The Emerald Lingam won the first prize in the category of General Fiction, in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books 1987 held by Children's Book Trust.

The author writes for children and contributes articles to journals.
THE
EMERALD
LINGAM

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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi
Fifteen years ago

On a dark night in August, the coastal village of Rajapuram in Tamil Nadu was lashed by severe rain and thunderstorm. The sea was a churning, roaring turmoil and the fishermen were happy to be safe at home.

At the ancient Sundareswara temple on the lonely beach, Govinda, the priest, was still awake. A single oil lamp lit his humble dwelling.

Govinda was a worried man. Recently there had been a spate of robberies in the neighbouring villages, where several temples were stripped off their treasures. The Sundareswara temple could be an attractive target. It housed several valuable idols and the rare and precious emerald lingam of Lord Siva, all of which were stored in a strong-room, next to the sanctum sanctorum. Govinda was realistic enough to think that this was poor protection against unscrupulous men.

Fearing the worst, he had hidden the emerald lingam in a small cavity that he had painstakingly chiselled in absolute secrecy. Just a few hours
back, he had shifted the lingam to the hiding place.

Lightning flashed and bathed the shrine in brightness for a moment. In that instant, Govinda saw something. A shadowy figure seemed to be prowling near the temple. Grabbing a lantern, Govinda rushed out into the downpour. The lock on the carved wooden double door to the shrine had been broken.

"Who is in here?" called out Govinda.

No answer. Only the sound of the wind howling through the palms, the roar of the sea and the patter of raindrops.

The lantern cast an eerie glow, making strange shadows of the ornately carved pillars in the vast hall. In the middle of the hall was the giant stone lingam worshipped daily.

A shadow moved. A man stepped into the pool of light. A sharp, deadly knife glistened in his hand. The lower half of his face was covered with a cloth...but Govinda recognised him, by the zigzag scar on his temple.

"Nagesh...You!"

Nagesh was a village youth. His parents had perished at sea, years ago. Govinda had adopted him...but the boy fell into bad company and took to petty crime. Three months back, he had run away after a serious brawl in the village.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Govinda angrily. "Why are you lurking about like a thief?" ^

Nagesh gave a slow, mocking smile. "Where is
"it?" he asked abruptly. "Where have you hidden the lingam?"

"What?"

"Don't waste my time, old man! I have opened the strong-room. It is not there...Tell me, where you have hidden it...if you want to live." He turned the knife in his hand.

"Fool! The emerald lingam will never be yours," retorted Govinda bravely. "I am not scared of your threats."

Nagesh lifted his hand and struck a vicious blow.

"Ah...hh!" Govinda fell, hitting his head against a stone pillar. Blood trickled down his temple. He became unconscious.

Nagesh panicked. Grabbing three idols from the strong-room, he fled into the night.

* * *

The morning was peaceful and sunny. But outside the village hospital a group of men talked in tense whispers. Govinda was dying. At dawn, his friend Chintamani, the village postmaster, had discovered him, wounded and barely alive.

A police officer waited outside the patient's room. "Doctor, will the patient recover?" he asked. "He is the only witness and the priest's evidence is of vital importance in nabbing the culprits."

Dr. Srinivasan sighed. There was little hope, although the doctor had done his very best.

Just then, Govinda opened his eyes.
The doctor and the police officer rushed to his side. Govinda struggled to speak. His lips trembled but he was very weak.

Time was running out. "Nandi," he muttered hoarsely. "The foot of the Nandi."
And he fell back dead.

**Disguise**

The news was prominently displayed on the third page of the 'Goa Chronicle':

**Stolen Antiques Recovered.**

Fifteen years ago, three idols were stolen from a temple in Tamil Nadu, under mysterious circumstances. Last year, they surfaced at an antique dealer's shop in Amsterdam, Holland.

The idols are of Lord Murugan (Subbrarnaniya, son of Siva) and his consorts, Valli and Devyani. Made of *panchaloha* (five metals - gold, silver, copper, tin and iron), these idols date back to the twelfth century A.D., the reign of the Chola ruler, Raja Raia I.

Apart from their considerable antique value, the idols contain eighty-five tolas of gold.

At the time of their theft from the Sundareswara temple at Rajapuram, a priceless emerald lingam was also
stolen. However, this has not been recovered.

The Government of India has successfully negotiated for the return of the idols to their rightful place. They will be reinstalled at the Sundareswara temple early next month after the purification rituals and the abhishekham have been performed. The temple, which was sealed after the theft, is being renovated by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Nathan put down the paper, thoughtfully. Fifteen years ago he had handed the idols to a tall foreigner on a lonely beach in Mahabalipuram. That was the last he had seen of them, a job for which he was paid handsomely.

"Mr. Nathan, what is the price of this ring?" asked the lady tourist. "I want to take it for a friend in Germany."

He awoke from his reverie and evaluated the ring carefully. "A lovely gift, madam. It is nearly two hundred years old, a gift from a Portuguese nobleman to his lady."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the tourist, delighted.

"Yes, of course! Feel the heaviness of the silver, madam... such exquisite carving!"

He sold the piece for five times its normal value. 'Rebeiro's Antique Arts' was a famous shop in Goa's capital, Panjim. It was very popular with the tourists who carried away the memory of a
persuasive salesman, Mr. Nathan.

Old Rebeiro was eighty-five and had all but handed his business over to Nathan, the assistant he had employed fourteen years ago.

After Govinda died, the police had searched for Nagesh. He was wanted for questioning in connection with the murder and the theft. To avoid arrest, Nagesh had run away to Bombay. As a ruse he sent a fake telegram to Rajapuram, announcing his own death in a bus accident.

Nagesh died and Nathan was born. Over the years he had built a reputation for himself in the underworld of antique smugglers. His job at the antique shop was a perfect cover for his nefarious activities. He had grown rich, but it was not enough.

The emerald lingam haunted him. Over the years; he had often thought about it. He knew the temple as well as the back of his hand. Where could Govinda have hidden it? Avarice got the better of him. The emerald lingam would make him wealthy beyond his dreams.

He would go back to Rajapuram. After fifteen years no one would recognise him. Nagesh had been a thin, barefaced, village youth. But Nathan was a well-built, prosperous businessman. His beard and moustache would make a good disguise. He quickly made his plans.

"But why do you want to go on leave?" asked Mr. Rebeiro querulously. "Where are you going, anyway?"

"To Bangalore. An aunt needs some advice on
financial matters," lied Nathan smoothly. "Please don't worry. I have explained the job to young D'Cunha and I will be back in two weeks."

Rebeiro assented reluctantly. A little later, Nathan walked down to a travel agency and booked an air ticket for the following Saturday.

**On trail**

"Tr...ring!" The phone jangled noisily at the local CBI headquarters. A tall, lean man stretched to answer it.

"Alva, here."

"D'Cunha, sir," said the voice at the other end. "Our common friend just bought an air ticket for Bangalore. Saturday. Noon flight."

"Any idea why?" asked Alva. D'Cunha told him.

"Aunt!" sneered Alva. "I will bet you a bottle of feni (Goan drink made from cashew), there is more to this...Thanks. Keep your eyes and ears open."

Inspector Roderick Alva, better known as 'Sleepy' for his drowsy eyes, rolled a cigarette thoughtfully. The spires of St. Cajetan's Church were visible from his office window. He gazed at them while puffing at his cigarette.

A new office assistant with an armful of files peeped in timidly. He sighed. Inspector Alva seemed to be napping. But Sleepy was wide awake and thinking hard.
This move of Nathan puzzled him. For over a year now, Sleepy suspected Nathan of playing a key role in the smuggling of antiques out of India. But Nathan had been as slippery as an eel. Twice, on a tip-off the police had raided his flat, but they had found nothing. Recently Alva had placed him under constant surveillance.

A trip to Bangalore would be necessary, thought Inspector Alva.

Saturday afternoon's Indian Airlines flight to Bangalore had two men travelling under false names.

Mr. A.R. Shetty was described as a freelance journalist. Nathan had taken care to hide the tell-tale scar on his temple by the use of make-up. An expensive camera was slung across his shoulder. He looked like a successful journalist.

A few seats down the aisle sat Dr. Sylvester D'Souza, a white-haired, bespectacled dentist. Alva, who rather enjoyed disguises, played his part to perfection.

Rajapuram

"Kartik! Wake up!" Jaya tugged at her elder brother's sleeve. It was nearly seven a.m. and they had promised to meet their friend Gowri, early.

"Ten minutes," mumbled Kartik, turning over
in his bed and burrowing deeper into the pillow.

The leaves of the jack fruit tree outside rustled loudly. A grinning monkey face peered at the window. "Eeks!" screamed Jaya, caught by surprise. "Gowri, you wretch! Get down before Ammachi (grandmother) catches you!"

Balancing nimbly on the branch, the girl leaped onto the window ledge.

"Take the silly mask off!" pleaded Jaya in exasperation. "You don't fool anyone."

"Ho! That is what you think," scoffed Gowri. "I frightened the wits out of Linga, the cowherd. He nearly spilt a pail of milk." Her attention wandered to the sleeping figure. "What, still asleep!" she remarked.

"Full marks for observation."

"You city-folks are a lazy lot," said Gowri. "Let us wake the sleeping beauty." Tiptoeing to the bed, she yelled right into Kartik's ear, "Rise and shine!"

"Wha...Argh!" Kartik jumped out of bed. "You!" he exclaimed in tones of deep disgust at the sight of Gowri's grinning face. "Get out of my room!"

Gowri stuck out her tongue at him. With as much dignity as he could muster Kartik marched to the bathroom ignoring the two girls. Unfortunately he tripped on the doormat and hit his nose hard against the wall.

"Oof!" Peals of laughter followed him. "Girls! Phooey!" he muttered brushing his teeth with unusual vigour.
Kartik examined his reflection in the mirror. Was that the faintest sign of a moustache? Kartik's secret ambition was to have a luxuriant moustache like his grandfather, Dr. Srinivasan.

At fourteen, Kartik was a dark, lanky boy with an uncommonly grave expression. Jaya, his younger by a year, was as different from him as chalk from cheese. Short, plump and fair, she was a chronic giggler. While never actively planning any mischief, she would invariably be mixed up in it.

The two children lived and studied in Delhi where their parents were doctors. They always came down to Rajapuram, their ancestral village, for the Dassera holidays.

Gowri, the third member of the trio, was also the youngest at eleven years. But she was the most mischievous. Demurely clad in flowing, long skirts and a blouse, her oiled hair neatly plaited, she looked too good to be true. In fact her favourite activities were flying kites, playing marbles, climbing trees, and planning practical jokes on unsuspecting people.

Fresh and tidy, Kartik continued to ignore the two girls, as he went downstairs. They followed, annoying him considerably with their giggles and smothered laughter.

"Amma...Amma...!" came a frantic shout from the garden. The children rushed towards the commotion to find their grandmother and three servants chasing a goat. "Maa...aa...Maa...aa!" bleated the animal pathetically as it ran panic-
stricken towards the cowherd, Linga.

The boy jumped out of the way. "Catch it, paithyam (mad)," yelled the irate gardener, Muniappa.

The goat dashed past Linga and made straight for Gowri's arms. The girl soothed her pet.

"It is all your fault, Gowri," scolded Ammachi. "Why can't you tie that goat of yours? See, she has destroyed the cabbage patch."

"I am sorry," said Gowri remorsefully. "I had tied her to the gate but she must have broken away—she loves cabbage."

The gardener was breathing fire at the sight of the destroyed vegetables. "That creature! If I see her loose again, I will skin her and make korma (gravy) of her," he vowed.

Gowri tethered Chikki, her goat, to the gate again and went in to join Jaya and Kartik for breakfast. The three children sat on the spotless floor of the dining hall and ate off banana leaves. After a hearty meal of hot, soft appams and sweetened coconut milk, uppuma and vadas, they made their plans for the day.

"There is a Rathotsava (chariot festival) at Pathanur," said Gowri. "Let us go early before the day gets too hot."
The Rathotsava

Kartik, Jaya and Gowri, followed by Chikki, set off for Pathanur, the neighbouring village. All had turned out in their finery to see the Rathotsava. People came on foot, bicycles, bullock carts, and tractors. The dusty, winding road was flanked by verdant green fields and coconut palms on one side and by a vast stretch of sandy beach on the other.

"Gowri, mind that goat of yours!" warned Jaya as Chikki took a curious nibble at a ribbon tied on to a little girl's plait.

"Amma!" shrieked the frightened child.

"Maa...maa..." bleated Chikki.

"The crowd and the noise is exciting her," said Gowri. "Let us take a short-cut through the fields."

Buying pieces of sugarcane to munch from an enterprising farmer, the trio made for the fields. Jumping over streams and crossing palm groves, they finally reached Pathanur. From a distance could be heard the music of nadaswaram (South Indian wind instrument) and tavil (percussion instrument) playing at the temple.

Pathanur was a sleepy village built around a small hillock. At the top of the hillock was a temple dedicated to Goddess Ambal. A long flight of steps was built into one side of the hill. At the base was the flower-seller's street.

Jaya and Gowri stopped to buy sweet-scented strings of malli (jasmine) flowers for their hair.
Other shops selling incense sticks, kumkum (saffron), coconuts and fruits were doing a brisk trade. "Do you two want to see the abhishekham (ritual bath performed on idols)?" reminded Kartik. "Let us hurry up. The crowd is getting bigger."

Racing up the steps, they reached the hilltop. Tethering Chikki firmly at the entrance, the children went into the temple.

The crowd was large, and the noise intense. The music reached a peak. In the sanctum sanctorum a group of priests were performing the abhishekham for the utsava murthi (idol taken around in procession). The idol would later be taken out in the temple car.

To the chanting of hymns, the idol was bathed in milk, honey, sandalwood paste and holy water in turn.

A curtain was drawn across while the idol was dressed. Soon afterwards the nadaswaram began reaching a crescendo. People swayed in ecstasy as arati (waving of lit lamps) was performed for the deity which was then carried to the decorated temple car waiting at the foot of the hill.

The ratha, or temple car, was a replica of the temple on wheels. Carved out of wood, it was twenty feet high. Two long, sturdy ropes were attached to the front so that it could be towed along.

A tourist bus from Mahabalipuram had parked nearby and the tourists were busy clicking photographs of the colourful scene.

"Look, the kavadi dancers!" Gowri pointed out
to a group of men who were taking up position in front of the car.

"Obviously a tourist attraction," drawled Kartik, but he too was soon entranced by the rhythm of the music and the dancers.

The kavadi is a curved framework made of light material like bamboo. Decorated with flowers, buntungs, and peacock feathers, it is used to carry offerings of milk to the deity. Usually the kavadi is carried by worshippers who wish to fulfil a vow made at the shrine of Lord Subramaniya or Kartikeya - the God of war, worshipped widely in the south.

During religious festivals, the kavadi is used in a dance performed by young men. Dressed in simple white dhotis, the group of dancers move in slow, rhythmic steps that gradually gain momentum as the music reaches a crescendo.

After the dance was over, the procession started out. The ropes of the temple car were towed by two rows of men. The procession was led by musicians.

People crowded on roof-tops, urchins hung from tall coconut palms and a vast crowd followed the ratha, which took a circuitous route through the village and made for the beach.

A long row of catamarans was lined up on the beach, each decorated with bright marigolds.

"They are going to have a boat race," said Kartik excitedly. The three children rushed to find a vantage point on top of a rock at the sea's edge.

The catamarans are primitive rafts made of
coconut trunk, and used by the fishermen. The fishermen are singularly unprotected and at the mercy of the sea. Sailing a catamaran is not easy. It requires skill.

Beside each catamaran stood a team of two fishermen, clad only in a loincloth, their bodies glistening with shark-repellent oil. They waited for the signal to start. A gunshot rang out.

Quickly the fishermen pushed the boats into the water and jumped on. Out in the sea a trawler was anchored. The participants were to sail up to it, bring back a card each and hand it to the waiting judges on the beach.

The sea was choppy. The rafts bobbed away, thrown up and hidden, alternatively, by the foaming crests of the waves. The crowd cheered lustily. The participants were returning. As they came closer, the leading raft capsized.

A howl of dismay went up. Obviously, the team was a favoured one. There were two young boys, hardly more than sixteen.

The nearest rivals cheered and passed them. Quickly the two boys turned left, set the raft upright and clambered on. But they had lost precious seconds. Pitching their last bit of strength, they rowed desperately till they were abreast.

"Oh, buck up," cheered Kartik and Gowri while Jaya bit her nails in suspense.

The crowd roared happily as the first catamaran reached the shore. The boys had won.

Cameras clicked as the grinning pair was garlanded and presented the cash award.
"That was a terrific race," said Kartik happily, as the trio walked back to Rajapuram.

The sun was past its zenith. They bought guavas and monkey-nuts from a vendor to assuage their hunger after an exciting day.

"I am famished," declared Kartik. "Monkey-nuts don't really count."

"Let us go to Murugesha's Military Hotel," suggested Gowri. "My treat," she added generously. "Thatha (grandfather) gave me a tenner this morning."

A ghost

Rajapuram is a quaint village situated off the beach road from Madras to Pondicherry. Centuries ago, it had been a minor port; now it is inhabited mainly by fisherfolk and farmers.

The streets are cobbled and narrow, flanked by carved doorways of dwellings. Time has touched Rajapuram lightly. Thus Murugesha's Hotel was a striking contrast amidst such humble surroundings. Called Military, because the hotel served non-vegetarian food, it was the village's only hotel which boasted of lodgings and a modern decor. The walls were bright blue, the floor red-tiled and the tables and chairs painted a gay orange.

Murugesha, the fat proprietor, was a jovial man with a penchant for wearing bright iungis and listening to loud music.

"Ah...ha!" he grinned on seeing the three chil-
dren troop in. "Vango...vango (come in). Indeed, I am honoured," he teased. "How may I serve you?"

The children chose a table and sat down. "Mutton curry, fried fish, chicken korma, liver fry, biryani..." rattled off Murugesha.

"Would you have some idlis with chutney?" asked Gowri.

"Yes, of course."

"...and some bondas...three masala dosas...and three cold drinks."

The food arrived and the children ate hungrily. A shadow fell over the table.

"So...you are here, are you?" exclaimed an amused voice. They looked up to see old Chintamani, Gowri's grandfather.

"I presume you are eating your way through the ten rupees I gave you!"

"Come, join us," smiled Gowri.

"Thank you, I will. One coffee. Double quick," he ordered. "It beats me why you eat this rubbish," he remarked.

Seated at his counter, Murugesha bristled like a porcupine.

"This Murugesha is a fat crook," continued Chintamani. "All this is last night's left-overs..." He picked up a bonda and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Indeed, it is not!" yelled Murugesha. "Just because you cannot eat all this, you are jealous!"

"Quiet!" Chintamani roared back. "Or I will box your ears."
Murugesha grinned and winked at the children. "Do not get excited, grandfather," he said. "It is not good at your age."

Chintamani threw him a baleful look. He hated any reference to his ninety years.

The retired postmaster was the oldest inhabitant of the village. Despite his age, he was a sprightly fellow with a sharp tongue and a short temper. However nobody was particularly scared of him, and Murugesha always enjoyed these altercations.

A black Fiat nosed past and came to a halt. A man stepped out and looked at the signboard. "I am looking for a room," he said, "for four days. Is anything available?"

"Yes, of course, sir!" answered Murugesha sensing a prospective customer. "A single room with an attached bath. Meals served."

"That will suit me," said the stranger. "May I know your name, sir?" asked Murugesha. "I have to enter it here."

"Shetty," said the man. "A.R. Shetty. I have come from Bangalore. I am a freelance journalist researching for an article on ancient temples in this region."

"Ah...yes!" smiled Murugesha. "No doubt you have come to see the Sundareswara temple which is due to be reopened next week. The archaeologists are working on it. A team came all the way from Madras."

Suddenly Chintamani, who had been staring
hard at the stranger, spoke loudly. "Nagesh."

The stranger stood still for a moment. His face paled, but when he spoke his voice was cool. "Are you addressing me?" he asked. "I am afraid you are making a mistake."

"But..." protested Chintamani.

"Which Nagesh are you talking about...?" asked Murugesha in surprise.

"Why - old Govinda's boy," said Chintamani, puzzled.

"He has been dead for years," exclaimed Murugesha. "You are making a mistake." He turned to the stranger. "I am sorry, sir...he is an old man and often makes these mistakes. Come, let me show you your room."

"It is all right, Thatha," said Gowri quietly. "You made a mistake...don't be upset."

"I could have sworn it was Nagesh...yet...it is not possible...Nagesh died long ago..." mumbled Chintamani.

Upstairs, in his room, Nagesh relaxed. That had been a close shave. He had not bargained on Chintamani being alive. The old man had always been a shrewd observer with a sharp memory. Luckily, the moment had passed. He had to get to work quickly; he had wasted precious time. A few miles outside Kanchipuram, he had hit a careless cyclist, who sustained minor injuries. Unfortu-
nately, a police constable had witnessed the accident and marched them both to the police station to file a report.

In a fix

Inspector Alva was in trouble. It happened in Bangalore, in the crowded Majestic area. Disguised in a brown wig, long moustache, dark glasses and a very colourful shirt, he passed easily for a rich tourist. Sleepy was on Nathan’s trail.

"Is the man mad?" he muttered. His quarry was making a round of all the travel agencies in the area. Apparently he was interested in a bus tour of the South!

The crowd jostled Alva. Cars honked, bicycle bells rang furiously. Majestic was pandemonium as usual.

Nathan had finally decided to eat lunch at the crowded Elite Non-vegetarian Hotel, and Alva who was famished, followed him in thankfully. He chose a corner table behind a potted palm, from where he could keep an eye on Nathan, and ordered a feast of fried fish, mutton biryani, chicken curry and naan. Just as he was polishing off a dish of thick, sweet basundhi (a sweet dish made of milk), his quarry, Nathan, rose, paid the bill and casually sauntered off.

Alva rose hurriedly and wiping his lips, made for the door.

"Just a minute!" yelled out the proprietor.
"You have not paid for what you ate."

Alva fumbled for his purse. He checked his shirt pockets, trouser pockets, even his shoes where he sometimes kept his wallet. But, it was missing. A pickpocket with nimble fingers had made away with Alva's purse.

"Look...I will pay later...I am a police officer after a suspect," he explained.

"They all say that," jeered the owner. "Pay up or you will be washing the dishes and swabbing the floor."

Two hefty waiters moved uncomfortably close. Inspector Alva was desperate. "Listen, here is my identity card. You can ring up the local CBI office. This is the number..."

"You certainly don't look like a police officer," remarked the owner sceptically. "More like a film hero...James Bond."

By now the crowd in the restaurant was concentrating on this interesting exchange.

"Anyway, police officer or not, you are supposed to pay for the meal like anyone else," said the proprietor belligerently. "Where is your purse?"

"Stolen," answered Alva sheepishly.

The crowd roared with laughter.

By the time Sleepy managed to extricate himself from this embarrassing situation, he had lost Nathan's trail.

Two days later, Alva got a break. An obscure travel agent in Indira Nagar at the other end of the city, remembered Nathan.
"Which bus did he take?" asked Alva.
"He didn't take a bus at all," answered the agent. "He hired a car."
"Hired a car?"
"Yes, a Fiat. See, here is the registration number, date and his signature," he pointed out the entry in the register. "I run a car rental service as well. The customer, Mr. Shetty, hired a car for ten days. Paid in advance."
"Did he say where he was going?" asked Alva.
"Mm...yes! I think he said he was a journalist writing an article on the South Indian temples at Mamallapuram."

Alva thanked the agent and went to the local Police Headquarters in a thoughtful mood.
A few hours and some phone calls later it was confirmed that the car Nathan had hired had crossed the State border and entered Tamil Nadu. It was last seen entering the city of Madras.

That evening Inspector Alva got into a Madras-bound bus.

A lucky break

"Your man was last seen near Kanchipuram," said Inspector Varadan at the CBI headquarters, Madras. "There was a report of an accident involving a car and a cyclist. The description of the driver and the car's registration number are the same."

At Inspector Alva's request an alert had been
flashed to all airports and traffic checkpoints throughout the State.

"Kanchipuram? Isn't that place famous for..."

"Silk sarees...and temples," finished Inspector Varadan.

"The temples of Kailasanatha and that of Vai-kunthaperumal date back to the time of the Pallava kings in the eighth century. But, if your man is planning to burgle these, he is in for a difficult job. The security is very tight."

"He is not foolhardy," said Alva thoughtfully. "This man is very cool and very smart. He has managed to evade the police for a long time. We know he is involved in the smuggling of antiques, but there is no proof, none at all. No, it is something else he is after. Where exactly did the accident occur?"

"A few kilometres past Kanchipuram, on the road to Pondicherry. There are a few coastal villages...It was close to a place called Rajapuram."

"Rajapuram...Rajapuram?" Alva muttered softly. "I seem to have heard that name recently..."

"It was splashed all over the papers," said Varadan. "Three idols which were stolen from the Sundareswara temple at Rajapuram have been recovered after fifteen years."

"Ah, yes! I remember it now. Was not there something else also? A missing emerald or ruby...?"

"That is right... An emerald lingam," answered Varadan. "It was priceless and very rare. It vanished completely. We never heard a
whisper. I remember the case well. I had just joined the force and it was the biggest temple theft in years."

"Sounds interesting," commented Alva. "Fifteen years ago...hmmm."

"Why don't you read the report? It should be in the records," suggested Varadan.

"Curiosity has always been my worst trait," said Alva with a grin. "All right, please get me the report."

In this case, Inspector Alva's curiosity gave him a lucky break. The file arrived. It was a thick one. He settled himself comfortably, lit a smelly cigarette and began reading. Two hours later, he turned over the last page. In an appendix attached to the report were some photographs. Looking through them casually, he exclaimed suddenly and stared hard.

"What is it?" asked Varadan who had come in with two cups of coffee.

"This photograph," pointed out Alva. "Who was this man?"

"Nagesh was a troublesome youth," answered Varadan. "He was one of the suspects."

"Why?"

"For one, he knew the temple inside out," said Varadan.

"And it was strongly believed that the theft had been done by a person or persons familiar with the layout of the temple and its security," added Alva. "Did you ever question him? This man, Nagesh?"
"No, he was missing. There were no clues regarding his whereabouts. Later we heard that he was dead."

"Was it verified?"

Varadan frowned, trying to recall. "No, I don't think it was...Why are you asking?"

"See this scar here," said Alva pointing to a faint zig-zag mark on Nagesh's temple. "The man I am after has a similar scar." He pulled out a photo of Nathan.

Varadan compared the two snaps, and remarked, "Apart from the scar, there is no resemblance between Nagesh and Nathan."

"No? Do you have an official artist here?" asked Alva.

A thin, bespectacled man was summoned and Inspector Alva discussed something with him.

A few hours later, the artist came in and handed a drawing sheet to Alva.

"Ah!" exclaimed Sleepy with satisfaction. "Excellent job." He thanked the artist and turned to Varadan, saying, "Take a look at this, my friend and tell me what you think."

"Remarkable resemblance to Nathan," said Varadan.

"Yes, isn't it?" Alva said smilingly. "I asked the artist to sketch a picture of Nagesh from the photograph, adding about fifteen years, a beard and a moustache."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Varadan. "That means the news of Nagesh's death was faked."

Alva nodded grimly. "Take my word for it, he
is the culprit in the theft of those idols."

"And the lingam," added Varadan.

"I have a hunch," said Alva slowly, "that he never did find the lingam."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a hunch," said Alva mysteriously. "You have yourself said that the disappearance of the lingam was baffling."

"Yes," Varadan admitted thoughtfully. "We did get a tip-off that the idols which were stolen at the same time had been handed to a foreign tourist named Schmidt. They were traced to Bangkok, and then we lost the trail...till very recently Interpol informed us of their presence in an antique dealer's shop in Amsterdam. But there was no news at all about the lingam. It seems to have vanished into thin air."

"Well, if Nagesh or Nathan did steal the idols, he could have taken the lingam and hidden it somewhere till the furore died down," hypothesized Alva.

"But why wait for fifteen years to collect it?" asked Varadan. "It seems rather far-fetched," he said frankly.

"Truth is always stranger than fiction," said Alva with a smile. "I will pay a visit to Rajapuram," he decided. "Just to keep an eye on Nathan."

... ... ...

The next evening a jeep from the Archaeological Survey of India went to Rajapuram. Two
archaeologists were on a visit to check on the renovation being done at the Sundareswara temple. The third member was the jeep driver, a thin, sleepy looking man called Nandu, who smoked a smelly brand of cigarette and sang film-songs loud and off-key.

**At the temple**

The children had decided to spend the day on the beach. Jaya and Gowri were helping Ammachi pack the picnic lunch into a cane basket.

"Banana leaves, water bottles, squash, biscuits, paper napkins..." reeled off Jaya. "Can you think of anything else, Gowri?"

"Here is the food," Ammachi came in with a large tiffin carrier. "Idlis with chutney, tamarind rice, coconut burfi and tomato sandwiches. Will it do?"

"More than enough," Jaya assured her grandmother.

"In that case don't come home at lunch time saying that you are hungry," warned Ammachi. "I am a little busy today. Your grandfather has invited some guests for lunch."

Kartik came in with some tender coconuts. The tops had been sliced off, and a small hole made for the straws to be inserted.

"It is going to be very heavy," said Jaya as she stuffed the coconuts into the basket.

"We will take turns carrying it," said Kartik.
"Here are the playing cards as well."

"Don't forget your sun-hats," reminded Amrriachi. "Oh, do me a favour please. Stop at the Sundareswara temple and tell your grandfather that lunch will be ready by half past one. You know how absent-minded he can be."

The children assured their grandmother that they would convey the message to Thatha. They set off, followed by Chikki.

"Gowri had a little lamb..." teased Kartik. "That pet of yours follows you everywhere. How do you manage to go to school without her?"

Gowri grinned. "I tie her to the school gate, under the tamarind tree. She has got used to waiting for me."

"Why don't you leave her at home?" asked Jaya.

"I tried but she ran away and came searching for me."

"What happened?" prompted Jaya.

"On the way she side-tracked into the vegetable market and ate up old Puttana's spinach. Then, she was diverted by Janakiamma's tomatoes," recalled Gowri. "When she eventually found me after running all through the school building, there was a crowd of angry people chasing her. Everybody was yelling at the top of their voices."

"It must have been funny," said Kartik. "I wish I had been there."

"I certainly didn't," recalled Gowri. "I wished I was miles away, particularly when Amma and
Appa came to know about it. Such a yelling Amma gave me! Since then I tie Chikki outside and she is quite happy."

They had crossed the paddy fields and were passing through a grove of palm trees. The foliage was so thick that hardly any sunlight filtered through.

"Eeks!" screamed Jaya pointing a trembling finger at a snake that had just slithered across.

Gowri gave a hoot of laughter, "That is just a harmless rat snake."

But Jaya was glad to be out of the grove. A vast stretch of sandy beach ended near the sea in the distance.

"There is the temple," pointed out Kartik. "Let us go and have a look at it."

**How old?**

The Sundareswara temple, dedicated to Lord Siva, stood on the edge of the palm grove. Built in the South Indian style, it was bounded by a high wall, newly painted with vertical rust-coloured and white stripes. A tall *gopuram* (tower) stood over the main gate which was made of carved wood.

Passing through the entrance, the children saw a huge Nandi (Siva's bull mount) carved in black stone.

"It is so life-like," exclaimed Jaya walking round it
Gowri stuck a marigold in one ear of the statue. "There is Thatha," Kartik went towards his grandfather who had just stepped out of the main shrine. Dr. Srinivasan was deep in conversation with some men.

"They must be the archaeologists," observed Jaya. "They have come all the way from Madras."

"Yes, but what is he doing here?" whispered Gowri.

"Who?"

"That man Shetty or something. Remember we saw him in Murugesha's Hotel."

"Oh Shetty!" Jaya too had seen the journalist talking to her grandfather.

"Ah!" Thatha exclaimed beaming at the children. "Come and be introduced to these gentlemen."

Dr. Rao and Dr. Menon were the names of the two archaeologists. One was very fat, and the other tall and thin.

"Laurel and Hardy," whispered Gowri into Jaya's ear.

"Sh...h.." The girls stifled giggles as Kartik frowned warningly.

"These gentlemen are in charge of the renovation," said Thatha. "Since the temple is very old, its repair requires a great deal of expertise."

"We have almost completed it," said Dr. Rao.

"In a week's time it will be ready for opening."

The third person, Mr. Shetty, had wandered off and was clicking some photographs. He came back to the group. "I have a few questions," he
said smilingly to the archaeologists. "Could you give me some details regarding the history of this temple."

"Certainly," said Dr. Rao, "it is an interesting one. You children must listen as well..."

The trio who were keen to explore on their own were thus forced to curb their impatience.

"The original shrine dates back to the time of the great Pallava king Mahendra Varman I, in the seventh century A.D. He was also known as Vichitrasiddhan. It is believed that his queen ordered the building of this temple."

The journalist was busy writing notes in his diary.

"Later, in the reign of the Cholas, further embellishments were added - the shrines of Murugan and Ganesha that you see there..." He pointed towards the two smaller temples.

"The Nandi bull was installed in the eleventh century," continued Dr. Menon. "The same time as the *panchaloha* idols of Lord Murugan and his consorts. Along with these were some idols of Lord Vinayaka (Ganesha) that are at present in Government custody."

"And the emerald lingam?" interrupted Shetty, "how old is that?"

"Comparatively speaking, it is very young," answered Dr. Rao with a smile. "Only five hundred years old. Legend has it that the stone as such first came from Sri Lanka, where it was bought by a rich trader named Parthiban. One night he had a dream — Lord Siva came to him..."
and told him to donate the gem to a temple. No man could own it; it would bring ill-luck to anyone who tried to possess it."

"Then what happened?" prompted Gowri.

"Parthiban was a god-fearing man, but a shrewd one. He sold the stone to the ruler."

"Did ill-luck come to him?" asked Kartik.

"We don't know that," said Dr. Rao with a smile. "Presumably it did, for the ruler ordered a lingam to be carved out of it, which was duly installed at the temple."

"It was here till fifteen years ago," completed Thatha. "Never have I seen such a beautiful statue."

"I wonder if it has brought bad luck to its present owner," said Kartik.

"A great deal of money, more likely," commented Dr. Menon.

"Its estimated value fifteen years ago was close to fourteen lakh rupees."

Now that the tale was over, Gowri wandered off. "Jaya, come and see," she called out.

A small rectangular tank was built on the other side of the temple. Steps led to the water's edge. It was full of pink and white lotus flowers.

"Aren't they lovely!" exclaimed Jaya. "May I pluck some?" she asked Dr. Rao. "Please?"

"All right, young lady," said the archaeologist, "but only one or two."

Jaya reached out to pluck the nearest one but it was just beyond her reach and she nearly lost her balance.
"Wait," called out Kartik, "I will get it for you." Removing his wrist-watch, he kept it on a pillar's ledge and went down to pluck the flowers.

"Will you hurry up?" said Gowri impatiently. "It is nearly eleven, and I am famished. Let us go to the beach."

Midnight adventure

One by one, the lights of Rajapuram went out as homes settled down for the night. Downstairs, Ammachi supervised the last of the household chores, bolted the doors and went to her room.

Kartik was still awake, although very sleepy. He turned over the last page of the book he was reading and kept it on the bedside table.

It was then that he noticed it! He sat up. Suddenly, he got out of bed and searched in all the usual places - but could not find it. There was no doubt about it...it was missing. His watch!

The watch had been a birthday gift from his parents. Its loss could be a serious matter. Quickly, Kartik went over the day's events. When had he last seen his watch? In the garden? On the beach? In the temple?

Ah, yes! That was it. He had left it on the ledge of a pillar when he had entered the tank to pluck those flowers. What should He do now?

He made up his mind, quickly. With luck it should still be there. Pulling on his jeans and
shoes, he looked around for a torch. It was in Jaya's room, next door.

"Who is that?" Jaya sat up in alarm.
"Shut up. It is me. Where is your torch?"
"Kartik! Why are you dressed up? Where are you going?"
"Keep your voice down, silly," growled Kartik.
"Do you want to rouse the whole house?"
"But where are you going?" persisted Jaya.
Kartik sighed and told her what had happened,
"...so, I am going to the temple to fetch it."
"Are you not scared?" asked Jaya.
"Scared? Of what?"

"Govinda's ghost. You know what they say, his ghost comes at midnight to search for the lingam," said Jaya fearfully.

"Ha!" exclaimed Kartik scornfully. "I can tackle any ghost that may be wandering about."

It was an idle boast. Actually, he was feeling a bit jittery at the thought of going to the temple so late. It was close to midnight.

"I will be back in half an hour."

Kartik climbed the window and jumped on to the ledge. He shinned down the trunk of the jackfruit tree and landed on a rose bush.

"Ouch!"

"Kartik, what is the matter?" Jaya leaned out of the window.

Kartik got up gingerly to his feet. "See you."

He climbed over the gate and jumped on to a dusty lane. Sprinting along, he crossed the fields. The palm grove loomed ahead, dark and
shadowy. A breeze rustled through the leaves. An owl hooted. At night the grove seemed even more frightening. In a field, a jackal called out to its brethren.

Kartik was glad to be out of the grove. The outlines of the Sundareswara temple showed now. He ran swiftly and pushed at the main gate. It was locked!

Kartik stared at it, dismayed. The wall was too smooth and too high to be scaled. Quickly, he went around it. Perhaps there was another entrance which might be open.

The other entrance, which faced the sea, was locked as well, but he found a small door in the wall that was open.

He made his way through the courtyard to the lotus tank. The watch was where he had left it! Light with relief, Kartik strapped it on. He looked around. At night, the temple seemed different, much bigger and cavernous. The Nandi at the entrance seemed even more life like. Any moment now, it would get off the pedestal and run away, snorting, into the fields.

Kartik was not a fanciful boy; but he felt scared here. And then he saw it. A faint light in the vicinity of the main shrine. There it was again! A light that moved up and down the walls. Someone was inside.

Kartik’s first thought was that Govinda’s ghost had come, but it was banished instantly. A ghost was unlikely to use a modern torch.

A man came out of the main shrine, down the
steps and walked towards Kartik. The boy hid in the shadows. Perhaps it was just a chowkidar, but something in the man's posture made Kartik wary.

The man turned up the collars of his coat. He paused for a minute to light a cigarette. In that brief instant, Kartik caught a glimpse of his face. It surprised him considerably.

The intruder was none other than the journalist from Bangalore, Shetty. Why was he prowling about the temple at this late hour?

Shetty looked left and right, then crossed the courtyard. Obviously he knew about the side door in the wall for he went out that way. Kartik waited a few minutes. Then as he made for the door, he saw someone else leaving through it. Was it an accomplice of Shetty’s? What were these men up to? The man vanished into the dark, before Kartik could get a glimpse of his face.

Thoughtfully, he made his way back home. Jaya was waiting up. "What took you so long?" she asked at once. "You have taken more than an hour. I was getting worried."

Kartik quickly told her what he had seen.

"Gosh! It sounds exciting!" said Jaya. "I wonder what those men were doing there! Sounds rather fishy, does it not?"

No answer. Kartik was fast asleep.
A sleuth

In the morning light, Kartik's adventure seemed less mysterious. Indeed, he wondered whether he had imagined it all. But, Gowri took a different view.

"It is a mystery," she exclaimed happily. "I bet those men were after something. Maybe they had a secret ritual in the temple, like the thugs used to."

"Oh Gowri! Take a rest," pleaded Kartik. "Thuggery died out in the last century. I am sure there is a perfectly simple explanation," he said. "Next you will be saying that I am a thug as well."

"And the thugs worshipped Kali, not Siva," added Jaya.

"Well, so what?" retorted Gowri who was not one to give up easily. "Perhaps they have murdered someone and hidden the body there," she suggested.

"What a bloodthirsty creature you are!" teased Jaya.

"Well, you two are not coming up with any ideas," complained Gowri. "I am the only one who is doing any thinking."

Jaya and Kartik grinned at each other.

"Did I not tell you there was something strange about that journalist?" said Gowri with an 'I-told-you-so' air.

"Just because you don't like his face is no reason why he should be a murderer or a thug," commented Kartik.
"Well, you people can say what you want. I am going to do something," said Gowri rather huffily.  
"What?"
"Why should I tell you?"
"Aw, come on!"
"All right, I am going to search for clues. That is what they do in all mystery stories."
"What sort of clues?" asked Jaya, rather intrigued.
"How can I say till I have found them?"
Kartik sniggered.
"All right, laugh all you like. I will bet there are tons of clues - blood stains, tufts of human hair, footprints and so on."
"If you are determined to be a sleuth," said Kartik with a sigh, "we will come along. Just so that you don't fall into the tank."
"I can swim," informed Gowri with dignity.  
* * *

Work was on in full swing at the temple. There were men all over the place with ladders, cans of paint and brushes. The two archaeologists were there busy poring over a large blueprint. They did not look very happy at seeing the children.
"We are busy today," said Dr. Menon. "You will get in the way of the workmen."
The trio felt slightly abashed. They left quietly.
"See, here is the door through which I entered," said Kartik. "Those two men left the same way."
Gowri was combing the ground with all the care of a professional sleuth.

"Ah...ha! Look what I have found," she said pouncing on the burnt end of a cigarette.

"Tchah! That is nothing," scorned Jaya, wrinkling her nose.

"How do you know?" countered Gowri. "In the books it is always small clues that help in solving the mysteries." She pulled out her handkerchief and wrapped the cigarette end carefully; the other two watched in amusement. Paying scant attention to them, Gowri returned to her search. She saw a footprint and studied it seriously.

"What is it now?" asked Kartik. "The murder weapon?"

Gowri ignored him and continued to study the footprint. The ground was damp and it showed up clearly. There was a distinctive diamond shaped pattern on the heel. She called Jaya to see it.

"I am bored with all this silly search for clues," exclaimed Kartik. "I am off to play cricket!" He ran away. He had spotted the village boys setting up stumps on the ground outside the village and was itching to join them.

"What is that Chikki has in her mouth?" said Jaya suddenly.

The goat was nibbling at something - a white object which lay half-hidden by some bushes. Gowri pulled it out of the goat's mouth and stared at it.

It was a white handkerchief, neatly monogrammed in one corner - RA.
"RA?" said Gowri. "I wonder who that is. That journalist fellow's name is Shetty."

The goat had wandered off in search of greener pastures. Jaya looked up and exclaimed, "Oh crumbs! Gowri, look at that pet of yours."

A little distance away stood a jeep belonging to the Archaeological Survey. In the front seat a man lay fast asleep, his feet sticking out at one end and his head at the other. A towel covered his face. The curious goat was taking an experimental nibble at one of his toes. The man jumped up!

"Maa...maa..." bleated the startled goat.

Gowri ran across and put her arms around her pet's neck protectively. "I'm sorry," she said. "Chikki is very inquisitive."

"Well, so am I, but I don't go around nibbling at toes," said the man. He lit a cigarette.

"You are new here, aren't you?" asked Gowri conversationally. "Haven't seen you around before."

Jaya waited a little distance away, feeling rather shy.

"Gosh, that cigarette smells awful," commented Gowri.

The man grinned.

"Much worse than the one Pachiappa smokes," she added.

"Who is Pachiappa?"


"Thank you," the man said. "I will take it as a compliment."
"Where is Jayaseelan?" asked Gowri. "Usually he drives the archaeologists around. He is my friend," she added.

"Oh! He is on leave," said the man. "I am Nandu."

"Have you come from Madras as well?"
Nandu nodded.

"Hey, what is that you are holding so tightly?" he asked.

Gowri opened her palm to show the handkerchief marked RA. To her amazement, Nandu took it from her, folded it and thrust it into his trouser pocket.

"Thanks, it is mine," he said with a smile. "I was searching for it."

"But..." protested Gowri. Then her eyes narrowed as a new thought came to her mind.

"Where did you find it?" asked Nandu.

"At the back of the temple," answered Gowri watching him carefully.

"Oh! I must have dropped it when I went for a walk this morning to the beach," he said. "Anyway, thanks." He chucked his cigarette end and went back to lie down in his jeep.

"Gowri, come on," whispered Jaya.

The younger girl bent down to pick up the cigarette butt. Then the two girls walked away, followed obediently by Chikki.

"He is lying!"

"Yes," said Jaya slowly. "I think you are right. There is something fishy. Firstly, we found the hanky inside the temple."
"He said his name was Nandu," recalled Gowri. "But the initials on the hanky were RA..."

"And the way to the beach is from the other side," added Jaya.

Gowri opened her own hanky and took out the two cigarette ends...they were of the same kind. "Remember, he was rolling it himself."

* * * *

"That is strange," remarked Kartik studying the fine white paper. He smelt the tobacco, and coughed.

"What is strange?" asked the girls at once.

"That an ordinary jeep driver should smoke something like this. It is a rare brand of tobacco," said Kartik. "My friend Peter's father smokes this, rolls his own cigarettes. It is grown specially on a farm in Andhra and very few people get it."

The girls told him of their own deductions.

"He was probably the second man," said Kartik. "The one whose face I could not see."

More clues

Meanwhile, Nagesh alias Nathan alias Shetty had carried out some investigations. Time was running short. He asked the garrulous Murugesha several questions about the temple, particularly its last priest, Govinda.
"You should talk to Chintamani, sir," advised Murugesha. "He was Govinda's closest friend. It was Chintamani who found him that fateful night."

But Shetty was not too keen on this. "Was he dead?" he asked.

"No, sir. He died in the hospital. Our own Dr. Srinivasan attended on him. He is another person who is well informed about the temple. He is on the Trust Committee."

So it was that Shetty sought an appointment with Dr. Srinivasan that morning.

After saying goodbye to Gowri, Jaya and Kartik returned home to find a black Fiat parked outside their grandfather's house.

"It is that man's car," whispered Jaya excitedly. "He is here."

"Just keep a watch," said Kartik. "Let us see if we find anything inside!"

He checked the doors and found them locked. However, one of the rear windows was not fully rolled up. Kartik rummaged around in his trouser pocket in which he carried odds and ends. He pulled out a string and looped one end. This he pushed through the gap in the window till it reached the door handle.

Jerking hard, he changed it from the locked position. The door opened with a click.

"Hurry!" whispered Jaya. "He is sitting with Thatha in the study. The window directly opposite us."

Kartik slipped inside the car and rifled through
the glove compartment. Apart from some road maps, traveller's cheques, and a box of tissues, he found nothing. There was a flask near the rear window. Kartik looked under the seats. A big leather bag lay tucked underneath. He pulled it out and checked the pockets. To his shock, there was a revolver and some cartridges lying in it.

Kartik went through all the pockets. He found a licence for the revolver made out in the name of R. Nathan and an old Indian Airlines plane ticket from Goa to Bangalore in the name of A.R. Shetty. There was also a piece of paper tucked deep inside in one of the pockets. Kartik pulled it out. It was a calling card on expensive cream coloured paper. Printed in gold letters was

R. NATHAN (Manager)
Rebeiro’s Antique Arts
Panaji, Goa

On the back of the card something was scribbled with a black felt-tipped pen. It seemed like a schedule.

October 7 - Bangalore
October 8 - Madras
October 9 - Rajapuram
October 10 -
October 11 - Emerald Lingam
October 12 -
October 13 - Pondicherry
October 14 - Madras
October 15 - Bombay
October 16 - Goa

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Kartik's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. He pushed the card back and got out of the car locking the door after him.

**Eavesdropping**

"Gowri, come quickly," called out Jaya.
"I can't, I am helping Amma in the kitchen," Gowri yelled back.
"Well, then, come as quickly as you can," so saying Jaya went home.
A little while later Gowri arrived. "Where is the fire?" she asked. "I had a hard time thinking up a good excuse to convince Amma."
"What did you tell her?"
"That you had invited me for lunch," said Gowri with a mischievous grin. She loved eating at Jaya and Kartik's house because their grandmother was an excellent cook.
"Fine, I will just go and inform Ammachi," Jaya got up. "Don't begin without me."

The three children sat in the shade of the jack fruit tree and held a conference. Gowri's eyes became as round as saucers when she heard about how Kartik had unlocked the car and looked inside.
"A proper pistol?" she asked. "Are you sure it was not a toy one?"
"Of course I am sure," answered Kartik in exasperation. "I felt it. It was heavy and the cartridges were real too."
"What this means is Shetty is actually a man called Nathan from Goa and he is planning to steal the emerald lingam," he added.

"Aiyyo! How can that be?" asked Gowri, puzzled. "The lingam was stolen years ago. I remember Thatha talking about it."

"Gowri," said Kartik suddenly, "did he ever mention anyone who was suspected in the theft?"

Gowri frowned. "Well, you know the police could not catch the culprit. But many in the village believe that a man called Nagesh had something to do with it..."

"Nagesh!" exclaimed Jaya. "Wait a bit. Remember, your grandfather mistook this man Shetty..." she recalled. "He called him Nagesh that day in the hotel."

"Yes. He was insistent about it," added Kartik. "Maybe this man really is Nagesh."

"And that driver with the archaeologists must be his accomplice," said Gowri. "We must do something to stop them."

"But where is the lingam?" asked Jaya.

"In the temple," hazarded Kartik. "Maybe when Nagesh stole the idols, he could not find the lingam, so it must still be in the temple," he concluded. "Besides, when I saw him in the temple he was searching along the walls."

"Along the walls! That seems a strange place to search," remarked Jaya.

"Silly, there is probably a secret cavity somewhere," said Gowri who was an avid reader of mystery books.
"I think you are right," Kartik remarked. 
"And they have not found it, yet."
"This journalist fellow has been making a lot of 
enquiries in the village," said Gowri. "I heard 
Murugesha tell my grandfather that he asked 
many questions about Govinda."
"He is interviewing Thatha right now," said 
Jaya. "Ammachi told me he will be staying on for 
lunch. Thatha has invited him."
"I wonder what he is asking Thatha right 
now?" mused Kartik.
A crafty gleam came into Gowri's eyes. "Why 
don't we go and eavesdrop?"
The other two stared at her.
"Well, come on," she challenged. "Don't you 
want to know what this crook is after? How else 
will we stop him?"

Shetty, the journalist, had a profitable inter-
view with Dr. Srinivasan. Under the pretext of 
Collecting material for his article, he had turned 
the conversation to the night of the theft, fifteen 
years ago.
"Yes, I remember that morning when Chinta-
mani brought old Govinda to my hospital," said 
Dr. Srinivasan. "He had a skull injury when he 
hit the stone pillar."
"Did he recover consciousness?" asked Shetty. 
"Did he mention anything, a name or a place?"
"You mean some clue to the culprit," said Dr.
Srinivasan. "No, he did not. The police officers were very disappointed. You see," he elaborated, "Govinda recovered only for a few minutes and he was probably delirious. He did mumble something unintelligible."

"What?"

"It did not make any sense...something about the foot of the Nandi."

"The foot of the Nandi," echoed the fake journalist.

There was a knock on the door. A servant came in to say that lunch was ready.

Kartik, crouching outside the open window of the study, hid himself behind a bush. A shadow fell across — someone was standing near the window.

Nathan frowned. Was that one of those pesky kids hiding behind the bush? The boy. What was he doing there? How much had he heard?

Dr. Srinivasan said something. As Nathan turned to listen, Kartik slipped away.

A warning

Lunch was served in the cool, high-ceilinged dining hall. Plantain leaves were placed before each person by a servant. Ammachi began serving. She had surpassed herself, but none of the three children were eating.

Between mouthfuls, Gowri eyed the guest. Jaya nudged her, whispering, "Gowri! Don't stare!"
Suddenly Gowri burst out, "Uncle, did you go to the temple last night?"

Kartik and Jaya stared at her in dismay. Even Thatha stopped eating and looked up.

"Gowri, shut up!" muttered Jaya.

Shetty gave her a sharp look. "I was fast asleep in my bed at the hotel," he said with a laugh.

Gowri rolled up her plantain leaf and went out to wash her hands.

"But, you haven't had any buttermilk," protested Ammachi. "What is the matter? Not feeling well?"

"Uh! Just a headache," prevaricated the girl.

Jaya rose too, and went out with her.

They washed at the tap outside.

"You idiot!" whispered Jaya. "What possessed you to ask him such a question?"

"I thought I would catch him unawares," answered Gowri sheepishly. Suddenly an idea came to her. "Let us check whether he is lying or not," she said.

"How?"

"Look, his shoes are outside the dining hall," pointed out Gowri.

"So?"

"Remember, there was a footprint with a diamond-shaped design on the heel, outside the temple..."

Before Jaya could say anything, Gowri had crossed over and picked up the shoes. She turned them over. The design was clear.

"See!" she said triumphantly.
"What are you up to?" asked an angry voice behind them.

The girls turned to see Shetty looking down at them.

"Er...nothing..." stammered Jaya.

"We were just admiring your shoes."

"Oh? Really?" he sounded extremely nasty.

"You children are an inquisitive lot. Perhaps I should teach you to mind your own business."

Gowri stared back boldly.

"Remember," said Shetty softly, "curiosity killed the cat."

He turned away, and both the girls fled upstairs.

Outwitted

Nagesh had an uncomfortable feeling that trouble was brewing close at hand. Time was running out and he was behind schedule.

Those pesky kids! How did they know that he had visited the temple late at night? Was he being followed? He had an uncanny instinct for sensing danger...and now it was at work.

But the lingam had become an obsession. He was desperate to possess it. He thought of the old tale about it bringing bad luck...and laughed at himself.

It was in the temple, hidden somewhere by old Govinda. Through his probing he had come to know that Govinda had been rather worried
about the lingam just before his death. He had often talked about the poor security arrangements.

'The foot of the Nandi' - those last words had some meaning. Nagesh knew Govinda well. The priest had not been raving. He had tried to convey something.

Another visit to the temple was needed. This time he would unravel the secret. He would go there late in the evening when the workers had left, not when it was dark. He laid out his plans, and went down to the hotel.

"My work here is over," he said to Murugesha. "I will be leaving early tomorrow morning."

"Indeed, sir! We shall be sorry to lose you," said Murugesha. The guest had been generous with tips.

He had not noticed that the wily proprietor had charged him nearly double.

"Have you collected all the material for your article?"

"Oh, yes, my job here is nearly over," answered Shetty. "I would like to settle the account right now."

While Murugesha went over the accounts, Shetty waited. He cast an idle glance around. A couple of village youths sat around a table sipping coffee and making a racket.

A lone customer sat at a corner table eating his way through a mountain of idlis and sambar. For a thin man, he had a gargantuan appetite, thought Shetty. How sleepy he looked. If he did not watch
out he would fall face first into the plate of *idlis*.

Suddenly an alarm bell rang somewhere in his brain! A memory stirred...Sleepy...Sleepy Alva! That man was Sleepy Alva! His arch enemy. In disguise, but there was no doubt. No wonder he had been aware of a sense of danger.

Shetty controlled his consternation and turned the other way. He paid his bill, and walked out quickly.

Alva got up and followed him. *'T will teach him a lesson,'* thought Shetty. He walked in and out of the maze of narrow streets, leading the unsuspecting police detective a merry dance.

He turned into a narrow alley flanked by backyards of houses on both sides. A smelly gutter ran in the middle of the alley. No one was in sight.

Shetty pushed open a door in the wall and peeped in. The backyard was empty. A cowshed stood along a wall. He went in and waited.

Inspector Alva was puzzled. He never suspected a trap. Creak! He pushed open the door of the cowshed and entered.

"Thwack!" Something heavy and hard hit the back of his head. He crumpled under the blow.

Quickly Shetty trussed him up tightly with a thick rope and stuffed a dirty cloth into his mouth.

Inspector Alva would be 'out' for some time - long enough for Shetty to finish his work and be far away!
A traffic jam

The setting sun bathed the world in a golden reddish light. The air was alive with the noise of the birds returning home to roost.

The cowherds from the village were bringing the cows home. There were at least two hundred animals milling about on the road and raising a storm of dust. It was a traffic jam!

"Beep...beep!" went the car horn.

"Moo!" a friendly cow pushed her head in and bellowed into Shetty's ear.

"Get these wretched animals off the road!" he yelled at the grinning cowherd.

Linga was in no hurry to do the man's bidding. It was amusing to watch the man from the big city caught in this unusual predicament.

"Moo!" another inquisitive cow looked in. Shetty quickly rolled up the window, and waited, fuming.

"Where are you off to?" asked Linga. "Are you going away?"

"None of your business," snapped Shetty. "Just get these animals off the road!"

The last of the stragglers among the cows went past. He started the car, and drove away in a hurry. Linga saw him take the turning towards the Sundareswara temple and went home shaking his head and laughing to himself.

* * *
"Linga!" Kartik yelled out. Linga came out of the cowshed holding two pails of frothing milk.

"What took you so long?" demanded Kartik. "Ammachi's been waiting to boil the milk since an hour. I saw you bring the cows home late. Fell asleep in the fields?"

Linga related the incident of the traffic jam, laughing at the memory.

"What are you talking about?" asked Kartik, pricking up his ears at the mention of Shetty.

Five minutes later, he went in search of Jaya. "Listen, that man has gone to the temple again," he said breathlessly. "I am going to see what he is up to."

"Wait! I will come with you," said Jaya firmly. She was not one to miss out on the excitement. "I will just tell Ammachi we are going out for a while."

Their grandmother was in the prayer room lighting the oil lamp. She could not be disturbed for an hour till she finished her prayers. Jaya left a message with a passing servant and joined Kartik near the gate.

"Should we call Gowri?" she asked uncertainly. "She will hate it if we don't include her."

"There is no time," said Kartik. "Linga saw Shetty on the temple road an hour ago."

"Oh Kartik, I am scared," confessed Jaya. "He has that pistol. We should tell somebody where we are going."

"We will be back by the time Ammachi finishes her prayers," said Kartik. "Do walk faster."
The two children crossed the dark fields and reached the palm grove near the temple.
"Look, there is his car," pointed out Jaya. The Fiat was parked under the trees.
"Wait here," instructed Kartik. "It is safer."
The girl waited in the bushes feeling rather nervous. Adventures were fine in books, but being in one was too scary. Shetty's menacing words came back to her - 'Curiosity killed the cat'. She shivered and waited.

**Rescued**

"Gowri, go and give the fodder to the cows," said Gowri's mother. The girl ran to do her bidding. They had four cows - Kasturi, a brown cow; Nandi, the belligerent one; Radha, a sly creature who butted suddenly; and Mohini, a calf.

Chikki, stayed away from the cows, and bleated outside in the yard. It was her mealtime, too.

Gowri liked feeding the cows. She pushed open the door of the cowshed, humming a tune softly.

"Ah...h!" There was a strange groaning sound. It came again. "Ah...h!" followed by 'Thump! Thump!'

Gowri peered inside and let out a scream. "Aiyyo! Amma!" In the darkest corner of the shed, a man lay bound and gagged. He was hitting his heels on the floor — thump. The girl went close.

"Mmph...mmph!" he tried to speak through the cloth. The man rolled his eyes. It was Nandu,
the jeep driver from the Archaeological Survey. What was he doing here? In this condition? Gowri's eyes grew round with amazement.

"Mmph...mmm!"

"Do you want me to untie you?" she asked.

He nodded vigorously.

She inspected the knots and said in a voice tinged with admiration, "The person who has tied this has done a neat job. I can't open it!" An idea struck her. "Wait a bit. I'll be right back." She ran off and returned with a sharp sickle and cut the ropes. Then she opened the gag.

"Water...water..." he said, spitting out bits of hay.

Gowri ran to the hand-pump and fetched some water in the empty shell of a coconut.

"Ah...thank you...oh...my head," he groaned.

"What happened?" asked Gowri agog with curiosity.

"He sandbagged me."

"Who?"

"Nathan."

"Nathan?" asked Gowri. "Who is that? There is only one Nathan in our village, the headman. Did he do this?"

She was very surprised, indeed. Was the portly, jolly headman a maniac who went around hitting strangers on their heads, trussing them up like chicken and dumping them in cowsheds! It was a side of his personality that she had never heard of.

"Nathan, Shetty, Nagesh, he has many names," groaned the driver.
"But..." Gowri protested, "are you not friends?"

"Friends!"

"Well, who are you?" she asked. "Don't say you are Nandu. I know you are not what you say you are!"

"Little girl, my head is splitting with pain and I am in a hurry."

"Wait a minute. Who are you? Are you after the lingam?" she asked fiercely.

He looked surprised. "No, I am after Nathan."

"But who are you?" asked Gowri for the third time.

"Inspector Alva of the CBI." He got up.

"Which is the shortest way to go to the temple?" he asked.

"Are you going to stop that journalist chap from stealing the lingam?" asked Gowri eagerly.

"Then I am coming along as well."

"No, you are not."

"I am," said Gowri firmly. She led him out to the street and they both ran to the jeep parked outside Murugesha's Hotel and got in. Alva started the engine and reversed.

"Ma...aa...Maa...aa.i" bleated Chikki who had raced after her mistress. She leapt into Gowri's lap.
Search ends

Unaware that he had been followed, Shetty prowled about in the sanctum sanctorum. He tapped the walls for hollow sounds indicating a cavity. After an hour or so he gave up.

A little distance away, Kartik crouched behind a pillar. Shetty came out of the main shrine and walked across the courtyard to one of the smaller shrines. Kartik ran after him softly, and hid in the shadow of the Nandi bull.

Inside the small Ganesha temple, Shetty ran his torch along the wall.

'He has not found it,' thought Kartik, thankfully. He came around to the front and crouched under the neck of the stone bull.

The stars were twinkling in the sky. A gentle sea breeze rustled through the palms. Kartik shivered and pressed his knees closer, digging them into the stone. Suddenly he felt the stone beneath him shift. Some earth fell off. He looked down to see the part of the pedestal beneath the forefeet of Nandi had caved in. There was some sort of a cavity. It struck him in a flash. The dying priest's words came back to him.

Shetty came out of the small temple and looked around. He had heard a scuffling sound that had alerted him. A shadow shifted. Shetty swung around suddenly and grabbed the boy hiding behind Nandi.

"You!"

"Let go!" Kartik fought back.
"What are you doing here?" demanded Shetty in a soft drawl that held an undertone of menace. "Snooping around, eh? Do you know what happens to snoopers?" he smiled grimly. "Let go of my arm," panted Kartik. The man was too strong for him. He tightened his grip cruelly on Kartik's arms and forced his head backwards by pulling his hair. "I warned your sister this afternoon," he said. "Curiosity killed the cat." He pushed Kartik against the statue. The movement caused some more earth to cave in. Shetty looked at the statue in surprise. He kicked at the soil till the cavity was completely open. He flashed a torch inside.

The dying priest's last words had been "The foot of the Nandi".

Now Shetty understood. In his excitement he let go of Kartik and started digging the soil. He pushed his hands in. Inside was a wooden box. "Ah!" he said triumphantly.

Kartik watched in dismay. He had never felt so disappointed. His bid to save the lingam was lost. ' Run! ' commanded his brain. Kartik turned and fled. A shot whistled past. In his desperation, Shetty had used his pistol.

Grabbing the box, Shetty ran after the boy, but Kartik had a few minutes advantage.

Jaya had heard the gun shot. The sound of running feet came closer. She fell flat amongst the
bushes hardly daring to breathe. She peered through and heaved a sigh of relief. It was Kartik but what was he doing?

Aware that Shetty was close on his heels, Kartik forced himself to think coolly. Perhaps he could still stop the crook from making a getaway. In a trice, the idea came to him. He opened the bonnet of the car and hurriedly began pulling at something.

"Kartik, what are you doing?" Jaya whispered. "Hurry up, he is coming," she cried urgently.

The two children hid among the palm trees; just as Shetty reached the car.

Without wasting a second, he got in, started the car and reversed, driving away at top speed.

"Come on," said Kartik. "Run! We have got to tell them at the village."

The chase

The jeep bumped along the rugged track. "Oof!" said Gowri wincing as she bounced up and down. Breathless with excitement she held on to her seat to avoid falling.

"Ma..aa..Ma..aa..." bleated Chikki who had decided that she had had enough of jeeps and that she wanted to hop off.

"Did you have to bring that goat of yours?" asked Inspector Alva in a pained voice.

"She follows me everywhere," explained Gowri. "I hope we catch that crook."
What a pity that Kartik and Jaya had missed out on all the excitement. They would be so envious when they heard that she, Gowri, had helped to capture an international crook and prevent the theft of the emerald lingam. She would be the heroine of the village, maybe she would never have to go to school again! Fat chance of that, she thought gloomily. Her mother would force her.

Suddenly, two figures rushed out of the palm grove and began waving wildly. Inspector Alva braked suddenly, nearly sending Gowri through the tarpaulin roof.

"Move away," yelled Alva.

"Wait...wait!" screamed Gowri. "Jaya and Kartik! What are you doing here?" she asked in surprise.

"Stop...stop!" panted Kartik.

"What is it?" asked Alva curtly. The boy stared at him a little uncertainly.

"It is all right," said Gowri knowledgeably. "This is Inspector Alva of the CBI. He is after the crook Shetty."

"Too late!" said Jaya breathlessly. "He left twenty minutes back and he has the lingam with him."

"Oh...no!" groaned Alva in dismay.

"But he won't go very far," added Kartik. "I could not stop him from getting the lingam but I have cut the fuel pipe from the tank to the carburettor, in his car. By now all the fuel would have drained out."

"Excellent!" Alva cheered up immediately.
"Clever boy! Hop in, all of you."

It was rather cramped but no one minded. They reached the main road and Alva took the turning for Kanchipuram.

"Not that way," said Kartik suddenly. "Shetty has gone to Pondicherry." Seeing Alva's surprised look, he quickly told the police officer how he had seen Shetty's schedule written on the back of the calling card.

"You children have been very busy," commented Alva admiringly. "Excellent detective work!" He turned towards Pondicherry, and stepped on the accelerator.

Kartik glanced at the speedometer and grinned. The needle was touching ninety!

The headlights picked up a car parked on the roadside.

"There he is," said Kartik.

Shetty had raised the bonnet of the car and was investigating the trouble with the help of a torch. He cursed fluently. The fuel tank was dry. He had no choice left. He would have to hitch a ride. He heard a jeep approaching and waved frantically.

The jeep stopped.

"I want a lift," said Shetty.

"To the nearest police station?" enquired Alva politely.

"What!" Shetty nearly jumped out of his skin. "You!" With a quick move he whipped out the pistol from his coat pocket. "One more move..." he threatened.

Alva froze.
Shetty grinned and said, "You know I mean business. Now get out, all of you! I want the jeep."
"I think we better do what he says," said Alva, coolly. They clambered out of the jeep.
"Line up, all of you," ordered Shetty. "No tricks, I warn you." He waved the pistol threateningly.
In the dark he failed to see the goat behind him. Chikki darted towards her beloved Gowri, taking Shetty by surprise.
Alva dived towards his legs, and overpowered him. The pistol flew out of Shetty's hands and fell in front of Jaya.
"Grab it!" yelled Kartik.
Jaya picked it up gingerly.
Alva and Shetty were wrestling on the ground.
"Stop...or I will sh...shoot!" said Jaya in a quavering voice but nobody heard her. She pressed the trigger experimentally.
BANG!
The shot surprised everyone, but most of all it surprised Jaya. In a quick movement, Alva pinned Shetty down with Kartik's help.
"There is a rope beneath the driver's seat," said Alva.
Gowri ran to get it.
"This gives me immense pleasure," remarked Alva as he tied Shetty's hands and feet together and bundled him into the jeep.
"I will take that, if you don't mind," he told Jaya, who handed him the pistol thankfully. Picking up the wooden box which contained the lin-gam, he got into the jeep. The children piled in.
Dr. Srinivasan and his wife were very worried. Gowri's parents and her grandfather, old Ghintamani, sat in the drawing-room of the doctor's house.

It was nearly ten o'clock and the three children were missing. Servants had been sent out everywhere and some of the villagers had joined in the search. Gowri's mother was crying softly.

"I have rung up the police at Kanchipuram," said Dr. Srinivasan. "They should be here any time..."

A jeep roared into the courtyard. Everyone rushed out in time to see the three children tumbling out.

"Where...?"
"What...?"

"Mr. Shetty!" exclaimed Dr. Srinivasan seeing the bound man. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded sternly. He turned towards Alva. "Who are you?"

"Inspector Roderick Alva," said the police officer pulling out his identity card.

"Thatha, this man is an inspector and Shetty is an imposter. He is not a journalist but a crook who wanted to steal the emerald lingam!" rattled off Gowri.

"What!" All the grown-ups stared at her as if she had gone mad.

"Yes, Thatha, it is true," added Kartik. "Actually his name is Nagesh and he stole the three statues from the temple."

Gowri went to her grandfather Chintamani,
and held his hand. "You were right," she said. "You were the only person who recognised him."

"May we all go inside?" asked Alva politely. "I would like to ring up the police station at Kanchi..."

"We have rung them up already," broke in Dr. Srinivasan. "They should be on their way. Please come in," he invited.

No sooner had they settled inside, than he asked the question uppermost in everyone's minds. "Where is the emerald lingam?"

Inspector Alva took out the box. The lock had rusted. With one powerful jerk, he opened it. Inside was a silk cloth wrapped around something. Slowly he unwrapped it...and there it was!

The emerald lingam saw light after fifteen years. It was not big...six inches high and six inches wide at its broadest point — but it was a rare stone. It seemed to gather all the light, glow and flash its green radiance. Everyone in the room was silent as they gazed at it.

Chintamani spoke first. "Now my friend Govinda, will rest in peace. He did not die in vain."

The children were nodding with sleep, but they stayed up to tell the tale.

"The foot of the Nandi!" said Dr. Srinivasan slowly. "So that is what he had meant. You children have been very smart. Thanks to you we have recovered the lingam. You deserve a big gift..."

But there was no response. The trio was fast asleep.
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Killing to grab temple idols, and biding his time to steal the emerald deity, Nathan alias Nagesh transforms himself into A.R. Shetty, a freelance journalist. On his trail walks CBI sleuth Alva, determined. Outsmarting them are Kartik, Jaya, and Gowri with her pet goat Chikki.

Treated with ease and simplicity, the story carries you on waves of suspense to the climax.