Mottu home, that the postman heard a scraping on the gravel path outside his front gate around midnight, and rushed out cudgel in hand to where he caught the faint glint of metal by starlight. The bicycle fell with a clatter to the ground, and it was then that Mottu caught sight of the black-clothed figure turning to flee. With a blow of the club he brought the man down. Thwack! Thwack! Thwack-thwonck! went the club again as the figure scrambled desperately about on hands and knees.

"Mottu-u-u!" screamed the returner of stolen goods. "Stop! Don't you recognize me? I'm your neighbor Lazarinh'!"

"You lie!" cried Mottu, who knew exactly where the truth lay, but was not giving up a heaven-sent advantage. "Take that for lying (thwack)! Lazarinh' does not dress in black (sswish)! Lazarinh' does not steal—he has told me so himself (thump)! Take that (double-thwack) for smearing the name of an innocent man!"

"O Mottu, Mottu," cried the figure, "thank you for believing in my innocence! Look closely! It is indeed me, it's Lazarinh'!"

"Aha!" cried Mottu. "So, it's really you, is it? It's Lazarinh', come like a thief in the middle of the night, with my stolen bicycle, and dressed all in black like the devil himself?" and he raised the stick again.

“It’s not what you think,” said Lazarinh’, leaping nimbly out of harm’s way. “I was returning a few minutes ago from the funeral of a cousin in Assonorá, you know how far it is to that village, and having missed the last bus out had to walk all the way home. Right outside the post office, in the middle of the road, would you believe it, I found someone had left your bike. In fact, in the dark I tripped right over it. If there were some light here you’d see the bruise where the pedal caught my shin. But when I tripped over it I didn’t think of the pain—in fact, I felt no pain at all. My first thought was—heavens be praised! This must be Mottu’s missing bike! The thief has brought it back! That’s what I thought. Lucky for him he got to leave it there before I arrived, or he would have caught it from me, I tell you! And how lucky is Mottu—I said to myself—that I was the first person to stumble across it, and not some half-drunken stranger with larcenous fingers! Indeed, I said to myself, Mottu is doubly lucky that the bike was returned after the last bus passed this way or the no-good bus driver would certainly have driven right over it, accidentally on purpose! I must take it right away to Mottu, I said, without changing out of my funeral clothes, because this bike is definitely Mottu’s, no doubt about it, and what’s Mottu’s must go back to Mottu as fast as possible, because that’s the way Mottu delivers our mail. Those were my very words, that I said aloud to myself, and too bad there was no one else there to hear me, or they too would have told you that that is exactly what I said!”

“Hit him!” screamed Mottu’s wife, appearing suddenly in the doorway. In her left hand she held a hurricane lamp, in her right a heavy frying pan. “Hit the misbegotten one! Hold him till I can lay my hands on him!”

Seeing the enemy thus powerfully reinforced, Lazarinh’ dived headfirst into some bushes, and though Mottu flailed about with vigor, his cudgel became entangled in brambles, and his quarry escaped into the night.

A week later Atmaram the shopkeeper thought he had better luck. His younger daughter, the buxom one, had heard three coconuts fall almost simultaneously to the ground an hour after sunset. Alerted by that thud-tha-thump, she heard them roll towards their door, and rushed out to retrieve them because by local custom any coconuts that fall and roll to your door are yours to keep, especially if you have helped in the rolling. But then the thought came to her—three coconuts rarely fall to earth all at the same time, especially on a calm and windless night, unless somebody is up there fooling with Mother Nature. Glancing upwards, she saw silhou-

eted against the moonlight the figure of a man clinging as motionless to the tree as a squirrel that's spotted a cobra.

"Bapu! O father!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, bringing the man shinning down the tree even as her father came rushing into the yard.

"Badmash! Whoremaster!" cried Atmaram, for he had recently returned from a visit to Bombay, and in that great city had picked up the right words to use in times such as these. Besides, he had rushed out thinking from his daughter's cry that some stranger was about to stain the family's honor, and finding instead that it was only Lazarinh'—for he recognized him in an instant—out to steal the family coconuts, he switched in relief from alarm to uncontrolled fury.

"Thief! Steal our coconuts, will you? Take that!" and he raised a coconut-frond club while Lazar was still some six feet off the ground. Before he could strike, however, Lazarinh' bounced a coconut off his head, and once on the ground flung another at Atmaram's onrushing wife, who escaped injury only because she ducked under a clothesline on her way to battle.

"Ay-ee-eee!" cried Atmaram's wife, not missing a step.

Faced with this onrushing fury, now coming at him with eyes of fire and arm upraised, Lazarinh' darted nimbly past Atmaram, who found himself hampered by his unwieldy club. Hither and thither darted Lazarinh', dodging and weaving around the coconut trees, confounding the best efforts of Atmaram, his wife, and both daughters to catch him; he might even have gotten clean away, had not their pi dogs joined the chase, and one of them grabbing him by the ankle, Lazarinh' found he could not shake himself free.

The screaming, cursing, and yelping brought a host of neighbors to the scene. But as they got in each other's way trying to pummel Lazarinh', he, reeling and crying out, worked his way ever closer to the village creek, into which he gave one mighty leap and once again fled into the night. Next morning he was back, defiant as ever, confident that the previous night's punishment would ensure his safety.

With each such episode Lazarinh's fame as a petty hoodlum began to spread beyond Tivolem, but still did not compare with that of older and better-known hooligans in the surrounding areas. Who, then, was the

brazen son-of-Shaitan who broke into the church of St. Benedict the Beneficent, in the hamlet of Aiconá, two weeks before St. Benedict's famous annual feast? It was an hour yet to cockcrow when Apolinar', their aged sacristan, preparing the darkened church for early-morning mass that Sunday, shuffled to the main altar with lighted taper in hand, genuflected, then raised his light to find—nothing. Thinking that perhaps the vicar had moved the candlesticks, he turned to the side altar, only to see something that brought the cold hand of fear to his heart: no trace of gold candlesticks there either, but candles strewn and trampled on the floor, vases knocked down, and St. Benedict himself—St. Benedict, pride and patron of the village—missing!

“Father Vicar! O Father Vicar!” called Apolinar' in a choking voice, and rushing to the belfry, sent the great bells spinning into a clangor that shook the village awake.

Hushed were the faithful as they moved through the church, counting up the missing items. The gold candlesticks, the giant candelabra, the finely wrought censer that the vicar said came from the time of Vasco da Gama, the loss of these grieved them greatly; but the loss of the statue of St. Benedict—St. Benedict of the heavenly blue robe and the upturned visage and the mystical rapturous eyes—that loss left them truly orphaned.

Outside, the hubbub was immense. How could they hold their feast, the village women said, when their husbands would not be able to carry the statue in procession around the churchyard, as had been done for centuries? Ah, but their saint would not forsake them, Apolinar' the sacristan said, he would surely break free of the thieves and come back to his church and his people! And he had just begun to speak of the saint's great powers, of his many miracles, when his wife suddenly began reciting the Rosary, and all joined in the responses.

With prayers, vigils, and a novena the distraught parishioners laid siege to Heaven, and the vicar declared he was going to keep the church doors open around the clock, so his people could take turns praying day and night, and St. Benedict himself might—God willing—find his way back into the church.

No one knows how the rumor started, but by the third night of the novena it was said, even here in Forttu's tavern in Tivolem, that the statue of St. Benedict would miraculously reappear in its usual niche on the altar at Aiconá, some said on the eve of his feast, some said on the morning of the feast day itself.

The day before, crowds began converging on the church to witness the expected miracle, many coming from far-off villages, and not a few walking there from Tivolem. It was a pilgrimage of the devout and the curious! In the church a thousand candles flickered and sank to Pater Nosters and Aves and *mea culpas*, while evening turned to night, and night gave way to morning. Yet they waited, and prayed, and waited. Not till the Mass of the Feast itself had been celebrated, not till it was quite over, and the acrid smell of fireworks filled the air, did the now disheartened faithful begin to drift out of the church, the niche on the altar still gapingly unfilled.

In the bright sunshine the fair awaited them, but they had no eyes for it. Still the vendors hawked and cajoled, held up their wares, and thrust bargains in their faces. So some children's toys were sold, and a black lace mantilla or two, but there was not much doing anywhere, not even at the booth off to one side, where the statues of saints, and other religious objects, stood arrayed on a cloth-draped table. Nothing much, at least, until the dark, full-mustachioed vendor began loudly hawking ointments, beeswax candles, and beads he vowed had all been blessed in Rome.

But the white-cowled women who gathered around at his call had another concern in mind, and having looked over those saints he had on display, and not finding the one they were after, one finally thought to ask — did he perhaps know where they could find a statue of St. Benedict?

"Indeed, I have one," said the man. "But it's not for sale."

"Could we see it," she persisted, "if you have it at hand, and it's no trouble? It would mean a lot to us, since ours was stolen just weeks ago."

"Very well, then," he said, and reaching beneath the tablecloth carefully brought out a statue with upturned visage and rapture-filled eyes, one so delicately carved that it could have been mistaken for the stolen statue itself, had not this St. Benedict been clothed in a robe of the richest crimson instead of heavenly blue.

Imagine the rush of people to see it!

"I'll give you a hundred and fifty rupees for it," said a voice.

"It's not for sale," said the vendor.

"Three hundred!" cried another. And the women clamored: "It's for the church! A statue so beautiful should be in our church!"

"You have truly touched my heart," said the seller. "It's my very favorite statue, and I've had it for many years, of all the saints I like this the

best, and I would not sell it to anybody, not even to the Holy Father himself, and not for all the money in the world; but since you say it's for your church, and this after all is the Church of St. Benedict, it is right and proper that this statue should be placed in your church, so I will let you have it for a mere thousand."

"Let me see it up close," said Apolinar', reaching forward.

"Leave it right there," cried the vendor sharply. "Nobody touches it until I see your money!"

But the sacristan had already laid hold of the statue, and the two grappled for possession until Apolinar' let go with a cry, holding up his crimson-stained hands for all to see.

"Ayeee! Has this man cut you, Apolinar' my brother?" cried a woman. And turning to the vendor, she screamed: "What have you done to him?"

But the sacristan, eyes bulging, could only point to the statue, where traces of a sky-blue robe could be seen beneath the smeared crimson paint.

O, the struggle that followed, with the man trying to hold on to the statue and run, and the crowd trying to pull it away from him! Then, all of a sudden, they had it, and—surprise! The mustache was on St. Benedict, and not on the thief.

"Why, it's Lazarinh'!" cried a voice.

Forgetting completely that the focus of their novenas and prayers and all-night vigils had been the simple return of the statue, forgetting that a miraculous return had been forecast for that very day, ignoring the fact that Lazarinh' had been the chief and only instrument of that return, the crowd seized on him and beat him, shoved him, knocked him about, and would have very nearly beaten him senseless had not the local police, who had been watching with intense curiosity from just a short distance away, now decided that further punishment should only be legally administered. They therefore rescued Lazarinh' from the undisciplined mob, and buffeted him soundly themselves as they took him first to headquarters, and then to the district hospital.

Although news of Lazarinh's beating, arrest, and hospitalization did not make the local papers, noteworthy though it was, it did reach Tivolem the way important local news always does—with the tinkling of a bicycle bell as the baker made his morning rounds. The villagers were immediately split into two dissenting groups. "He got exactly what he deserved," said

Mangu the coppersmith, and all who agreed with him. But others, led by Kashinath the barber, took the opposite view, insisting that what he got was not what he deserved—he should have been beaten half to death. Crime must be controlled, Kashinath said, blowing the froth off a glass of coconut-palm liquor in Forttu's tavern; what use are the police, what use are the judges, what use is the law, if criminals are routinely freed and roam about our streets? Since earlier thrashings had not taught Lazarinh' a lesson, the time had surely come to give him stronger medicine.

The stronger the better, Forttu agreed.

Next morning the baker brought sobering news: Lazarinh's condition had worsened—he was dying. Dying!

"O my God!" said Mottu the postman, but Kashinath scoffed.

"Lazarinh', dying? He has more lives than a cat."

Mottu, laughing nervously, agreed, then went off to Forttu's tavern for a touch of McDowell's.

"Lazarinh' always comes back," Forttu told him over and over again.

And the regulars there repeated: "Always, always. That's Lazarinh'."

Yet, next morning, there once again was the baker, riding his bicycle through the village, ringing his bell with shrill urgency, and telling everyone that Lazarinh' had died in the night. He had heard it himself at the bakery in Mapusa, from a man who had just come from the hospital.

Still unbelieving, they stopped the first bus passing through.

"What news of Lazarinh'?" they asked.

"Lazarinh' is dead!" said the driver.

And the baker added, rather maliciously, that since Lazarinh' probably had died without benefit of clergy, his soul would surely fry in hell, and how did they feel about that now?

The village was devastated. Gloom blotted out the sun, and people on their way to work gathered in knots to discuss the tragedy.

"That beautiful lad," said Mottu, "to die so young, in such a state!" And he shook his head in shock and disbelief that such things should be.

"A tragic fate!" mourned Atmaram. "A fate I would not wish upon my worst enemy. And Lazarinh'—he was no enemy, he was a neighbor, a (yes!) a friend! Always ready to do you a favor, when one was needed! And what a climber of trees! Even the tallest coconut trees! If anyone needed coconuts—" and in a well-timed gesture he wiped an unborn tear against his sleeve.

“As a child he was always at my house,” recalled Govind’s wife, stretching recollection to its limits. “And he would say: ‘Govind’s wife,’ for he spoke like no other child, he was old and solemn for his years, ‘Govind’s wife, are you going to give me a *laddu*?’ And if I had no *laddus* as sometimes happened, then I gave him some other sweet. Or some gram, or a slice of ripe papaya, or even a piece of jaggery. He was like our own son — Govind and I could refuse him nothing.”

Ah, the praise that was lavished on the well-beloved newly deceased! The happy memories that were evoked, the eulogies that were rehearsed, the tears that were shed! In the context of death, so final, so terrible, so utterly irrevocable, even the incidents of the calf, the bicycle, and the coconuts were treated as harmless escapades, greatly misunderstood at the time. The people of Aiconá were roundly and properly condemned for their heartlessness, their savagery, their inhuman cruelty in killing—in fact, in murdering (why have we been pussyfooting around that word?)—in murdering poor defenseless Lazarinh’, standing proud and defiant, far from home and quite alone, against a treacherous mob. And the point was raised: hadn’t he taken the statue back? Hadn’t he refused to sell it? And wasn’t it true that he was seized upon and beaten before he could get it to the church? Strong contrasts were drawn between the ethos of the two villages; things such as this lynching, it was agreed, could never happen in Tivolem.

It was Josephine Aunty, the local spinster, who brought the discussion back to reality.

“When,” said she, “should we have the funeral?”

“Of course,” said Forttu, clapping his hand to his forehead. “We forgot about the funeral!”

“I have a little money,” she said. “I could pay for the band.”

“I’ll pay for the band,” said Forttu, “and for the casket, candles, whatever is needed. Josephine Aunty, you’re all alone, save your money—you may need it some day.”

In the midst of all this, Mottu’s wife, who had been listening intently to all the to and fro, uttered a muffled “Lord forgive me!” and, making the sign of the cross three times in quick succession, whispered hoarsely: “Look!”

“It’s a ghost!” cried Josephine Aunty, and they all crossed themselves, all except Govind and Atmaram, who being Hindus could scarcely invoke

the same protection. Lazarinh' alive was one thing, but Lazarinh' the ghost appearing in Tivolem, bandaged head, swollen lip and all, not waiting for night but facing them down in broad daylight—this was a type of haunting beyond all reason and experience.

“Mottu, get the vicar quick, with incense and holy water,” said his wife. But Mottu saw the ghost was standing between them and the path to the church, and Mottu did not move.

They fell back a step, then, and would have turned and scattered had not the ghost also stopped.

“What’s that thing in the bag he’s holding?” asked Josephine Aunty. “Look at it move! What has he brought us from Hell?”

With a piercing squeal the Thing burst from the bag, and raced towards them as if chased by the devil.

“Merciful God!” cried Mottu’s wife, and fell in a faint.

They flung themselves against the sides of the lane, and the Thing flashed by, leaping over Mottu’s wife where she lay, and they saw it first as a blur of white and grey, that’s how fast it was moving, but as it sped down the lane Atmaram recovered his wits.

“Forttu, isn’t that the pigling you’ve been fattening up for Easter, and that was feeding by the creek?”

“Yes, it is,” said Forttu, “and now Lazarinh’s ghost has touched and defiled it!”

“What ghost?” asked Mottu. “Ghosts disappear—pouf! Look! This ghost is alive and is running away!”

“That’s Lazarinh’!” shouted Atmaram. “Get him! Get the mother-lover! Get the stealer of pigs, the defiler of sacred places!”

Lazarinh’ heard their shouts as they surged behind him, and gaining the main road as the express Mapusa-Panaji bus came groaning up the slope, he caught it on the run, barely ahead of their clawing hands; and the last they saw of him he was leaning out the rear door, gesturing obscenely and spitting in the wind.

That Saturday afternoon the vicar of Tivolem sat, pen poised in hand, thinking long and hard of the possibilities open to him for the evening’s homily, and the sermon to be preached at Sunday Mass. Should he draw parallels between Lazarinh’s reappearance after reported death, and the miracle of Lazarus called forth from his tomb? Could it possibly have

come about to serve some higher unseen purpose, or was it perhaps due even to the intercession of St. Cornelius the Contrite, who after all as patron saint of Tivolem looked after the spiritual needs of all local sinners? But if so, why did Lazarinh' then steal the pig? Or could it be that these two incidents coming so soon one after the other—the statue in Aiconá, the piglet here—could they be taken to mean that Lazarinh', the known and hitherto unrepentant thief, in his inmost heart and unknown to himself really wanted to make restitution? These were the questions that plagued the good vicar's mind, and that he wished his parishioners to ponder.

But his curate gently said no: whatever the judgment of posterity might be, at that moment Tivolem's five hundred inhabitants, whether parishioners or not, would not consider Lazarinh's reappearance to be one of St. Cornelius's more laudable achievements. Not unless, the curate said, they had first been meditating long and hard in the depths of Forttu's tavern.

With a sigh the vicar agreed, and preached instead on the general subject of minor mischief in youth, citing the case of the young man who asked St. Ignatius to make him a priest, and when the Saint took him into his own home for prolonged tutelage, the young man turned out to be an inveterate prankster. But, with strict restrictions on the number of pranks that could be played each day—St. Ignatius limited them to seven, the good vicar said—the youngster finally made it into the priesthood. And one of his first deeds on being anointed was to write a life of the Saint. So it is all right to indulge in youthful mischief, the old vicar said, provided it is of the inoffensive kind, and that ultimately you dedicate your life to God.

And that, Mottu the postman told his wife in a whispered aside, is exactly where Lazarinh' had failed, and for that he would come to a no-good end.

“Amen!” said Forttu the tavern-keeper, sitting three pews to the rear. But Mottu kept his eyes up front, and the Mass proceeded.