Eleven

Building and Destroying

Children, you all know what it is to build and to destroy.

Weapon in hand, the warrior goes forth to destroy.

The builder draws up plans, digs foundations, and the toiling hands of men build a farmhouse for the peasant or a palace for a prince.

It is better to build than to destroy, and yet destroying is sometimes necessary.

You, children, who have strong arms and hands, do you only build? Do you never destroy? And if you do, what do you destroy?

Listen to this account of an Indian legend:

A new-born baby lay in a grove. You might think that he was sure to die, for his mother had laid him there and gone away never to return. But it so happened that honey-sweet drops fell from the beautiful flowers of the Illupay tree and nourished the tiny child until a good woman passed on her way to worship great Shiva in the temple near the grove.

At the sight of the infant, her heart was moved with pity; she took him up and carried him to her husband who welcomed him gladly, for he had no son of his own.

The couple adopted the unknown child from the Illupay grove. But very soon the neighbours began to mock them, reproaching them for taking care of a child without caste. So, for fear of displeasing them by looking after the baby themselves, they put him in a hammock hung from the beams of a stable, and entrusted him to an outcaste family.

A few years later the boy, strong in body and bright in mind, said farewell to those who had showed him kindness and set out
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alone to travel. After walking for some time, he sat down to rest at the foot of a palm-tree. And it happened that the tree took care of him and seemed to love him like the woman who had once taken him up in the Illupay grove. For though it might seem impossible that a tree with such a tall trunk could shelter someone in the shade of its leaves throughout one whole day, the story tells that the shadow did indeed keep still and shield the boy with its coolness for as long as he wished to sleep.

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Now why should it have happened like that? Why was the child saved from his very birth and why did the palm-tree shelter him from the heat of the sun? Because his life was precious: this child was one day to become the noble Tiruvalluvar, the famous Tamil poet and author of the sweet verses of the Kural.

Thus there are things and beings who must be protected, for they bring messages to the world.

Let us be glad to have strong arms so that we can enfold with their strength what is beautiful, good, true, and guard it from evil and death.

And it is to guard these things that we must sometimes fight and destroy.

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Tiruvalluvar, who gave golden words to the people, could also fight and kill. He slew the demon of Kaveripakam.

In Kaveripakam there lived a farmer who owned a thousand head of cattle and vast fields of corn. But a demon had been terrifying the countryside; he uprooted the crops from the soil, and slew cattle and men. And the hearts of the people of Kaveripakam were distressed.

“I will give house, land and money to the hero who will rid
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us of this demon,” said the wealthy farmer.

For a long time no hero appeared, and the farmer asked the sages who lived on the mountain what he ought to do.

“Go to Tiruvalluvar,” said the sages of the mountain.

So he went to visit the young poet and asked for his help. Then Tiruvalluvar took some ashes and spread them on the palm of his hand and on it wrote five sacred letters, uttered some mantras, then threw the ashes into the air. And the power of the letters and the mantras fell upon the demon, so that he died. This filled the people of Kaveripakam with joy.

Later, when Tiruvalluvar came to the town of Madura, many people gathered together to hear him recite lines from his beautiful poem, and they were enchanted by the verses composed by the child from the Illupay grove:

\[
\text{Hard it is to find in this world}
\text{A greater good than kindness.}
\]

But on a bench, beside a pool where lotus flowers floated on the tranquil waters, some very learned poets were sitting in a row.

These men on the bench had no intention of making room for a fellow-poet of low birth, but they tried to confound him with their questions and to catch him out in some mistake. At last they said:

“O Pariah, put your poem on this bench, and if it is truly a work of beauty, the bench will hold nothing but the Kural.”

Tiruvalluvar placed his writings next to them, and the legend says that the bench at once shrank until it was just large enough to hold only the poem. So the proud and jealous poets of Madura tumbled into the water of the pool! Yes, the forty-nine envious men fell into the pool amid the lotuses. They came out dripping and ashamed. And from that day, all who speak the Tamil language have a great love for the Kural.
Children, do you find it sad that the demon of Kaveripakam was slain? And do you think it was a pity that the forty-nine bad poets of Madura fell into the water? 

In this world there are both good and evil things; and we should cherish and defend only the good, fight and undermine the evil.

All wise men, like Tiruvalluvar the noble poet, know and are able to do this. And the wiser they are, the better they do it. But even little children who are not yet very wise or very strong can emulate them and thus grow in valour.

This is how Avvai, the sister of Tiruvalluvar, emulated her brother.

One day as she was sitting on the ground in a narrow street of Urayur, three men passed by: one was a king and the other two were poets.

As the king approached, she drew up one of her feet as a mark of respect.

When the first poet came, out of regard for him, Avvai drew back her other foot.

But when the second poet came near, however, she suddenly stretched out both her legs, barring his way.

This behaviour seemed rude, but Avvai knew very well what she was doing, for the second poet was a pretentious man who claimed talent though he had none.

And since he seemed irritated and asked why she had treated him so, she replied:

“Then make me a couplet in which the word ‘wit’ occurs thrice!”

Seeing that people had gathered round, the poet wanted to show his skill, but he was quite unable to make the prescribed word fit into the lines more than twice.

“What have you done then,” laughed Avvai, “with the last wit you have left, which cannot find a place in your lines?” And so she put the pretentious man to shame.

Do you think that she took pleasure in being rude? Certainly...
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not. But to her, pretension did not seem worthy of respect. She knew how to distinguish between what should be respected and what should not.

“Good people,” she would say, “go towards what is good, just as the swan goes towards the lake where the lotus blooms. But the wicked seek what is bad, just as the vulture, attracted by the smell, swoops down upon its dreadful food.”

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So, brave children of every land, what are the evil things that you should learn to fight? What are the things that man must master or destroy?

All that threatens his life and is harmful to his progress, all that weakens or degrades him, all that makes him unhappy.

Let him harness the power of the flood by bridging the raging torrents and building dykes along the swelling rivers.

Let him build strong ships able to withstand the fury of the wind and waves.

Let him drain and dry the fatal swamps where the demon of fever hides in the damp.

Let him make war on wild beasts wherever they are a danger to him.

Let him train skilful doctors to drive out pain and sickness everywhere.

Let him strive to conquer poverty, the cause of hunger, which makes so many mothers grieve because their children have no bread.

Let him abolish wickedness, envy, injustice, which make life miserable for all.

* * *

And what are the things that man should cherish and defend? All those that give him life and make him better, stronger and more joyful.
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So let him watch over every child that comes into the world, for its life is precious.

Let him protect the friendly trees and grow plants and flowers for his food and his delight.

Let him build dwellings that are strong, clean and spacious.

Let him preserve with care the holy temples, statues, pictures, vases, embroidery, as well as beautiful songs and poems, and all that increases his happiness with its beauty.

But above all, children of India and other lands, let men cherish the heart that loves, the mind that thinks honest thoughts and the hand that accomplishes loyal deeds.