Chapter 1

A Slice of Onion

Samuel couldn't keep awake. He just couldn't! In spite of all he could do, his eyes went shut, and his head slowly tipped forward until it reached that angle where the weight of it made it drop suddenly. His chin struck his chest, then up went his head again. Opening his eyes, he blinked once or twice and tried to get his mind on the lesson he was going to teach. But it was no use. In a moment his head was nodding again.

He reached across the crude desk before him, picked up half an onion, rubbed his fingers over it, and then across his eyes. That did it! The tears flowed from the smart in his eyes. He was awake now!

It was a sticky tropic night, enough to make one drowsy, and, besides, the low hum of the voices of twenty-three boys reading their lessons out loud was enough to put almost anyone to sleep. But there was another reason why Samuel was sleepy. He was tired - just plain tired!

Before the sun had sent its first rays to outline the beauty of the coconut palms, Samuel had gone to the rice fields in the morning to transplant rice. All day long he had stood with his bare feet in the water of the paddy field, his back bent almost double, and planted each separate stalk of rice in the muddy water.

There wasn't much pay for the day's work. When the rice was harvested in the fall, he would receive his pay in measures of rice. Part of the rice he would trade at the roadside shop for salt, vegetables, and a few yards of cloth.

Tired, very tired, he had gone to his little mud hut when the sun had gone to rest behind the hills. Mary, his wife, had lowered the palm-leaf basket into the open well. Pulling the rope hand over hand, she had drawn many baskets of cool water for her husband's bath. Over his head he had poured it, and was refreshed.

On the clean-swept earth outside the hut, Mary spread a grass mat, and Samuel sat down for his evening meal. A fresh banana leaf was brought, and on it the rice and curry was heaped. Mary stood by ready to serve as Samuel ate, for it is a custom of India that the women do not eat with their husbands.

"I've been thinking," said Mary, "about the night school you have started for the boys. Isn't it too much for you, Samuel? You are so tired at the end of the day, you need more rest."

Samuel glanced up quickly. The look on his face was one of disappointment more than surprise.

"Mary, sharing my faith with these boys is my work. I only plant rice to earn our living. These boys are learning more than to read and write. Within a few months some of them may share their faith in their homes or perhaps in distant places."

Samuel rose from the grass mat, took the lanterns which were to light his classroom, and started toward the road. Then he turned back and asked:

"Mary, do you have a slice of onion that I could take with me tonight?"

A slice of onion! What would he teach from that? But, without asking the question, she brought the slice of onion which was to keep her husband awake.

The schoolroom was hardly worthy of its name, but it served the purpose. Samuel had built it himself. It was just six bamboo poles stuck in the ground and topped with a roof of coconut leaves. Mary had braided leaves many hours of long days for that roof.

A crude table and stool which Samuel had made were the only pieces of furniture in this schoolroom shed. The textbooks were long strips of palm leaves about an inch wide. Samuel used a nail to scratch the letters of the alphabet into the leaf and then rubbed charcoal over the letters to make them black.

As Samuel entered with his two lighted lanterns, the boys, who sat on the earth floor for their classes, stood at attention. These twenty-three boys were very anxious to read and to write and to learn something about numbers. Of course they did not study the English alphabet of twenty-six letters, but the vernacular alphabet of several hundred sounds. There were no spelling lessons because when the sounds were said the word was said. There were no silent letters.

However, Samuel was more interested in the Bible story. It was a strange and wonderful story that he taught night after night. It was the story of only one God. These boys had been taught by their Hindu parents that there were 360,000,000 different gods - terrible gods.

On this particular night as Samuel wiped the onion tears from his eyes and stood up to share his faith with these boys, he noticed a lad standing in the shadow of a nearby tree.

Evidently the boy was drawn to the night school through curiosity. Did he linger on the outside because he was shy? Or was he a high-caste boy who could not associate with those of a lower caste?

Samuel read from his Bible an excellent description of the gods to be found in the homes of any one of these Hindu boys:

"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not:… noses have they, but they smell not: they have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them…. O Israel, trust thou in the Lord." Psalm 115:4-9.

Samuel went on with his story of the Bible, while the boys in front of him paid respectful attention and the boy outside by the tree listened.

Even as a sculptor takes a lump of clay in his hand, not knowing what may come of it, so Samuel that night little knew the molding influence that would result from sharing his faith with the boy out there in the shadow of the tree.