

LAKSHMI AND LUCK

"Ashtalakshmi," Thomas yelled, leaning forward over the front seat. Ashtalakshmi Temple in Besant Nagar had been given high recommendation by all four desk clerks at the Hotel Connemara.

The driver's gnarled old feet popped the clutch into second gear and they jolted forward. Thomas hoped he knew where the Temple was, one of scores of temples scattered about Madras. On this fine Sunday afternoon he was also hoping to put out of his mind entirely all thoughts of unbudgeted expenditures in respect to accommodations and local transportation.

The autorickshaw swung recklessly around a slower autorickshaw and charged at a motorcycle carrying an entire family, nearly felling it. The driver frowned in thought.

"Mahalakshmi," he said, wobbling his head in agreement

"That too," Thomas shouted. He already knew there were at least two words for every place and thing in south India.

"Good luck!"

"Thank you," Thomas responded hesitantly. "Is there some problem?"

"No, no, no," cried the driver, turning fully around in his seat. "Lakshmi - good luck goddess!"

"Ah!"

Indeed, Thomas had learned that Lakshmi was the goddess of fortune, that 'ashta' meant 'eight' and that the Ashtalakshmi shrine was consecrated to the goddess in all her

eight manifestations. The design and construction of the temple was sponsored by a wealthy Madras businessman, propelling him into the highest form of hereafter.

Thomas braced himself as the driver took aim at an oncoming Jeep. This was his second Sunday in India, and he had learned never to look ahead into the traffic. As a result he was suffering a persistent kink in his neck. He made a mental note to purchase an orthopedic pillow from the chemist's store next to the Hotel.

After passing several hundred tiny stores of every purpose - bricks, computers, pots, telephones, scrap metal, radios and food bars - and then passing the same sequence with all their colourful signs and awnings at least two dozen times, they wound down a narrow lane.

"Besant Nagar," announced his driver over all the clatter, tooting his weary horn at dogs, goats and children. They rounded a turn and Thomas gazed upon Elliott's Beach, one of the longest in the world and clearly the most crowded. He soon spotted the domes and merrily ornamented turrets of a temple poking above the huts and teeming kiosks. In another few moments the three bald wheels crunched softly in the sand.

He removed his shoes, tucked in the laces and deposited them with the waiting driver. He got down nimbly to the ground and, finding it as hot as a flatiron, screamed across the sand toward the snakes and monkeys and gods populating the marble spires of Ashtalakshmi Temple. A surge of hawkers descended on him to offer for sale every configuration of god, goddess and consort that ever populated the realms celestial. Here was a poster of the temple showing the eight forms of Lakshmi. There was a suite of plastic-laminated devotional cards with gods and goddesses, sitting, standing, resting on

lotus flowers. It was an unruly mob that set upon Thomas like crows settling upon carrion.

"One must have one of these," yelled one. "For pooja!"

"Coming from which country?"

"Lakshmi, Lakshmi!" shouted a vendor of silver ornaments and charms. "Goddess of wealth!"

"Wealth?" Thomas muttered. "I thought she was the goddess of luck."

"Yes, luck," the young man replied, puffing along after him. "But wealth is simply one possible manifestation of luck. You need changing of American dollars?"

Thomas tore loose and strode toward the iron gates where a grizzled old man perched as guard. The guard gave a warm smile and put forward his hand. He frowned at a five-rupee note but accepted ten rupees, then nodded at the young man circling Thomas.

"No guide," Thomas said wisely. He had been advised by Balakrishnan.

The old man wobbled his head and smiled. The young man stayed at Thomas' side.

"No guide!" he repeated.

"Guide," ordered the old man, handing Thomas' pursuer an orange ticket.

The lineup to the first shrine on the ground floor of the temple streamed its entire length, down the stairs and winding all the way across the hot stone walkway to the entrance to the shrines. Men in lungis and men in suits, women in saris, kids playing tag amongst a jungle of legs, all streamed about the steps, everyone chatting, arguing and laughing.

"Have we time?" Thomas asked, glancing at his watch.

His newly appointed guide gave a knowing gesture and returned to the entrance. Moments later he reappeared waving a yellow ticket. It had cost an extra three rupees, it would be put toward the final bill, and it allowed him and his client to skirt the entire lineup.

At the first shrine, full of darkness, two priests with saffron robe and sash cried out prayers to Lakshmi. Bells pealed with urgency as the crowd coursed into the tiny space, competing with the scratchy recording which chanted from loudspeakers high above. The priests dispensed holy water from a bowl with a silver spoon into the hands of supplicants, who washed it quickly over their faces before confronting the statue. Lakshmi, of black stone, was smeared with the milky remains of the last worship. A few coins clinked into the copper plate that held a struggling flame of incense, and hurried prayers went to the gently smiling goddess. The rushed pace of the proceedings, the jostling of elbows to get ahead in the line, proved far from the soft murmured orisons and serene chanting of the Hindu temple Thomas had always imagined.

Then the same priests who had hurried them into the shrine pushed and goaded them out again, up toward the second level. The surging crowd swept Thomas into a narrow passageway and up a corkscrew spiral of stairs. He had to stoop to cram himself into it. The smack of bare feet on soft stone became deafening, as lean bodies wedged him in place. It was pitch dark and his socks slid desperately over each of the time-worn stone steps. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be washed upstairs by this sea of sweltering humanity.

Now panting, Thomas stood before a recess in the wall on the second level. A priest glowed into view. He moved and things gleamed before him. The oily smoke of incense trickled upward. Then he stopped and murmured a few words.

"A few rupees for the large pooja," his guide translated.

When the coins had clanked into the brass cup, the priest began mixing some oils and scented potions in a crucible, and then in a quick flick of his wrist he dashed it over Thomas's head. He jumped back but his new aide held him upright as the lotus-scented potion fingered down his forehead and cheeks. After he opened his eyes, the priests were already attending to the next in line, a large woman with two infants.

"It seemed to be just like the previous one," Thomas commented, rubbing the lotus water from his eyes and stumbling blindly around the walkway far above the battered tin houses in the settlement below.

"It will seem so," his guide agreed. "Adi Lakshmi," he announced, pulling Thomas's hand to lead him to the next shrine. "The previous one was for good luck with money. This one is Dana Lakshmi -- for bravery."

"I've never been lucky with money. Perhaps I can fare better with bravery, but can it be a form of wealth?"

"Of course," answered the guide. "Bravery is a tool that can lead one to wealth. Regarding the money, it may be that sound financial management is lacking rather than luck."

Thomas stared at his guide for a moment. Not only erudite, this young man was prescient as well.

Acquiring enough bravery to climb the stairs further, to the third level and the next four shrines, took three more rupees. Inside this dark tomb, the monk was short and squat as a toad draped in a white cloth. Here Lakshmi was of coal-black stone, with strings of hair, and eyebrows that snaked up and over her bulging eyes. Her smile, which curled upward suddenly at each end, spoke indeed of good fortune. Not a recent lottery perhaps, but her polished, sinuate beauty gave her much to smile about.

The priest rose only slightly, taking his coin. Then, murmuring the words of Santana Lakshmi, he wished Thomas a quick good health. He stuck his finger in a silver vessel of something red and applied the powder to the center of Thomas's forehead. Watching what others did, Thomas washed the oily smoke upwards from the flame of the incense bowl, coaxing it into his face and especially over his eyes.

"For wisdom and insight," his guide advised as they teetered on the balustrade around the edge of the next spire. "Lakshmi is having not one but two distinct roles among the gods. Although being goddess of fortune, she also represents female beauty."

Thomas now wondered whether the man had memorized the passages he related.

"Here she is having only two arms."

"Here?"

"On earth."

"And... elsewhere?"

"She is having four arms. But she can hardly be shown as symbol of women's beauty with four arms," he attested. "I am Vasanth."

"Well, I am Thomas."

With the eighth and final shrine, and a dizzying crawl around the spire above innumerable sculpted gods and goddesses, they had covered money, success, crops and bravery.

"And children," Vasanth added. "Vidaya Lakshmi. And not forgetting education and knowledge."

"But are not education and knowledge simply the tools for acquiring wealth?"

"No-no-no! Knowledge, and the wisdom which results from it, are riches in and of themselves."

"Hmm," Thomas murmured, reflecting on the recent argument with Sivanandan and Balakrishnan concerning collecting information merely for its own sake.

"Sri Lakshmi is wife of Lord Vishnu," Vasanth declared. "Vishnu being the Preserver."

"Preserver of...?"

"Of all. Humanity and all forms of life. Unlike Shiva the Destroyer."

"We should choose between preserver and destroyer?"

"Lakshmi has managed to be Vishnu's wife in each of his reincarnations."

"Very lucky for her."

"Or clever. Vishnu has no need to assert his superiority. His mildness combined with his power makes him greatest of gods. He is object of devotion more than of fear."

At the summit of Ashtalakshmi Temple Vasanth explained that Lakshmi was originally the wife of Varuna the sun, and was re-born during the churning of the Milk Ocean as one of the fourteen precious things. Shiva the Destroyer was the first to demand her but as he had already laid claim to the moon, Lakshmi's hand was awarded to Vishnu.

"Fortunately for Lakshmi, she preferred Vishnu."

Thomas begged to stop. His heart was pounding. They were quite high now, and the houses and apartments far below blurred into one single corrugated tin roof, dotted with palms and washed in the smoke of early evening cooking pots. Thomas took a deep breath of fresh air blown up from the crashing waves on the beach. All around were plaster gods and goddesses: Brahma the overlord, Vishnu the protector, Ganesha the elephant of wisdom, Hanuman the man-monkey, Naga the five-headed cobra, all streaming down the sculpted gopuram. He could hear the ocean thundering below and he peered at the flicker of silent ships on the grey horizon. It required at least a quarter of an hour for Thomas and Vasanth to maneuver down three levels of stairs against the surging mass of ascending worshippers.

Down on the beach, young men strolled down the edge of the wet sand and talked to each other of dowries. Vendors cried of their wares -- seashells, bidis, pan, sugarcane, and there was even a bicycle-mounted ice cream van. A merry-go-round sagged idle on the sand, its operator stretched asleep over the great steel crank that could bring the horses to life but for lack of three rupees, or two if it were a slow day.

"What brings you to India?"

Thomas told Vasanth about the dream of cleaning up the Buckingham Canal.

"And you are...a guide," Thomas suggested.

"I am a priest. A priest in training."

"I see." Thomas' heart finally resumed its normal pace.

"At first I tried economics," explained Vasanth. "I was always good with numbers." While he left the private institute with a certificate, his business attempts had

failed. Then there was this opening at the temple. There had been a connection, a friend of a relative. And here he was.

"From an economist to a priest," observed Thomas. "Can you get Lakshmi to intercede with my investments portfolio?"

Vasanth laughed. "That is certainly most amusing, Mr. Thomas." His eyes narrowed. "Most respectfully, do you have any openings?"

"Openings? You mean in a spiritual sense?" Thomas asked. How could a Hindu priest possibly help clean up the most polluted waterbody in south India?

"No, no, no... openings," he replied.

"Why on earth would you be interested in any openings?" Thomas wondered, waving his arm around at the Temple and its marvelous gopuram and its sculpted figures.

"There is talk of a strike."

