

THE BARBER

By ROBIN WHITE

WHEN Vattu finished making his early morning rounds of the various high caste Hindu homes in Thappur, he returned to his shop on Bazaar Road and hung out his sign. "Vattu's" it said in large but worn letters across the top:

Quality haircutting
Trims Shaves
Nails pared Ears cleaned
Bodily insects and odors removed
While you wait.

K. N. S. Vattu, Proprietor.

With a clean rag he tenderly wiped each word and then stepped back, arms folded, to view his handiwork. It saddened him to see how old the sign had become, and as he stood looking at it, he shook his head, perplexed by the thought that Karnan, the village accountant and Communist boss, the only man in Thappur sufficiently versed in letters to make the restoration, had for some time adamantly refused to do the job.

"But how can this be?" Vattu asked his wife, Toosi, as he went around to the kitchen behind the shop for his morning coffee. "Karnan and I are friends." With his back against the right wall and his feet tucked under him, he could have touched anything in the room without shifting his position, and so his wife's loud reply made him jump.

"Friends!" she said in that sharp, reedy voice of hers that set the brassware ringing. "What has the lazy old jackfruit ever done for you except owe you money?"

"Now, Amma. . . ."

"Mark my words," Toosi rattled on, "Karnan is friend in name only. Even an ass may observe that he resents you."

Vattu eyes Toosi cautiously. "How so, woman?" he asked as she tossed the hard little kernels of rice in her palm leaf winnow and blew at the chaff. Her hands were never still, and watching her, Vattu thought how restless and sharp she was getting. "It comes of having no children," he said to himself

"How so, how so!" Toosi mocked, spitting betel juice at a chicken trying to steal grain. "Karnan resents the good business you do. He wishes to make money without working. Why else does he wave the red flag and twiddle the pencil? If only because he hates to do anything but talk? All the time talk, talk, talk. That's Karnan for you."

"It is a fact that Karnan has difficulty observing silence," Vattu agreed. "But we all have our faults, Amma, and Karnan is basically decent."

"Then why does he refuse to paint the sign, eh?"

"Perhaps he is too busy, Amma."

Toosi set her work down, clapped her hands to her head, and swayed back and forth as if the ultimate in stupidity had just been reached. "Busy! Are you so blind that you cannot see what an English sign means to a Communist?"

"Karnan painted it in the first place," Vattu persisted.

"That," said Toosi, "was many years ago."

With a shrug Vattu got up to leave, mumbling in a slow, baffled voice, "How can this be?"

But as he took his place on the platform, he was surprised to see Karnan come charging around the corner onto Bazaar Road. Now the accountant was a large, rotund man. Because of his size he regarded walking as the epitome of hard work, requiring a prodigious and wholly unnecessary expenditure of energy. It was therefore elementary for Vattu to assume that Karnan would not be dashing about unless something was grossly wrong.

Hastily he re-examined his conscience. Earlier he had gone to Karnan's place where he had taken care of everyone in the house, from Old Mother who lay on a cot in the back room smoking opium and who needed her head and beard shaved once a month, to Karnan's sons, Jothi and Ruba—the brats, Vattu called them—and the chokra boy, Das. This was always an unpleasant task for Vattu. Not that the house itself wasn't nice enough. As a matter of fact, Karnan had married into one of the best homes in Thappur, and it was kept neat and clean because Karnan was fussy about such things, asserting that "a wife worked to the bone remains virtuous." Of the entire family, however, only the chokra boy was easy. He held still, talked lightly, and was both patient and polite—qualities Vattu would have liked in a son. Even the old woman was not difficult. She slept most of the time and shaving her posed no problem except on the back of her head. Karnan, of course, was a little more troublesome. He lectured Vattu constantly on the merits of a Communist state and was very particular about his hair. It had to be cut just right—close around the sides, flared out and long on top so that it could be swooped back over his left ear, each hair well-oiled and slicked into place. Trying as this could be, Vattu did not really mind clipping Karnan. But when it came to Jothi and Ruba, he was ready to give up. The

difficulty here lay chiefly in Karnan's attitude towards them. The way he talked one could see that he considered his boys something better than saints, which they definitely were not. They would hop up and down, fidget and fuss, kick and bite, and Karnan would do nothing to make them hold still. Furthermore he kept a hawk eye on Vattu to make sure he employed none of those little tricks so dear to the hearts of barbers—like giving the ear a meaningful snip, or asserting pressure with the heel on the toes, or applying the point of the shears to the base of the skull and making a fiendish hiss until movement ceased and the haircut could proceed. No, Karnan would allow none of that, so it was snip a hair here, chase—chase—chase, snip a hair there, chase—chase—chase. Two hours it had taken! and less than half-way through, Vattu's resentment got the best of him. He allowed the shears to pull instead of cut, he turned his fingernails and the point of his comb down when holding the head, and when he grabbed an arm, he grabbed it fiercely. The boys cried out and squirmed, but Vattu persisted, and, in the end, prevailed. By then it was mid-morning and he was duly exhausted. He had done, as usual, a superb job. Karnan had asked for special attention because he planned to take Jothi and Ruba to Mathurai for the festival, and he wanted everything right.

"Well," Vattu told him, coming in from the back veranda, "it is done." The boys had already made good their escape.

"You did a neat job, of course?" Karnan was seated on the floor in the front room. He had some of his accounts spread out before him, but these were for appearance only. There was no money in sight, and Vattu could tell from Karnan's attitude that he would not get paid.

"Of course," he said irritably. "However it might have been easier had you remained on the veranda with them."

"Why do you say that?" Karnan asked.

"You know why," Vattu said. "It has taken much time and effort to hold them still."

"Naturally the fact that you pulled the hair and scratched the scalp had nothing to do with it, eh?"

The truth annoyed Vattu, especially since he knew what was coming. "I wouldn't do a thing like that," he protested.

"Come, come, my dear Vattu. Well do I know your methods. You are a monopolist, and like all monopolists you think you may do as you please because we have no one else to go to." He paused. "I think you do not like my sons."

"They are hard to manage," Vattu admitted, "but good

boys, no doubt."

Karnan pointed his pen accusingly at Vattu. "If you find them hard to manage, it is your own fault. You have no sons. You are not used to boys. This makes you jealous, and in your jealousy you persuade yourself that I have not brought my sons up properly."

"Let us not argue," Vattu said. "I am tired, the hour is late, I must return home." He held out his hand. "Eight annas please."

Pretending not to see the hand, Karnan turned to his papers and scratched away busily. Vattu waited. "Oh?" Karnan said, looking up. "Still here? What now?"

"Payment."

"I cannot pay until I see what sort of a job you did."

"Summon the boys."

"Unfortunately," Karnan said, shifting his ground, "it must be admitted that I am temporarily short of funds."

"A man need not always pay in cash," Vattu quickly suggested. "There are other ways."

"Such as?"

"One might repaint my sign."

"No. Too busy. Sorry."

"You could take it to the city for me."

"In a crowded jutka there is no room for signs."

"Then apprentice the boy, Das, to me."

"What man! How can I do that when there is much work to be done here?"

"But Karnan, surely you can pay me. It had been a good season. Even now you are preparing to go to Mathurai."

"And that, I am telling you, is the whole trouble. I have promised the trip to my family. It takes much money. My funds are all tied up."

"It is not necessary to act immediately," Vattu said. "You have only to agree to paint the sign or apprentice the boy."

"Simply recollect, man, recollect. Have I ever in the past neglected you?"

"On the fingers of both hands can I count the times, within this year even." Vattu began counting.

"We shall not go into that, please," Karnan said abruptly. "Accept this." He wrote out a promisory note and handed it to Vattu who tucked it in the pocket of his shirt without looking at it, and bowing, left the room. It was worth a few annas to stay on good terms with Karnan.

But now, less than half an hour later, he saw Karnan coming

after him. Although he was not sure why, he knew it could only mean trouble.

"A-dai! Come back, man, come back!" Karnan shouted.

Vattu waited for him by the steps. Then, as the fat man drew up, snorting and puffing, he saw that Jothi and Ruba had come too. Apparently the boys had been playing barber. Their hair was all in lumps and tufts, and Vattu, looking at them, knew without being told what had brought Karnan out at such a furious pace.

"What man? What is it?" he said, feigning surprise.

Karnan was too winded to reply. He shoved his sons forward. "Look! See this!" he gasped.

Vattu grinned. It really was quite a mess—the sort of mess a barber with less patience might have made.

"Tomorrow they are to go to the festival," said Karnan, still panting. "And how am I to take them?"

"As they are."

"Fool's talk! Cannot you see the hair is ruined. Why, they will look like idiots."

"Exactly," Vattu said, "what has this to do with me?"

"You cut it, man."

"Surely you are not accusing me of cutting it so."

"Who else?"

"Karnan, do not speak nonsense. We are friends. I would never play such a trick on anyone. Clearly this is the work of children."

"Then how do you explain your reticence when I asked that the boys be called for inspection?"

"You forget. Not I but you were reticent to summon them."

"Tell him, Jothi," Karnan said. "Tell him just what you told me. Who did this to you?"

Jothi was simpering behind his father's vashti. "He did," he said, pointing at Vattu.

"Ruba?"

"Vattu, Appa."

"And if you had been playing barber, you would not try to deceive your father about it, would you?"

Angelically both boys replied, "Oh, no, Appa."

"There, you see," Karnan said. "Proof."

"Suppose we call Das and see what he says," Vattu said.

"Are you suggesting that my sons are liars? or that the word of a servant boy is to be taken over theirs?"

"You may put it that way if you wish. But it must be

evident that I did not do this work. Even a fool can see that."

"Call me a fool, will you?"

"I simply state that a fool could see that it is not my work. I never gave bad cuts. You know that."

"You call me a fool and my sons liars because you are jealous!" Jowls trembling, Karnan raised his forefinger to the sky. "I shall insist that you do it over and make the hair right."

Vattu shook his head. "All I can do now is shave it off."

"What do you mean, shave it off? Fix it! You spoiled it. Now fix it."

"It simply cannot be," Vattu said. "There is no other way."

"Trickster!" Karnan spat. "This is all a trick of yours. You have done this out of the hardness of your heart because you have no sons of your own to take to the festival."

"What else am I to say since you do not believe me?"

Karnan shook his fist in Vattu's face. "Meat-eater!" he said. "Insolent, gutter-fed swine! Paithiyakaran!"

Vattu shrugged and started up the steps, and Karnan, seeing that he was unable to get a rise out of him, cast about for some more forceful means of bringing home his contempt. His glance fell on the sign. Screwing himself up, he directed a thick stream of betel juice at it. Vattu saw the red spittle land and run down over "Proprietor." For a moment he was unable to move. Then he felt something let go inside him. Anger surged up in his throat.

"Rascal!" he cried. The English word used that way in Tamil has a terrible connotation. Even Vattu was surprised at himself. But he could not stop. "Rascal!" he said again, almost enjoying the sudden release of anger as he came down the steps at Karnan.

The fight was on. The two men threw down their tunics, knotted up their vashtis, and squared off in the street. By this time a sizeable crowd had gathered, and Vattu and Karnan circled each other in the enclosure. They pranced about fiercely, spitting and swearing, making obscene gestures, and getting rid of some hateful antagonism that had been cankering secretly within. But according to the accepted methods of fighting between friends, it was implicitly understood that no one would strike a blow or go beyond personal insult.

"I will bash out the brains, so. Hah!"

"And I, I rip off the nose. Like so. Hah!"

"Pig's son, I disembowel that fat, rotting belly of yours!"

"I smash in the diseased, pock-marked piece of flesh mistakenly called your face. So!"

Fists flicked out at but did not touch the various parts of the anatomy named; and despite the vileness of their words, the spitting and grunting and snorting, both men picked their targets with care. Vattu called Karnan lump of stinking grease, a lazy blabber-mouth no more capable of earning a decent living than an outcaste pig. He called him a slave-driver of the lowest order, a begetter of imbeciles; and by exercising his imagination he proceeded to elaborate on these qualities in detail. But he was careful not to accuse Karnan of falsifying village accounts. Nor did he suggest anything that might hurt him financially. In a like manner, Karnan swore up and down that Vattu was an utter abomination to mankind, the reincarnation of a dog's son, a barren scum of the gutter. He called him the product of incest, a carrier of disease, and a wretched cunyu-eater; but all the while he avoided reference to him as a bad barber, a cheat, or a monopolist. Aside from this wee but important corner, the rest was free territory, from ancestors to progeny.

Considering the wide range of opportunity, the fight did not last long. After several minutes of threats and counter-threats, shadow uppercuts and shadow fouls, it became evident that Vattu, physically and mentally, was more agile. Karnan, as he tired, began uttering curses that fell flat. His threats lost their sting. He kept repeating himself or used Vattu's words, adding "Twice that." Every time Vattu said something he was cheered by several of the on-lookers. And Karnan realized that if this trend continued he would suffer a loss in prestige while the little barber would be regarded as the victor, the one capable of the vilest oath and the most ferocious gesture. So, inadvertently and in desperation, he was first to cross the line.

He was backing up the steps away from Vattu when, as he took the last step, his head struck the sign. In a sudden burst of frustration he seized and dashed it to the ground. "Capitalist!" he cried. "Swindler!" He looked at Vattu and seemed to hesitate for an instant as if he wished to recant. But it was too late. Silence descended upon the gathering, and Karnan, to save face, plunged blindly ahead.

"All right!" he shouted, trying to catch his breath. "All right. Now listen to this. Listen to this everyone. I am the accountant. It is my privilege to manage the financial affairs of this town, and I know who makes money and who does not. I can tell you all right now that this Vattu is as good at making money off you as he is at calling names. Today he skinned me

out of eight annas. Before the month is up he will skin every single one of you again as he has done many times in the past. And why? Because he is the only barber in Thappur and will allow no one else to compete with him. This cheap-skate has no right to such a position. He is getting rich off us. He acts like a poor, honest man, to be sure, but let me tell you, he has money, much money, your money, hidden away in a secret cache in his house. Look at the sign will you! Written in the language of the Parangis! Is that not proof enough that he conspires against us?"

As Karnan's words began to have effect, the crowd drew away from Vattu and left him standing alone. It was only natural for people with little money to presuppose that someone was responsible for depriving them of it. Karnan played upon this sentiment. A few began to grumble about Vattu, agreeing that what Karnan said was indeed so. Presently angry voices were heard. Someone shoved Vattu. Someone else tweaked his nose. Then several hands were laid roughly on him, and Vattu found himself flat on his back. He looked up unbelievably to see friends kicking and spitting and throwing dust at him. But since he did not resist or cry out, they left him alone and pushed up into the shop to look for the money Karnan assured them was hidden there.

Needless to say, they did not find any hidden treasure. Although they tore up Vattu's platform and smashed his sign, they still found nothing that even vaguely resembled treasure. Flushed with disappointment, they decided to ransack the house just to make sure. This little program, however, was doomed to instant failure. The moment they opened the door they were confronted by an enraged and violent Toosi armed with a red hot poker which she flailed about her until she had driven everyone back into the street.

After that the fury of the demonstration subsided. It was too hot under the noontide sun to stay angry for long. One by one the men began dropping away. Some had come in from the paddy fields. Others had come from the river, the shops, the market place. Vattu knew them all intimately. He had grown up with them. They were his friends, and now that their anger had passed, they seemed ashamed, unable to face Vattu and his ruined platform. From the pile of debris, Karnan kept yelling, but the audience had thinned out. The tumult had ceased. People were going home. The line had been crossed, but the fight was Karnan's. To the rest it didn't matter any more.

Vattu picked himself up and went into his house. "I'll show you yet," he heard Karnan shout after him. "This is just a beginning. Within the hour you will have no friends left here. I shall bring in the competition man, I shall bring it in!"

Toosi held out the poker to Vattu. "Go drive the beast away," she said. "Kill him!"

"No, Amma." Vattu closed the door and leaned against it. "I cannot."

There was something so woeful in his voice that Toosi put the poker down and came over to him. "There," she said softly. "Sit and rest. I shall clean the dirt from you."

He stared glumly at the floor while she hurried about getting water and fresh clothes. Then as she squatted before him he said, "We shall move out of town."

In gentle reprimand, Toosi took his face in her hands. "How you talk! For the first time in your life you have a fight and you wish to move out of town. One must strike back."

"It's no use, Amma. Look at me. What am I? A nobody. Every day of my life I work hard. I earn enough money to buy food, perhaps also a new cloth. I do not complain because I say to myself, 'Vattu, you have made a place for yourself. Here you belong. What more does a man need?' Now I see that I am mistaken. I really have no place at all."

Outside someone shouted. Toosi and Vattu looked at each other. She was first to speak. "It would appear," she said, "that you have at least one friend left. Well, why do you hesitate? A customer calls."

Reluctantly Vattu allowed himself to be pushed out the door. The customer was one of the bazaar men. Vattu cut his hair quickly and without enthusiasm. While he was working, a group of men who had helped break the platform approached with lumber and tools and asked awkwardly if they might be allowed to repair the damage. Vattu shrugged. "Do as you please," he said as if it didn't matter one way or the other.

During the next half hour three more customers arrived. One of them did not need a haircut but insisted that Vattu take care of him anyway, and the other two stayed to talk. Vattu did business with them in the street until the new platform was completed. Then he moved up onto it and changed into the clean clothes Toosi brought.

All of this, of course, combined in a large degree to restore his self-confidence. So, towards mid-afternoon when the promised competition arrived in the form of a young barber who

installed himself at the far end of Bazaar Road, Vattu was able to study the man with a certain sense of detachment.

"Go at once and fight him," Toosi said.

"Well," said Vattu, observing that people passed the new barber but did not stop, "I do believe I shall have me a little talk with him." And tightening the sash about his waist, he stepped down into the street. When he returned there was a smile on his face. "Why didn't you chase him out?" Toosi asked.

Vattu sat down. "There will be no need," he said.

Presently Karnan and his sons appeared. They pretended not to see Vattu and sat down in front of the new barber. At first Vattu noticed that a small discussion had arisen between the barber and Karnan. Then Karnan waved his hand and the barber proceeded to shave the heads of Jothi and Ruba. He did this very swiftly and carelessly, and the moment either of them started to wriggle, he merely held his razor to their throats and the wriggling ceased abruptly. Karnan looked quite desolate about it all but did not object. The barber finished with the boys and suggested that Karnan's hair could stand a little improvement. Vattu smiled and leaned against the wall. "It will not be long now," he said to Toosi.

A few minutes later there was an angry roar from the other end of the street. The new barber rushed past with Karnan in hot pursuit. The two disappeared around the corner. Karnan returned alone. He came storming up onto the platform, stamped on it tentatively and then hesitated.

"Who built this?" he asked.

Vattu told him to state his business or get out, and Karnan, bending over, displayed the haircut he had just received. "Look, see this, man!"

"So?" Vattu said.

"It is terrible."

"Yes, indeed," said Vattu. "That is what you get for putting your trust in new barbers."

"No, it isn't. It is your fault entirely. You have gone to this barber and told him the wrong way to cut my hair."

With a sly grin Vattu parroted the words of Jothi and Ruba. "Oh, no, Appa," he said.

The imitation was so convincing that for a moment Karnan was speechless. Slowly his face puckered and he began to cry. "Vattu, what have I done to you?" he said.

Picking his teeth with a piece of straw, Vattu was unable to restrain a soft chuckle.

"Why do you laugh?" Karnan asked.

In reply Vattu held up his mirror. Karnan looked at himself. "Iyo!" he said, laughing through tears, "Look at me! I am a fat mess, man, a fat mess. Can it be fixed?"

"I have already given you one clip today."

"Can it be fixed?"

The little barber pressed Karnan to the floor. "It might be," he said, shears poised, "conditionally."

"What do you mean?"

"If it is seen to that I have a certain apprentice and a new sign."

Karnan made a motion for Vattu to proceed. "So be it," he said.