

When Shelley, the romantic poet of the nineteenth century, and Sri Sri Telugu poet of the twentieth meet in the kingdom of Krishnadevara of the sixteenth century. Literary fireworks will delight readers of Andhra, Telangana and Karnataka.

Shelley and Sri Sri in Vijayanagaram

By Cdr G.V. Rama Rao

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Shelley
and Sri Sri
in
Vijayanagaram

Historical, Literary, Fantasy, Novella

CDR G.V. RAMA RAO

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958877-40-1

E-book ISBN: 979-8-88531-314-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters are historical, and the events in this book are fictitious. British English and syntax have been used, and contractions have been avoided.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Rao, Cdr G.V. Rama

Shelley and Sri Sri in Vijayanagaram by Cdr G.V. Rama Rao

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022915971

Chapter 1

A white man stood transfixed as a few hundred strangely dressed foot soldiers ran past him. A considerable contingent of cavalymen, all dressed alike, followed them. Their uniforms and weapons showed they could be none other than an army. While some were wounded and bleeding, everyone seemed dejected, like soldiers retreating in defeat. Suddenly, another horseman carrying a sword and shield came charging from the opposite direction on a magnificent white stallion. The mini army stopped at the sight of the new equestrian, who shouted a command at a high pitch. His order worked instantaneously. The contingent stopped, turned around, yelled something akin to a battle cry, and moved towards where they had come from. The command of the newcomer electrified the whole retreating force. Shedding their despair, they moved with a purpose. Even the horses turned on the balls of their hooves and started galloping, throwing a cloud of dust like a fierce desert sand storm. Nobody took note of the white man, who looked neglected and sad.

The white man took in the scene around him. When the dust settled, he noticed the bright sun halfway up to the zenith, an azure sky with a few patches of white fluffy clouds and a plantation next to him. It was a strange place he had never visited, nor could he determine who those soldiers were. The only thing he could understand was the man's arrival on the white stallion. He seemed a born leader, for he changed the order of the battle, wherever it was taking place, and infused new energy and determination in the troops retreating from it. The white man started perspiring and feeling hungry. He looked around, took in the strange scene, and noticed a plantation full of trees laden with fruits hanging from every branch. The plantation had neither a fence nor a gate. Feeling

hungry and curious to find out, he took a few steps and plucked a ripe yellow fruit. He found it succulent and sweet beyond words. He wanted to take a second one but hesitated and looked around.

From a nearby hut, a man appeared dressed in a white cloth around his waist, which fell to his knees, and similar material loosely tied around his head. He had a long staff and a cane tray with three luscious fruits in his right hand. He approached the white man, gave him a once over, bowed, and pushed the tray to him. The white man noticed the smile and respect on the man's face and picked up the fruit, setting aside the feeling of neglect he had experienced earlier. The man, dark but healthy with a muscular body, brought a cot and gestured with his hands.

"Thank you very much. I'm Shelley, PB Shelley from England." Shelley extended his hand. When he got no response, he made himself comfortable on the cot and had one more fruit. It was much sweeter than the first and quenched his hunger. "Thank you," he said again. The dark man stood with both hands on his wooden staff but did not reply. He did not understand and resorted to sign language, conveying his readiness to bring more fruit from the garden behind him. He seemed proud of his plantation and showed his inclination to please his guest. He rotated both hands to show he had plenty of fruit in his vast garden.

Shelley also took to sign language and showed his full tummy. He expressed his thanks by tipping his hat, but his gesture did not register on the plantation man, as he stood with a blank expression on his face. Both looked at each other but could not break the language barrier.

The plantation man went into a thatched hut and returned with a clean cloth and a pail of water. Shelley cleaned his mouth and hands and took a few coins from his pocket to offer, but the gardener declined by moving his head across. Shelley caught the man's hands and placed the cash, but the man returned it. No matter what Shelley tried, the man refused.

As Shelley relaxed on a full stomach, he recollected he was last in a boat caught in a storm. He tried to place the scenes in the context and sequence but failed. Shelley could not understand how he had landed next to the strange plantation. When he tried hard, the scenes flashed before him but did not answer his doubts.

The troops returned, led by the well-dressed man on the white stallion. His troops marched behind him, shouting something Shelly did not understand. The soldiers called just the way any army would after a victorious battle. The front lines of the foot soldiers danced, swinging their arms and legs. A few men on horseback blew on a curved horn, and a few drummers played to give a beat to the dancers. Shelley stood aside, out of the way of the army. From the troop's uniform, he could see the same force that had retreated earlier.

Shelley stood watching the spectacle that now resembled a carnival, except for some bleeding participants. He tried to stop someone and ask a few questions about who they were and what battle they had fought. The gardener ran to meet the victorious army as the troops neared him. He stood to one side and folded his hands. The leader stopped before the man and noticed Shelley in a long, thick overcoat, dark trousers, and a hat. He moved on.

Shelley looked at his dress and realized he had come from a wintry England. As the leader moved on, Shelley had doffed his hat, but the leader on horseback trotted away without acknowledging his gesture. Shelley stomped and said aloud, "It is just like England, where no one has given a damn." He found the seeds of the fruit he had had earlier and kicked one of them with his right foot.

The seed flew and should have landed on the plantation. Instead, it swerved in midflight and hit one of the foot soldiers bringing up the rear. The soldier, hurt from the earlier fight and bleeding from the forehead, felt the fruit hitting, which intensified his pain. He charged at the

stranger with his sword held high. He would have hurt Shelley badly, but the soldier next to him caught him just in time and prevented any harm to the white man.

The second man, probably senior in rank to the first, stood before Shelley, gave him a once over, and asked a few questions in his dialect. When Shelley did not respond, the soldier called a third man who asked a few more questions in the same dialect.

“Look, I don’t understand your language. I do not understand many things. Could you tell me who you are and what this place is? Incidentally, I’m Shelley, PB Shelley from England.”

The two who asked him questions looked at each other and seemed to decide on some course of action. On their orders, a third man appeared with a strong rope and tied Shelley’s both hands as he would tie a prisoner of war and showed the way.

Shelley protested, “Look, I have not committed any offence. Nor am I from the enemy camp. I’m the son of a member of the British parliament, and I have been to Oxford. I may add I’m a writer with many published essays to my credit. I’m also a poet. What you are doing is unfair, to say the least. I want to see the British Ambassador, and he is likely to get terribly angry and take quick action against you people. I’m warning you.”

His words did not register with the soldiers. The troops took him along a road laid with bricks. After a couple of hours, they entered what looked like a town or a city. The street was lined on both sides with men, women, and children who lustily cheered the victorious army. Some even threw flowers and garlands to show their appreciation.

Shelley looked around with wonder. The people cheering were dressed in colourful cotton clothes that covered them from foot to neck. The people were in shades of brown, and the women were lighter. The

women looked well-fed and exuded oomph and happiness. They had long hair and plenty of flowers tucked in them. Some sported garlands of flowers of many hues and ornaments in gold and jewels. The buildings on both sides of the road seemed like structures constructed of stone and mortar. Some had the first floor, and people stood on top of the buildings and showered flowers on the victorious troops.

The troops took Shelley through a high arch that seemed like an ornate entrance to a palace or castle. Soon, the victorious army passed through the gate into a court, and the troops took him to the central hall that bespoke opulence. It looked no less regal than the aisle in Buckingham Palace.

It was a long hall with high ornate chairs on both sides occupied by people who looked like nobility, for they had some distinguishing dresses and gold and pearl necklaces. A group of eight, dressed differently, sat on a raised pedestal at one side. A few odd bodies of different skin colours sat in a separate corner. Their skin color and dress stood out in the crowded room. At the end of the hall stood a raised dais with a more oversized chair, as beautiful as the British Emperor's throne. The chair had arms with the figures of tigers built in them. Covered with rich silks with jewels embedded, it looked like a throne of a rich and powerful king.

The crowded hall showed good discipline, as pin drop silence reigned. The three persons who had tied his hands kept Shelley standing in the middle of the hall and retreated to a corner. Shelley, seething with anger, looked around to appeal to one of the nobilities. A pecking order appeared, as those closer to the throne had more ornaments than those farther from it.

One of the odd bodies stood, walked to the nobleman in quick steps, and talked to him for a minute. The nobleman stood, ran up to Shelley,

untied his hands, and said something to the soldiers. He must have given them a dressing down, or so it seemed, as they mumbled with bent heads.

The nobleman and the other gentleman stood before Shelley and said something like an apology. He ordered a comfortable chair for the visitor but withdrew and returned to his seat in a hurry.

Meanwhile, the congregation stood, folded their hands, and bent their heads. A couple of people blew a curved horn, another musician played some drums, and finally, a set of cymbals crashed. A small procession entered the hall from the left. A group of three in the van, dressed in saffron robes and wearing beads necklaces, chanted something in a sing-song fashion. Another set of three, dressed the same way, brought up the rear. In the centre, the King walked in a regal manner. His rich clothes, several ornaments around his neck, the way he strolled holding his head high, and his graceful gait showed he could be none other than the King. His headgear, in red silks with a white plume, confirmed it. The entire congregation welcomed him with a single chant. At the hall's centre, the King ascended the steps, greeted his audience with folded hands, and took his seat on the throne. Shelley transferred his hat from his head to his lap involuntarily. When the King signaled, the nobility took their seats. All personnel participating in the ceremony heralding the King's arrival withdrew.

As on cue, one curvy woman, dressed in body-fitting silks of many colours, appeared from a different corner, stood in the center of the hall, and bowed with folded hands. The King raised his right hand as if he were permitting to start the proceedings. The lissome danseuse danced to the music provided by a small orchestra seated behind a pillar.

The woman danced to the beat, twisting her torso, turning her hands, and gracefully moving her legs, entralling the entire gathering. She showed different expressions that conveyed love, anger, jealousy, laughter, and hatred. When she changed her moods, the audience

responded as if they were going through the same emotions and clapped. Encouraged, she danced with more verve and won her audience's admiration. The King smiled, twirling the ends of his handlebar moustache. The audience clapped enthusiastically for a few minutes when the performance finished, and Shelley joined, showing his delight.

One nobleman closest to the throne stood and raised his hand to stop the clapping. Meanwhile, the King took out one of the many necklaces around his neck and held it out. One of the courtiers carried it and presented it to the dancer, who received it with folded hands, curtsied differently, and withdrew from the court.

The nobleman who signaled to stop the clapping stood and started the proceedings. Reading from a parchment, the minister seemed to have set the agenda for the day.

The King looked at Shelley, stood, and, using both hands, beckoned him to approach the throne. Shelley instinctively obeyed and walked up to the podium, holding his hat. The King posed a question, and the nobility explained and answered, but Shelley could not understand their interaction. Shelley said, "I don't know what this place is, who you are, but let me introduce myself. I'm PB Shelley from England, a writer and a poet of sorts, your Highness." When the King did not show any response to that, he added, "I may add I'm the son of a member of the parliament—the British Parliament, of course."

When he found no change in the King's demeanor, he tried to explain using hand signals that he was from England and could not explain his presence in the strange country. None of the court members could understand what Shelley tried to convey, but when he showed that he was a writer and a poet, the message somehow got through and won the admiration of everyone. The King clapped and asked Shelley to come closer while he extended both his hands. When close, he hugged Shelley, took out one of the many necklaces around his neck, and garlanded

Shelley. One of the noblemen walked up to Shelley and escorted him to a seat closer to the throne.

Shelley watched the court's proceedings organized by the nobleman at the foot of the podium. The discipline of the court, the respect shown by everyone to the King, and the King's dignity were indeed praiseworthy. However, the absence of women in the entire court was conspicuous. The King dispensed justice, resolved disputes, listened to a few religious and literary discourses, and finally retired to his chambers following the same path he had used earlier to take his throne. Shelley sat as a mute witness, as he could not follow the court proceedings.

Shelley looked at the necklace around his neck. It had pearls, each the size of a blueberry but shining white and bright and joined by a thick gold thread. A diamond the size of an almond formed the pendant, and precious stones of different hues lay in between, all arranged in an artistic pattern, creating the chain.

What good deed have I done to land up in this fantastic place and receive this kindness from this benevolent king?" he asked himself, as no one could understand and answer him. Meanwhile, the court emptied in an orderly fashion.

Chapter 2

Left alone in the vast hall, Shelley looked around for help, which came within a few minutes. The foreigner, who had arranged his release in the court earlier, approached him and asked, “Frenchman?”

“No, I’m an Englishman. Don’t I look like one?”

“I’m sorry, I speak little English. I’m Portuguese, from Lisbon. I’m a traveler and understand a little of the local language.”

“What language do people speak here? What is this place? Why are you here?”

“This is India, you know?”

“Of course, I know India. The East India Company used to pay handsome dividends as the trade with India used to be brisk,” Shelley said.

“This place is Vijayanagaram. The king is Krishnadevaraya. Here they speak Telugu or Kannada. Understand?”

“No, I don’t understand anything you mentioned, not even the language. Could you tell me the date?”

“I do not know the date, but it is the sixteenth century.”

“I’m a poet of the nineteenth century. How in heavens did I land here?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“King is looking for some man to speak your language. Come with me tonight. My name is Paes, Domingo Paes.”

Shelley spent the night in the quarters of Paes, a two-storied building. He had an excellent bath provided by two attendants, a sumptuous dinner of fried chicken, fish with rice as white as milk, and a few glasses of local wine that put him to sleep. Shelley seemed in the best spirits when he got ready to attend the court after a delightful breakfast of cooked vegetables. He showed utter delight when one nobleman approached him and greeted him in English but with an accent.

“Good morning, my name is Sastry, and I'm your translator as per the king's orders,” he said.

“Thank God. I thought I'd never find an English-speaking soul here,”

“Don't be angry. This is a beautiful place, and the king, although powerful, is a kind man. He is also learned and a poet.”

“Now, he speaks English. I go,” Paes said and left them.

“The Chief Minister has arranged quarters for you. I will take you in the evening. Now we must go to court without delay. The king will be upset,” he said and took Shelley in a horse-drawn carriage to the court, where the two took the seats allotted to them close to the throne after three rows of noble people.

Sastry presented Shelley to the king and explained the gentleman was from England, a country consisting of a few islands north of many countries but wealthy and powerful. He said the visitor happened to be the son of a noble person in the court of their king and a well-educated man, a writer, and a poet. The king learnt the words from Sastry, smiled, and told Shelley, “Thank you.”

After that, Sastry gave a running commentary of the court proceedings during the day. He had also explained how kind and just the king was and how he dispensed gifts to anyone who pleased him. Shelley saw some people standing and reciting some song or poetry and the king honoring each person with a suitable gift, from a gold coin to a necklace.

The high-class performers received silver salvers filled with gold coins that would make a fortune anywhere in the world.

In the evening, Sastry took Shelley to a two-storied structure no less, in any way, than the quarters of the Portuguese friend and the facilities provided to him. The following day, Sastry arrived, sauntering. He carried himself erect and walked with a gait exuding wealth and confidence, of medium height and with a potbelly beginning to form. Dressed in saffron silks that covered his body from the waist down, he had another robe hanging down from his shoulders, covering his upper body. Two necklaces, one golden and the other of beads hanging from his neck, showed his class. A thick thread ran from his left shoulder to the right across his torso. A set of three white lines drawn across adorned his forehead, and a red dot stood in the centre just above the bridge of his nose. He had a funny hairdo. The fore part was clean shaved, and the rest of the hair was gathered like a pigtail. He looked like one of the well-dressed noblemen in the court and a man who took pains about his appearance. When he arrived, Shelley showed immense happiness. Sastry noticed it and said, “You look happy.”

“Yes, I am, as I could find you speaking a smattering of English.”

“What was that?”

“Never mind. I’m delighted, as I found you to tell me about this place and people. You also exude a nice smell.”

“Oh, smell. I use sandalwood paste here,” he said, showing the horizontal lines on his forehead.

“Are you happy in your house? The minister wants to know.”

“Yes, I have three servants, one for providing me the food, one for making my bed and arranging my bath. And the last one is to keep my clothes and quarters clean. Thank your minister.”

“Today, the king doesn’t hold court. You are free to do whatever you like,” Sastry said.

“First, I want to know how you can speak English. Second, I want to go back to my country, England, as soon as possible. Third, I want to go round the city to observe people, their customs, costumes, schools, and markets.”

“Sure. I'm fond of travelling. Once, I went west following the sun. I saw the sea for the first time and a few ships. I wanted to go on the sea and requested the ships’ people to take me. One ship took me, stopping at many ports. Finally, they dropped me someplace. I learnt it was England and the people speak English. I spent one year in your country and learnt your language. It was hard in the beginning, but I learnt a little. The place was cold, but one kind man gave me some warm clothes, and I got used to the cold. I know some English, but I pose I know it well, to make some money.”

“You speak English reasonably well. I’ll also use simple English you can understand. Now, how about my returning to England?”

“I’ll speak to the minister and arrange a passage in one of the ships. It will take some time.”

“Mind you, it is difficult, as I’m a nineteenth century poet, and you are of the sixteenth century. Also, there may not be a British Ambassador here.”

“I do not understand anything. I will speak to our chief minister. What is the nineteenth century?”

“It means I’m a man three hundred years ahead of you. A century means a hundred years.”

“I understand a hundred. How are you ahead?”

“Never mind. Meanwhile, please take me around your city, as it looks beautiful and far different from the places I visited.”

“Sure. I can arrange this. You like to go in a horse carriage?”

“No, I’d like to go walking.”

Sastry took Shelley for a guided tour of the city. The streets, well laid out with bricks, looked neat and clean. The roads seemed no different from the cobbled stone streets in England. People walked along at a leisurely pace. No one seemed to be in a hurry. When a few people on horseback approached, they warned the people on the road in advance to make room for them. Occasionally, an elephant with a mahout atop passed by. Buildings, small and of medium size, stood on either side, and some had shops in them. Some sold vegetables and fruits, like any street in England, but some sold precious stones. Sacks of diamonds, pearls, rubies, and other gems stood on the raised verandahs. The customers took the gems out, examined them, and paid with gold coins from pouches they carried. No police nor any equestrians protecting the jewels could be seen. There seemed to be no thieves around.

“Do these people sell gems openly as if they were vegetables?”

“I don’t understand.”

“No thieves or robbers to steal these gems?”

“No, no stealing in my country.”

There were many shops selling flowers of varied sizes and colours. The women fancied them, for they were buying them in bulk from the heaps in front of each shop. Each street had a sports complex at the end. It had many sandpits where people practiced wrestling, sword fighting, and hand-to-hand combat. Shelley wanted to see them, and Sastry took him to one.

In the sandpit, the wrestlers greeted each other with folded hands before the commencement of a bout. An older man stood in the centre and supervised the episode, giving instructions as and when needed. The spectators formed a ring around the pit and encouraged the participants.

The other holes where different sports flourished followed the same pattern. In the open spaces, few people practiced horsemanship. Some cantered, while some galloped. A few practiced trotting in style as if drilling to take their place in the ceremonial Royal guard.

While watching the horsemanship on display, Sastry drew Shelley's attention to a corner where the equestrians practiced swordfight on horseback.

"Cavalry," Shelley said. The foot soldiers practiced sword fights and archers shooting skills a few yards to the right.

"Excellent," Shelley said, and Sastry warmed to the comment.

"We have artists and artisans at work mastering their skills." He showed a street where people used a hammer and chisel to sew figurines out of rocks. Some formed figures of muscled men while others cut voluptuous women. The figurines seemed surreal, for they looked the same as the women in the streets. A few artisans had chiseled to make trees, animals, flowers, and other items needed to form a scene. "Excellent again," Shelley said.

"You say excellent again and again."

"Because you would not understand other words."

"Now, I'll show you something even more interesting," Sastry said and took his English friend to a street a few blocks away. As they passed each house, they heard music and the rustle of ankle bracelets. "What's that strange noise?" Shelley asked.

“It is the noise of anklet bells used for dancing. It means some girl or woman is dancing in the house.”

“What do you mean, anklet bells?”

“Dancers wear a bracelet around the ankle. It has many small bells attached to it. When the dancer shuffles her feet, the bells jingle in tune with the music for the dance.”

“Can I watch the dance and the ankle bracelet?”

“Of course, you can. I’ll request the man of the house.” Sastry went inside and returned in a moment. “They were highly pleased a foreigner has taken an interest in their dance,” he said and took Shelley inside, where the entire household received them bending waist down and with folded hands. They provided seats for the visitors and showed them a pair of ankle bracelets with plenty of small bells attached to each of them. The music started.

Without any further ado, a young girl in her teens danced with a rare passion. The ankle bracelets made a slight noise to complement the main music.

The dance lasted a few minutes, and the visitors looked pleased. At the end of the dance, Shelley clapped, took out his pocket watch, and presented it to the dancer.

Shelley walked up to her when she hesitated and put it in her hands. It was too big for her dainty hands, and Shelley looked around for a suitable spot to keep it. When he found a figurine that looked like the icon of a Goddess, he kept it at the feet of the icon.

“What are you doing?” Sastry asked.

“I saw the king presenting a necklace to the danseuse in the court. This young girl is an equally accomplished dancer, but I’m no king. I don’t have a necklace, and I’ve presented this pocket watch to her.”

“You have a necklace around your neck,” Sastry laughed.

“Goodness gracious, I didn’t remember the king had presented one to me.” He then replaced the watch with the necklace. The young dancer took the chain closer to her eyes and swung her head thrice across before placing it around her neck.

“What has she done with the necklace?”

“She showed her respect to the gift she received.”

“That was indeed decent of her,” Shelley said as they took leave of their hosts. The house man stopped them at the threshold and insisted they partake in some refreshments before leaving. He took them inside and served them a plate of snacks and sweets of different tastes. As they were going, the host said, “Thanks.”

After leaving their house, Shelley asked, “How did they know this English word?”

“I explained the word to the king, and he used it in the court. All noble people asked me for the meaning and practiced using it. Now it has become fashionable to use it.”

“Good. Soon, people in your country will learn many words in my language. I want to visit a school and see how the children learn their three Rs.”

“I don’t know what three Rs are, but I’ll take you to a school.”

The school had no building but a wide-open space with trees. Each tree provided adequate shade that accommodated about twenty children. The teacher, an older man, stood or sat in the centre and taught his wards. Neither the teacher nor the pupils had any books with them. The teacher explained something, and the students, after understanding, learnt their lessons by rote. Each tree catered for children of an age group. The teacher for the elderly students explained using the stick in

his hand and drawing figures on the ground. The elder ones wrote their lessons on small parchments, each three by nine inches. Using what seemed a sharp iron pen, the students punched on the parchments from left to the right.

When the two visited each class, the teacher paused his lesson, and the students stood, folded their hands, and said, “Namaste.”

“What are they saying?”

“They are greeting you,” Sastry said and greeted them the same way. Shelley followed suit but did not know what to say. When coached, Shelley could say the words.

“It’s the way people greet each other in our country. I think you should practice it.”

“I took note of it.”

“Namaste has three uses. For equals, strangers, and guests, it is a greeting. For superiors, like God and king, one says Namaste with head bent. Third, it is to acknowledge the greeting of others.”

Before leaving each class, Shelley made it a point to join his hands and say, “Namaste.” The children giggled at his pronunciation, but the teacher admonished them.

The school had vocational training also. It had pottery, carpentry, and foundry classes for making swords of assorted sizes, shapes, and lengths.

The students took out the hot metal and beat it into any form they needed. On the other end, the students had jewelry lessons. Shelley watched as the students made ornaments with beautiful designs. All the students had no drawings to guide them and relied entirely on their imagination or memory.

Similarly, the students practiced music using different instruments, relying on their memory alone. None of them had any notes before them. Students exercised their vocal cords in the same fashion.

Another class demanded Shelley's attention, as the students kept laughing after each lesson, and the teacher did not seem to mind it.

"Why are these students laughing heartily, unmindful of the teacher?"

"They appreciate the humor. One humorous poet has joined the court and won all, including the king. Now, humor is popular. These students are learning humour."

"Amazing, they learn all these trades with no notes except the oral lessons of the teachers. I studied using many books," Shelley said.

When Sastry explained to the students, they wanted to know what books were. Shelley found it hard to explain paper, print, and books. He left the class disappointed to note his inability to make children understand the basics. "All my learning at Oxford has gone waste," he said to no one in particular.

Chapter 3

The following morning, a gentleman, dressed like Sastry but with just a necklace of beads and a thick thread across his torso, arrived and narrated something Shelley could not make out. Sastry went up the steps to Shelley's quarters, taking two at a time. He found Shelley ready to go to the King's court.

"What's the hurry? First, tell me what the morning visitor narrated and what he expected in return?" Shelley asked.

"He is a brahmin, like me, but poor. He tells you the date, phase of the moon, auspicious time, and such details, and then he expects something in return."

"What should I give him?"

"Anything you can spare. We normally give some rice, vegetables, and a few coins."

"I will give a gold coin."

"He will be delighted, but give a coin once weekly."

"Now tell me, why are you in a hurry?"

"The king wants you to read one of your poems, and I should translate it for him."

"What about my passage to England?"

"If the King is pleased with you, he will order his minister to help you. You give your best poem and please the King."

“It’s no problem, and here it is,” he said, reciting the poem Ode to a Skylark. Sastry sat with a bewildered look all through. “What does it mean? Who is a skylark?”

“My dear Sastry, a skylark is a bird.”

“How can I explain to the king when I didn’t understand a word of it?”

“Don’t you worry! Even in my country, only a few could understand.”

“Why is that?”

“It requires a level of education to understand it. As for the King, I will explain to you first. You remember all the good points and inform the King.”

“I have a better idea. I will get parchment and an iron pen. I’ll write down every word of what you say and read it before the King.”

“Splendid. Are you ready?”

“No, I am not ready. First, Today is not our day at the court. Second, I’ll get a pen and writing material.”

“The students we met yesterday did not know paper and books.”

“I’m not a student but a pundit. You wait and watch.” He hurried down the steps. He returned in a moment, sat cross-legged, and said, “I’m ready.” He had parchments and an iron instrument.

Shelley explained each stanza, its meaning, and his philosophy underneath each idea. Sastry took copious notes in his language. “I don’t understand a few things. Why should the sweetest songs have something sad in them?”

Shelley again explained the meaning and what prompted him to write those lines. It was afternoon and too late to go to the town by then. They

had lunch, and Sastry had a siesta. In the evening, three persons walked up to Shelley's quarters.

"Who are these men?" Shelley asked Sastry.

"One is for making cotton clothes for you to go to court and other purposes, the second is to wash your clothes, and the third is to shave your head."

"I can do with some cotton clothes; these winter clothes make me uncomfortable. A fellow to wash my clothes is welcome, but why should I shave my head?"

"Since you are a poet, you should look like one. Poets here have half-shaven heads and a pigtail like me."

"Nonsense. I don't want my head shaven. He can shave me on alternate days. Of course, clothes like a court poet appeal to me. Please thank your minister for providing me all these."

"I will."

"I see plenty of water in my bathroom. How do you get the water?"

"I don't know. You must ask the other foreigner. His people have made some arrangements. All of us get enough water for use at home."

"Excellent again."

Sastry took Shelley to court after two days. While going to the court in a horse-drawn carriage, Shelley asked him, "Why didn't you come yesterday?"

"Our court was not held during the last two days."

"What do you mean *our* court?"

"The King has a vast kingdom where two languages, Telugu, and Kannada, are spoken. Two days for each set of people, one day for state

matters, seeing sports and games, and the last two days of the week for his time with the queens. That is the program of the King and his court.”

“Did you say, queens?”

“Yes, the king has two queens.”

“So, you had two days to understand the notes you have taken.

“Now I know every word of it, as I learnt it by rote.”

“You surprise me with your talent.”

“I know many books of poems that I learnt by heart.”

“I wish I could say that. I don’t even know Shakespeare by heart.”

“What is that?”

“Shakespeare was a great poet of our language.”

“I see.” As Shelley and his friend made their entry, the entire court laughed at the foreigner’s attire but suppressed it out of deference to him. With his midriff partly exposed, Shelley, dressed like a poet, provided a spectacle that evoked laughter. Sastry told the minister he was ready, and the latter took note of it and promised to fit in the day’s program and call the poet at the proper time.

“No need; I’ll recite the poem and explain it to the king myself.”

“You’re a big show off, as usual.”

“Otherwise, how would I earn some gifts from the king?”

The King arrived in the court, took his seat, and enquired Sastry about the foreigner and his poetry. Looking at Shelley, the King found it hard to hold his laughter. He, however, complimented the poet. Tenali Raman stood up and, as was his wont, rendered a poem about Shelley. When the entire court laughed, Sastry explained the poem had nothing to offend Shelley but only to appreciate his new dress. While the minister

stood and pointed out the more essential items on his list, the King wanted to listen to the foreigner first.

Sastry took his stance with his left foot, extended a foot in the front, recited the poem, and explained the meaning of each stanza. Shelley stood as a mute witness but was amazed at the prodigious talent of Sastry, who repeated the whole poem word for word without knowing the meaning of many words. He explained the importance as well as he would have done. After finishing the recital, Sastry looked at Shelley, who clapped for his performance. The King and his court stood in a standing ovation. The court poets gathered around Sastry and started discussing the poem he recited. Meanwhile, one of the poets clapped, drew everyone's attention, and rendered his poetry. The court appreciated his poem also equally.

“What was that?” Shelley asked.

“He recited a poem to appreciate your poetry,” Sastry whispered.

“How could he do that? He did not know my poetry till you explained now.”

“That is what distinguishes these poets. They can form a poem on any subject that fancies them in a few minutes.”

“Do these poems formed fast follow all the rules of poetry?”

“You will be surprised. All such poetry will conform to the rules.”

“I'm intrigued as we spend time searching for the right word, rhyming, meter, and several other matters.”

“You see these eight poets; they are called eight mighty elephants. I don't know the English word, but they are eminent poets.”

The King smiled, twirled his mustache, and asked one of his courtiers to bring the foreign poet to the throne. He hugged Shelley and clapped his hands. A courtier brought a silver salver with gold coins.

First, the King took a silk shawl and wrapped it around him. A few drums and one wind instrument with a strong bass sounded on cue. The King then garlanded him with a heavy necklace and presented the silver salver. To cap it all, he said, "Thanks."

The King presented one of his necklaces to the court poet and appreciated his poem in equal measure.

Flabbergasted with all the honour bestowed on him, Shelley folded his hands and said, "Namaste." He returned to his seat, walking backward, as briefed by Sastry. Showing one's rear to the mighty King was considered disrespectful in the court.

While returning to his seat, Shelley noted a dancer was talking in hushed tones to the minister. A plot was afoot, but he did not fathom it. When the day's events were rescheduled, the dancer lost her chance to perform and show her talent to the King. Shelley noted the pout of the dancer while she retreated into a corner and out of sight.

Sastry later explained the court followed a practice of giving a chance to a new dancer every time the court assembled as the King presented a necklace if he appreciated the nuances of her dance. The minister devised the system to ensure the King's benevolence was shared by many. It also encouraged many young girls and women to practice the various forms of dances to perfection to win the appreciation of the King and merit a necklace that would go a long way to feed her and her family. The King, an accomplished poet, encouraged fine arts and wanted them to flourish in his kingdom. Shelley appreciated the noble idea and wondered why the British Emperors, with all the wealth from the colonies, did not have a similar idea.

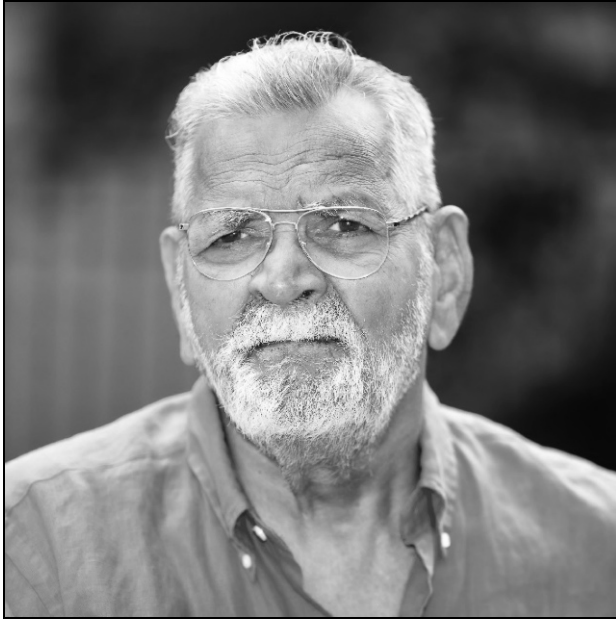
Sastry brought out a new fact. Shelley unknowingly made an enemy in the girl, as she was deprived of the gift she had worked hard for and had been looking forward to. She was not likely to get her chance to perform for some time, all due to his poetry.

“She can’t fault me, can she?”

“I know, I’ll try to explain to her, but it’s hard to convince women on these matters.”

Sastry’s friend had a different take on the matter. “Could be she appreciated his poetry,” he said.

“She did not look like that,” Shelley said.



The author graduated from the ANDHRA University, joined the Indian Navy as an officer, retired as a Commander, and joined the Mercantile Marine as a ship captain. He took to writing and publishing middles, and short stories in Indian print media, including Alive, woman's era, and Gentleman He also wrote blogs on various websites. He has the following books published to his credit: The Colonel's Last Wicket, The Good Boy, The incomplete Man, Odd Ways of Gods, Emma's Escapades in Incredible India, and children's books Captain Riddle's Treasure and Race for Crown Jewels. A producer has bought the IPRs of Captain Riddle's Treasure in the USA for a comic book, TV Series, or s movie. www.gvramarao.com



Shelley
and Sri Sri
in
Vijayanagaram

Historical, Literary, Fantasy, Novella

CDR G.V. RAMA RAO

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958877-40-1

E-book ISBN: 979-8-88531-314-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters are historical, and the events in this book are fictitious. British English and syntax have been used, and contractions have been avoided.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Rao, Cdr G.V. Rama

Shelley and Sri Sri in Vijayanagaram by Cdr G.V. Rama Rao

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022915971

Chapter 1

A white man stood transfixed as a few hundred strangely dressed foot soldiers ran past him. A considerable contingent of cavalymen, all dressed alike, followed them. Their uniforms and weapons showed they could be none other than an army. While some were wounded and bleeding, everyone seemed dejected, like soldiers retreating in defeat. Suddenly, another horseman carrying a sword and shield came charging from the opposite direction on a magnificent white stallion. The mini army stopped at the sight of the new equestrian, who shouted a command at a high pitch. His order worked instantaneously. The contingent stopped, turned around, yelled something akin to a battle cry, and moved towards where they had come from. The command of the newcomer electrified the whole retreating force. Shedding their despair, they moved with a purpose. Even the horses turned on the balls of their hooves and started galloping, throwing a cloud of dust like a fierce desert sand storm. Nobody took note of the white man, who looked neglected and sad.

The white man took in the scene around him. When the dust settled, he noticed the bright sun halfway up to the zenith, an azure sky with a few patches of white fluffy clouds and a plantation next to him. It was a strange place he had never visited, nor could he determine who those soldiers were. The only thing he could understand was the man's arrival on the white stallion. He seemed a born leader, for he changed the order of the battle, wherever it was taking place, and infused new energy and determination in the troops retreating from it. The white man started perspiring and feeling hungry. He looked around, took in the strange scene, and noticed a plantation full of trees laden with fruits hanging from every branch. The plantation had neither a fence nor a gate. Feeling

hungry and curious to find out, he took a few steps and plucked a ripe yellow fruit. He found it succulent and sweet beyond words. He wanted to take a second one but hesitated and looked around.

From a nearby hut, a man appeared dressed in a white cloth around his waist, which fell to his knees, and similar material loosely tied around his head. He had a long staff and a cane tray with three luscious fruits in his right hand. He approached the white man, gave him a once over, bowed, and pushed the tray to him. The white man noticed the smile and respect on the man's face and picked up the fruit, setting aside the feeling of neglect he had experienced earlier. The man, dark but healthy with a muscular body, brought a cot and gestured with his hands.

"Thank you very much. I'm Shelley, PB Shelley from England." Shelley extended his hand. When he got no response, he made himself comfortable on the cot and had one more fruit. It was much sweeter than the first and quenched his hunger. "Thank you," he said again. The dark man stood with both hands on his wooden staff but did not reply. He did not understand and resorted to sign language, conveying his readiness to bring more fruit from the garden behind him. He seemed proud of his plantation and showed his inclination to please his guest. He rotated both hands to show he had plenty of fruit in his vast garden.

Shelley also took to sign language and showed his full tummy. He expressed his thanks by tipping his hat, but his gesture did not register on the plantation man, as he stood with a blank expression on his face. Both looked at each other but could not break the language barrier.

The plantation man went into a thatched hut and returned with a clean cloth and a pail of water. Shelley cleaned his mouth and hands and took a few coins from his pocket to offer, but the gardener declined by moving his head across. Shelley caught the man's hands and placed the cash, but the man returned it. No matter what Shelley tried, the man refused.

As Shelley relaxed on a full stomach, he recollected he was last in a boat caught in a storm. He tried to place the scenes in the context and sequence but failed. Shelley could not understand how he had landed next to the strange plantation. When he tried hard, the scenes flashed before him but did not answer his doubts.

The troops returned, led by the well-dressed man on the white stallion. His troops marched behind him, shouting something Shelly did not understand. The soldiers called just the way any army would after a victorious battle. The front lines of the foot soldiers danced, swinging their arms and legs. A few men on horseback blew on a curved horn, and a few drummers played to give a beat to the dancers. Shelley stood aside, out of the way of the army. From the troop's uniform, he could see the same force that had retreated earlier.

Shelley stood watching the spectacle that now resembled a carnival, except for some bleeding participants. He tried to stop someone and ask a few questions about who they were and what battle they had fought. The gardener ran to meet the victorious army as the troops neared him. He stood to one side and folded his hands. The leader stopped before the man and noticed Shelley in a long, thick overcoat, dark trousers, and a hat. He moved on.

Shelley looked at his dress and realized he had come from a wintry England. As the leader moved on, Shelley had doffed his hat, but the leader on horseback trotted away without acknowledging his gesture. Shelley stomped and said aloud, "It is just like England, where no one has given a damn." He found the seeds of the fruit he had had earlier and kicked one of them with his right foot.

The seed flew and should have landed on the plantation. Instead, it swerved in midflight and hit one of the foot soldiers bringing up the rear. The soldier, hurt from the earlier fight and bleeding from the forehead, felt the fruit hitting, which intensified his pain. He charged at the

stranger with his sword held high. He would have hurt Shelley badly, but the soldier next to him caught him just in time and prevented any harm to the white man.

The second man, probably senior in rank to the first, stood before Shelley, gave him a once over, and asked a few questions in his dialect. When Shelley did not respond, the soldier called a third man who asked a few more questions in the same dialect.

“Look, I don’t understand your language. I do not understand many things. Could you tell me who you are and what this place is? Incidentally, I’m Shelley, PB Shelley from England.”

The two who asked him questions looked at each other and seemed to decide on some course of action. On their orders, a third man appeared with a strong rope and tied Shelley’s both hands as he would tie a prisoner of war and showed the way.

Shelley protested, “Look, I have not committed any offence. Nor am I from the enemy camp. I’m the son of a member of the British parliament, and I have been to Oxford. I may add I’m a writer with many published essays to my credit. I’m also a poet. What you are doing is unfair, to say the least. I want to see the British Ambassador, and he is likely to get terribly angry and take quick action against you people. I’m warning you.”

His words did not register with the soldiers. The troops took him along a road laid with bricks. After a couple of hours, they entered what looked like a town or a city. The street was lined on both sides with men, women, and children who lustily cheered the victorious army. Some even threw flowers and garlands to show their appreciation.

Shelley looked around with wonder. The people cheering were dressed in colourful cotton clothes that covered them from foot to neck. The people were in shades of brown, and the women were lighter. The

women looked well-fed and exuded oomph and happiness. They had long hair and plenty of flowers tucked in them. Some sported garlands of flowers of many hues and ornaments in gold and jewels. The buildings on both sides of the road seemed like structures constructed of stone and mortar. Some had the first floor, and people stood on top of the buildings and showered flowers on the victorious troops.

The troops took Shelley through a high arch that seemed like an ornate entrance to a palace or castle. Soon, the victorious army passed through the gate into a court, and the troops took him to the central hall that bespoke opulence. It looked no less regal than the aisle in Buckingham Palace.

It was a long hall with high ornate chairs on both sides occupied by people who looked like nobility, for they had some distinguishing dresses and gold and pearl necklaces. A group of eight, dressed differently, sat on a raised pedestal at one side. A few odd bodies of different skin colours sat in a separate corner. Their skin color and dress stood out in the crowded room. At the end of the hall stood a raised dais with a more oversized chair, as beautiful as the British Emperor's throne. The chair had arms with the figures of tigers built in them. Covered with rich silks with jewels embedded, it looked like a throne of a rich and powerful king.

The crowded hall showed good discipline, as pin drop silence reigned. The three persons who had tied his hands kept Shelley standing in the middle of the hall and retreated to a corner. Shelley, seething with anger, looked around to appeal to one of the nobilities. A pecking order appeared, as those closer to the throne had more ornaments than those farther from it.

One of the odd bodies stood, walked to the nobleman in quick steps, and talked to him for a minute. The nobleman stood, ran up to Shelley,

untied his hands, and said something to the soldiers. He must have given them a dressing down, or so it seemed, as they mumbled with bent heads.

The nobleman and the other gentleman stood before Shelley and said something like an apology. He ordered a comfortable chair for the visitor but withdrew and returned to his seat in a hurry.

Meanwhile, the congregation stood, folded their hands, and bent their heads. A couple of people blew a curved horn, another musician played some drums, and finally, a set of cymbals crashed. A small procession entered the hall from the left. A group of three in the van, dressed in saffron robes and wearing beads necklaces, chanted something in a sing-song fashion. Another set of three, dressed the same way, brought up the rear. In the centre, the King walked in a regal manner. His rich clothes, several ornaments around his neck, the way he strolled holding his head high, and his graceful gait showed he could be none other than the King. His headgear, in red silks with a white plume, confirmed it. The entire congregation welcomed him with a single chant. At the hall's centre, the King ascended the steps, greeted his audience with folded hands, and took his seat on the throne. Shelley transferred his hat from his head to his lap involuntarily. When the King signaled, the nobility took their seats. All personnel participating in the ceremony heralding the King's arrival withdrew.

As on cue, one curvy woman, dressed in body-fitting silks of many colours, appeared from a different corner, stood in the center of the hall, and bowed with folded hands. The King raised his right hand as if he were permitting to start the proceedings. The lissome danseuse danced to the music provided by a small orchestra seated behind a pillar.

The woman danced to the beat, twisting her torso, turning her hands, and gracefully moving her legs, entralling the entire gathering. She showed different expressions that conveyed love, anger, jealousy, laughter, and hatred. When she changed her moods, the audience

responded as if they were going through the same emotions and clapped. Encouraged, she danced with more verve and won her audience's admiration. The King smiled, twirling the ends of his handlebar moustache. The audience clapped enthusiastically for a few minutes when the performance finished, and Shelley joined, showing his delight.

One nobleman closest to the throne stood and raised his hand to stop the clapping. Meanwhile, the King took out one of the many necklaces around his neck and held it out. One of the courtiers carried it and presented it to the dancer, who received it with folded hands, curtsied differently, and withdrew from the court.

The nobleman who signaled to stop the clapping stood and started the proceedings. Reading from a parchment, the minister seemed to have set the agenda for the day.

The King looked at Shelley, stood, and, using both hands, beckoned him to approach the throne. Shelley instinctively obeyed and walked up to the podium, holding his hat. The King posed a question, and the nobility explained and answered, but Shelley could not understand their interaction. Shelley said, "I don't know what this place is, who you are, but let me introduce myself. I'm PB Shelley from England, a writer and a poet of sorts, your Highness." When the King did not show any response to that, he added, "I may add I'm the son of a member of the parliament—the British Parliament, of course."

When he found no change in the King's demeanor, he tried to explain using hand signals that he was from England and could not explain his presence in the strange country. None of the court members could understand what Shelley tried to convey, but when he showed that he was a writer and a poet, the message somehow got through and won the admiration of everyone. The King clapped and asked Shelley to come closer while he extended both his hands. When close, he hugged Shelley, took out one of the many necklaces around his neck, and garlanded

Shelley. One of the noblemen walked up to Shelley and escorted him to a seat closer to the throne.

Shelley watched the court's proceedings organized by the nobleman at the foot of the podium. The discipline of the court, the respect shown by everyone to the King, and the King's dignity were indeed praiseworthy. However, the absence of women in the entire court was conspicuous. The King dispensed justice, resolved disputes, listened to a few religious and literary discourses, and finally retired to his chambers following the same path he had used earlier to take his throne. Shelley sat as a mute witness, as he could not follow the court proceedings.

Shelley looked at the necklace around his neck. It had pearls, each the size of a blueberry but shining white and bright and joined by a thick gold thread. A diamond the size of an almond formed the pendant, and precious stones of different hues lay in between, all arranged in an artistic pattern, creating the chain.

What good deed have I done to land up in this fantastic place and receive this kindness from this benevolent king?" he asked himself, as no one could understand and answer him. Meanwhile, the court emptied in an orderly fashion.

Chapter 2

Left alone in the vast hall, Shelley looked around for help, which came within a few minutes. The foreigner, who had arranged his release in the court earlier, approached him and asked, “Frenchman?”

“No, I’m an Englishman. Don’t I look like one?”

“I’m sorry, I speak little English. I’m Portuguese, from Lisbon. I’m a traveler and understand a little of the local language.”

“What language do people speak here? What is this place? Why are you here?”

“This is India, you know?”

“Of course, I know India. The East India Company used to pay handsome dividends as the trade with India used to be brisk,” Shelley said.

“This place is Vijayanagaram. The king is Krishnadevaraya. Here they speak Telugu or Kannada. Understand?”

“No, I don’t understand anything you mentioned, not even the language. Could you tell me the date?”

“I do not know the date, but it is the sixteenth century.”

“I’m a poet of the nineteenth century. How in heavens did I land here?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“King is looking for some man to speak your language. Come with me tonight. My name is Paes, Domingo Paes.”

Shelley spent the night in the quarters of Paes, a two-storied building. He had an excellent bath provided by two attendants, a sumptuous dinner of fried chicken, fish with rice as white as milk, and a few glasses of local wine that put him to sleep. Shelley seemed in the best spirits when he got ready to attend the court after a delightful breakfast of cooked vegetables. He showed utter delight when one nobleman approached him and greeted him in English but with an accent.

“Good morning, my name is Sastry, and I'm your translator as per the king's orders,” he said.

“Thank God. I thought I'd never find an English-speaking soul here,”

“Don't be angry. This is a beautiful place, and the king, although powerful, is a kind man. He is also learned and a poet.”

“Now, he speaks English. I go,” Paes said and left them.

“The Chief Minister has arranged quarters for you. I will take you in the evening. Now we must go to court without delay. The king will be upset,” he said and took Shelley in a horse-drawn carriage to the court, where the two took the seats allotted to them close to the throne after three rows of noble people.

Sastry presented Shelley to the king and explained the gentleman was from England, a country consisting of a few islands north of many countries but wealthy and powerful. He said the visitor happened to be the son of a noble person in the court of their king and a well-educated man, a writer, and a poet. The king learnt the words from Sastry, smiled, and told Shelley, “Thank you.”

After that, Sastry gave a running commentary of the court proceedings during the day. He had also explained how kind and just the king was and how he dispensed gifts to anyone who pleased him. Shelley saw some people standing and reciting some song or poetry and the king honoring each person with a suitable gift, from a gold coin to a necklace.

The high-class performers received silver salvers filled with gold coins that would make a fortune anywhere in the world.

In the evening, Sastry took Shelley to a two-storied structure no less, in any way, than the quarters of the Portuguese friend and the facilities provided to him. The following day, Sastry arrived, sauntering. He carried himself erect and walked with a gait exuding wealth and confidence, of medium height and with a potbelly beginning to form. Dressed in saffron silks that covered his body from the waist down, he had another robe hanging down from his shoulders, covering his upper body. Two necklaces, one golden and the other of beads hanging from his neck, showed his class. A thick thread ran from his left shoulder to the right across his torso. A set of three white lines drawn across adorned his forehead, and a red dot stood in the centre just above the bridge of his nose. He had a funny hairdo. The fore part was clean shaved, and the rest of the hair was gathered like a pigtail. He looked like one of the well-dressed noblemen in the court and a man who took pains about his appearance. When he arrived, Shelley showed immense happiness. Sastry noticed it and said, “You look happy.”

“Yes, I am, as I could find you speaking a smattering of English.”

“What was that?”

“Never mind. I’m delighted, as I found you to tell me about this place and people. You also exude a nice smell.”

“Oh, smell. I use sandalwood paste here,” he said, showing the horizontal lines on his forehead.

“Are you happy in your house? The minister wants to know.”

“Yes, I have three servants, one for providing me the food, one for making my bed and arranging my bath. And the last one is to keep my clothes and quarters clean. Thank your minister.”

“Today, the king doesn’t hold court. You are free to do whatever you like,” Sastry said.

“First, I want to know how you can speak English. Second, I want to go back to my country, England, as soon as possible. Third, I want to go round the city to observe people, their customs, costumes, schools, and markets.”

“Sure. I'm fond of travelling. Once, I went west following the sun. I saw the sea for the first time and a few ships. I wanted to go on the sea and requested the ships’ people to take me. One ship took me, stopping at many ports. Finally, they dropped me someplace. I learnt it was England and the people speak English. I spent one year in your country and learnt your language. It was hard in the beginning, but I learnt a little. The place was cold, but one kind man gave me some warm clothes, and I got used to the cold. I know some English, but I pose I know it well, to make some money.”

“You speak English reasonably well. I’ll also use simple English you can understand. Now, how about my returning to England?”

“I’ll speak to the minister and arrange a passage in one of the ships. It will take some time.”

“Mind you, it is difficult, as I’m a nineteenth century poet, and you are of the sixteenth century. Also, there may not be a British Ambassador here.”

“I do not understand anything. I will speak to our chief minister. What is the nineteenth century?”

“It means I’m a man three hundred years ahead of you. A century means a hundred years.”

“I understand a hundred. How are you ahead?”

“Never mind. Meanwhile, please take me around your city, as it looks beautiful and far different from the places I visited.”

“Sure. I can arrange this. You like to go in a horse carriage?”

“No, I’d like to go walking.”

Sastry took Shelley for a guided tour of the city. The streets, well laid out with bricks, looked neat and clean. The roads seemed no different from the cobbled stone streets in England. People walked along at a leisurely pace. No one seemed to be in a hurry. When a few people on horseback approached, they warned the people on the road in advance to make room for them. Occasionally, an elephant with a mahout atop passed by. Buildings, small and of medium size, stood on either side, and some had shops in them. Some sold vegetables and fruits, like any street in England, but some sold precious stones. Sacks of diamonds, pearls, rubies, and other gems stood on the raised verandahs. The customers took the gems out, examined them, and paid with gold coins from pouches they carried. No police nor any equestrians protecting the jewels could be seen. There seemed to be no thieves around.

“Do these people sell gems openly as if they were vegetables?”

“I don’t understand.”

“No thieves or robbers to steal these gems?”

“No, no stealing in my country.”

There were many shops selling flowers of varied sizes and colours. The women fancied them, for they were buying them in bulk from the heaps in front of each shop. Each street had a sports complex at the end. It had many sandpits where people practiced wrestling, sword fighting, and hand-to-hand combat. Shelley wanted to see them, and Sastry took him to one.

In the sandpit, the wrestlers greeted each other with folded hands before the commencement of a bout. An older man stood in the centre and supervised the episode, giving instructions as and when needed. The spectators formed a ring around the pit and encouraged the participants.

The other holes where different sports flourished followed the same pattern. In the open spaces, few people practiced horsemanship. Some cantered, while some galloped. A few practiced trotting in style as if drilling to take their place in the ceremonial Royal guard.

While watching the horsemanship on display, Sastry drew Shelley's attention to a corner where the equestrians practiced swordfight on horseback.

"Cavalry," Shelley said. The foot soldiers practiced sword fights and archers shooting skills a few yards to the right.

"Excellent," Shelley said, and Sastry warmed to the comment.

"We have artists and artisans at work mastering their skills." He showed a street where people used a hammer and chisel to sew figurines out of rocks. Some formed figures of muscled men while others cut voluptuous women. The figurines seemed surreal, for they looked the same as the women in the streets. A few artisans had chiseled to make trees, animals, flowers, and other items needed to form a scene. "Excellent again," Shelley said.

"You say excellent again and again."

"Because you would not understand other words."

"Now, I'll show you something even more interesting," Sastry said and took his English friend to a street a few blocks away. As they passed each house, they heard music and the rustle of ankle bracelets. "What's that strange noise?" Shelley asked.

“It is the noise of anklet bells used for dancing. It means some girl or woman is dancing in the house.”

“What do you mean, anklet bells?”

“Dancers wear a bracelet around the ankle. It has many small bells attached to it. When the dancer shuffles her feet, the bells jingle in tune with the music for the dance.”

“Can I watch the dance and the ankle bracelet?”

“Of course, you can. I’ll request the man of the house.” Sastry went inside and returned in a moment. “They were highly pleased a foreigner has taken an interest in their dance,” he said and took Shelley inside, where the entire household received them bending waist down and with folded hands. They provided seats for the visitors and showed them a pair of ankle bracelets with plenty of small bells attached to each of them. The music started.

Without any further ado, a young girl in her teens danced with a rare passion. The ankle bracelets made a slight noise to complement the main music.

The dance lasted a few minutes, and the visitors looked pleased. At the end of the dance, Shelley clapped, took out his pocket watch, and presented it to the dancer.

Shelley walked up to her when she hesitated and put it in her hands. It was too big for her dainty hands, and Shelley looked around for a suitable spot to keep it. When he found a figurine that looked like the icon of a Goddess, he kept it at the feet of the icon.

“What are you doing?” Sastry asked.

“I saw the king presenting a necklace to the danseuse in the court. This young girl is an equally accomplished dancer, but I’m no king. I don’t have a necklace, and I’ve presented this pocket watch to her.”

“You have a necklace around your neck,” Sastry laughed.

“Goodness gracious, I didn’t remember the king had presented one to me.” He then replaced the watch with the necklace. The young dancer took the chain closer to her eyes and swung her head thrice across before placing it around her neck.

“What has she done with the necklace?”

“She showed her respect to the gift she received.”

“That was indeed decent of her,” Shelley said as they took leave of their hosts. The house man stopped them at the threshold and insisted they partake in some refreshments before leaving. He took them inside and served them a plate of snacks and sweets of different tastes. As they were going, the host said, “Thanks.”

After leaving their house, Shelley asked, “How did they know this English word?”

“I explained the word to the king, and he used it in the court. All noble people asked me for the meaning and practiced using it. Now it has become fashionable to use it.”

“Good. Soon, people in your country will learn many words in my language. I want to visit a school and see how the children learn their three Rs.”

“I don’t know what three Rs are, but I’ll take you to a school.”

The school had no building but a wide-open space with trees. Each tree provided adequate shade that accommodated about twenty children. The teacher, an older man, stood or sat in the centre and taught his wards. Neither the teacher nor the pupils had any books with them. The teacher explained something, and the students, after understanding, learnt their lessons by rote. Each tree catered for children of an age group. The teacher for the elderly students explained using the stick in

his hand and drawing figures on the ground. The elder ones wrote their lessons on small parchments, each three by nine inches. Using what seemed a sharp iron pen, the students punched on the parchments from left to the right.

When the two visited each class, the teacher paused his lesson, and the students stood, folded their hands, and said, “Namaste.”

“What are they saying?”

“They are greeting you,” Sastry said and greeted them the same way. Shelley followed suit but did not know what to say. When coached, Shelley could say the words.

“It’s the way people greet each other in our country. I think you should practice it.”

“I took note of it.”

“Namaste has three uses. For equals, strangers, and guests, it is a greeting. For superiors, like God and king, one says Namaste with head bent. Third, it is to acknowledge the greeting of others.”

Before leaving each class, Shelley made it a point to join his hands and say, “Namaste.” The children giggled at his pronunciation, but the teacher admonished them.

The school had vocational training also. It had pottery, carpentry, and foundry classes for making swords of assorted sizes, shapes, and lengths.

The students took out the hot metal and beat it into any form they needed. On the other end, the students had jewelry lessons. Shelley watched as the students made ornaments with beautiful designs. All the students had no drawings to guide them and relied entirely on their imagination or memory.

Similarly, the students practiced music using different instruments, relying on their memory alone. None of them had any notes before them. Students exercised their vocal cords in the same fashion.

Another class demanded Shelley's attention, as the students kept laughing after each lesson, and the teacher did not seem to mind it.

"Why are these students laughing heartily, unmindful of the teacher?"

"They appreciate the humor. One humorous poet has joined the court and won all, including the king. Now, humor is popular. These students are learning humour."

"Amazing, they learn all these trades with no notes except the oral lessons of the teachers. I studied using many books," Shelley said.

When Sastry explained to the students, they wanted to know what books were. Shelley found it hard to explain paper, print, and books. He left the class disappointed to note his inability to make children understand the basics. "All my learning at Oxford has gone waste," he said to no one in particular.

Chapter 3

The following morning, a gentleman, dressed like Sastry but with just a necklace of beads and a thick thread across his torso, arrived and narrated something Shelley could not make out. Sastry went up the steps to Shelley's quarters, taking two at a time. He found Shelley ready to go to the King's court.

“What's the hurry? First, tell me what the morning visitor narrated and what he expected in return?” Shelley asked.

“He is a brahmin, like me, but poor. He tells you the date, phase of the moon, auspicious time, and such details, and then he expects something in return.”

“What should I give him?”

“Anything you can spare. We normally give some rice, vegetables, and a few coins.”

“I will give a gold coin.”

“He will be delighted, but give a coin once weekly.”

“Now tell me, why are you in a hurry?”

“The king wants you to read one of your poems, and I should translate it for him.”

“What about my passage to England?”

“If the King is pleased with you, he will order his minister to help you. You give your best poem and please the King.”

“It’s no problem, and here it is,” he said, reciting the poem Ode to a Skylark. Sastry sat with a bewildered look all through. “What does it mean? Who is a skylark?”

“My dear Sastry, a skylark is a bird.”

“How can I explain to the king when I didn’t understand a word of it?”

“Don’t you worry! Even in my country, only a few could understand.”

“Why is that?”

“It requires a level of education to understand it. As for the King, I will explain to you first. You remember all the good points and inform the King.”

“I have a better idea. I will get parchment and an iron pen. I’ll write down every word of what you say and read it before the King.”

“Splendid. Are you ready?”

“No, I am not ready. First, Today is not our day at the court. Second, I’ll get a pen and writing material.”

“The students we met yesterday did not know paper and books.”

“I’m not a student but a pundit. You wait and watch.” He hurried down the steps. He returned in a moment, sat cross-legged, and said, “I’m ready.” He had parchments and an iron instrument.

Shelley explained each stanza, its meaning, and his philosophy underneath each idea. Sastry took copious notes in his language. “I don’t understand a few things. Why should the sweetest songs have something sad in them?”

Shelley again explained the meaning and what prompted him to write those lines. It was afternoon and too late to go to the town by then. They

had lunch, and Sastry had a siesta. In the evening, three persons walked up to Shelley's quarters.

"Who are these men?" Shelley asked Sastry.

"One is for making cotton clothes for you to go to court and other purposes, the second is to wash your clothes, and the third is to shave your head."

"I can do with some cotton clothes; these winter clothes make me uncomfortable. A fellow to wash my clothes is welcome, but why should I shave my head?"

"Since you are a poet, you should look like one. Poets here have half-shaven heads and a pigtail like me."

"Nonsense. I don't want my head shaven. He can shave me on alternate days. Of course, clothes like a court poet appeal to me. Please thank your minister for providing me all these."

"I will."

"I see plenty of water in my bathroom. How do you get the water?"

"I don't know. You must ask the other foreigner. His people have made some arrangements. All of us get enough water for use at home."

"Excellent again."

Sastry took Shelley to court after two days. While going to the court in a horse-drawn carriage, Shelley asked him, "Why didn't you come yesterday?"

"Our court was not held during the last two days."

"What do you mean *our* court?"

"The King has a vast kingdom where two languages, Telugu, and Kannada, are spoken. Two days for each set of people, one day for state

matters, seeing sports and games, and the last two days of the week for his time with the queens. That is the program of the King and his court.”

“Did you say, queens?”

“Yes, the king has two queens.”

“So, you had two days to understand the notes you have taken.

“Now I know every word of it, as I learnt it by rote.”

“You surprise me with your talent.”

“I know many books of poems that I learnt by heart.”

“I wish I could say that. I don’t even know Shakespeare by heart.”

“What is that?”

“Shakespeare was a great poet of our language.”

“I see.” As Shelley and his friend made their entry, the entire court laughed at the foreigner’s attire but suppressed it out of deference to him. With his midriff partly exposed, Shelley, dressed like a poet, provided a spectacle that evoked laughter. Sastry told the minister he was ready, and the latter took note of it and promised to fit in the day’s program and call the poet at the proper time.

“No need; I’ll recite the poem and explain it to the king myself.”

“You’re a big show off, as usual.”

“Otherwise, how would I earn some gifts from the king?”

The King arrived in the court, took his seat, and enquired Sastry about the foreigner and his poetry. Looking at Shelley, the King found it hard to hold his laughter. He, however, complimented the poet. Tenali Raman stood up and, as was his wont, rendered a poem about Shelley. When the entire court laughed, Sastry explained the poem had nothing to offend Shelley but only to appreciate his new dress. While the minister

stood and pointed out the more essential items on his list, the King wanted to listen to the foreigner first.

Sastry took his stance with his left foot, extended a foot in the front, recited the poem, and explained the meaning of each stanza. Shelley stood as a mute witness but was amazed at the prodigious talent of Sastry, who repeated the whole poem word for word without knowing the meaning of many words. He explained the importance as well as he would have done. After finishing the recital, Sastry looked at Shelley, who clapped for his performance. The King and his court stood in a standing ovation. The court poets gathered around Sastry and started discussing the poem he recited. Meanwhile, one of the poets clapped, drew everyone's attention, and rendered his poetry. The court appreciated his poem also equally.

“What was that?” Shelley asked.

“He recited a poem to appreciate your poetry,” Sastry whispered.

“How could he do that? He did not know my poetry till you explained now.”

“That is what distinguishes these poets. They can form a poem on any subject that fancies them in a few minutes.”

“Do these poems formed fast follow all the rules of poetry?”

“You will be surprised. All such poetry will conform to the rules.”

“I'm intrigued as we spend time searching for the right word, rhyming, meter, and several other matters.”

“You see these eight poets; they are called eight mighty elephants. I don't know the English word, but they are eminent poets.”

The King smiled, twirled his mustache, and asked one of his courtiers to bring the foreign poet to the throne. He hugged Shelley and clapped his hands. A courtier brought a silver salver with gold coins.

First, the King took a silk shawl and wrapped it around him. A few drums and one wind instrument with a strong bass sounded on cue. The King then garlanded him with a heavy necklace and presented the silver salver. To cap it all, he said, "Thanks."

The King presented one of his necklaces to the court poet and appreciated his poem in equal measure.

Flabbergasted with all the honour bestowed on him, Shelley folded his hands and said, "Namaste." He returned to his seat, walking backward, as briefed by Sastry. Showing one's rear to the mighty King was considered disrespectful in the court.

While returning to his seat, Shelley noted a dancer was talking in hushed tones to the minister. A plot was afoot, but he did not fathom it. When the day's events were rescheduled, the dancer lost her chance to perform and show her talent to the King. Shelley noted the pout of the dancer while she retreated into a corner and out of sight.

Sastry later explained the court followed a practice of giving a chance to a new dancer every time the court assembled as the King presented a necklace if he appreciated the nuances of her dance. The minister devised the system to ensure the King's benevolence was shared by many. It also encouraged many young girls and women to practice the various forms of dances to perfection to win the appreciation of the King and merit a necklace that would go a long way to feed her and her family. The King, an accomplished poet, encouraged fine arts and wanted them to flourish in his kingdom. Shelley appreciated the noble idea and wondered why the British Emperors, with all the wealth from the colonies, did not have a similar idea.

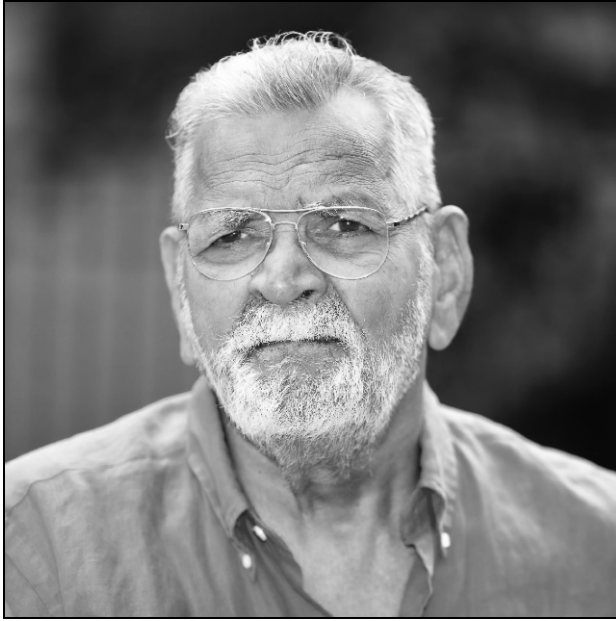
Sastry brought out a new fact. Shelley unknowingly made an enemy in the girl, as she was deprived of the gift she had worked hard for and had been looking forward to. She was not likely to get her chance to perform for some time, all due to his poetry.

“She can’t fault me, can she?”

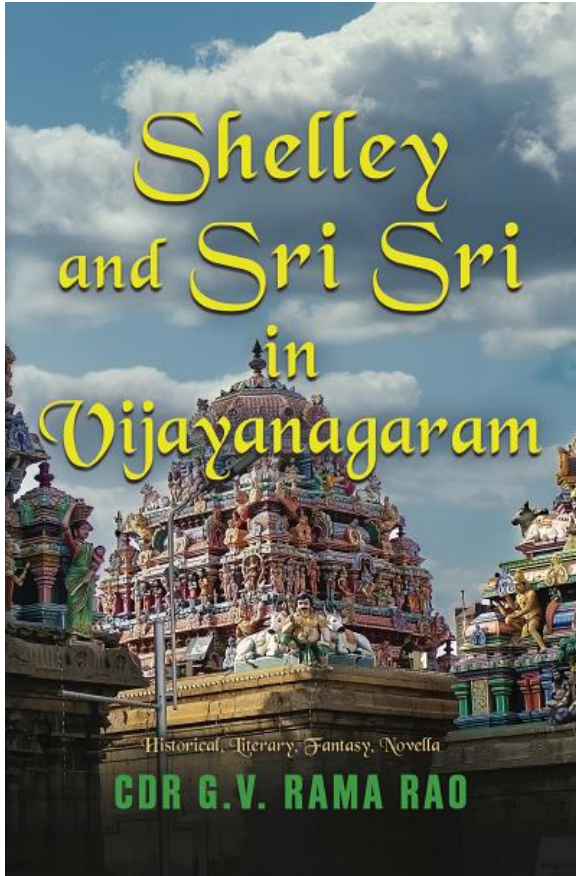
“I know, I’ll try to explain to her, but it’s hard to convince women on these matters.”

Sastry’s friend had a different take on the matter. “Could be she appreciated his poetry,” he said.

“She did not look like that,” Shelley said.



The author graduated from the ANDHRA University, joined the Indian Navy as an officer, retired as a Commander, and joined the Mercantile Marine as a ship captain. He took to writing and publishing middles, and short stories in Indian print media, including Alive, woman's era, and Gentleman He also wrote blogs on various websites. He has the following books published to his credit: The Colonel's Last Wicket, The Good Boy, The incomplete Man, Odd Ways of Gods, Emma's Escapades in Incredible India, and children's books Captain Riddle's Treasure and Race for Crown Jewels. A producer has bought the IPRs of Captain Riddle's Treasure in the USA for a comic book, TV Series, or s movie. www.gvramarao.com



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