

**The
Purple Lotus**
AND OTHER STORIES

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coming to India to seek a meaning to his life, and she, a young woman who had chosen marriage far too early.

David hurried to the *ghats*. He wanted to be there before the evening *aarti* was performed for the Ganga, a river so integral to the lives of Indians that it was considered sacred. He wished they would not make such a song and dance about these things to attract tourists. He did not remember any of this pageantry three decades ago when he had first come to Banaras. But things had changed even in this city where time, he often imagined, sat lightly.

Tomorrow he would take a flight to Delhi and from there make the train journey to Madras. Even the name of the city had changed. To Chennai. If he could persuade Nandita, he would like to go with her to Chidambaram to see the Nataraja temple, where Shiva, the ascetic appears as the ecstatic dancer, setting the world into motion. Yet, how could he forget that the god here concealed as much as he revealed?

He didn't know what life held for him beyond this day, he thought, as he watched the sun set over the Ganga. He dipped his head into the water and, standing waist deep in it, looked, not at the sun setting on another day, but within him. Into that silence, deep within where he hoped to find some understanding.



THE PURPLE LOTUS

THE LOTUS, FRANGIPANI and incense fragrances of the dark caverns had been part of Bhikkhu Ananda ever since he stepped into the Dambulla monastery. All that he could remember of that wet day when he had to leave home to go to the monastery was his mother weeping unabashedly; in fact like nothing he had seen before, when his father lifted him into the bus. She and his little sister had stood by the winding mountain road waving to him until he could not see them any longer. It would be an eight-hour journey his father had told him, peeling a banana, asking him to eat to keep hunger away.

He, however, didn't want to eat, but only cry and ask his father why he was being taken away from home. Why me, he mumbled to himself softly as he fell asleep on the bus, beside his father.

He was only a child, and no one had told him about the long tradition of one child from every family being dedicated to a

He hurried into the inner sanctum to join the other *bhikkhus*. “*Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dhammam Saranam Gacchami, Sangham Charanam Gacchami*. (I seek refuge in the Buddha, I seek refuge in the *Dhamma*, I seek refuge in the Sangha),” he muttered, lost in meditation.

And Anjalika, who continued to come to the Dambulla Caves missed seeing the young monk evening after evening and began to grow sad, though not a word had passed between them.

One day, she brought with her three purple lotuses. She placed two before the Buddha, and the third one, after some hesitation, before the Buddha too.

This was her last visit to the Caves.



AHALYA'S ANGUISH

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AHALYA TOOK A deep breath. She tried to settle down comfortably on the grass mat in a room dimly lit by a flickering oil lamp. The traditional make-up of her face alone would take at least three hours. She tried to find a position that would let her lie still while Kannappachettan worked on her face as if it were a canvas.

It was afternoon, but it was dark outside with just a promise of the monsoons. People everywhere waited anxiously for first rains here in Kerala which would then sweep across the country lashing streets, drenching houses and filling streams. She couldn't smell the rain as yet but the temperatures had dropped and the countryside had cooled down. Her '*appa*', who was not her father but her guru, would not allow even fans in classrooms as he felt these would disturb his students' concentration. So they rehearsed or studied in the humidity of the Kerala summer.