

## Boxing Day

“What about your shops at other tourist centers?”

“They are equally busy. I am always on the move supervising the shops. That is the reason I could not come on the last Poya (Holy) Day - (Full Moon) - to take all of you to the temple. Even Delta might be finding fault with me for failing to give her a lift to the bus stand to go to the University.”

Delta walked in with the hot, steaming cup of coffee and offered it to me. “I do not know whether I added too much of sugar,” she said, biting her lower lip.

“You always do that? Isn’t that so, Dudley?” Jean said, smiling at me.

Delta rushed back, wearing a new dressing gown. “Dudley, excuse me for holding you back.”

“It’s OK with me. What is it, Delta?”

“I have consented to join a picnic to the Sinharajah rain forest arranged by the University Students’ Union.

“When is it?”

“On the 15th of next month. I do not like to bother you, as you are really busy with your business. But my problem is taking all my luggage and go to the University. I will have to walk up the distance from the Galle bus stand to the Campus. It is very hard to take a taxi at that time of the day. Can you please give me a lift to the Campus?”

“At what time do you want to leave home?”

“Say by about 8.30 in the morning.”

“How long will you be there?”

“Five days. It is really a camping expedition.”

“How do you people plan to go the Sinharajah forest from the Campus?”

“By a private coach. Our Union has already made arrangements.”

“Sure, I can take you to the Campus. When you return, give me a call. I will pick you up.”

“Thank you, Dudley. It is nice of you,” said a beaming Delta.

I thanked them, especially Delta, for the nice cup of coffee, adding that the reason I came early in the morning was to check whether they were all right after the nasty weather overnight.

Sam and Jean were devoted Buddhists. They never failed to go to the nearby temple on Full Moon days to listen to sermons delivered by Buddhist monks. Delta followed in the footsteps of her parents. She too was a good Buddhist. In fact, she offered Buddhism as a subject for her GCE (Advanced Level) examination.

Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) was under British rule for over 150 years until it gained independence in 1948. Religion and most of its culture remained intact. Younger people adopted English names though they retained the traditional surnames. The European

countries, however, influenced their lifestyles and ways of living to some extent.

I was not living far away from the sea, and could reach the beach in about 15 minutes on foot. When the sea was gusty and rough, I could even hear waves dashing on the shore, leaving a trail of ripples that turned into sea-foam when the waves receded.

When I was young and at school, I used to gang up with my peers and go sea bathing without the permission of our parents who were so protective. It was a safe place to bathe or swim because the coral reef was within about 100 yards from the beach, which kept the waves in check. Underneath the waves of translucent water was a fascinating and enthralling colourful world with many species of fish; angelfish, butterfly fish. The flat but elegant fish swam through rocks and coral, giving a heart-throbbing spectacle. Besides, there were well over 50 varieties of corals. Thousands of fish and other sea creatures including lobsters took refuge in those corals.

This area is now a popular sea resort known as the Hikkaduwa Coral Gardens.

The beach of Hikkaduwa is situated 98 km from Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, towards the south. This beautiful town is the main attraction of tourists and holidaymakers along the southern coastal belt. Snorkeling, surfing and diving in the clear waters of the sea are the major tourist attractions of this resort.

The coral sanctuary is a large shallow body of water enclosed by a reef decorated with layers of multi-coloured corals, which is a home to countless number of coloured fish.

Along the beach are also found islets replete with beautiful coral formations. One such spot is known as the Coral Garden Cave underneath the water created by boulders of the seabed. This area is covered with corals like flowers of many varieties normally seen in inland gardens. The marine life comprises fish of many varieties such as clown fish, angelfish and snappers, including turtles.

The remains of Ship Earl of Shaftsbury is yet another tourist attraction which has a historical significance. It is an English ship that sank in 1847. The area is full of beautiful corals grown over the last few centuries, and is full of fish such as rays and barracuda.

December 26 was a public holiday in Sri Lanka immediately after Christmas, and the beach was over crowded with visitors and tourists from overseas. I had my breakfast and was among the crowd to join in the fun.

Delta and her parents sat under the shady coconut trees that were leaning towards the beach, providing shelter to beachgoers and the ecstatic children playing with seashells and building sand dunes. I ran up to them, gave a hug to Delta and started the usual chitchat with them. They were eager to have a dip in the

water. I too joined them though I felt that a chat was more enjoyable than a dip.

The sea was calm unlike the previous evening. Most of the people were swimming, snorkelling, surfing or skiing.

Delta, her parents and I waded through the shallow water and started swimming into deeper waters. Delta had always been reluctant to swim in the sea, as she feared death by water. I took her hand and asked her to move on. She tried to evade the waves and move away from them. She held my hand tightly as water heaved away from her and lunged back several times. She, however, moved forward fearlessly, knowing that her parents and I were there to come to her rescue in case of an emergency.

Delta felt pebbles under her tender feet shifting, slippery and even cold. She looked pretty frightened closing her eyes with her hands as the waves struck her body and water splashed across her face.

“Come on, Delta, come on. Don’t be afraid. The sea is not that rough,” I said jokingly.

In the struggle with the waves, she stumbled and fell a few times. She had to take in one or two mouthfuls of seawater, salt stinging in her eyes and the back of her throat, bitter and burning. She went under the water once again. I soothed her as I swung her up

against my chest. Overcome by a rush of love, I squeezed her closer, smelling the nutty fragrance that still remained on her hair. Delta’s fear of death by water confounded her but, like a carefree girl now in the arms of her sweetheart, she seemed to have nothing to worry about.

Clusters of white triangles were heading out to deep sea for sailing. Delta was staring at them, hoping that one day she could own one of them and sail past the huge Rockies sprung from the ocean bed and go even closer to the horizon.

All of a sudden there was a remarkable change in the sea, as if it was taking a deep breath. All the water was sucked back, leaving the seabed bare. Fish flapped

Desperately. Submerged rocks and reefs became visible. Children and even elders started catching the fish and collecting them in heaps. It was a free-for-all day for every one. It intensified the fun and frolic of the festive season - a day so memorable.

Snorkellers and scuba divers out at sea may have sensed that something terrible was happening, and felt the pull of a massive current dragging them towards the horizon.

A 12 year-old girl dressed in a bathing suit with brown and white stripes, who looked like a baby zebra in a leafy park, was playing with her friends a bit earlier on this idyllic beach when she noticed bubbling on the water, right on the edge, and foam sizzling just like in a frying pan. The water was coming in but it was not going out. She knew that earthquake-driven waves were only minutes away. She had learnt all about it from her Geography lessons. She turned towards her mum and shouted.

“Mum, I know there is something wrong. I know it is going to be a tsunami.”

“No, darling Judith, no, it is just a day at the beach,” her mum said, brushing aside her warning.

“Go back, mum, Go back,” shouted the girl. “There is danger,” she yelled at the top of her voice so that even others could hear her warning.

“What are you talking about, darling?” her mum said, a broad smile on her face reddened by seawater and the strong sunrays. “Look at those beautiful sea shells. Collect more of them,” she continued.

Judith gave mum a stern look, keeping the eye-to-eye contact for a few seconds.

She went hysterical, and ran with her father to the hotel where they were staying, and gave a warning to the hotel staff. She ran back to the beach and told the others who were collecting seashells and fish on the half-barren seashore. Her mum reluctantly joined her husband and the daughter near the hotel.

The Japanese hotel chef alerted the crowds through the security staff of the hotel. Most of them did not pay any heed to the warning coming from a 12 year-old girl.

A long thin line of darkness approached along the horizon. Ocean waves rolled down towards the shore like towering cliffs some even ten meters high. They did not break on the shore but kept going, flooding the area taking every thing before them to the low-lying mainland and beyond. Rivers breached their banks by the rush of water and the whole area was suddenly under a major flood.

People on the seashore collecting fish and seashells and excited swimmers shouted at each other, the sea is coming; the sea is coming, and ran for their lives. The pace of the rolling waves was so fast and swift that all men, women and children, the parked motor cars near the beach, fishing boats and all the fishing gear, fallen houses, shops and boutiques went under the waves and were swept away.

I got hold of tearful, pale-looking Delta by her locks of curly, black hair, floated a while, and swam a little, till we were able to reach a higher point on the mainland unknown to us. Five or six other people were with us. All were fully exhausted and clung on to each other to avoid being washed away by the swift current. There was no sign of Delta’s parents.

A few rescue boats, a helicopter and planes evacuated tourists from the holiday resort and airlifted stricken victims to hospitals and safer places. Hundreds of frightened tourists stood in line waving at the rescue boats and planes. Some tried to get in to the queue pushing those who stood ahead of them for hours. Swearing and arguments ensued. There was confusion all around as people tried to board the rescue boats and the helicopter as soon as they came to rescue them.

*To be Continued...*

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