

Christmas Bells

Once again, father was transferred. This time to the sleepy town of Palai in Kerala.

On arrival at Palai, we moved into a house, surrounded by banana trees, beds of tapioca, roses and chrysanthemums. Bordering them were a dozen coconut palms, reaching out to the stars in the sky.

I pranced round the house, exploring every nook and corner.

My mother was busy unpacking the cartons and arranging the various articles in the proper places.

I was bored. I picked up a rubber ball and went into the garden.

I ran round the garden chasing the ball or watching squirrels scramble up the trees or observing the humming bees.

The ball which I kept bouncing up and down went over the parapet into the compound of the neighbouring house. I saw a little boy, almost my age, rushing out and collecting the ball. He rolled his eyes, put out his tongue and teased me. I did not like his attitude. I too rolled my eyes and

stuck out my tongue at him.

"Why did you throw the ball into my house?" he asked loudly.

"I did not throw it. It came by itself," I replied.

"Then let it come back by itself. I won't give it to you."

"I will snatch it from you."

Try.

I climbed up the parapet, jumped over it and chased the boy. He ran off, turning and twisting, weaving his way through the thick vegetation. I raced round the garden after him. At last, after ten minutes of running around, we sank down, panting for breath.

"I am Raman," I broke the ice.

"Thomas," he offered his hand.

"Glad to meet you."

"Let us be friends."

"All right. I need a friend."

That was the beginning of an association that soon developed into a close and intimate friendship.

We spent all our time together, eating from the same plate, playing hide and seek, chasing butterflies, climbing trees, plucking unripe mangoes and sinking our teeth into the slightly sour pulp. Occasionally we fought like cats and dogs, clawing and tearing at each other, only to forget our

differences soon, swearing never to fight again.

Nights were the hardest for us. Then we were pulled apart. We had to be carried away by force by our parents, while we raved and kicked and cried to be left to ourselves.

Thomas told me all about Christmas. I listened to him, fascinated. He told me that Christmas came in the last week of December. He invited me to spend Christmas Eve with him.

I looked forward eagerly for Christmas to come. I associated it with new clothes, sweet dishes, happiness and celebration.

Thomas suddenly became docile. I did not like this change. I threw dust on his clothes. Still, he kept on smiling. I threw a stone at him. He winced with pain. But, he did not retaliate. He only said, "I wish I could hit you back."

"Why don't you do it, then?" I teased him.

"Because I must be good and obedient. Only then will I get a gift from Father Christmas."

I too wanted a gift from Father Christmas, whoever he was. I meekly asked, "Thomas, will he give me a gift too?"

"Only if you are good," Thomas said in a superior tone.

Thomas and I waited eagerly for Christmas to come. We did not misbehave. We obeyed our parents. We gave up chasing squirrels. We gave up fighting.

It was a long wait for us.

At last, Christmas Eve came.

Dressed in my best, I ran over to my friend's house. His father, Mr. Jacob, took me by the arm. He led me round the house. Thomas accompanied me. I saw the gaily decorated Christmas tree. Tiny flames at the tips of the candles danced with the mild breeze that wafted along.

Myriad candles threw gentle shadows and changed shapes with the flickering of the flame.

Paper bunting and ornate cardboard lamps peered at us from every corner. Star-shaped lamps hung from the branches of the trees too.

A jackfruit tree, further away from the house, stood in the hazy glow cast by a star-shaped light.

We waited for Father Christmas to come.

"When will he come?" Thomas asked his father.

"Wait. He is due any moment now."

"What will he bring for me?" Thomas asked.

"New clothes and sweets."

"For me too?" I asked.

"Of course, for you too, my dear."

Suddenly, Mr. Jacob shouted, "Look, there's Father Christmas, your own Santa Claus."

We did a double turn and stared in the direction of the jackfruit tree. What we saw was remarkable. We saw a bearded man, wearing a *dhoti** and a full sleeved shirt, flashing a bright

"Loin-cloth.



smile, descending from heaven! Over his shoulder hung a heavy sack. We watched him float down.

Then, we ran towards him, our hearts bursting with delight.

"Merry Christmas to you, children," Santa Claus spoke in a gruff but affectionate voice.

"Do you have a cold, Santa?" Thomas queried.

"Yes."

"You must consult our doctor. He will give you an injection, and you will feel better very soon," said Thomas.

"Thank you."

"Where are our gifts, Santa?" Thomas and I asked almost together. We could not conceal our curiosity any longer.

Santa Claus smiled, released his hold, and allowed the sack that hung on his shoulder to slip down to the floor. He heaved a sigh of relief. "It is too heavy, boys," he muttered.

"Why didn't you engage a *coolie*?"* Thomas asked.

"Well, I wanted to bring the gifts for my dear children myself."

"Oh, come on, Santa, let us have the gifts."

"Wait," Santa untied the string that bound the sack. He pushed his hand into it and pulled out a big fat packet and handed it to me.

"Thank you, Santa," I replied happily.

"Porter.

"Here's your gift, Thomas," Santa took out another packet from the sack and gave it to Thomas.

Thomas accepted the gift. But he seemed to have lost interest in it. He suddenly dropped the packet he had in his hand and tugged at my shirt. Puzzled, I raised my eyes.

"Look. There's a mole on Santa's nose."

"So what?" I asked.

"Mammen *Ammavan** too has a mole on the nose."

Thomas did not waste words. He bounded up to Santa Claus and shouted, "*Ammavan*, when did you become an agent of God?"

Santa laughed aloud. He took off his flowing beard. And there he was, our Mammen *Ammavan*.

"When did you learn to fly?" I asked.

"I can't fly," Mammen *Ammavan* replied.

"But you flew down from heaven," Thomas remarked.

"I did. Come I'll show you how I did it."

Mammen *Ammavan* led us to the foot of the jackfruit tree. He asked us to look closely at the branches.

We saw two sturdy men sitting on one of the branches.

They held in their hands a long rope that reached down to the ground.

"Uncle.

We were baffled.

We looked at *Ammavan*.

He smiled. Then, he said, "I climbed up the tree, along with those two men. I had a rope round my waist. I put the sack full of presents on my shoulder. Then I asked them to let me down, slowly, releasing the rope so that it would appear to you as if Father Christmas were coming down from heaven. I arranged it in such a way that my arrival would be sensational."

"Oh, it was a grand sight! We'll never forget this evening when a *dhoti-c\ a.d* Santa came down from heaven, bringing us gifts," Thomas and I shouted happily and moved back to the house, trailing behind Mammen *Ammavan*.

