

| Chapter – 1

Memories and Musings

With heaviness he casts his eye
 Upon the road before,
 And still remembers with a sigh,
 The days that are no more.

Robert Southey

Not all would take a backward glance upon the road before like the poet Southey. Some may not have reason to recall their past with any great joy. “We are what we remember” writes biologist Rebecca Rupp in her book, *Committed to Memory*. If you stretched that aphorism, you could say that if you did not want, for whatever reason, to remember your past, you could then wish away your past altogether. Or, at the very least, whatever it was that you wished to ‘delete’ from your memory. It would then be the same as not having had a past to speak of. For someone who wanted to break with his old associations from an indifferent past, this line of thinking might be hugely appealing although the reasoning behind it would prove to be flawed, let alone less than honest. To doubt your very existence, including its past without which there could not have been a present, is to deny the dimensions of time and space. That would be as good as denying that your present persona has evolved, by choice or by chance if you like, from an earlier part of your life.

You may not have come into this world ‘trailing clouds of glory’, but you cannot doubt that you had your antecedents. Call it the DNA or the Double Helix if you are that way inclined. You would then know that the parent and the offspring are parts of a genetic continuum in this ‘bank and shoal of time’. Or, if you have a philosophical turn of mind, you may bank on the Wordsworthian aphorism, ‘The child is father of the man’. Whichever way you look at it, that you are what you are depends largely on whatever provenance you had started your life’s journey with. And, for those who believe in reincarnation, time and space could keep stretching back further to earlier cycles of life as your *Karma* would have it. But of course, a memoirist, regardless of his particular persuasion about how the present is bound up with the past, can gloss over his memories or opt for selective amnesia to sanitize his account if he so wishes.

It was Christina Rossetti who wrote: *‘Better by far you should forget and smile / Than that you should remember and be sad’*. Doubtless, she has a point. It is true that for some people the past never seems to hold any memories worth treasuring. Nor is there a pause in their daily grind to let them worry about what their future holds in store for them. For, it takes them all of their present to grapple with the grim business of everyday survival. The few, however, who have made their stately progress through life almost seamlessly, by blind chance if you like, will have largely happy recollections to savour, although their vividness may have somewhat blurred with time.

For most people, on the other hand, their plodding along the path of life has had its long, hard moments as on a trek across rocky terrain.. Given to falling by the wayside from time to time, they however pick themselves up again by their bootstraps, shake the dust off their clothes and resume their course. And when they look back, they may regret the times they have tripped up or faltered but remember more their redeeming moments, big or small, that came their way and will have reason to be content.

They are the multitude. Being one of those unknown plodders is like being a battle-weary foot soldier who is asked to advance with his comrades-in-arms into the thick of the fray. You win some you lose some. You may yet feel secure, for practical wisdom has it that there is safety in numbers. It is comforting to know that you are not alone.

Whether or not that is a self-evident truth, the very act of having to cope with life's ups and downs like most others has in and of itself been an educating experience for me. At least, it has taught me how to take the rough with the smooth with equanimity. I dare say the old maxim 'all's well that ends well' would be an apt enough epitaph on every such man's tombstone. Hopefully that will wait until after I have had enough time to look back at the story of my past with a "calm of mind all passions spent".

Yet I have often balked at the thought, for there are some stages of my salad days that I feel down in the mouth about and yet others, downright ashamed of. And the feelings of self-reproach have refused to go away. Hanging in my study is one of these comical quotes, which reads, **"When you're over-the-hill, you don't have to worry about yesterday's mistakes...YOU CAN'T REMEMBER THEM!"** Far too often, people offer the advice that a person ought to put his past behind him. A fat lot of good that would do! You see, from time to time when you least expect it, your past has a way of stealing back on you and crowing over your misfortunes. Call it your inner voice, if you like, which says, 'I told you so!'. Thus your 'original sins' continue to dog your footsteps. Your past has well and truly come home to roost! And, wish hard as you might, you couldn't start all over again to create a different set of memories. If that were possible, you could have gone back in time to chart another course with the benefit of hindsight to guide you.

I may, however, hazard a guess, with all the detachment I could muster, on how my life could have taken a different direction had I so willed. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves *etc. etc.* Some, on the other hand, might blame their *karma* in an earlier incarnation for this rotten deal in their present life. With a sense of abject resignation, that is; maybe even with relief that they have at least been spared the shame of regression to a vermin in the food chain. Others who feel they were victims of circumstance carp at the rest of the world for their predicament and look back with a sense of rage. Yet others with a discerning eye have often put pen to paper more objectively to throw light on the whys and wherefores of the human condition obtaining then that has made them what they are now. Memories thus hold perpetual possibilities for those who would like, for whatever reason, to delve into the past.

I have long crossed the Biblical Span of 'three score and ten' years. Yet, having failed to achieve anything particularly remarkable judging by the skewed standards of a judgemental society, I doubt if I can recall much of my past with a great deal of pride. In

any case, pride would sound hollow without an audience to apportion what is your due. However, I may, judging on my own, winnow whatever ‘wheat’ I can from ‘the chaff’ in what was after all only a lean crop. That exercise would take a great deal of time and effort, and there’s the rub. You see I have more years to look back upon than I have to look forward to, so I must make haste while I can as time is of the essence.

T. G. David, a dilettante philosopher I knew from my Tambaram days and a retired professor of economics to boot, had kept cautioning me ominously not to trifle with time. By his own admission, regardless of his having repeatedly failed to inveigle publishers into having his attempted first novel published, he doggedly continued to write. And he was going on eighty when he passed away! And if I know him, he would be smirking at me, pushing up daisies from six feet under, and daring me to defy the way of all flesh. Therefore, I had better make haste slowly.

Yet, since memories are difficult to retrieve intact the deeper one has to delve, the task is likely to be long and drawn out. Sifting through more than seventy five years of slowly crumbling memories and brushing off the dust of years to pick up odd shards of interest is an exercise that calls for reflection and discrimination and choice, no less. And, in doing so, I could be tempted to tinker with the truth or leave some of it out altogether, couldn’t I? Yes, that is a distinct possibility.

I should, however, be as forthcoming as I can without being overly ashamed to divulge the minutiae of my past. One may not always choose to reveal the whole truth, warts and all. Then again, one may be tempted to tell it all. With a mischievous glint in my eye, I could easily shock the more squeamish in the family if I wanted to. No doubt, the stuff would make for piquant reading to the inquisitive, of which tribe there’s generally no lack around us. But, they are not going to miss what I choose not to reveal. Nor will they know if I have doctored my story, either. Editing or even embellishing memories could be a memoirist’s narrative option.

Besides, autobiographical memories do not have a reclusive existence. They share a space with social memory or collective memory, which is the sum-total of the ‘hand-me-down’ recollections of a community you grew up in. So when you try to retrieve your personal memories, often you cannot tell them apart from the shared memory of your community. Willy nilly, they get confused with your own. By Time’s sleight of hand the two kinds have become one. And even if you try hard to separate them, you are apt to confuse one for the other.

So, every time I attempt a recall, the memories that rush through my mind get more mixed up than ever, without logical or sequential progression. The fastidious reader who has an eye for spotting flaws may find it all grist to his editorial mill. The casual reader, on the other hand, can amuse himself, if nothing else, by trying to put the jigsaw pieces together. That they may not all snugly fall into place will surprise only those who are not familiar with the story of my disjointed days. Looking back, I too have often been surprised at how disconnected they have been.

Yes, ‘surprise’ is a familiar feeling when you mull over the events of the past. You realize that many times your life has had a disobliging way of ‘dashing your dreams’ as

dreams in your sleep often do. However desperately you try to shepherd a dream and guide its outcome in your state of slumber, it proves to be a will-o'-the-wisp. Even as your subconscious 'views' the series of pictures that each dream is made up of, you would despair of ever being able to create a 'serial' that ends meaningfully. It becomes a clever delusion in which the players and the props keep changing without rhyme or reason. Its backdrop morphs like a surreal canvas, characters in the plot change face inexplicably and shades of colour keep altering drearily from one half tone to another. You lose yourself somewhere in that maze, unable to retrace the path you took, for you have walked hitherto untrodden ways. Strangest of all, you see yourself in the dream mostly not as you are, past your prime, but as in your callow years when you had opportunities to make things happen but did not. And, it cuts to the quick as you wake up to the reality of your current predicament.

Perhaps, embedded somewhere in that *mélange*, there was a clue to giving each such dream a past meaning. I have often wondered if a dream were not some sort of an allegory for real life in which one's cup of hope had, through inexperience and irresolution, been snatched away from the lips of fulfilment. Do these dreams gone awry, point to how, in real life, one could have hoped for a different set of personal memories if one had opened the door when opportunity knocked? Hindsight, they say, is an exact science.

My earliest memories are those of my childhood first in the city of Madras and later in the village of Kumbanadu. Incidentally, the name 'Madras' has since been changed to 'Chennai' by the powers-that-be. Some say the change was prompted by the compulsions of Dravidian pride. The Dravidians have always resisted, often with passion, the crass attempts of an obscurantist fringe among the 'Aryans' of North India to impose a non-existent cultural, religious and linguistic homogeneity on an India that never was. The Tamils were certain that these attempts were part of a conspiracy to thrust upon them not only an alien language but also the myth, dressed as history, of a monolithic Hindu Nation or *Ram Raj* that encompassed the whole of the sub-continent. Perhaps the Aryans inhabited the hypothetical Gondwanaland as well? Driven by pride in their ancient Tamil heritage that pre-dates by far the Aryan saga, and as part of a strategy to counter this apparent Brahminical distortion of history, the Tamil people may have fired their first salvo by giving the city a name that sounds more Dravidian than the name 'Madras' does. Or, for that matter, the pejorative cognomen 'Madrasi' for all South Indians. Interestingly, the mentors of the University of Madras, in their measured wisdom, have retained the old name of that citadel of learning after making light of this perceived threat on their culture and language. Whether this confidence is misplaced or not, only time will tell.

The Tamil commonality, however, have eagerly taken to the change of name. In contrast, the people of Kumbanadu, who had all those many years ago hit upon the name 'Kumbanadu', or at any rate its etymological antecedent, have continued to call it 'Kumbanadu' to this day. They have no reason to be uncertain of their past. Many believe that the place name, *Kumbanadu*, in time led to the naming of the family viz. *Kumbanattu Kudumbam*. On the other hand, some say that the name of the family came first. Oral tradition has it that some two hundred and fifty years ago, the family's

progenitor, one *Kocheasaw Panicker*, had cleared forestland and settled in what is now Kumbanad to claim it as his own. The place, however, had not always been forestland before the new owners appropriated it. And, thereby hangs a legend.

Long before the establishment of the family here, tradition has it that the place was a prosperous village inhabited by two score or so Kerala Brahmin families or *Illangal* and their retainers. According to oral tradition, they lived in large, sprawling houses; each one called an *Illam*, and cloistered within it a four-sided roofless courtyard or *Naalu kettu*, not unlike Spanish patios, paved with flagstone slabs, in keeping with their status. None of these houses is standing now. But, many a stone-bound pond or *Kulam* that had reputedly been dug by them, with granite steps leading down to it, such as *Manalkulam*, *kollarkulam*, *Kaniyaamittathukulam*, *Kariyilakulam*, *Manakkattukulam*, *Korekkaakulam* and *Nellimalakulam* survive to this day. Most of them, though, have fallen into disuse or have dried up. Tradition has it that there were eighteen and one half ponds in all, the half being an uncompleted one. These ponds must have been used for rituals and ablutions, as is the custom in many a rural Brahmin community even today.

As proof of human habitation that goes further back in time than even this Brahmin settlement, large clay pots believed to have been funerary urns have also been dug up in several spots in Kumbanadu. According to tradition, in the olden days, dead persons were ceremonially interred in these pots. Archaeologists believe that the far south of India and what is now Sri Lanka at one time shared a culture with a strong Buddhist bias.

As a matter of fact, Tamil Sangam Literature has a number of references to pot burials but their chronology is still not clear although many archaeologists have hazarded an informed guess after carbon-dating the pots to date the burial sites around 3rd Century B.C. or 2nd Century B.C. at the latest.

Three large jars fitting the description of funerary urns were spotted as the foundations for our rebuilt *Nadavallil* house were being dug, back in 1979. All attempts to retrieve them intact failed as the pots had become too brittle with age to save. They crumbled during efforts to ease them out. We reckon that at least a part of my grandfather's homestead stood on an old burial ground.

Having lived here, off and on, since 1981. we might then venture to say, tongue firmly in cheek, that its ancient occupants are all resting in peace now. For, we have yet to experience the presence of restless spectres wandering in our neck of the woods or poltergeists throwing things about in our house or around.

What I mentioned earlier must have happened much, much later. According to oral tradition the inhabitants of this Brahmin village had to flee from their settlement in disarray, not having been forewarned of coming danger, leaving no trace behind them. T. K. Joseph, a well-known writer of St. Thomas Syrian Christian history of Kerala, has made an educated guess that a marauding band of *Paandi parayar*, a nomadic tribe from over the Western Ghats (the mountain range that runs part of its stretch along the west of Malabar), might have descended on the village and having plundered it, put its inhabitants to the sword. Such forays were not uncommon until well into the 18th Century A.D..

Incidentally, as a sequel to the story, only a woman and her son from among them managed to escape unharmed. At one point during their flight, they were given succour by a forest dweller, who later became romantically involved with the woman and set up home with her. Some say it was one of the more calculating of the raiders who spared her and made her his helpmeet. Either way, many believe that their progeny came to be known as the *Ranni Karthaakanmaar* (the Karthaas of Ranni), the first feudal family of Ranni. Ranni is only ten miles or so, as the crow flies, from the village they fled from.

In course of time, the overgrowth of trees and shrubs turned the place into a jungle, offering a haven for wild animals to range freely. It was not until a little after the middle of the 19th Century, nearly a hundred years after it was re-inhabited, that the place had more or less been rid of leopards, tigers and elephants. And that was largely owing to the ongoing 'depredations' of its new owners, the *Kumbanattu Kudumbam* or the Family of Kumbanadu. Where did they come from?

Popular legend has it that St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ established several churches in Malabar and that the present-day Syrian Christians can trace their ancestry back to the high caste Hindu converts to one or the other of these churches, especially Quilon and Crangannore. Folklore would have us believe that those who had dwelt on the northern side of the *theruvu* or the high street of Crangannore (*Vadakkumbhaagar* as they later came to be called)) had by and by migrated further south to Kuravilangadu in search of a better life and established themselves there. Much later still, a few of their descendants, who had enlisted in the Raja of Edappally's army, moved further south and settled down with their families at Eraviperoor Plankootathil. It is generally believed that they collectively came to be known as the Eraviperoor Panicker family, '*Panicker*' being an honorific title that had been bestowed by the Raja on the family for their martial antecedents. *Kocheasaw Panicker*, the founder of the '*Kumbanattu Kudumbam*' or the 'family of/in Kumbanadu', hailed from the Eraviperoor Panicker family.

The first half of the eighteenth Century was a time of great political ferment in this part of the world. The feudal chiefs known as *Ettu Veetil Pillamaar* along with the petty chieftains of principalities, in what was to become the greater Travancore later, were vying for power with *Marthanda Varma* the Rajah of *Venaad*. Intrigue and treachery were the order of the day. Several attempts were made on his life. The rajah, however, not only prevailed but also succeeded in annexing their fiefdoms and unifying them into a new entity known as *Thiruvithaamkoor*, or Travancore as its Anglicized version would have it. It was sometime in the late 1750's, corresponding to the Malayalam Era 930, that a Vellala Brahmin Court Official in the service of the Maharaja Marthanda Varma of Travancore, and later of his successor Dharma Raja, became a Christian, gave up his privileges, assumed the name *Yohannan* and set out from Trivandrum to preach the Gospel.

He made his way north in stages, staggering his progress as his mission demanded. In course of time, he came to be known as a *Sanyaasi* or a sage for the ascetic life of an itinerant preacher that he was known to lead. His reputation had preceded him wherever he went. Four years after the start of his missionary journey, he arrived at Eraviperoor, near Tiruvalla, to be received as an honoured guest by the then head of the Panicker family. That host was none other than *Plankootathil Vallya Easaw Panicker*, a brave

soldier who had fought against the invading Muslim hordes of Mysore. He was also a devout Christian and a member of the ancient Jacobite Syrian Christian Parish of Kallooppara. While the said itinerant preacher was living under the roof of his latest host, he expressed a desire to build for himself a *dayara* or a monastic refuge that would also serve as a halfway house for other like-minded gospellers to rest while passing through. The hermit solicited his host's help. The kindly host readily agreed to locate a site that would offer him a quiet retreat and, having done so, followed it up with whatever assistance that was within his means to help the hermit build his shelter.

In their efforts to find a secluded spot, they came upon a wooded area barely two miles to the east of Eraviperoor. They took possession of that unoccupied expanse of land that had been abandoned by its earlier owners and had remained desolate for so long that it had been over-run by wild beasts. This might have been before the introduction of land records to demarcate private property in these parts. The first site chosen was relinquished after some months of work as they were constantly in danger of being attacked by wild animals, especially wild elephants. They looked elsewhere for a safer place and found one on a higher ground, roughly in the centre of what is now Kumbanadu, and built the retreat there and, next to it, a makeshift church, the first of its kind in Kumbanadu. The year was *circa* 1760. As the work was still in progress, the youngest son in the Panicker family, Kocheasaw or *Easaw Junior*, would sally forth every day with his father Vallya Easaw or *Easaw Senior* beside him to help the *Sanyaasi* build his hermitage.

The protagonist of our story, *Kocheasaw Panicker*, was only twelve then. The sage was impressed by the boy's sincerity and hard work, and, in course of time, made him his acolyte. Respecting his mentor's wishes, the boy moved to Kumbanadu. Staying in the relative security of a tree house, the youngster helped clear the land around the church and beyond. In time, he became a successful farmer and, at his mentor's instance, married one *Kochumariamamma* of the *Kuttickaattu* family from the nearby village of *Thattekkadu*. The *Sanyaasi* had earlier chanced upon this family during his ministry in the surrounding areas. In the year *circa* 1786 the *Sanyaasi* passed away and is buried in an unmarked grave in the churchyard in deference to his wishes.

By that time, a house had been built to the north of the church for *Kocheasaw Panicker* to move in. And it was named *Valliaveetil* or 'big house' and it still stands as the family's ancestral seat. (Incidentally, in response to the wishes of many in the family that this house ought to be converted into a heritage house, John Titus a sixth-generation member of the family –now a member of the Indian diaspora in America- has acquired it from its present owner.) By and by, the proliferating progeny came to be collectively known as the *Kumbanattu Kudumbam*.

And in the early years of the family, it is said that they jointly farmed the land as a large collective that covered the whole village from end to end. It was near *Kaniyaamittathukulam* that they customarily got together to decide what crops to grow, come the next season. Clearly, crop-rotation was not unknown to them. I have heard it said that down to the third generation of our forebears, the few homesteads of Kumbanad that had sprung up had remained seamlessly interwoven in all directions. Apparently, everyone was free to move about from homestead to homestead without let or hindrance,

doubtless ‘without malice aforethought’. It was not until the fourth generation set up homes of their own that boundaries were drawn to demarcate land bequeathed to each head of the family. And even then, the flimsy wattle and palm-frond fences of yesteryears had been a far cry from the off-putting brick and mortar boundary walls that have since come up as a reflection of man’s increasing acquisitiveness and the sense of insecurity that goes with it.

Kocheasaw Panicker and *Kochumariamamma* had raised five daughters and three sons. The second son, *Maammachen*, had moved to the nearby village of Edanadu, where he had earlier acquired property. The eldest, *Kocheasaw*, was bequeathed the family seat. The youngest, *Yohannaachen*, built a house to the south of the church and moved in there. The eldest and the youngest were the progenitors of the Southern and Northern branches i.e. Thekke Veedu and Vadakke Veedu of the Kumbanattu Kudumbam.

But, the perennial conundrum, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” stubbornly persists. The family name or the place name? One version has it that since the place was once infested with elephants, it derived its name from the pachyderm. The theory is that the word *kumbhi* which means ‘elephant’ was tagged on to the word, *nadu*, which means ‘land’ or ‘region’, to make up the blended word, *Kumbhinadu* or ‘elephant land’ and that this coinage must have much later elided to *Kumbanadu*. Did the original settlers use the word to name the place first and later adapt it to name the family that struck roots there?

If so, it is possible to make an educated guess and argue that the final voiced vocalic consonant ‘*du*’ of the place name, *Kumbanadu*, was modified to become the retroflexed, voiceless, vocalic consonant ‘*ttu*’ to derive the prepositional form, *Kumbanattu*. This form carries the meaning ‘*of/in Kumbanadu*’ and thence must have logically arrived at the form, ‘*Kumbanattu Kudumbam*’ or ‘*The Family of/in Kumbanadu*’. It is less logical, although it has also been posited by some, that ‘*Kumbanadu*’ the place name is a subsequent back formation from the form i.e. *Kumbanattu* in ‘*Kumbanattu Kudumbam*’, the name that was given to the family. Either way, it is interesting that ‘*Kumbanadu*’ as a place name does not exist in the Land Records of our State to this day. Incidentally, perhaps as a minor concession to the increasing use of English, especially with the opening of a Post Office there as early as the 1920’s, the place name was further shortened, in English print, to ‘*Kumbanad*’ with the final vowel ‘*u*’ discarded to indulge anglicized ears..

Anyway, the etymology of the place name does not deserve the same urgency of expression as do my unspoken memories, groaning to find release from a tangle of recollections, of the people and events that characterised Kumbanad. Strictly speaking, I cannot stake a claim to being a native of Kumbanad born and bred. I was born in far-away Mesopotamia, the Babylonia of ancient times, on 9th September, 1929. And, except for the few months that I was there before I was carried in my mother’s arms to India, I was brought up, for the next four years or so, in Madras, where my father had found work as Assistant Secretary to The Employers’ Federation of South India. The ‘true sons of the soil’ of Kumbanad might, therefore, look askance at my credentials to hazard a guess on the origin of the word or, come to think of it, to assume the role of a chronicler of Kumbanad. In any case, the linguistic theory, such as I have attempted here, would only sound so much gibberish to the denizens of Kumbanad. I would like to believe that my

‘recollection’ of memories will cause them no such confusion except perhaps in its desultoriness.

Given the peripatetic nature of my father’s job with the engineering firm of Harrisons and Crosfield after he had earlier returned from Madras to be nearer home, I had to change schools more than once; doing only short spells at each place. Needless to say, the images of each of those places have lost its sharpness over the years. And they come into focus again, without regard to sequence of events, only when some present stimulus nudges them back into the field of vision.

The one picture that refuses to go away is the memory of how I gulped down a mouthful of paraffin mistaking it for soda water. It was the bottle that had fooled me. It was in fact a soda bottle, but not a bottle of soda. My father was away at work. We were staying at 17A, Broadway in Georgetown, Madras. My mother was distraught and did not know whom to turn to for help. A kindly neighbour, who providentially came by, rushed me to a nearby clinic and had my stomach pumped. I was none the worse for the experience.

Another image is that of the white nuns, at the play school on Broadway I went to, in their well-worn habits, each one with her forearms crossing, tucked one under the other, as they padded about soundlessly. Yet another memory that still lingers is the flavour of the smoked and cured bacon that we sometimes bought at the Broadway Butchery just up our street. If I closed my eyes and willed my senses, I could still taste the salted strip and savour its aroma. Twenty-two years or so was to pass before I would relish a similar flavour again; this time, that of the excellent, Kenyan made *Uplands* bacon. I had moved to Africa by then in search of a better life. I was in Tanganyika at the time. It was still a British colony and the butcheries prominently displayed bacon among other things. But, that can wait. Let me now resume my story in Madras.

The itinerant milkman with his milch cow in tow, turning up like clockwork every morning at the bottom of the steps leading from 17A Broadway to the sidewalk, is another moving picture in my stream of consciousness. The milkman would then deftly work the cow’s udder, squeezing the teats, first the nearer pair and then the other, each time his hands alternately moving from top to bottom like pistons to direct the stringy jets of milk unerringly into the loud pail below, not a drop missing its mark. When he is done, he measures out our usual portion before making the next ‘house call’. I would often be standing beside my mother all that while. And sometimes to my wide-eyed wonder, the occasional electric tramcar plying in George Town would trundle by a stone’s throw away, grating harshly on the tramlines set in the street. The bells of the street car would be ringing clangorously and its articulated ‘arm’ on the roof spewing sparks as it slid over the joints of the cable overhead.

Fourteen years later, when I went back to Madras as a college freshman, the trams, grown rickety with use by then, were still spewing sparks and plying their familiar routes. But, set beside the newer commuter buses and electric trains, they proved painfully slow to someone in a hurry. However, to the first-time tram rider with time on his hands, there is nothing more edifying than unhurriedly observing the city streets and its hurly-burly. And, if it is after dark, one tends not to see their squalor as the city wears a mellower face. The streets look less harsh and more endearing with the lit-up wayside lamps

refracting benignly, especially after a heavy downpour has cleared the air and washed the fetid streets. After midnight, the city seems to slow down to a crawl before it comes to a standstill, only to stir again later before the break of day. I was too young to see Madras in that garb while I was a child staying with my parents at 17A Broadway in George Town or later after moving to 110 Barracks Street in Chintadripet.

When we moved to Travancore, it was first to a place called Pallam, nearly twenty miles away from Kumbanad, a longish ride by bus at its usually sedate pace. We lived in a rented house at Pallam. Earlier, for a short spell, I had been a reluctant boarder at a kindergarten in the company of girls my age, in an all-girls' school at Tiruvalla called *Baalikaamadom*, which had been founded by Miss Brooke Smith, an intrepid Scottish teacher. She was only one of several such pioneers who had run schools for girls in this part of the world at that time. It was part of a silent revolution that unwittingly helped bring the unemancipated girls of Central Travancore out of the protective bosom of their hidebound families. And, *Baalikaamadom*, along with Nicholson's Syrian Christian School for Girls at Tiruvalla and Baker Memorial School at Kottayam played no small part in it. *Mahilalayam* at Alwaye was its illustrious counterpart in North Travancore.

How a boy like me found himself in a girl's school remains a mystery to me, still. It might have been a halfway house for me before I could join a boys' school nearer home. The only vivid image that still sticks in my mind is the day my parents and grandparents together visited me and presented me with a toy train that could run on a wound-up spring tucked away in its underbelly. Was this offered as a sop? My stay at that school was an eminently forgettable one, anyway, as I had from the start felt ill at ease in uncongenial company. Hopelessly outnumbered by the girls, perhaps I may have felt miserably insecure there and may have made my feelings obvious as only a child can. I was withdrawn soon after.

Of Pallam, there is one singularly bloody episode that stubbornly refuses to leave my mind. One day, some of my father's cousins descended on Pallam unexpectedly and noisily barged into our house. In our part of the world, people thought nothing of turning up thus, unannounced. Social proprieties like giving time to the hapless 'host' to receive visitors, with a semblance of hospitality, were not observed. It would seem to be a 'courtesy' that was more honoured in the breach especially among the Malankara Syrian Christians. This, regardless of their professed high-caste cultural antecedents going back nearly two thousand years! Perhaps, their ancestors were not so highly cultured after all and therefore were not sticklers for standing on the oh-so-necessary ceremony typical of gentlemen everywhere!

Then again, one might ask how they could have given notice without having easy means of communication. A telephone was almost unheard of in those days. Couriers, so common these days, were some fifty years away, albeit there was the mail runner or the *anchal ottakkaaran* whose 'footsore' beat did not extend beyond the surrounding villages. Incidentally, the mail runner would wear anklets with bells that would tell the news-deprived villagers of his approach. The long staff he carried primarily for support as he ran, and incidentally to parry unwelcome attention from stray dogs, also had bells attached to it. Anyway, the absence of a quick means of sending news led to the 'surprise callers' overlooking such social niceties. Sociologists might rationalize this oversight as

‘environmental determinism’. Central Travancore in those days was a backwater, largely untouched by modern trends. Visitors were likely to pitch up at odd hours of the day expecting to be received with open arms and a laden table. My mother was in a tizzy not knowing what she would serve my uncles for a repast. It would have been gross not to do your best to make them feel welcome.

Then she remembered her free-ranging rooster, a Rhode Island Red, as I recall. It was her pride and joy as she was to tell us later, for it untiringly climbed her hens that in turn unflinchingly gave her a steady supply of eggs for the kitchen. She persuaded herself to make the ultimate sacrifice. Besides, as she recalled, she knew she had a cockerel waiting in the wings to be the new cock-of-the-walk! But, who would run the crested rooster down? My uncles, who could not be denied a ‘meatsome’ meal, were eager to do ‘the honours’ and I joined in the chase, all cock-a-hoop. Sensing danger, the cock ruffled its neck feathers, lowered its head and darted this way and that with the pursuers closing in to cut off its angle of escape. After several frantic squawks and fitful flutters to be airborne, the bird came crashing down helplessly no more than a few feet away from its ‘launching pad’. It was gasping for breath, with fear palpable in its dilated eyes. When one of the uncles performed the ‘last rites’, he failed to hold the luckless creature down firmly enough. The result was that the chicken, with its head lopping limply down from its neck at a clumsy angle and blood spurting from its severed veins, broke free and thrashed about briefly. Then, it subsided, twitched once or twice and lay still.

Later in life, every time I came across the phrase ‘like a headless chicken’, the image of this quivering end to a culinary quest would flash across my mind. And on the rare occasions that I had to do it at a pinch, I would first make sure that I held the bird down firmly under my feet.

We moved from Pallam to Perumbavoor, further afield. We were put up there at the residence of Thayyil David Lonappan, an evangelist, who was married to my step-grandmother’s younger sister, Aleyamma. They were kindly souls who had warmly welcomed us into their household.

The construction of Pallivaasal Hydroelectric Project was still going on at the time we moved in. Harrisons and Crosfield were the project engineers. Dad was in charge of the materials for the project. What stands out in my memory of our stay there was our car with a retractable-top - I do not recall what make it was. Apart from the rare occasions that he would take us out for a spin, I remember the times he went hunting game with his friends in his car. Later in life, I have often wondered how my father could have reconciled his Christian passiveness as a member of the Plymouth Brethren Society with his uncharacteristic fondness for this ‘blood sport’. Fond indeed he was of hunting! The ‘hunters’ once or twice brought back warthogs. Mostly, they came back with giant mountain squirrels. Once, I remember, they brought in a monkey with a black coat? What kind of a simian was it? A macaque? I don’t know.

The venerable Lonappan, the austere evangelist, had, nevertheless, no qualms about skinning these animals each time and conjuring up a delicious goulash or a tasty soup. He also had the knack of distilling the essence of *Narunandi Veru*, viz. sarsaparilla root with which to make a sweet drink with a pleasant root-like tang. I loved it. But, I remember

him most of all for his once-a-month, early Saturday morning ritual of faithfully dosing himself with an ounce of castor oil, that foul-tasting purgative which, apart from Epsom salt, was the most in use those days to detoxify oneself. He would religiously chase down the ‘drink’ with large quantities of tepid water, every hour on the hour, through much of the forenoon. The ‘water treatment’ was intended to work up a copious cleansing purge. Nothing else was ingested until the irrigated colon was fully flushed out. Even an enema could not have been more stirring!

We children, meaning my brother Georgie and I, who had no stomach for it, became his unwilling subjects in this masochistic ‘experimentation’ with ‘the stool of repentance’. Perhaps, he was made in the mould of the severe Cistercian monks of old or, nearer home, of the *Vairagees* (Sages) of Ancient India. It is common knowledge that the late Princess Diana had a penchant for colonic irrigation with water. We also know that this was eagerly aped by a host of anorexic fashion models in their yen to look like so many ‘Twiggy’s before they would sashay up and down the ramp ‘in the line of duty’, with their hips swaying like metronomes and their faces expressionless like those of zombies. This too was self-denial of sorts, but I doubt if even they would ever be so bold as to flush their insides, of all things, with castor oil before they were put through their paces!

The mention of the foul-tasting castor oil brings back memories of our mother force-feeding us –Georgie and me again- with the nearly as disgusting cod liver oil, doubtless with the best of maternal intentions. During the war years when supplies of cod liver oil from abroad dried up, we had to put up with its local substitute in the form of shark liver oil, which inflicted far worse punishment to the palate. Especially since I suffered from chronic rhinitis and a touch of wheezing at the time, I had to continue to suffer these well-meaning ‘cruelties’ much longer than my brother did. Later, graduating to Seven Seas’ cod-liver oil capsules -not to speak of endless bottles of Scott’s Emulsion, Kepler’s Extract, Waterbury’s Compound and what have you- was to my till-then tormented palate a welcome relief. But, I am jumping ahead of my narrative.

After Perumbavoor, my father moved to the engineering section of the company at Quilon. While he was looking for a place for the family to stay, my mother, younger brother George and I ‘stopped over’ in Kumbanad. This was a stopgap arrangement to obviate any break in my schooling. I was enrolled in Class Two of the *Aannpallikkoodam* (the school for boys) at Kumbanad, just south of the Thyparampil homestead lying to the west of the road to Arattupuzha. The Northern Branch of the family had earlier built that school, as part of a reciprocal agreement with the Southern Branch that had simultaneously built *Pennpallikkoodam* (the girls’ school) to the east of the road. Both schools were later handed over to the local government authority. That was at the turn of the twentieth century.

Those schools offered four years of primary schooling. Until these two schools came into existence, the only ‘institution of learning’ obtaining in Kumbanad had been the *Kudippallikkoodam* (church school) attached to the Mar Thoma Valiapally of Kumbanad. The parishioners learned the three R’s (Reading, wRiting and Reckoning) there. That had been the sum total of their education and their preparation for life. For anything beyond that they had to go further afield to Vennikulam, a good four miles away. Only a few

among my grandfather's generation were known to have ventured beyond the confines of Kumbanad to enlighten themselves. For the majority, the compulsions of having to supplement family income and make a living must have weighed against it.

My grandfather's generation, however, had made sure that their children did not have to travel far for their primary education. As for post-primary education, there was the St. John's Junior Secondary School at Eraviperoor, two miles due west, and for secondary education the Syrian Christian Seminary at Tiruvalla, six miles away. Incidentally, it was from the latter that my father had matriculated in the year 1916. He was twenty-two, then. He would often recall how he had to trudge that distance back and forth every day for many months until a kindly kinsman at Tiruvalla took him under his wing! Although, he had secured admission in the Miraj Medical College of the erstwhile Bombay Province the same year, his father did not have the wherewithal to send him there. Later in life he made sure that at least one of his siblings become a doctor, an ambition he could not himself achieve, having earlier been compelled by circumstances to set his sights lower.

It was thus that my father became a teacher and taught for two years at St. John's Junior Secondary School before leaving in 1920 for Madras en route to Mesopotamia, soon to be coextensive with the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq. He was to serve in the civilian arm of the British Expeditionary Forces for the next twelve years. In 1920, Iraq became a British Mandated Territory with Faisal 1 as its Hashemite king. More about the Iraqi connection, I shall write later.

The *Aannpallikkoodam*, as I remember it, consisted of just one long, leaky, thatched hall. On weekdays, four teachers would be seen gamely competing to be heard above the children's insistent hum of artless excitement, each one from the wards under his individual care. No class was properly partitioned off from the others. The four blackboards resting on rickety easels had peeled off badly with years of use. There were no desks for the children to write on; only benches to sit and your very laps to rest your slates on. And when you did lift your slate to rest it in the crook of your arm and begin to write, your tongue often unconsciously contorted in your efforts to form the squiggles you scratched on your slate. We sat six or seven to a bench. Each pupil carried to class only an all-inclusive Reader apart from the slate and its stone pencil, unlike his present-day counterpart 'with his shining morning face', dragging himself to school weighed down with a backpack full of assorted books, besides water-bottle, snack box and what not.

I do not recall very much about my 'attainments' there. I do, however, recall the system of sanctions that the school followed with single-minded zeal because I was a resentful victim of that system. And, its 'experiments' on me are seared in my memory. The only 'teaching aid' was the cane, which was virtually a long-reaching extension of the teacher's unforgiving arm.

Except for its infrequent use as a pointer to draw attention to something, the cane was sure to be applied with considerable force on the extended palm of an 'erring' pupil. It could be for acts of omission or of commission that the children were naturally prone to. If the teacher were in a more 'lenient' frame of mind, which was not often, he would

make the errant pupil stand *'in situ'* on the bench as an object lesson to the rest of the class. Or, he would be compelled to stay on bended knees in a corner of the classroom, at the teacher's pleasure, as an object of ridicule. Whether these punitive measures had any salutary effect on the pupils, either as a deterrent or as an 'instrument' of reform, is open to question. The fear of the cane notwithstanding, pupils continued to fall foul of the teachers, and that for the most trivial of infringements. In the final analysis, punishment in any form is self-defeating if it does not eventually become unnecessary.

As for rewards, the system was equally blinkered. I remember I was allowed to move ahead of others, just once -physically that is- from the obscurity of the grubby back row to the relative limelight of the equally grubby front bench. It was for no better reason than that I was the only one in the class who could name the King Emperor of India of the time! In the princely states of India, thankfully, school children did not have to sing 'God Save Our Gracious King' and therefore had no particular reason to find out who they were asking God to save. We had been spared such alien impositions, I was to recall later in life. We would, instead, lustily intone *Vanchi Bhoomi Paathe, Chiram*, (Long live, the Lord of Vanchi Land), an anthem singing paeans to the Maharaja of Travancore.

If anyone deserved 'credit' for my 'esoteric' knowledge, though it was of doubtful value to me at that time, it was my father. He would keep me unfailingly updated on world events during his weekend visits from Quilon. The year was 1936 and, as it happened, Edward VIII had just succeeded to the throne. My 'promotion' to the front bench was a dubious mark of honour, for it only served to invite invidious comparisons with my classmates most of whom were cleverer than I was. I do not recollect any other form of encouragement that the class teacher consciously employed to motivate us.

That they would, however, be compelled to shake themselves out of their torpor was apparent from the lengths to which they went to make sure that their wards measured up in the eyes of one who was higher up in their pecking order. It arrived in the person of the Inspector of Schools, known in the local lingo as *Melaavu*. His annual visit was a 'nine days' wonder' in the village. The teachers would religiously prime the children with answers to likely questions that the inspector might ask. He could, on a sudden whim, randomly ask any question to any one on whom his eyes happened to fall at that precise moment. And the children generally managed not to disappoint their anxious teachers.

With a few exceptions, the children looked grubby and usually wore only a wrap-around loincloth, or *mundu*, and sometimes a short-sleeved shirt to cover their torsos. This would be the worse for wear after long use. On the day in question, however, each child would be well-scrubbed and clad in a clean *mundu*. On pain of the direst consequences if they failed to pass muster, I might add! I remember being rigged out for the occasion in a white shirt tucked under a pair of shorts with braces holding it up, no less! Needless to say, I stuck out like a sore thumb. For the rest of the day, I was the cause of snickering among my classmates. Theirs was the inverted snobbery of the disadvantaged. If the teachers noticed it, they kept their own counsel. To the poorly paid teachers getting a clean chit from the inspector was what mattered most, however remote the prospect of their getting preferment might have been! This was not to say that teachers in general were not committed to their calling, despite the day-to-day compulsions that detracted from their pastoral responsibilities. Most tried hard to measure up. And, quite a few did.

One such teacher was *Mylamoottil Kuttysaar* alias *Painkilisaar* (the suffix *-Saar* is a corruption of the word ‘sir’ as a Malayalam synonym for ‘teacher’) who augmented his meagre earnings with the modest fees he charged for tutoring children in the evenings and over the weekends. *Mylamoottil* was his family name; *Kutty* was the name he was locally known by and *Painkili*, his nickname. The first impression one got on seeing him was that of a shrivelled-up man with a squeaky voice that did not exactly inspire confidence in him. But, that notwithstanding, he was a well-meaning soul. He gave of his best. It was not for lack of trying that he did not get very far with the thankless task of making me any more responsive to my studies than I was. As a hyperactive child with a short attention span, I could be managed neither by reason nor by rebuke. Boxing my ears or rapping me over the knuckles was his *modus operandi* when rebuke failed. Sometimes, in exasperation, he would use the rod on my outstretched palm. And yet, away from his wards, he was a mild-mannered man whose homilies at prayer meetings, of which Kumbanad has never had any dearth then as now, were often received well by his pious peers.

That was the beginning of my association, off and on, with my ancestral village. It lasted for almost twenty years until I left the shores of India, like my father before me, *for fresh fields and pastures new*. I left towards the end of 1955. It was not until almost forty years later that I was to return to Kumbanad to take up permanent residence, which is not to say that I kept away from Kumbanad in the meanwhile. In fact, every two years or so, the ‘native’ would dutifully return. And as a *disinterested spectator of mankind*, I could see the incremental socio-economic changes that a span of nearly half a century wrought on the place and its people. Should I have also said, ‘detrimental changes’?

The changes have not all been happy ones. True, the material circumstances of the rural community have steadily looked up over the years. One need only look at the gargantuan brick and concrete houses that have gradually replaced the quaint old, thatched cottages to be convinced of this.

Each such cottage would have, just behind its façade, an *Arra* -rather an all-wood store-room, complete with a heavy wooden door- for keeping pickled food and such like edible durables that need be replenished once a year. Like, for instance, *Uppumaanga* which is local mango in season pickled in salt or cured *Kodanpuli*, a sour-tasting fruit, which gives our Central Travancorean Syrian Christian fish curry its characteristic flavour, or again *sharkara* or molasses and, the ubiquitous, dried black pepper corn. Then, there would be *Waattu kappa* and *Upperi kappa*, both varieties of boiled and dried cassava -tapioca as we choose to call it- for long-term use. Most of all, it would store bags and bags of paddy rice after each harvest.

There would also be a *Pathaayam* or a large, rectangular, top-loading, all-wood receptacle, roughly ten feet long, four feet wide and four feet high, much like a rather large, oblong table except that panels box in the sides top to bottom all the way round to provide storage space in the *Pathaayam*. It would have partitions inside to make cubicles for storing the paddy seeds set aside after harvest for sowing come the following season, as also the spill-over paddy rice, which the *arra* would not hold especially after a good harvest. Wooden bolts or *Saaksha*, sliding flush with the underside of the ‘table-top’, could be shot across to fasten the hatches of the cubicles from beneath. After unbolting

them, the hatches could be lifted off the top of the cubicles. Interestingly, wooden dowel pins, and nary a metallic nail, held the different parts of the *Pathaayam* together! At a pinch, for instance, if you needed to yield your only bedroom to put up visitors for the night, it would also double nicely as a bedstead.

Then there was a *Nilavara* or a cellar in the basement, with a trap door and steps to go down into. This was for safely putting away heirlooms such as copper and bell-metal cauldrons used for cooking large quantities of food on special occasions or for parboiling unhulled rice before husking it for domestic use. There was also a *Nira* or a wood-panelled façade; which is fashioned from seasoned hardwood like Teak or like *Plaavu*; that is wood from the Jackfruit tree. Along the length of the façade, ran a veranda with wooden latticework or a screen enclosing it to double as a sitting room. In addition to these there would be at least two stone-built bedrooms –and maybe more if the family was compulsively fecund, which was not uncommon. A kitchen with a lean-to as work space completed the picture.

The traditional kitchen had food cooked on open fires, with each cooking pot resting on a tripod of fixed stones on a raised ledge above which there would also be a smoke vent or *Pukayera* to allow the smoke to escape. Even then, if the firewood wasn't tinder dry, which was a tall ask in the rainy season, the smoke would get into your eyes and make them smart because of the soggy, slow-burning faggots. The vent was only an apology for a proper chimney. But during monsoons when the sun played hide and seek with you, the wickerwork strung across head high above the fires provided ideal shelving for curing *Kodanpuli* and such like. Before the arrival of the more modern meat-safe or the food cupboard with sides of netting to keep out flies, a permanent fixture in every traditional Kerala kitchen was the *Urri*. Very much like the hanging flower pot, it hung from the roof on three lengths of thick coir strings. Starting from the bottom, it held two or three horizontal tiers of much thicker rings made of the same material strung to it to hold different dishes of cooked food, especially the *Meen Curry*, to save it from the depredations of the family cat. No cottage would be seen not to have this, for what it is worth, to fend off the feline.

These cottages, which were thatched with palm fronds, stood on raised, oblong stone plinths. The stone used was laterite, which was locally quarried. In fact, almost every homestead would have a *Kalluvettaam kuzhi* or stone quarry sunk within its boundaries to cut building blocks from. Traditionally, the village *Kallaassaarees* or stonemasons did the cutting and shaping.

In contrast, the house my father built in 1934 was one of the earliest of the tiled houses in Kumbanad, and he named it 'Hopeville' in a severe Christian frame of mind. Could he have foreseen that his youngest son, Thomaskutty, who has since inherited the house, would one day become an American citizen? 'Hopeville' would have been just the kind of name the founding fathers of puritan America settled for. More than seventy years on, though somewhat the worse for wear, the house stands drawn back from the road on a gentle slope, still reflecting glimpses of its old charm. Well, that is another story. Wire-cut and kiln-fired clay bricks and concrete blocks have since then replaced laterite blocks, as cement has now replaced lime mortar for joining building blocks together.

The houses of Kumbanad have grown bigger and more ornate, but the once unspoiled countryside has been scarred by these mushrooming structures. They loudly shout their presence; especially the ones belonging to those who were at one time with no land to speak of, but are now threatening to push out the true natives of Kumbanad, the erstwhile 'landed gentry', relatively speaking that is. But at what cost! These people, mostly the traditional journeymen workers of Kumbanad, having eagerly made a beeline for the oil-rich sheikhdoms of the Arabian Gulf to fulfil their dreams, soon realise that they have to slave long hours doing odd jobs for their Arab employers who are, by and large, notoriously bad paymasters.

Nevertheless, the money that they manage to scrape together with their blood, sweat and toil in the harsh expanses of the unforgiving Arabian Desert, is blithely spent by their dear ones back home buying up land from their erstwhile masters to build these monstrosities. The hidden sneer of these Johnnies-come-lately at having upstaged their old employers is all too apparent in the buildings that they make as a statement that they have arrived! But sometimes the sneer turns into an unmistakable sulk when they find themselves out of work and clueless as to how they could maintain themselves, let alone maintain their dream houses.

Predictably, the broad sweep of the old landscape has been fast shrinking with these 'encroachments'. The green fields of Kumbanad have been turned 'dry, bald and sere' not so much by the parching sun as by the incursions of these land-parched folk looking for a place of their own in the sun. One can hardly fail to notice the crassness of the flashy lifestyle of the more fortunate ones among them. The screaming colours they use to paint their houses with can only argue a certain lack of good taste. The village has been robbed of its character and largely stripped of its greenery, thanks to this rash of houses breaking out over what was once a gently rolling countryside. That is the price we have to pay for growing prosperity.

Again, the creature comforts we, erstwhile masters and servants alike, now enjoy have sadly put our once strong social relationships in danger of falling apart, to say nothing of our social graces being diminished. The firm, familial bonds that once knit our extended families together are, alas, slowly fraying. This would seem to be the curse of a community that likes to flaunt its newfound wealth. We see too the spectacle of every man being 'an island unto himself'. Sadly, this insularity compels their less fortunate kinsfolk, despite their innate goodness, to distance themselves from the snobbery of such people for having set themselves apart as a new class. When the family had faced difficulties in the past, it was the principle of -to use a cliché- 'all for one and one for all' that sustained them. That now seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

There was a time when making preparations for a marriage in our family was an occasion for a reunion, when the members set aside their differences and closed ranks to help each other with their time and effort. Not infrequently, they also helped with money. There was a tacit agreement in the family, from the moment the Banns were published, that the preparations for the marriage would be a collective effort. No invitation cards would be sent to the members of the family lest they felt that they were no more than invitees in the function.

And the homestead where the marriage was approaching would keep an open house, starting several days before the event itself. Young and old alike came and joined in with the family in the preparations, or lingered to be asked to run errands. Or, with nothing left to do, they would catch up with the latest gossip, largely spicy but occasionally ‘made tedious by morality’ as Oscar Wilde would have put it. That is, they would in the same breath be equally snide in their comments about others and be holding the moral high ground.

The lazier of the species hung about and simply twiddled their thumbs. ‘They also serve who stand and wait’ might as well have been their life’s motto! Some others would bob up suddenly from God knows where and bustle about, going through the motions of doing something without actually doing anything. And, the bride-to-be or the groom-in-waiting, as the case may be, would chafe under pleasurable anticipation, with thoughts of the wedded bliss to come, wishing clocks would be swifter, yet often sobered with bouts of self-doubt. All in all, a marriage in the family was a time to be savoured by all, in their different ways, whether they made themselves useful or merely pretended to be busy or did nothing of any consequence at all. Even the freeloaders, who turned up on the day of the marriage hoping to partake of a rare treat, went away ‘fulfilled’ for the day.

The children would have a rollicking time playing Hide and Seek or Hopscotch or Cops and Robbers, or whatever else that took their fancy, if they could find enough legroom for themselves in all that hustle and bustle. The older boys could be seen in unobtrusive nooks and corners engaged in one of the most delightful frills of adolescence, namely flirting, with their nubile cousins, but stopping short of getting too fresh with them for fear of being taken by surprise, or because of a pesky twinge of conscience. “Speak for yourself!” their latter-day counterparts might snort.

The men were busy with either putting up a marquee or a *pandal* - a canopy roofed with plaited palm-fronds sometimes lined inside with white cloth- or doing up the house before the appointed day. At the same time, the women busied themselves with cooking in the kitchen or in a lean-to that was specially erected for the occasion. Strange as it may seem to us now, in the patriarchal society that Kumbanad was, it was the men who decided what stuff to buy to prepare the marriage feast, and how much. The men arrogated to themselves even the right to decide on the quantum of spices that would be needed to cook the dishes!

I remember seeing what large quantities of the unused dried red chillies and coriander seeds were left over after my marriage! It would have been more than ample for another marriage in the family! So much for men’s self-assurance! The women might well have inwardly sniggered, but tactfully chose to keep their own counsel. They would on such occasions openly say nothing that might get the male chauvinist hackles up.

They would, however, have their own way with a host of helpers, mostly men, to dice the large mounds of beef, to dress and joint the chicken, to clean and fillet the fish, to chop up the vegetables, to grate the coconut, to prepare the condiments and to clean the rice. Among these drudges, I recollect the faces of *Muthirakaalaayil Thoma*, *Perumbalathu Mathaichettan*, *Pullukaalaayil Pappychettan*, *Keezhukara Chackochettan* and *Ovanaalil Elichedathy*. The suffixes, *chettan* and *chedathy* meaning ‘elder brother’

and ‘elder sister’, were attached to their names, by the younger members of the family, in deference to their age and seniority of service. As a boy, when observing them, from the other side of the fence, as it were, I did not see anything amiss in their lot that might have aroused in me something akin to a social conscience. That they did not join the family at the table, but were separately served food in the kitchen or its work area did not at that time seem to me anything but natural.

By the time I became aware of the exploitative ethos of the system, it was already on its last legs and, with it, the system of keeping retainers that had sustained it. Society in general soon underwent a sea change that swept away many of the inequities therein. I understand on good authority that these old retainers were among the pioneers who moved due east to the Malaria-infested forests on the slopes of the Western Ghats and to Vayanaad in Northern Malabar to clear and cultivate virgin land, theirs to sharecrop for the asking.

Often, the absentee landlords in these areas were only too eager to get off their hands, no doubt for a consideration, vast stretches of fallow land in their possession to willing sharecroppers. Later, with the passage of time, they claimed squatters’ rights and ownership changed hands. Not infrequently, some of these erstwhile tenants made modest fortunes by their toil. Yet others have found avenues other than sharecropping opening to them, with more than a little assistance from the Pentecostal assemblies to which they belonged. I know of two such retainers- one that of my grandfather and the other that of his brother Rev. Mammen- whose progeny have made it good in the United States of America.

Then there was a lower order of servants to fetch and carry for you all day, everyday, except the day of Sabbath. They were the farm labourers who lived on their masters’ lands virtually as bonded servants, and always at their beck and call to work on their lands. And the children never addressed the older ones among them as *Chettan* or *Chedathy*. They were just plain *Mailan* or *Karathakutty* or *Chaathan* or *Mathai* or *Thoma* or *Pappy* or *Chacko* or *Eli* or *Maria*.

Clearly, the caste distinctions of the Hindu ethos had rubbed off somewhat on the so-called Syrian Christians as well. If the family retainers, all of them Syrian Christians yet not social equals, sitting on their low stools or *korandi*, had to eat out of enamelware or earthenware bowls at the back of the kitchen, the bonded labourers were relegated to the backyard of the house to eat their meals squatting on the ground.

Looking back, I recall that the most demeaning part of this ritual was that they had to dig holes in the ground and cover them with banana leaves. These leaves would blanch and soften and nicely hug the sides of the holes like moulds, as soon as the hot rice gruel or *kanji* and to go with it cooked cassava or whatever, was dealt out of coconutshell ladles with long handles.

Thus, even the impoverished homesteaders of Kumbanad were not above treating their servants as such. But the masters could not get by without the help of this lower order of servants, for especially during special occasions like weddings they were indispensable.

The *Chembu* and the *Uruli*, huge copper or bell-metal vessels, needed for ‘community’ cooking had to be moved from the cellar, with considerable effort, to be placed over open fires stoked up with faggots and firewood. Those were the days when houses were without plumbing, which meant that enormous quantities of water had to be drawn in vessels and fetched, vessel after tedious vessel, from the wells, often some distance away from the house. And they chopped more wood to stoke the fire as the day wore on. These helpers were veritably, like the sons of Ham, ‘drawers of water and hewers of wood’. Using long-handled iron spatulas, they would then, robot-like, mix and stir for long hours the food being cooked over slow burning fires while the chief cook would occasionally look over their shoulders. This was, for what it was worth, certainly an ‘improvement’ on the practice of caste Hindus who would not let the likes of these ‘menials’ come within earshot of their kitchens for fear that they would pollute them!

Dishes such as *Irachi Veivichethu*, *Erisseri*, *Pulisseri*, *Kozhikkurry*, *Meenkurry*, *Pachadi* and *Thoran* were the standard fare. That is, (1) Diced beef and coconut cooked and seasoned with condiments, (2) Diced raw banana curry, (3) Buttermilk seasoned with shallots, turmeric, mustard and condiments, (4) Chicken curry, (5) ‘Red hot’ fish curry seasoned with *meenpuli* (fish tamarind), (6) Hotchpotch (for want of a better term to describe this yogurt-based relish) and (7) Sautéed vegetables, in that order. A lot of the cooking was done outdoors.

At the marriage feast itself, all these would be served up, along with steaming rice, on a banana leaf. The cut end of the leaf would be placed to your right and the tapering end folded in as tradition prescribed. For starters, they served *Paayasam*, a rice pudding of sorts. The main dishes followed, and the dessert *Pooven Pazham*, a special variety of bananas, was served last. The guest would forthwith elaborately mash and mix the banana with yoghurt and *Paani* - a kind of treacle- or sugar and would make short work of the resulting mishmash with great zest! To say that the guests downed it with great slurps might be closer to the mark. Their satisfied belch at the end of the meal was rather like the obligatory ‘honourable eructation’ of the Pacific Islanders after a banquet. It was an expansive backwash of their paunchy fulsomeness! Neither the slurp nor the belch looked or sounded too indelicate to anyone except the unaccustomed partakers of this dessert. Its present-day substitutes of caramel pudding or ice cream or fruit cocktail eaten out of wafer cones or dainty little dishes, with scoops and all, may not offend fussy eyes or delicate ears. The older generation prefer to this day the tried and tested system of the past, slurp and all.

The specially prepared pantry called the *kalavara*, which was actually an extension of the marquee itself, would be garnered with all the goodies long before the guests arrived. With few exceptions, the older men manned the pantry and the younger men served the food. Women were expected to hover discreetly in the background just in case they were beckoned.

There was a time, not too long ago, when guests used to sit, cross-legged or with their legs drawn under their bodies, on the matted floor of the *Pandal*, and ate with their hands. They still eat with their hands, but not to be outdone by the urbanized, they raise their backsides to sit at tables in order not to put too much strain on their atrophying ‘nether regions’. Oh, but let me backtrack to the days prior to the marriage.

The elders of the extended family, while they kept a watchful eye on the helpers, exchanged pleasantries and talked about old times. They had already paid their dues to society, so understandably it was their right to put their feet up. Their gossip, spiced with oblique references to old scandals, would often knock hidden skeletons to come tumbling out of the family cupboard. Whispering tongues, as Coleridge has it, can poison truth. But it mattered little, for the long dead walked no more. And, in any case, those who happened to overhear these tales privately envied these erstwhile sinners the more for their peccadilloes. The helpers within earshot would nudge each other and keel over with suppressed laughter even as they tried to stick to their assigned tasks. One or the other of the elders present might chide them in mock seriousness for slacking off, but that was all. This, easy-going, informality is now no more. These helpers of yesteryears are now as thin on the ground as snowflakes in summer.

Weddings have now become occasions for showing off or scoring points. Naturally, weddings have promoted a thriving industry that cashes in on human vanity. We have event managers, videographers, beauticians and caterers turning up on the day in question and frenetically doing all the legwork, so that in fact the family need do nothing more than fork out wads of banknotes at the end of the day. Cars bedecked with exotic flowers such as orchids and roses and such like ferry the bride and the groom from the church to the reception hall, where they would be installed on gilded chairs on the stage all resplendent with tinsel and satin drapes, with flower pots on pedestals, no less, as stage props. Their few moments of fame under the limelight is all meticulously stage-managed and recorded for posterity. All for a hefty price, that is! Even the vicar, who does not ordinarily seek to be in the limelight, cannot be denied his occasional privilege to discard his priestly reserve and act as master of ceremonies, even if somewhat tentatively. The old austerities have now become distant memories. The clergy like the laity join in the festivities. Up to a point, that is, within the bounds of propriety.

We have come a long way from the days when the parish priest would be the only clergyman present to solemnize the marriage. We now need a bishop, no less, with a galaxy of other priests in attendance, to conduct the ceremony. And the invited guests have to suffer in silence, in deference to the Bishop's eminence, if he does not get to the church on time; which is not infrequent! We have also come a long way from the days of the humbler *Velleim Karimbadome* (white cloth and blanket) to seat the elders of the family, beside whom the newly-weds would first be ensconced, on arrival from the church, before they are asked to join the guests in the *Pandal*. Even the *Kalyaanaurappu* or the engagement ceremony before the marriage is now used as an occasion for tasteless ostentation.

That the most intimate moments in family life are being turned into public spectacles to be gaped at compulsively by nosey passers-by is fast becoming a common practice. Gaping is the national pastime of India. It hardly makes any difference to us whether the occasion is a private one. A death in the family is perhaps the most bizarre example that one could think of.

I remember as a boy, when there was a death in the family, the youth of the extended family would fan out in different directions without having to be told, mostly on foot but sometimes on bicycles if they have to travel further afield, to convey the sad news. The

occasional line bus that plied the route might take too long to turn up. In the meanwhile, the mortal remains of the dead, even while the body is still warm, would first be carefully bathed, prepared and placed on a raised framework, usually a bed. Then would begin the solemn vigil by the kith and kin, all of whom lived within hailing distance, to watch and grieve prayerfully, over the departed one, often through the night before the burial. And, in the meanwhile, the many comforting hymns sung and the tributes paid recalling the life of the deceased helped reconcile the bereaved to bear their grief with dignity. It was catharsis of sorts.

After the final goodbyes were said, the pallbearers would carry the coffin to the church on foot, in a slow, subdued procession with the company of softly singing mourners bringing up the rear. Among the hymns they sang was a particularly evocative hymn that continues to echo in the minds of people, cutting across faiths, to this day. It begins, “*Samayaamaam radhathil njaan swargayaathra cheyyunnu...* and two or three lines later resumes *Ente yaathrayude anthyam innalekaal aduppam*. Roughly translated, it means, “In Time’s heaven-bound chariot do I make my way...my journey’s end is nearer by far than yesterday.” Interestingly, the music is set to the tune of that old cowboy favourite, ‘Oh my darling Clementine. ...You are gone and lost for ever...’ A bit soppy perhaps, but apt, one would have thought.

Things have changed since then. More often than not, no sooner did a person die than the body was removed with unseemly haste and wheeled off to a mortuary. It is kept there for as long as it takes the diaspora, of whom every family would have at least one, to come and pay their ‘guilt-ridden’ respects to the frozen dead. Usually, the obituary column in the local newspaper is the only source of information to the near and dear ones. They could hardly have turned up to pay their respects before the body was relegated to the freezing cold confines of the mortuary. Finally, in place of pallbearers or a traditional hand-drawn hearse carrying the body to the church, an ambulance that doubles as a hearse carts the body from the mortuary to the house and thence to the church. Sadly, a time of private grief, when members of the family would come together to draw strength and comfort from each other, is turned into a public spectacle. The cameramen and videographers hired for the occasion have a field day as they inveigle the mourners into posing beside the lifeless form in contrived attitudes of sorrow.

Then, there is the matter of floral tributes pointedly offered by the stragglers in a mawkish show of affection, so that, often, the body is soon all but submerged under a mound of petals and paper and plastic. Larger versions of the *Shoshappa*, the brocaded piece of cloth that is normally intended to cover the Eucharist at Holy Communion, now double as half-shrouds to cover the lifeless form. As if it were the Sacraments! But, the most banal of all is the not infrequent presence of a band like in some Latin American funeral cortege, playing cheerless tunes of teary-eyed farewells. Sometimes, a funerary vehicle, all draped in black, would be in attendance to broadcast pre-recorded hymns and homilies through a public address system.

One could speculate that if this is carried too far, it is just a short step away from ‘celebrating’ death as a festive event! Like an Irish wake. That reminds me of the day I was present at an African wake in Lusaka, Zambia. My colleague at the United Nations Institute for Namibia, Billy Modise, a Xhosa from South Africa, had earlier that day lost

his only son. No doubt, there was audible grieving from the mourning women whose keen of sorrow almost sounded Irish in its sadness. But, later that night, the men ate and drank and had a generally good time, with only a hint of moderation in deference to the dead. And yet, this would be no more than a throwback to our aboriginal past. To this day, the tribal societies in some parts of India continue to celebrate death with the joy of life. They dance like dervishes to the accompaniment of tinny drums and squeaking clarinets, as they accompany the funeral bier, all decked with marigold, the cadaver propped up on it lifelessly swaying to the exertions of the pallbearers, on that final journey to the cremation grounds. If we can celebrate a birth why not celebrate death as well, they might well ask, for has not life come full circle? If this is what we are moving to, one wonders whether there is any dignity left in dealing with death any more, or whether a crisis in a family is any more the unifying catalyst that it once was.

The effect of all this is that the family reunion, which had once helped, through thick and thin, to strengthen family bonds, is lapsing into a charade. Time there was when the elders had helped initiate the younger generation into taking life's vicissitudes in their stride. Family re-unions would give them 'hands-on' experience. Such occasions were virtually 'rites of passage' into adulthood for the youth of the family.

In contrast, we now see the spectacle of waning parental authority. The elders, who were once looked upon with reverence that almost bordered on awe are more likely now to be put away like unwanted pieces of furniture in the lumber-room, as it were. The old authoritarianism has yielded place to a more permissive dispensation in which the youth is free to make choices and take matters into their own hands. This is not in and of itself harmful to all youth. Thankfully, many make the right choices

Some of the youth, however, have veered off from their moorings, drifting helplessly. Without an anchor to hold them down, many a misguided youth are cast adrift. It is as if they have discarded the familial work ethos that was once sacrosanct. Instead, they believe that everyone owes them a living without their having to earn it. Some may see this as an alarmist view about youth, but the truth is there is enough shiftlessness among them to cause us disquiet. Nevertheless, every now and then, the youth do get a chance to backtrack and find their way again. Many were the times I could have fallen by the wayside or lost my way, but did not, for Kumbanad and its vestigial old-world values had a way of whispering timely words of warning in my ears.

Not that many of the youth in our own extended family have been alienated or lost their way. Some may have become estranged for a while, but in time they too are rehabilitated as they rediscover their traditions like the generation that went before them. It is not as if the so-called 'generation gap' is a new phenomenon. In fact, the youth in every generation have been holding out against their elders' patriarchal efforts to guide them. Maybe, such resistance is born out of a natural instinct to determine their threshold of defiance and see how much they can get away with. As part of their struggle for survival! The need for peer approval may also be a factor. The trouble is, if they fail to discern the critical moment to adapt or 'yield' to familial counsel, they will have forever lost many precious years of their lives. And with that, the opportunities to find the right niche for themselves at the right time!

My ‘affair’ with Kumbanad goes back to the early 1930’s. When I look back at Kumbanad as it then was, at its sights and sounds and at the familiar spots in it that I grew to like, I cannot help but feel a sense of loss. In some ways, life seemed less complicated in those far-off days. True, distance in time tends to give places and events in the past an improbable aura that may not be real and may blur the boundaries between memory and fantasy. Philip Roth, the American novelist, once said in a letter to his friend, ‘*Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the facts*’.

Indeed, the recollections of the past are constantly being ‘updated’ in the telling and retelling of it. After lying dormant for long at the level of the subconscious, the memory of a past incident or experience is suddenly triggered off by a new stimulus. And the old memory is thus once again ‘rudely’ awakened. But in the re-telling of it, you may add a new twist to it by whatever it was that jolted it out of sleep in the first place. That then sinks back into forgetfulness, only to be revived again later with a fresh look. It is more than likely, therefore, that the latest ‘edition’ of your recall could ‘read’ differently with every new ‘revision’. In short, you may never remain your ‘first edition’ for too long! If my impressions, therefore, look anything like having been ‘revised’ or even ‘redone’ in places, I do hope that those who know my antecedents will indulge me as I press ahead, regardless. The ‘medium is the message’ as Marshall McLuhan would say. The medium of a writer is not only the words he uses but also the flow of feelings and images he wishes to make manifest in these words.

A stretch of gravelled road running from Kozhencherry in the east to Tiruvalla in the west, passed through Kumbanad. It still does, only it is wider and tarred. The section of the road that passed along our village doubled as its high street, such as it was. Coming from the east along this stretch, you would see a road branching off at right angles to the left leading to the Arattupuzha river crossing, three miles due south. Lush green paddy fields would meet your eyes on either side of this road as it led you down a gentle slope before it slowly climbed up again. In the south-west corner where the two roads met stood the stone-built, single-storey cloth and tailoring shop that ‘Mishien’ (read *machine*) Kuttichaayan ran. His Singer sewing machine was the first of its kind in Kumbanad. Thus it was that the nickname ‘mishien’ was added to his name. His shop is not there anymore. In its place, we now have a high-rise under construction towering over the other structures, old and new. Which is only natural, for Kumbanad is now a bustling township.

And obliquely across on the north west side of the street was Mannil Paappichettan’s grocery store. It was really an extension of Kunnumpurathu Manager’s cloth shop. Next to it was a bookbinder who, apart from re-binding old books, sold Bibles, hymnbooks and Christian literature. As a sideline, he also sold drums and tambourines on which the born-again Christians of Kumbanad could try their percussive skills when they were seized with religious fervour, which was often. Then there was the Chempanaalil teashop on the south side and a few ramshackle kiosks on either side of the street selling odds and ends like *Bidis* (native cigarettes for smoking) and *Murukkaan* (tobacco and betel leaves for chewing) and *Naranga Vellam* (lime juice for slaking your thirst). Once or twice a week, a butcher would set up shop under a makeshift canopy, made of plaited palm-fronds, propped up by four stout poles. He usually sold beef and, on rare occasions, mutton. For

the villagers, mutton was too dear to be part of their spartan fare. Even beef, which cost only a third of mutton, was a luxury for many. Mostly, they made do with sardines or mackerels for an appetizing relish. They would stretch their resources to buy anything more expensive only as a rare treat.

There was also the *Anchal Aappees* (the mail service for sending and receiving letters and articles within the state) and further east to your left, the Post Office for national and international mail. While the cast-iron Anchal Mail Box, with the Maharaja's insignia of a twisted conch embossed on it, was painted a dark shade of green, the Post Office Box sported its characteristic shade of red. This then was the sum-total of the public service on offer to the people of Kumbanad. Oh, I almost forgot. To the wayfarers passing through the village, the public well sunk by the family, a few yards to the east of the main junction, offered sweet water for slaking their thirst. And for the farmer who wended his way to the market to sell the fruits of his labour, it was a welcome relief to see the load-rest, or in local parlance the *Chumadu Thaangi* -a rough-hewn granite beam held up by two granite piles- on which to lower his burden and rest from his exertions before picking it up again and moving on. Kumbanad had more than one of those.

The common means of transport in those days was the bullock cart, open and flat-bedded but occasionally covered, moving on iron-rimmed wooden wheels. Those were the days when carts ruled the highways and byways of the land. The cart was made of hardwood to make it last long. It often went by, well into the early hours of dawn, as part of a long convoy, noisily trundling along at an unhurried pace. The carter, who did not appear to have deadlines to meet, would occasionally doze off or, waking up, sing rural ditties to break the tedium of the journey as the heavy-laden cart rolled forward. Occasionally, he would crack his whip and click his tongue if the animals were moving too slowly for his liking. The cart would then set a brisk pace for a brief spell, its unmistakable bells all jingling faster, before relapsing into its usual trundle once again. Suspended from its under-carriage would be a hurricane lantern that swung with the moving cart, throwing an arc of dull light between the wheels. How this could have lighted the path of the cart has always baffled me. The sure-footed animals had no doubts at all. The soft jingle of the brass bells as the cart swayed along the rutted roads seemed to keep time with the pace of the cart. It carried mostly farm produce to the market and, sometimes, people.

Now and again, one might see a *villu wandi* or a covered carriage, mounted on leaf springs, carrying its well-heeled occupants, of whose tribe Kumbanad could not boast of many. One such carriage was owned by *Kizhakethil Kochumathai*, a fourth-generation notable of the family. He was a prodigal spender who never gave tomorrow a thought. Towards the end of his days his family was in dire straits, but he never wavered in his faith. Like Dickens' Micawber, he was a hopeless optimist who believed that '*something will turn up*'. Something did turn up in good measure for the family by and by, but he did not live to see it. He always sat in the same place in the church and always led the hymn singing on Sundays. He had a deep, resonant voice that challenged the congregation to a louder choral effort.

A motorized vehicle was a rarity in those days. There was, of course, the KCMS (Kozhencherry Changanassery Motor Service) eight-seater bus that plied in either direction once every two hours or so during the day. There was a sort of personal

relationship between the driver of the bus- mostly the owner himself- and the regular commuters. There were not many commuters, though, in those days. One would wait in front of the house to flag down the bus one usually took as it hove into sight. If one of the regulars was not seen waiting at the appointed spot, the driver would pull up and wait for his 'co-passenger' to come. In the meanwhile, he would tweet-tweet his quaint little horn once or twice as a wake-up call. The horn looked somewhat like a bugle with a hollow rubber ball attached to it and pointing towards the driver for him to squeeze and signal his arrival. Such intimacy! Ah, you will have to whistle for it now! I recall the time my brother George and I were at Quilon doing primary school. Come summer vacation, we, mother and children, would repair to Kumbanad bag and baggage to spend the school break there. In those days, there was, as I recall, the 'Balaram Bus Service' that plied along the coastal road between Quilon and Alleppey. There was also the 'Popular Bus Service' that ran between Tiruvalla and Quilon via Kottarakara and back once a day. The lone bus that plied the route would be parked in front of our house on the appointed day, long before its scheduled departure, to take us all on board with all our effects. And, after reaching its hub at Tiruvalla and having 'unloaded' the other passengers, it would make a beeline for Kumbanad to drop us off at our very doorstep. That was personalised, doorstep-to-doorstep service for you!

This was before the coming of the State Transport buses for all and sundry, brought into service by none other than Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Dewan of Travancore. Interestingly, he appointed as its director his own chauffeur and general factotum, a London Cockney by the name of Salter. Strange as it may seem, also as a member of the Viceroy's Privy Council, the Dewan may well have enjoyed certain privileges that made him an honorary white in the eyes of the powers-that-be like the *assimilados* did in Portuguese colonies! And hence, the curious spectacle of a uniformed chauffeur, a white man no less, driving an Indian around all that many years ago. In the streets of London now, such a sight will raise no eyebrows anymore.

As for cars in Kumbanad then, Edward H. Noel, and his redoubtable wife, both resident missionaries of the Brethren persuasion, had a Model T Ford for their personal use. Metti Yonnaachen was their butler *cum* chauffeur. And, Chempanaalil Yonnaachen had a car (I cannot recall the make) that plied as a taxi, of which he was himself the cabbie. Many years later, Karipuzha Kuttychaayan was to add another taxi to make up the sum total of three cars that Kumbanad could boast of. But coming down to the present, like the proverbial camel in the Arab's tent, the ever-growing ranks of taxis and auto-rickshaws in Kumbanad are threatening to push the hapless dwellers of the village off the road.

Kumbanad 'High Street', such as it is, has lost its old charm of uncluttered openness and friendliness. In those days there was an air of familiarity about the street, especially in the evenings. To the locals who gravitated to it, it was a meeting place to share news and views and, not least, the latest gossip on the grapevine. All that is now history. In its place, we see the strange and none-too-friendly faces of the interlopers, mostly political hatchet men, that crowd out the natives of Kumbanad and add a palpable air of menace to the street.

In those days, the village had a grid of country lanes running between hedges or between stone banks, allowing only enough elbowroom to make way for passers-by. People using

these lanes after dark were obliged to pick their way gingerly for fear of venomous snakes that might venture out of the undergrowth at night. Flashlights were still a long time in coming. They would usually carry a kindling torch of dried palm-fronds, which they would swish to and fro from time to time to keep the flame from petering out when they were out and about after dark. The occasional straggler in the night can even now be spotted surreptitiously carrying one at unseemly hours. Such an improvised torch is called *choottu* in our neck of the woods. It would throw a moving arc of light that lit up the ground beneath their feet with every wave of the hand that held it. Snakes were generally nocturnal and kept well away from people during daylight hours..

Sometimes even daylight did not deter a determined reptile to emerge from its hole to find a quarry, usually a rat or a field mouse. On occasions the tables are turned and the serpent itself would be the quarry to another predator, that is. Once, I remember, about sixty years ago as *Pallitheckel Mathaikutty* and I were on our bicycles making our way to a neighbouring village, all of a sudden a cobra slithered across the road with a mongoose in hot pursuit. We dismounted and watched in fascination even as the mongoose caught up with the snake and circled it in an end game, but keeping out of the striking range of the puffed-up cobra's repeated lunges. Soon the hissing grew weaker and the lunges slower. Like lightning, that furry long-tailed predator sprung, caught the serpent by its neck and slunk as swiftly as it came into the paddies, not far from *Thondu Kunjammen's* homestead near the Koipuram Primary School at Kadapra.

Thondu Kunjammen was a copra dealer who earned his nickname from 'Thondu'; that is, the fibrous husk of the coconut shell. He met an untimely death at the hands of a rival trader who was known to be a snake in the grass. The mention of Thondu Kunjammen brings to mind his neighbour the mild-mannered *Chakkakuru Mathai* who, in a fit of sudden rage, split his wife's head in two with an axe. And they say, it was all because the hapless woman had forgotten to cook Mathai's every-day must as his relish: stir-fried Jackfruit seeds or *chakkakuru mezhukkuperatti*, in local parlance. Hence the curious moniker attached to his name. He spent a few years in prison for second-degree murder, I remember my grandfather narrating the story to us. He would have made an interesting subject for psychologists to study how a Jekyll turned into a Hyde for the most unlikely of reasons. By all accounts, Mathai was no snake in the grass.

There were snakes aplenty, of the ophidian kind, in Kumbanad in those days. The most common were the *chera* or the ratsnake and the *polakan* or the water snake, both harmless varieties. Of the poisonous ones, the cobra, the krait and the viper were the most feared. Snakebites were not uncommon in those days. Should that happen, one had to travel long distances to get to a hospital, so more often than not victims were rushed to the nearest indigenous 'poison healer' or in local parlance, the *visha haari* in the fond hope that he could save the victim. The Pentecostals, on the other hand, opted for the healing power of prayer to treat snakebites, or any other life-threatening ailment for that matter. I remember how, some seventy years ago, a young man by name *Chittezhathu Kochucherukkan* died after he had been bitten by a krait. His kinfolk refused to take him to a hospital and relied solely on the power of prayer to work a miracle. Much more recently, my cousin *Kizhakothisil Thankachen*, a pentacostal pastor to boot, died of septicaemia because the injuries he had sustained in a road accident were not treated at

all. The pastors of the local Faith Home would not hear of it. When darkness of the mind and of the night meet, it can be lethal.

With the benefit of hindsight one could say people retired for the night unseasonably early, not long after darkness fell, but they would make a virtue of that necessity. There was no electricity in those days. There was no cinema and no form of entertainment to speak of. That they would have frowned upon such worldly diversions is another matter. Their spartan lives had no room for such ‘frivolities’. They therefore donned the mantle of ascetic Christians. ‘We are not put on this earth to enjoy ourselves’ they might well have been heard to say. In this life of denial, women had the worst of it.

The naked oil lamps that barely dispelled the darkness in their dimly lit houses were doused not long after the evening prayers were said and a spare meal eaten in its wake. If there was the odd lamp seen flickering after that, it was sure to be from a kitchen where the uncomplaining womenfolk would be winding down from their chores for each day. And, we unctuously continue to extol the virtues of these long-suffering unfortunates as icons of faithful Indian womanhood! ‘*Bhaarata naari th’n bhaava shudhi!*’ Typical of men! Looking back from the relative comfort of the modern kitchen, with domestic appliances to assist them for every chore, a fair-minded person cannot help wondering how the women had once put up so cheerily with their unrelieved drudgery all day long.

The only *night life* on offer, for what it was worth, was limited to the revivalist Christian conventions that vied with one another in saving souls and filling the night air, especially in the months of December and January, with sound and fury. With the weeklong Maramon Convention, the largest Christian convention in Asia, held in February on the shores of the River *Pamba* not far from Kumbanad, the season of revival would reach its grand climax.

In those days, a familiar presence at the said convention used to be the American evangelist, Stanley Jones, whose assertion that he could not think of a heaven without Mahatma Gandhi incensed no end many a Bible-thumping evangelical Christian of Kumbanad and beyond. One of them certainly was the evangelist P. V. George the author of the book, “*Unique Christ and Mystic Gandhi*” making invidious comparisons between them. The local wags have it that, at the Second Coming, Christ would appear first to those archetypal arbiters of the absolute Truth in Kumbanad. The place had for long been known as the Bible Belt of India, for such was its Christian assurance of the things hoped for, but as yet unseen!

In retrospect, as one who had gagged on faith, having been over-fed with homilies that they would have done well to let me ingest in small measures, I could not reconcile myself to the life of constant denial that my kinsfolk felt certain would win them reward. Like the early Christians, they believed in forgoing what little pleasures they could have had for a greater good. Viz. ‘Bear the Cross and win the Crown’. Almost every household in Kumbanad had this text hung up on the wall, often in a tacky wooden frame.

The Roman emperor Julian’s complaint about early Christians, as Ibsen put into his mouth, was, “...the sun shines for them but they do not see it; the earth offers them its

fullness but they desire it not: all their desire is to renounce and suffer and die”. Anything else was construed as hedonistic. Even a harmless cup of ‘water’ that blushed at the sight of the Lord, as Byron put it, and turned red at Caana! To them, a life on earth without joy and laughter was the quintessential offering on the altar of faith to claim the ineluctable bliss of chanting ‘*Hallelujahs*’ in heaven for all time to come. To me, all such anticipatory pieties could only inspire gloom in the here and now. If that sounds facetious, I plead guilty.

The number of people who subscribe to such old pieties is slowly but surely declining. Unless one loses all sense of time, one may well ask how in heaven’s name one could ‘bear’ such endless bliss in the many mansions promised for them. A proverb in Malayalam aptly admonishes against such zealotry: ‘*Adhikamaayaal amritum visham*’; that is, ‘*Taken in excess, even ambrosia is poison*’. Of course, this would equally apply to the wine-bibber! Either way, with some luck, you may also lose all sense of time. Is it not the Good Book that tells us that the Earth is the Lord’s, and its fullness thereof? Was it not God’s purpose of creation that Man must have dominion over the earth and partake of its bounties? The eminently sensible words of Prophet Mohammed come to mind: *a`amal li`dduniyaaka ka`innakka ta`eeshu a`abadan, wa a`amal li`aakhiratika ka`innakka ta`amoothu ghadan*. Freely translated, it means, *Prepare for this life as if you would live forever, and prepare for the life to come as if you would die tomorrow*. Ergo, I believe it would be foolish to deny ourselves the simple pleasures that this world has to offer us.

William Barclay, a New Testament scholar of international distinction, in one of his devotional books writes of J. P. Mahaffy, that great Irish churchman and scholar thus. When asked if he was a Christian, his answer was, “Yes! But not offensively so.” What he meant was that he never allowed the thought that he was a Christian to interfere with his enjoyment of the innocent joys of life.

The only caveat that he might have added would be: ‘the way we enjoy this life should in no way offend the society of which we are a part’. Such harmless pleasures I dare say would offer the harried Christian Pilgrims welcome respite from the tedium of wading through the Slough of Despond in their Progress towards the Hereafter. Instead, for people to have denied themselves even the innocent pleasures that this life had to offer for the projected bliss in the life hereafter was to deny reason. Nay, it was masochistic! But deny himself many a ‘Christian Pilgrim’ of Kumbanad did!

The day began early for them. Even before cockcrow, in the pre-dawn haze, oil lamps would dimly light up in ones and twos. These were mostly small, naked lamps. And, only occasionally, would you see lanterns with chimneys or the classier brass lamps. Any empty four-ounce bottle, with a wick pushed through a hole in the screw top to reach the oil below, would also serve nicely as a lamp. Every morning, from every homestead would rise the sounds of family prayer that began with a hymn of praise, not always sung in harmony but always with great conviction. The rural air was so clear and the other sounds so thin that the strains of these hymns carried long distances over the uncluttered countryside. There followed readings from the Bible. Last to come was an impromptu prayer offered to God, expressing, in equal measure, gratitude for the small mercies they had received and eagerness to bear the hardships of this world. And if you were not an

Episcopalian family, there would be a homily too before the final prayer. Their certitude of ‘things unseen’ was unshakable. By and large, the younger members of the family, bleary eyed with sleep, went through the motions of this daily routine in varying degrees of wakefulness. Although nothing was said about this during the prayer itself, the unspoken disapproval of the elders was always palpable.

The day also began early for the ploughmen who could be seen at first light, in their loincloths and conical headgear wending their way barefooted to the paddy fields, with their ploughshares slung over their shoulders, as they cleared the paths for their oxen. To this day, try hard as I might, I have not been able to hit the *falsetto* high note with which these men hallooed each other across vast distances, yet unerringly recognizing the author of each such wordless call and its intent. It was uncanny. This form of bush telegraph, one hardly hears employed these days.

And in the fields, equally unerringly did these men, their bare torsos shining, cut up the resisting earth with their ploughs. It did not seem to matter to them that the sun was beating down, harsh and unforgiving, or that the rain was coming down in buckets. Their teams of oxen were harnessed in pairs to pull the ploughs round the paddies in ever-widening circles starting from the centre or, sometimes, the other way. The furrows they made rose and fell as they prodded their animals on, round and round, clicking their implosive tongues in their customary style. In this fashion, they worked their masters’ fields, all plotted and pieced, from dawn to dusk and, come harvest, bring the crops in, their loyalty to their task never in question. That this loyalty was not always rewarded in equal measure is another matter.

Like the agricultural labourers, there were craftsmen and artisans too to serve the villagers. There was strict division of work in a labour-intensive world such as was ours. Kunjankaran, the *kollan*, or the blacksmith, just up the road within shouting distance of our place, was a busy man. He could be seen at his smithy the livelong day, pumping air with a pair of bellows into a flaming forge to heat pieces of iron that he would then beat and shape into knives and hoes. The inward hiss of the red-hot piece of iron as he dipped it into a trough of water to temper it still echoes in my ears. Kunjankaran has passed on and his progeny have closed shop. These days, we can buy factory-made knives and hoes sold across the counter without having to wait for the blacksmith to handcraft for us at his pleasure. Cycle Pappichettan, who repaired bicycles, and his brother Unnooni, the coppersmith, were also part of the local scene. The locals knew the latter as *Chembunnooni*, ‘chembu’ being the Malayalam word for copper. A word about Pappichettan will not be out of place here. All those who knew him as a dyed-in-the-wool Communist, and a sourpuss besides, were surprised when, later in life, he turned out to be a born-again Pentecostal with an impish smile that always shone owlshly through his thick glasses till the end of his days at the ripe old age of ninety-three. Perhaps, there was something about Kumbanad spirituality that he could not fend off!

Gopalan, the village barber, who had practised his tonsorial skills on three generations of the family, has now more or less laid down the tools of his trade. With predictable regularity, I remember he would turn up to give my father his customary haircut and shave. His haircut was only an apology for one, for there was only so much hair the

barber could work on. My father's that is. But there was no let up on the click-click of Gopalan's scissors before each tonsorial clip, his eyes cocked at a critical angle. The shave was more elaborate, face first and then the armpits! And between the two shaves, the razor would be vigorously stroked on the palm of his left hand, first one way and then the other, many times over.

If we children were back home from boarding school during the holidays, our scalps were not spared either. After Gopalan was through with us, we would look like army recruits on the first day of camp. As we grew older, we dreaded more and more, as did my sons much later, the prospect of yielding our pates to him, so would keep out of harm's way under some pretext or the other. Gopalan is now a sprightly old man who could still wield the tools of his trade, at a pinch. His sons have become professionals. And in place of the one barber who called on you at regular intervals, we have several barbers plying their trade from their poky little shops. We even have a beauty saloon or two that boast of hairstyling and facials.

The village once had its traditional washerwomen too. I forget their names. I remember their men, though. Especially Kittan and his son Thankan whose womenfolk washed our 'dirty linen in public' at the nearby streams. The men felled coconuts in the homesteads of Kumbanad. With the aid of a thong slipped round their ankles to get a splayfooted hold on the tree trunk and of their hands clasped round the trunk for leverage, they leapfrogged up and up each coconut palm, their rippling muscles straining to ooze sweat. Often, they had to scale fifty feet or more to get to the top. They would then swing round the treetop, with practised ease, to prune the palm fronds and to fell each 'lovely' bunch of coconuts from those dizzying heights. Which reminds me. Looking down from his lofty perch, Thankan was once heard quipping that he was closer to heaven than any of the earthbound Christians looking up at him would ever be. These fellers of coconut also helped their women with ironing our clothes.

Most of the washing and ironing is now done for us in mechanized laundries. More and more households are acquiring washing machines too. And, the village now has to rely on journeymen climbers from further afield to fell their coconuts. Not long ago, a pioneering group of people in Kozhikode is understood to have started a school to teach the art of felling coconuts with the aid of a mechanical device that they have invented. One hopes the venture catches on. In some countries monkeys are trained to do it for you. It is not as if we are without our monkeys, but we in India are more likely to venerate them and pamper them with goodies than ask them to drudge for us.

Kumbanad also had had its share of masons and carpenters. They belonged to a particular community that regarded their work as their traditional preserve. They were the *Aassaarees*. Nowadays we have carpenters and masons, cutting across communities, coming out of trade schools. Call it economic determinism if you like, but the change has been brought about for 'bread and butter' reasons. A stone's throw away, obliquely across the street from our house, there was an old fashioned wooden oil-crusher, a *chakku* as it was called in these parts. I would go there when it was crushing copra and watch its creaking gyrations.

It was like a fixed wooden mortar inside which a rotating pestle crushed the copra that was fed into its open mouth to extract its oil. The oil dribbled out of a spout at the bottom of the mortar. A rope ran down from the top-end of the pestle to the outer extremity of a thick wooden rotator going round the bottom of the mortar, rather like its extended limb. It was driven by a draught animal or by main force. The *Chettis* or members of the *Vaaniar* community were the traditional oil pressers. With the advent of power-driven expeller machinery to make this tedious ‘art’ obsolete, they have had to change tack. This has been the fate of other traditional artisans too. Progress has compelled them to seek other means for a living, which is not a bad thing *per se*. Kumbanad now has a *Chetti* who runs a flourishing pharmacy.

If the humdrum existence of this rural community held little scope for variety, the rural setting itself held up an infinite variety of images. I can never forget that moment, when, my crossed arms pressed tightly against my chest to ward off the morning chill, I saw for the first time in my life, with wonder in my eyes, icicles hanging down like needles of crystal from the eaves of Annaamma Kochamma’s (aunt Annaamma) cottage. And, prism-like, they broke up the beams of the early-morning sun into a rainbow of colours, even as the residual water from the earlier showers dripped slowly down the icicles that hung like crystals from the eaves. As the sun grew warmer, the icicles would dwindle and disappear. We see icicles no more maybe on account of global warming, or perhaps because the thatched roof with its spiked eaves, which would help suspend the congealed droplets, is a thing of the past.

The mention of ‘roof’ reminds me of a familiar scene that has left a deep impression on me ever since I saw it for the first time. Every year, when it was time to re-thatch the roof (tiled roofs were the exception rather than the rule), the members of each extended family, young and old alike, cousins and uncles, joined hands with the household to do the thatching. The ‘roofing’ material was the coconut palm frond, pre-cured in water and dried before being split down the middle and plaited. Each plaited piece was held end-to-end and flung from below, to the housetop where the more skilled members of the family were precariously perched to thatch the roof painstakingly. Apart from the satisfaction of having completed this labour of love, the only reward they looked forward to was the chicken-curry lunch on offer, a rare treat in those days, which they made short work of with obvious relish and no less obvious camaraderie. It was not as if chicken curry was otherwise part of the frugal fare that they had to make do with every tiresome day.

Thatches are not a common sight any longer. Nor is the early-morning haze of smoke hugging the thatch that slowly diffuses like a mist cover as the heat of the sun lifts it. The smell of the fragrant wood smoke that rises from the new palm-frond thatch is a mere memory now. And, what of the smell of earth made fresh after the previous night’s rain especially in the mornings when the house begins to stir before the sun is up? No longer are the homemakers up and about so early to kindle a fire in the kitchen and start their long-drawn-out chores and keep the home fires burning all day long and well into the night. These days, they have in their modern, almost smokeless kitchens home appliances that help dice, mix, blend and cook dishes in large quantities at the mere touch of a button. We save time and labour, no doubt, but no longer can we enjoy the taste of

freshly cooked dishes at every meal as we once used to. Refrigerators have put paid to that joy.

My mother never had any of those props in her old-fashioned kitchen except of course for what was grandly called a meat-safe. A plate rack and a second meat-safe were later additions and they found pride of place in our otherwise spare dining room. A small fridge that found its way into the house much later was only an apology for modernity. So was the three-band Blaupunkt radio, which my mother eagerly tuned into whenever she had a moment of respite from her daily chores.

I vividly remember her getting up with the sun every morning and instructing the kitchen help for the long day ahead. Next, without fail, she would be seen besieged by the squawking hens that had until then been at roost in the coop. She had earlier summoned them with the customary call, '*Kozhi, baa, baa, baa!*' She would then call them by their names and chatter as she fed them. They would peck the feed furiously, momentarily cease their labours from time to time, look up and cluck contentedly before resuming their mechanical 'peck-peck' again. Then they would range freely for the rest of the day. They repaid her with their eggs in the fullness of time. Chicken coops are increasingly becoming dispensable, now that battery hens in poultry farms are slowly but surely edging out the free rangers. The uncomplicated village that Kumbanad once was has been overtaken by the march of time.

The thatched cattle sheds or *Erithil* are disappearing too, as are the farms and the farm animals. The sweet-smelling haystacks that gave any village its distinctive stamp are also slowly on the way out. For the few who stubbornly continue to keep cattle, a hayloft is the easier option. The art of piling a haystack seems to have been forgotten. A haystack was a kind of totem pole that joyfully bound the family together as they replenished the hay, year after year, after the harvesting was done. Of late, planting and harvesting rice have become losing propositions since farm workers have, in their revolutionary fervour, raised the stakes.

It was in the year 1954, that an incident took place, which broke the even tenor of life in Kumbanad. The by-then unionized farm labourers, raring to flex their collective muscles, downed their implements in many parts of the state and refused to work on the farms unless their wages were hiked. Kumbanad was not spared, either. They had had enough of slaving for their masters for a pittance, they screamed! Truly, the Kumbanad farmers were only marginally better off than their workers in material terms, what with their having only small parcels of land to cultivate. However, the landless labourers in general saw no distinction between the 'lake kings' or *Kaayal Raajackanmaar*' with their vast expanses of *Kuttanaad* paddies in which they grew paddy as a cash crop and the small-scale farmers of Kumbanad who grew it for subsistence. They had been tutored to believe that all landholders, big or small, were *bourgeoisie* exploiters and class enemies.

The villagers were at a loss. Two days went by. It was not that the workers did not deserve to be paid more, but that there was only so much that the farmers could pay them with. And it happened at the time of transplanting or *Parichu nadiil* and any further delay in transplanting the rice seedlings -which the farm workers claimed was an arcane rite, let alone their traditional right, only theirs to perform- would render the seedlings

useless for planting. Come harvest time, there would be nothing to harvest and the farmers would have little to eat. But, the local labourers would not brook anyone but themselves doing the work. Two more anxious days, spent looking for answers, drove the elders of the family to distraction.

It was then that the youth of the village rose to a man and decided, after a nod from their elders, to defy this ‘proletarian’ diktat and do the task themselves. The insouciance of youth often helps to cut the Gordian knot in times of crisis. With the locally hired *Chendakkaaru* or traditional drummers loudly setting the pace, the youngsters moved, in a lockstep fashion, from paddy to paddy, to complete the work in less time than the traditional workers usually took to do it. The mystique of their esoteric art thus stood exposed at one fell swoop. The youth had done it unaided! Without feeling unduly modest, I can say I had a leading role to play in this ‘corporate’ venture.

Only, the engine of our effort needed to be stoked up from time to time for us to move full steam ahead. Was it not Napoleon who said that an army marches on its stomach? I still remember the alfresco meals that were unfailingly served up, piping hot, on the banks of the paddies, the venue only changing with the field, whenever it was time for us to eat. There was a general air of festivity throughout the week, but it was not without its anxious moments. Rumour had it that the workers were planning to teach us a lesson for calling their bluff, so we had cudgels fashioned and secreted away, just in case. However, the threat turned out to be a false alarm. Or, perhaps, having been forewarned, the workers were dissuaded! Afterwards, we celebrated this coup with an open-air meeting at the Kumbanad junction. I spoke in public for the first time in my life.

It was not long after this that I was fortuitously drawn into locking horns with a local labour leader. In the first flush of his followers’ rising strength, he had hoped that his writ would run in these parts in disputes between homesteaders and squatters. Our neighbour and my uncle once removed, Kaanakathil Koshy John, was a party to one such dispute. When he rejected the union leader’s unsolicited mediation, the latter believed that he would make him change his mind by main force. Quite by chance, I was a witness to his attempted trespass. I had to intervene. And so it was that I dissuaded him from it physically, but only after gentle persuasion had failed. That same evening Kumbanad witnessed a noisy demonstration along our ‘high street’ in which the rank and file of the local labour union bayed, in a manner of speaking, for my blood. The one slogan that grabbed everyone’s attention was, “*Profasserude irachi pattikku kodukum*”. The professor will be meat for the dogs! But, I slept safe in the knowledge that the family would close ranks, if push came to shove, just as they did during the seedlings crisis. That had been an unwritten pact of kinship that translated into help, offered free, but now sadly history.

Even the yearly baling out of the stagnant well -every homestead had at least one well- is not any more a service offered as a labour of love. This exercise was meant not only to remove the growing sludge of dead leaves and dirt at the bottom but also to revive the wellsprings that might have been slowly clogged with dirt or sand. Very often, the sides of the well had to be shored up to stop subsidence. The wells were dark and deep, often going down thirty or forty feet or more. I still remember how dizzy I felt looking down the ‘bottomless’ shaft of the well at *Valliaveettil* the first family house of Kumbanad.

Every well has rings hewn into the inner laterite wall, roughly thirty inches apart, as toeholds for men to go up or down. The volunteers formed a human chain going down the well, literally with their backs to the wall. Thus poised one above the other, they would lug the muck and the stale water from below in buckets, passing them up at a pace faster than it would take the springs to fill the well again. What if someone lost his narrow foothold? Or, lost his hold on the bucket handle? God forbid! This was risky work, but they did not shrink from it. If the well in question was in a state of disrepair, a rope and pulley was reluctantly used to haul up the water in ten gallon tin cans. The wells continue to be drained to this day in this traditional way, except in places where a pump is available to speed up the work, but now only at a price either way.

To resume at the sloping thatch where I left off. Often, I would sit under it, legs dangling from the veranda, and watch with fascination the day unfold in all its glory; the early morning dewfall on the grass, the cobwebs woven across the shrubbery and the gossamer upon the wet earth shimmering in the sun. And, I would blow hard in front of me to watch, in utter amazement, my breath turn into a stream of mist and then dissolve itself into thin air. Just as intriguing was the sight, up in the sky, of the dragonflies, with its veined, wispy wings that let sunlight through like so many miniature stained glass windows. Sometimes, they punctuated the air in their jerky flight paths, now hovering, now rising, now falling, and then landing on the ground below.

To catch a dragonfly, tie a pebble to its tail and watch it struggle to be airborne was a sport that you would not put past a determined child. As flies are to wanton boys, as the Bard put it. Was the child showing early signs that he derived a kind of twisted pleasure by inflicting pain on others? But that does not necessarily make the child a sadist in the making, does it? It may have been just a vestigial urge passed down through the genes from our caveman days when man fended for himself. The child would surely outgrow that tendency with socialisation.

The variegated splash of colours of the butterflies, - each showing off its characteristic squiggles and dots and radiating lines all symmetrically arranged like a Japanese fan - fluttering among the greenery, also fascinated the child. But, the multi-coloured profusion of nature's offerings around him soon draws his attention to other sights. He is no philistine. At night, for instance, he would look on in wonder at the myriads of fireflies winking against the backdrop of dark and looming trees, making them all look like so many silhouetted Christmas trees strung up with fairy lamps. During harvest, as he occasionally romped carefree beside the streamlets that ran along the paddy banks, he would suddenly stop to dip his cupped hands in and pick up the wriggly tadpoles and the delicate little fishes or *paral meen* that abounded there only to throw them all back in, being curious no more. He thus led an absorbing life in this delicate world of fantasy.

The ever-present hibiscus or the *chemparathi*, the sweet smelling jasmine or the *mulla poove*, the not-so-sweet-smelling periwinkle or the *shavam naari*, the many hued bougainvillea or the Flame-of-the-Forest do not escape the revolving sweep of a child's curious eyes. And then there were the mango trees in season. It was customary for the children of the family to try to outrun one another in the mornings to scramble for the mangoes that lay strewn all around. And, after having picked the 'fallen' ones, they

would fling stones and other missiles with uncanny aim at the reluctant fruit that had 'refused' to come down the night before.

The interests of the children were as many-sided as they were joy-giving. There were the sounds, too, that fascinated them; of the ubiquitous bee and the bird, of the unmistakable croaking of the bullfrog that signalled the advent of the monsoon. Also there was the incessant barking of the dog at all hours of the night, no matter what season it was, no less the intermittent, high-pitched whirring of the cicadas and the crowing of the cock at dawn. At first light, one could hear water spilling from the bucket every time the 'drawer of water' was hauling it up from the well, each time more wearily, with a pulley and rope that protested and squeaked in sympathy with its partner in distress. These noises, not always in tune, were nevertheless of a piece, creating a clash of sounds that was not entirely dissonant.

Where are all these sights and sounds gone? Maybe, a child, who starts his life with heightened perceptions of the world around him, loses this precious gift as he grows older. The *mind-forg'd manacles* of experience now restrain his natural curiosity. Or, perhaps, the hormonal changes he undergoes blunt his sensibilities and make him more prone to the dares of the physical world. Whatever the reason, the truth is that his interests change as he grows older. He then begins to question the limits imposed on his freedom and makes bold to 'cock a snook' at the older generation. He and his peers get sucked into the vortex of a local sub-culture in the making. Peer pressure leads him to escapades that are often socially disruptive. His strait-laced elders do not always take kindly to his juvenile high jinks. Kumbanad too had its share of disapproving elders. Of such elders, Thyparampil Chackoppappen was in a class of his own. Even at the ripe old age of 95, although his flesh is weak, his spirit is still willing.

I remember the time, back in the early fifties, when, my playmate, Mylamoottil George alias *Pacha Rotti*, taking us up on a dare, crept unnoticed into the local baker's place and lifted a loaf of bread before it was fully done, straight out of the oven if you please! Thus it was that this act of pilfering earned him the sobriquet, 'Pacha Rotti' or 'half-baked bread'.

He was our mild-mannered *Mylamoottil Kuttysaar's* son. Yet, he was no chip off the old block. Rather, he was a restless bounder who was often given to doing the 'undone thing'. Let me hasten to add that, like most of my peers, he too would mellow in time and slip into a cloak of respectability. When he moved, he usually walked fast on the balls of his feet, heels lifted, like a sprung jack-in-the-box out for a walk.

His instinctive knack for making good his escape did not, however, help him on this occasion. I remember Chackoppappen purposefully walking down the street towing George behind him, holding the 'green' loaf as 'Exhibit A' as a prelude to pronouncing his verdict. And we tagged along, defiantly. The curious onlookers from the shop-fronts on either side did not seem to know what was going on although they might have guessed that we had been up to some mischief. I recall one of them pulling in the mucus in his nose, spinning it into a knot in his mouth and then spitting it out with loud disgust. The curious passers-by paused in their stride and lingered for a moment before moving on.

George would have been made an example of by the ‘local custodians of morality’ with Chackoppappen as its leader, but for our vehement intervention. The ‘interrogation’ was held in the basement of the *Kalluzhathil* three-storeyed building, the tallest structure in Kumbanad at the time. As partners to the caper, we could not let George carry the can all by himself. So, we stood by George and would have none of it although in doing so we had to run the risk of being branded guilty along with George.

To this day, Chackoppappen continues to hold a mirror up to what is and what is not acceptable in society, according to his lights. He belonged to a generation that knew only to stand sternly, arms akimbo, over the delinquents. To hold them close or sit beside them and reason with them would have been unthinkable for him in a patriarchal society such as was ours. He has mellowed, though. He has now become something of an institution in Kumbanad, what with his having been the local correspondent for the Manorama newspaper for longer than any one would care to remember and with his long-standing sartorial preference for saffron.

My grandfather, Kuzhiyidethil Yonnachen as he was known among his peers, was also a celebrity in his own way in these parts. His formal education was limited to attending the church school, or *Kudipallikkoodam*, to sit at the feet of the village ‘Aasaan’ or teacher. As a legacy of his ‘education’ such as it was, I remember having seen in his possession long strips of cured and dried palm leaf, or *Panayola*, that he used to write on with his iron stylus, or *Naaraayam*. His main claim to fame was a puritanical streak in him that drove him into the arms of the European Christian missionaries who were by then deeply entrenched in this part of the world in the business of ‘saving the souls of the benighted natives’ from other faiths. If they could also bring in some of the ‘misguided’ Syrian Christians of Kerala (whose history incidentally pre-dates European Christianity) into the bargain, these fundamentalist fishers of men would regard that as a greater haul. My grandfather was one such Syrian Christian who was caught in their evangelical net. He had been a practising member of the local Mar Thoma Church until then.

His younger brother Mammen, an ordained priest in the same Church, having been dissatisfied by the half-hearted attempts of the Mar Thoma Church at reforming itself, had earlier left it to join the Plymouth Brethren. Although he had in the process discarded his priestly vestments, to the end of his remaining days he sported a buttoned-up long coat in dazzling white, worn cassock-like over a pair of equally dazzling white trousers. That, combined with his flowing, silvery white beard and the measured gait with which he seemed to pace his walk when he was out and about, gave him the appearance of an Old Testament patriarch. We children were initially in awe of this larger-than-life image, but his bald pate, his kindly face, his rounded spectacles and his soft speech to go with it were soon to dispel our imagined fears.

He had been cozened out of the mother church and baptized by one of their pioneering missionaries, Handley Bird of the Brethren Society. The main plank of their teaching was the need for adult baptism *after* a public confession of faith. They practised a spontaneous form of worship and believed that anyone who liked the fixed forms of liturgy and ritual was half way down the primrose path to Papacy and perdition! They pugnaciously insisted on free prayer. Not for them the sonorous, the mystical, the episcopalian. To them the Bible alone was the last word. And in their eyes it was

impossible for anyone to be virtuous without being in their fold i.e. that of *Verpaadukaare*, or the Dissenters.

My grandfather's youngest brother, Thomachen, having also had a brief flirtation with this doctrine, quickly returned to the bosom of the mother Church and later made a name for himself as a lay preacher. His greater claim to fame, however, was his 'notoriety' for his 'Evil Eye' i.e. that some unspecified harm would befall anything or anyone he cast his beetle-browed eyes upon. Legend had it that birds had fallen from the sky and mangoes from trees at his withering glance. Even my father, who thought that this was so much balderdash, was reluctant to let his grandson Bobby be taken into his 'baleful' presence. After my wife, Ammu, had come back following the 'obligatory audience' with the old man, Bobby developed a cough. Coincidence? My mother wouldn't take a chance and quickly bunged a chilli into the embers in her kitchen and let Bobby breathe in its acrid smoke disregarding the child's hawking protests. Touché!

His 'blighting' reputation, however, did not precede him when he sallied forth, armed with nothing more than his walking stick and an umbrella, to attend a political rally at Chengannoor that was to be addressed by C. Kesavan, that stormy petrel of the State Congress Party then. My granduncle had taken his vantage point on a knoll. As was feared, the State Police turned up in force to disrupt the meeting and, sure enough, they waded into the crowd as the speaker was warming to his subject i.e. the mailed fist of the government. The crowd ran helter-skelter in all directions. My granduncle too tried, but failed in his attempt to beat a hasty retreat. He had balked and fallen. His undoing was a high-banked country lane that he could hardly have leaped across. He got thwacked with a police *lathi* or truncheon, and it split his shining bald crown. Neither his flowing beard nor his venerable mien could save him from the wrath of the powers-that-be. Let me get back to the Plymouth Brethren Society.

It is largely a male chauvinistic, Christian Sect whose members have no formal creed or regular ministry, but who regulate their lives solely by their brand of Biblical interpretation. My grandfather, as his brother Mammen before him, had followed in their footsteps in good faith. I understand on good authority that some years later they fell out with their 'mentors' disenchanted with their supercilious ways and formed a splinter assembly of their own, for by then it was too late to go back to the family fold without losing face. Nevertheless, my grandfather continued to be held in high esteem by the family although he chose to remain the 'odd one out' until the end of his days.

He was a thickset man of medium height. He wore a beard that he always kept closely trimmed. His looks were inscrutable, bordering almost on the owlsh when he peered through his round spectacles, but his manner was generally mild. As a farmer, he was naturally drawn to cattle. Apart from a cow or two at any given time in the cowshed, he kept a pair of oxen to work in his paddies. He fed them the best of every thing and for most of the day they would be seen grazing about his homestead. Come summer when grass was scarce, he would dispatch them to 'HOPEVILLE' to graze around our house. There was a time when Hopeville was rented out to a kindly American missionary faithfully 'saving souls' in our neck of the woods. He would not, however, take kindly to the old man's oxen being around his house while he occupied it. Naturally, a spat was on the cards. No greater love hath man than that he should cross swords with another man

for the sake of his animals! That was what my granddad did on that day. The old man bested the missionary in a verbal encounter. With my granddad's Malayalam and the man of God's English, it could not have been anything but a dialogue of the deaf. I suspect it was more his body language and the decibel count of his voice that won him the day. The tender, loving care he bestowed on his oxen would have won him a trophy from animal activists had they been around at that time.

I am not sure if he could have been as gentle with people. With farm birds he had no patience. He had a thing about free ranging chicken messing up his front yard with bird droppings. My earliest recollection of him is that of an elderly man who always carried a tall walking stick, somewhat like a shepherd's crook, when he was out of doors. If the morning was cold as he set out, he would also be sporting a balaclava that only partially revealed his face. I also remember him as one who would be more indulgent than not to his grandchildren if they inadvertently fell out of step in their exuberance.

Once, my brother George and I between us managed to run down a free-ranging rooster in our yard and hold it down in an unused lime-mixing trough full of alkaline water until it choked to death. Without realizing its full import, we had committed a piece of needless cruelty. My mother screamed blue murder when she came to know of it. It was grandfather who saved us from her ire. '*Edaa pailikale*, (that was the appellation he would use before beckoning us) *Ivide vaa!*' (Come here!) And with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he decreed that as punishment for our misdeed we would dress the dead bird for our mother to cook it. Try hard as she might, she could not hide a rueful smile. She reluctantly let us off the hook. Granddad always kept a large supply of candy called, *Palli Muttaai*, a kind of multi-coloured cumin and candy pellets, for his grandchildren whenever they called on him. It is still a mystery to me why the *Muttaai* or candy is so called. It doesn't even remotely resemble the lizard or *Palli* after which it is named. Or, maybe it was the creature's droppings that earned the candy its name

My older cousin Ponnamma Pengal remembers how on one occasion she was denied her quota of 'lizard candy' because she had unwittingly connived with her two youngest uncles, Kunjappaappen and Ponnappaappen, ('appaappen' is the local way of addressing an uncle by suffixing it to his nickname) while they were still in their teens, in a matter of what the old man thought was 'dereliction of duty'. She was only six or seven at the time. Sometimes the boys would play truant instead of doing the odd jobs entrusted to them, like tethering the cows or weeding the vegetable patch or whatever. They and some of their playmates in the neighbourhood would play some game or the other instead, in an unobtrusive corner of the homestead. And, my cousin would be roped in, willy-nilly, to be on the look out for any unwelcome intruder, and in particular one in the person of the old man himself. And when she spied him in the distance, she was to warn them of his approach by shouting, '*Powran! Powran!*' when he was still out of earshot. To this day, she has not been able to figure out why they picked on that 'alarm signal', which simply means, 'citizen'. Anyway, one day they were unfortunately caught unawares. In his ire, he gave the uncles a good drubbing and denied my cousin her customary quota of 'lizard candy'.

Ponnamma Pengal also remembers the occasion she was dared, by the very same uncles, into leaping in a most unladylike fashion, across a country path with raised banks about

four feet across. Mind you, she was no tomboy. What the men would manage to do with ease, my hapless cousin –who was only six or seven at the time- missed by more than a whisker. Poor thing! They had a hard time tending to the cuts and abrasions she had sustained in her foolhardy attempt to leap across a ‘chasm’. It gave them both a much harder time, trying to keep the news of the mishap from reaching the old man’s ears. You see, he was particularly fond of his oldest granddaughter and my uncles in question were her proxy ‘guardians’. And woe betide them if they did not keep their faith!

Clearly, the old man could turn prickly if sufficiently provoked, but generally mixed his indignation with a show of impish humour. The elder of the two uncles, *Kunjunju*, did what, in those days, was a ‘no-no’ in our strait-laced society. He was rash enough to have tea and snacks at a local teashop in the company of his friends. It was a no-no in those days to be seen entering an eatery, heaven forbid! Having come to know of it almost at once through the local grapevine, granddad had got my baffled grandma to prepare at short notice huge quantities of *Puttu* and set it on the table. It is breakfast fare that looks anything but inviting. It is like a shaft roughly nine inches in length and six inches around. But there’s no denying that its off-putting looks belie its steamed flavour that convinces anyone’s venturesome taste buds. Interestingly, along with *Paalappam* (rice pan cakes) and *Idiappam* also called *Noolappam* (steamed String hoppers), *Puttu* is said to have been introduced into the local cuisine by the proselytizing Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century in the hope that the way to a man’s soul is through the stomach.

It is made by steaming moistened rice-flour and grated coconut. The two ingredients are fed, first the coconut and then the flour in turns, into an upright cylindrical mould fashioned out of hardened bamboo with tiny holes drilled into its bottom node. The mould stuffed full is then snugly propped up in the narrow neck of a pot on the boil to let steam through the open end at the top of the mould and cook the mix. A coconut shell inverted over the open end helps to let the steam do its work better. After a minute or so of steaming, the mould is lifted off and the *puttu* -the steaming tiers of flour and coconut now bound together in one piece- is pushed out with a plunger onto a flat dish. It is often eaten with ripe bananas or cooked chickpeas, or meat or fish seasoned with condiments, as a relish. Some eat it with ‘pappadoms’ too. Whatever your preference, it is delicious to one who has acquired a taste for it. But, there is only so much anyone can eat. Ah, but I am getting carried away.

As soon as my ‘erring’ uncle returned, the old man, without the tongue-lashing that preceded the inevitable punishment, gave him six of the best with his customary cane. The ‘delinquent’ had no choice but to bear it dutifully. Then taking hold of his left arm, like a father would his resentful child, he pulled him along, sat him down at the dining table and promptly signalled him to eat up all that had earlier been laid there. It was nowhere near mealtime. My uncle must have guessed what had prompted it and tried to look sufficiently contrite, but the old man was not about to let him off the hook. Mind you there was no relish to go with it, either, to smooth the stuff down his throat. He would not let him get up until the *Puttu* almost came out of his ears!

On another occasion he caught a young nephew of his red-handed, smoking a *Bidi*. He called his shamefaced nephew over, gave him a playful box on the ear and asked him for a *Bidi*. Not knowing what was coming next, he hesitantly handed one over to his

uncle. The old man gingerly took it and studiously flung it in front of a street dog that happened to be in the vicinity at that time. ‘Jaywalking’ street dogs are a common sight here even to this day. The dog stopped, briefly sniffed at it and then proceeded to cross the street spurning the offer, whereupon, with utter derision in his voice, my granddad said tersely, ‘*Edaa Nokke, pattikkupoulum vendallodaa athe!*’ (‘Look, even a dog turns up its nose at that!’) I do not know if the nephew in question mended his ways.

I know I did not, at least until the rebelliousness of my early years had worn off. In their early years, boys tend to ignore family strictures and express their independence overtly. After completing my Primary School, I spent three years in a boarding school (Keezhillam Middle School), a no-nonsense school, vaguely reminiscent of Dotheboys Hall. Of all the teachers of the school, the headmaster in the person of the good Reverend P. C. Cherian was a holy terror, especially to the newcomers. My inter-ethnic background set me somewhat apart in the eyes of my teachers although my schoolmates themselves had accepted me as one of them right from the word ‘go’. Boys rarely discriminate for irrelevant reasons. I remember my headmaster half-jokingly referring to me as an ‘Arab horse’ for my high-spirited ways.

There was, however, no malice in the man. I am sure he must have felt that I had to be broken in and put through my paces. He had a certain reputation for giving the cane -and what caning it was!- in particular to those who were tardy in mending their ways. I remember having had my bottom soundly birched time and again for any number of misdemeanours one could think of. Looking back, however, I feel certain that my brand of pre-pubescent deviltry would look harmless if set against the wanton mischief that the ogling, street-wise twelve-year old boys of today are often up to. Unlike in the past, the boys seem to have no bounds set for them. The boys of today tend to lose their ‘innocence’ much too early.

Even girls are not above questioning the old verities. I think mothers have a lot to answer for. Their values, for what they are worth, are only about keeping up appearances: a Sunday face and a weekday face; one demure and retiring and the other, pushy and calculating. It is not unusual these days to see little girls eager to get facials and manicures and to wear suggestive dresses that make them appear prematurely grown up and desirable. Why would mothers wish their little daughters to look provocative? Are they being artfully introduced to the artifice of snaring husbands? ‘Exposure’ is the operative word in this stratagem.

Strangely, it was at Keezhillam that I was witness to exposure of sorts. The school boarders would have their ablutions every day, alfresco-style. They would draw water in buckets from a built-up pond some distance away from the school. A pair of shorts and a loin cloth which doubled as a towel was all that we carried to cover our bodies. That was one kind of exposure I was not used to until I joined the school. Incidentally, the piece of land adjoining the bath was brushwood in those days and it gave us comparative privacy to relieve ourselves -lavatories did not come to the school until later- without feeling too self-conscious. Only, you had to watch your backside lest a free-ranging pig foraging for ‘food’ nuzzled against your *maximus glutius* in its impatience to get at your ‘leftovers’. The other exposure happened quite out of the blue and it was delectable.

One day, on our way back from ablutions, we saw a gaggle of Kerala Brahmin girls - Namboothiri Brahmin girls that is- approaching from a distance. There were five or six of us in our group. As soon as they noticed our presence, they slid their hands up the handles of the palm-leaf parasols they held and shield-like tilted them sideways to ward off unwelcome glances in their direction.

Boys being always boys, craving for fun and games, we mischievously drove in their direction a herd of pigs, a ubiquitous presence in those parts. The scampering pigs unsettled the placid pace of the girls. Flustered by the commotion, they 'let their guard down' momentarily, to expose, lo and behold, their nascent breasts that seemed to hold out a wordless promise. Quickly regaining composure, they hurried off, with their palm-leaf parasols once again tilted to mask their unwittingly exposed torsos. Mine eyes had seen a forbidden sight!

Instinctively, I felt vague stirrings in my pre-teen loins. For boys from Christian families with their puritanical upbringing, this was like 'tasting' the Forbidden Fruit. It was perhaps this incipient sense of guilt that held us back from giving rein sooner to uncontrollable laughter. After a few moments' discomfiture, we nearly fell over with fits of helpless laughter like a string of crackers that had burst aimlessly in all directions. The eruption finally spluttered to a stop. We then went on our way without giving it much thought.

I have sometimes asked myself what had made us react the way we did although not one of us had quite reached the age of experience. And, why did we not feel uneasy about it after the incident? Self-reproach rises only from being aware of the discomfiture we have caused in others. Perhaps, our sense of delicacy had not been fully formed by then. If it were possible for me to go back in time and feel sorry for my pre-teen gaucherie on that occasion, I would do so unhesitatingly.

Not that I am now allergic to a bit of cheesecake unabashedly exposed either on the silver screen or on the ramp. When a Dorothy Lamour or an Esther Williams of yore in her skin-tight swimsuit was seen frolicking in some blue lagoon on make-believe celluloid, who would not have sat up and gazed with 'willing suspension of disbelief' at the apparition that emerged! The pictures of Marilyn Monroe or Brigitte Bardot or others of a more recent vintage, seen in the buff on the screen or spread across the pages of men's magazines, could not have evoked such curiosity. Perhaps they left too little to the imagination! The Namboothiri girls of Keezhillam were no willing cheesecakes, poor things!

Keezhillam and the adjoining villages like Pulluvazhi and Iringol were dotted with traditional Namboothiri homes called *Illams* very much like the Illams that Kumbanad had reputedly had in the distant past. Each latter-day Illam usually stood in the middle of a homestead or a farm comprising paddies and groves for as far as eye could see. In a wooded part of that estate would usually be a sacred shrine erected in it to house the family deity, often a *Devi* or a female godling. If the family moved, the deity moved with them and the shrine and grove around it fell into disuse and was soon overrun by wild creatures, mainly monkeys. Snakes have also been known to find refuge in such groves.

One such grove was *Iringol Kaavu*, which was a favourite picnic spot for schoolboys. It was spread over nearly fifty acres of wood, smack in the middle of which was a shrine in a state of disrepair. Age-old trees, with their heads held high, as did also rare shrubs and herbs, covered this venerable retreat. The locals regarded them as supernatural sentinels of the female deity. For that reason, no one ever dared to break off branches from these trees or even remove dead wood from there. And it was a safe haven for birds. And monkeys!

Of a Saturday afternoon, at least once every term, we would joyfully trek to the grove just three miles away. Many of the trees in the grove were ancient banyan trees, each with a tuft of stout branches growing downwards to strike new roots, which on first glance appeared not one tree but a clump of trees. With the trees thus having spread sideways, the grove provided pleasant shade for the picnickers. And safe perches for the monkeys that infested the *Kaavu* or the grove! The more adventurous of the boys would shoo the monkeys away and climb up the trees to swing from branch to branch, *a la* Tarzan, using the sturdy vines that still hung above the ground. And all the while the worried teachers would be tearing their hair and waiting for the boyish caper to end. Sometimes, a stentorian voice would be heard shouting, ‘That’s quite enough!’ but not sufficiently convincingly for the boys to scale down with the same speed with which they had gone up. They took their own time. Inwardly, the teachers must have felt they were, as an act of atonement, offering the boys a welcome respite from the all-too-pervasive harshness of their discipline back at the boarding school.

Another spot we used to foray into now and again was *Nellikkaa Mala* or Gooseberry Hill, one of the rolling hills that stretched from a little distance behind the school for as far as one looked due southeast. There was only a rough country path leading to it, often overgrown with the aromatic guinea grass with their sharp-edged leaves that nicked your legs as you passed by, but gave you its unmistakable fragrance in return. The hill was covered with gooseberry trees of the Indian variety. The fruit, known as ‘*Nellikkaa*’ hereabouts, is small, round and green and is rather bitter to the taste, but as you chewed it more and more into a mash, it surprisingly tasted somewhat sweet especially when you washed it down with water. Gooseberry is also excellent for pickling.

It was no surprise therefore that the school’s head cook, the easy-going *Ithaappiri Chettan*, bare-torsoed, big-bellied and bear-like, would inveigle us into picking as much fruit as all our pockets together could carry -and sometimes even our bath towels- to be dutifully delivered at the kitchen door!

Having to make do with the insipid fare generally on offer in the dining room, each of us would zealously try to get on the right side of *Ithaappiri Chettan* who might then be persuaded to look kindly upon us especially on days when some special fare was on offer. Generally, in the mornings, we had to put up with the bland *Kanji* or rice gruel and the only slightly tastier *Payaru veivichathu*, a ‘*Koottaan*’ or relish made of a variety of dried legume boiled and mashed with grated coconut and then sautéed.. A second helping of the special fare, given furtively, was always gratefully accepted. But the man did not always oblige.

The boys, however, had a way of getting their own backs, especially by asking for more helpings of the customary *Kanji* until the kitchen ran out of the stuff. They couldn't ask for more of the *Koottaan*. Generally, they had to make do with just one helping of the side dish. But the boys could clamour, with undisguised glee, for more of the unrationed gruel. Anyway, that did not persuade the powers-that-be to change the fare. The occasional outings further afield, with their promise of being able to eat out, however, provided some relief for the boys who stoically suffered such Spartan fare day after sequestered day.

Once a year, the school would arrange for the children to be ferried in a hired bus or two on a day's excursion to a place of interest. I recall two such. One was to Mattancherry and Cochin, about twenty-five miles from the school. That was in 1941. We visited the old Jewish Synagogue hung with ornamental lamps and paved with quaint ceramic tiles. We walked along Jew Street occupied in those days almost entirely by Cochin Jews descended from refugees fleeing persecution in Persia in the first century AD. Even as a boy I could see there was something different about them that I could not put my finger on. There were quite a few Jewish families living and running businesses in the princely state of Cochin. Incidentally, several more years were to pass before their exodus to the new state of Israel slowly began. We also visited St. Francis Church on Wellington Island and saw the spot in the nave where Vasco da Gama had been first interred before his mortal remains were carried away to Portugal. The Chinese fishing nets fixed along the waterfront, lowered and raised by weights and counterweights, were as novel to us as they were fascinating.

But, what intrigued us most was the seemingly threatening array of emplacements we saw that day along the seashore. On each emplacement was mounted what looked like a huge machine gun menacingly trained on the horizon for any likely ship or plane that might approach with hostile intent. On closer look, they turned out to be no more lethal than the coconut tree trunks from which they were shaped, and then polished and painted, to look like an artillery pack. Of course, World War Two was on at that time. And we were too wet behind the ears not to have been impressed by a ruse that in retrospect one could guess was so easy to see through. But then, seeing it from a distant point in the horizon would have been deceiving enough.

On another occasion I remember our visiting Trichur, at that time the capital of the Principality of Cochin. Its main attractions were the famous Vadakkumnaathan Temple, the Roman Catholic Basilica that was then nearing completion and the Zoo. To young schoolboys, the basilica, in particular, appeared larger than life. We climbed right up to the parapet surrounding the dome of the church and looked down in awe. To the boys, not used to such heights, to look down from up there was an exhilarating, if rather dizzying, experience. After all, none of us had until then gone up anything taller than a two storeyed building, except maybe for the odd one who might have climbed up the lighthouse at Alleppey or Quilon.

Before leaving school, I had taken the Middle School Leaving exams. That was in March of 1942. At the end of each school term, the pupils would leave the school together in hired buses- belonging to the *Pankajam* Motors Company of Kottayam- that would take them as far as Kottayam. The community bus ride that always began at first light was

something we looked forward to, if only for the halt at Koothaattukulam for a rare breakfast that broke the tedium of the unrelenting school fare of *Kanji* and *Payaru*. Usually, the school hired two buses to cart us boys. For the rest of the journey the children would have a whale of a time. If they were not singing community songs, they would be egging their drivers on to step on the pedal and outdo each other to get to Kottayam before the other bus did. There, they parted company to go their different ways.

Incidentally, on this occasion while I was waiting just outside the Thirunakkara Maidan for a bus that would take me up to Tiruvalla en route to Kumbanad, I became an involuntary witness to a slowly unfolding real-life drama. The maidan or ground with wrought iron railings all round was slap-bang in the middle of what was then the Kottayam town. I still remember it vividly. A petty thief, who had been caught red-handed stealing some brass utensils from a house, was being frog-marched by policemen to a corner of the yard. There, he was spread-eagled on a three-legged contrivance, his back and buttocks bared, and belaboured brutally with a yard-long rattan cane until he went limp. There had been no due process as far as the onlooker could make out. This was instant justice at its harshest. The swish of the cane as it came arcing down its path, each remorseless time, on the defenceless man's bare bottom sizzled in my ears for a long time afterwards.

This happened at a time when Travancore, a Princely State, was still ruled with an iron hand. Without regard to one's position in society, any subject of the State could be dealt with arbitrarily and summarily. The astute but amoral Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer was the Dewan (the Raja's Deputy) of Travancore. He was an uncompromising autocrat that brooked no opposition to his imperious ways. He trampled underfoot anyone who dared to stand up to him. Many eminent people who had crossed swords with him had come to grief. Often they had their properties confiscated with impunity. The liquidation of the National & Quilon Bank was a case in point. And, the impressive bank headquarters was later turned into an eye hospital named after him. Sir C.P. was a law unto himself. Five years later, on 25th July 1947, the man got his comeuppance when he was compelled to flee the state in undignified haste after an attempt on his life had sadly gone awry. A little more than twenty years later I had the pleasure of teaching his grandson Aryama Sundaram, a well-balanced teenager with the mildest of manners almost bordering on the meek.

On reaching Tiruvalla, in the first flush of freedom from school, I walked straight to a street-side vendor and bought a cigarette, a Gold Flake no less, and, after quickly glancing this way and that, uneasily lit it. Anyone watching me could have guessed that I was a novice. And I was still trembling on the brink of teens! I pulled at it and coughed. I did not realize that I was being watched until I saw a silver-haired gentleman coming in my direction at an unhurried pace. He came to a stop in front of me and pointedly looked into my eyes first and then at my cigarette, which I had by then tried unsuccessfully to hide behind my back. I was to learn later that it was Dr. Abraham, a.k.a *Thalakkotte Avaraachen*, my granddad's dentist. Having persuaded me to throw the cigarette away, he promised me that the family would hear of it. And yet he made no effort to let me know who he was. With visions of the welts on the felon's back still fresh in my mind, I

boarded the bus for Kumbanad with a sense of foreboding of the terrible retribution that would befall me if the man kept his promise. When I reached granddad's homestead, I learned from grandma that he had gone, of all places, to the dentist's. My goose was cooked! Punishment was a long time coming, though.

After what seemed hours, granddad returned. As he came up the pathway leading to the house, his face livid with rage, he screamed at grandma, '*Avane ingotte erakkivide!*' ('Send him out here!') I meekly stepped out of the verandah into the front-yard. He stormed into his room and came out with a slim rattan cane. Sensing trouble, grandma, my step-grandmother, that is, had in the meanwhile come out and put her arms around me somewhat like a mother hen spreading its wings over its brood. She would not hear of punishing a boy just back from boarding school! The old man relented, but only after the cane had descended on me once or twice. That gave me only a brief respite; for I knew that my father was to arrive later in the evening to collect me. (Kumbanad was a halfway house for me before I joined my family at Quilon where my father was employed.) When he learned of what I had been up to, inexplicably, he did not react as I had feared he would. His favourite Solomonic precept, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child', if put into practice, would normally have been 'just deserts' for me, but, instead, all he did was to give me a long, hard look. Looking back now, I reckon he must have viewed with indulgence the crass attempts of his son at growing up in haste.

For a long time afterwards, his response to my repeated 'law breaking' would be no more than a stern reproof or, if the worse came to the worst, a slap on the wrist. Seven years later, he ran out of magnanimity. I was nineteen, pushing twenty, yearning for adulthood, just within reach. I was home for the mid-summer vacation and I had gone boating with my Quilon friends, Babu and Raju. We had a whale of a time, criss-crossing the Quilon backwaters, fishing with a line and rod and grilling our catch of *Karimeen* -a pearly-dotted fish found in our lakes- over a makeshift fire in Raju's backyard that rolled down to the waterfront. Raju was the son of Chalakuzhi C. P. Mammen, a leading businessman of Quilon at the time. We ate the fish with great relish, washing it down with the fresh palm toddy that Raju had earlier procured.

Unfortunately, I had overlooked the 'small matter' of letting my folks know about my extended plans for that day. So when I returned home rather late after our exciting exertions, my father, with no warning at all, began to belabour me with a fresh twig of *Poovarusu* -a hardy tree with thin, supple branches- that he had earlier stripped from the tree in our front yard. I was dumbfounded! I remember taking it without flinching, but my pride was hurt as never before. Later that night, even as I was trying unsuccessfully to catch some sleep, my father crept into my room balm in his hand. I pretended to be sleeping. He carefully applied medicated oil to the welts he managed to locate and left the room. Atonement for anguish he was too proud to show! Half mollified, I still decided to let him know, through a note to be left on his desk, what my feelings were, exactly.

The mention of oil brings to mind a harrowing everyday experience from further back in time. Few were the children in our part of the world who did not get an attack of tropical sores, especially in summer, what with their having cavorted long hours with the children in the neighbourhood. The sores attacked the legs, usually. We did not escape the attack,

either. There was only one treatment for it in my father's book. As soon as he was back from office, he would change his clothes, march us –my brother George and me- to the bathroom, strip us naked and apply *Enna kaatchiyathe* (coconut oil pre-boiled with black pepper and shallots) on us from head to foot. Then there would be our tearful half-hour wait for the 'marinade' to 'sink in' before he lathered us all over with carbolic soap, smelly, sharp and stinging, and gave us a vigorous rubdown with *Incha* (the crushed bark of a medicinal tree). Our abject cries of appeal to go gently over our broken skin would always fall on deaf ears. To him, the treatment would be pointless unless the scabs came off and let the sores bleed. The carbolic odour comes back now and again and still makes me squirm. The house smelt like a hospital ward after father was through with us.

Boys of Kumbanad were a high-spirited lot, no different from others of that ilk. They grew into their *adolescence* with undiminished energy. The headstrong urges of youthfulness found expression in different ways. During the holidays, it was customary for the lads to meet by prior arrangement at a place and plan their particular brand of fun for the day. In the evenings, barring Sundays, if they were not involved in some horseplay, they would be kicking up a lot of dust and din playing football. What better way of sublimating their primary instincts than working up a sweat playing a game in any available venue? *Pullukaalaayil*, a piece of fallow land not far from home, or *Meenaarumkunnu*, a 'table-top' hill further afield with its panoramic view of gently rolling hills, comes immediately to mind. At this latter place, many a time we had had to chase an errant ball that rolled down the hillside at a fair lick to the gully below. If this happened too frequently, it would be somewhat of a drag on the game. We also had to be careful not to stray on to the woven reed mats spread with diced cassava or parboiled paddy rice left to dry in the sun by the homesteaders around. If we did, there would be hell to pay! Regardless, the games were uproariously enjoyable.

After that they would boisterously repair to *Parameswaran Nair's kaappikada* (coffee shop) and tuck in the *vadas* (a deep-fried lentil snack) and what have you on offer. By then, the older generation's unwritten prohibitions had slowly but surely become less and less mandatory. *Parameswaran Nair's* fare was always toothsome. Sometimes, we would assemble at *Mepurathe Kunjachen's* cycle shop. That was where we hired bicycles for our rendezvous away from home. That was also where we could smoke *beedies* on the sly. I was one of those, as were my brothers after me in due time. My father was *au fait* with this, but he would look the other way whenever he happened to pass by, with his open umbrella firmly held aslant between him and the offending shop. Once when the 'coast was clear', he spoke sternly to *Kunjachen* about his conniving at our furtive indulgence. Prompt came the reply, "If I don't keep them here, they would be up to all kinds of worse mischief. We would like to nip that in the bud, won't we?" My dad could only laugh at this riposte.

Kunjachen was the local wit, whose wisecracks were enjoyed by young and old alike. He knew how to change his speech registers depending on his audience. On a rainy day, with time hanging on our hands, we would spend long hours hanging on his lips. Cycle rental business would be slack then and he would gladly banter with us, killing time and keeping us all in splits. *Chiriche, chiriche chaakum* in local jargon, which literally

meant, ‘You would die laughing and laughing’. The changing cycle of seasons would seem to have a decisive sway over his cycle-hiring business and over us.

Come Onam, which coincided with the local harvest festival spanning ten days of festivities, my brother Georgie and I would make a beeline for Puthencavu four miles away. We always walked the distance. There was a river to be crossed at Arattupuzha. In summer, one could ford it. For the rest of the year, a boatman rowed people across. Sometimes, he would have to stand at the helm and push a long barge pole against the bottom of the river, especially when it was in spate. Of course, now we have a bridge to go across. Our maternal cousins Yacub, Ephraim and Alex of the Parambil family lived at Puthencavu. They did not have the kind of puritanical hang-ups that inhibited the children of Kumband with its religious fervour that killed joy of any description.

I think a word in passing about Onam as I knew it would be edifying to the diaspora. It falls during the harvest season in the first Malayalam month of Chingam which spans the months of August and September, when the earth offers its most generous bounty to the sons of the soil. Fittingly, come Chingam, there is a profusion of ‘mellow fruitfulness’ at hand that helps the Malayalees to celebrate the festival with a carefree splurge of their hard-earned money. ‘*Kaanam vittalum Onam unnam*’ is a popular adage that does the rounds in the festive season to justify such profligacy. ‘Even if I have to sell all my worldly goods, I must celebrate Onam!’ And what is the pretext for such extravagance, the uninformed might ask. They could ask the same question with better reason to the merry-makers at Yuletide, couldn’t they? In this case, the occasion is a nostalgic hark-back to the reign of a legendary king, King Mahabali, who gladly renounced his kingdom to keep a promise he had made to *Vaamanan*, a poor Brahmin, who, as it turned out, was in reality one of the incarnations of the supreme god Vishnu in the Hindu pantheon. The Aryan god of gods was green-eyed at the prospect of a Demon or Asura king winning renown as a compassionate monarch who cared for his subjects. The legend goes that Mahabali’s wish that he be allowed to visit his former subjects once every year was granted by the Aryan god. It is the lost peace and prosperity of that great king’s reign that Onam symbolically tries to re-enact.

Whereas the people of Kumbanad would not hear of observing *Onam*, or for that matter any other festival that even remotely smacked of what was ‘un-Christian’ in their view, the young and old of Puthencavu, Christian to a man, revelled in it. It was a common sight to see their children swinging higher and higher on their swings strung up on trees, reaching dizzy heights, or playing pranks on one another. *Onam* in fact celebrates the legend of Mahabali’s yearly return to earth from self-imposed exile. There was *Puli Kali* or ‘tiger-dancing’ –young men wearing tiger masks, their bodies painted with tiger stripes, and make-believe hunters carrying toy guns and stalking each other even as they kept time to the beat of the accompanying drummers, enacting a tiger-shoot. It was also a time of community singing and feasting. The villagers generally made merry, well into the night for days on end. They played rustic games peculiar to this part of the world, like *chillakko Pallakko*, or *Kudu Kudu* or *Thala panthu* or *Kilithattu*, in a spirit of fellowship that reflected the bond between people of different faiths.

And between different generations. Incidentally, Chackochen, my maternal cousins’ grandfather- they called him *Appachen*- was one of a kind. He was by profession a *Kannu*

Vaidyan or an indigenous eye doctor. He was a great one for playing practical jokes on others, especially during Onam. His grandchildren had a whale of a time with him, each pulling the others' leg at every opportunity that the holidays offered. And Georgie and I would join in the fun especially during the Onam break. I remember the old man's wife – we called her *Ammachi*- for her sense of humour. Commenting once on her daughter-in-law's not too successful attempt at making the normally spicy and hot mulligatawny - *Rasam* or *Mulaguthanni* as we call it- she once famously said with a straight face, "*Ayyo Fellam, ithu vechu chamarichaa neerukeilallo.*" ?? "Ah Fellam, you can wash your backside with this and be none the worse for it!" It was far too bland for her taste!

And, again, as the high point of the Onam festivities, on the ninth day of Onam to be precise, there is the world-renowned Snake Boat Race at Aranmula, two miles due east of Puthencavu and about four miles southeast of Kumbanad. It draws people from far and near in their thousands to watch a score or more boats vying for honours in what, many believe, is the most spectacular boat race on earth. Each boat, sleek and well-oiled for the race, is well over a hundred feet long. With its pennants and streamers fluttering in the September breeze, its high stern embossed, top down, with burnished brass baubles that blazed in the sun, and its pointed prow that swiftly glided over the waters, the snake boat offered a 'moving spectacle' that is hard to forget. As hundred or so men, seated two abreast, dipped their paddles in unison to the beat of a rousing *vanchi paattu*- a boat song in praise of the local temple deity- the spectators would noisily spur them on.

I would sneak away in the company of friends to Aranmula to watch this spectacle and join in the fun. Anything that even remotely spoke of fun, even good clean fun, was frowned upon in our puritan milieu. So we had no choice but to sneak away. And, when we returned from Aranmula tired but happy, we would invariably zero in on Parameswaran Nair and his offerings before slinking back home, hoping no one had missed us in the meanwhile.

Onam celebrations would have their characteristic local flavours. There was the time I spent Onam at a place called Pallipaad and had occasion to see the feminine input to the festival. I was there at the invitation of my paternal grandaunt and her husband on whose extensive properties their farm-hands and their families had their dwellings. Their women celebrated Onam with *Kaikottikkali*, *Kummiyadi*, *Thiruvaathira kali*, *Thumpithullal* and *Poo Kala Matsaram*. The first three were folk dances performed by groups of women to the accompaniment of Onam folk songs, again sung by women. The last named, the *Poo Kala Matsaram*, was a comradely contest between teams of girls in making up attractive floral mosaics on the floor, to say nothing of its being a test of their perseverance in combing the countryside, often in the company of boys, to fetch flowers of different hues needed for this test of their artistic skills. The most engrossing of the items was the *Thumpithullal*, in which women, young and old alike, sat on their derrières in a circle, their legs pointing to the centre like spokes, let their hair down and spun their torsos on their bottoms like so many tops. To start with, the movements were lazy but gradually increased their tempo until the women fell into a frenetic trance as though they had the shakes, like pipal leaves on a breezy day, their tresses flying and their eyeballs rolling up. Fascinating, but decidedly taboo, to the disapproving Christian! I thought of my

folks back home and of how they would have forbade me from watching such a ‘pagan’ spectacle, had they been with us, my mother excepted.

If Onam was a time of furtive joy for us children, Christmas was a time of open celebration, for it had the approval of the community. Even my father who believed that Christmas was merely a mask for a vestigial pagan practice, could not resist entering into the spirit of the season with the rest of the family. Folks at Puthencavu often used to join the festivities at Hopeville on Christmas Eve. The children in particular enjoyed these boisterous get-togethers. Christmas crackers that loudly burst staccato fashion and sparklers that harmlessly spat may-hued sparks and cartwheels that spun like tops as they hissed and sputtered down all added to their excitement. For them, unlike for their sedate elders whose enjoyment was measured and restrained, the festive season was a largely unsupervised occasion to have fun and games and to tuck in the oodles of goodies on offer on well-laden tables. Sometimes, however, things would go awry. I shall not forget one such occasion.

I remember how my cousin Ephraim (He later chose the monicker Freddie, goodness knows why) on that occasion choked on a piece of chicken bone and gasped and retched until someone had the presence of mind to thump him hard on his back and out flew the thing that might otherwise have been curtains for him. Earlier attempts to dislodge the offending piece having failed, my mother, who was so distraught, had even given him some dirty water in a dish that happened to be within reach, without realising that it could only have made matters worse. Anyway, Freddie was none the worse for it after he had regained his breath. After a short spell of anxiety, we took it up from where we left off as though nothing had happened to interrupt the party.

The job of preparing for the Carol Service on Christmas Eve would always devolve on the Youth League of the Mar Thoma Valiapally (parish church) of Kumbanad. The older parishioners were quite content to take a back seat and let the youth prepare for the occasion. Decorating the Christmas tree, doing up the church and putting up streamers and buntings and fairy lights and stars also fell to the lot of the boys and girls of the parish. Of the girls, my cousins Puthenveetil Shishu and Vazhaparampil Kochuthankamma and Ammini come to mind as being the most enthusiastic participants, especially as members of the Choir that rendered the carols. Shishu and Ammini are no longer with us. Shishu leaves behind an enduring reputation as a social activist and a social worker in the slums of Bombay. By the way, her brother Thampy Mammen too is fondly remembered.

Any of my coevals looking back on the Christmas of 1954 would remember how glad they were, not to have found themselves in my shoes on that occasion. It fell to my lot to sing *Silent Night* solo as the grand culmination of the choir service. Although I was not overly proud of my singing voice, in the brashness of my youth I had readily agreed in the fond hope that I could impress my nubile cousins. Whether it was my failure to hit the right pitch or it was some mental block, I do not know, but things went horribly wrong. By the time I worked my voice up to the penultimate line of the first verse, *Sleep in heavenly peace*, I was nearly out of breath and my voice died in my throat. I made one last ditch effort, but try hard as I might I could not render the last line except in a humiliating falsetto. To this day, I have not been able to outlive the embarrassment of

that attempt gone awry. On my way back home, although it was well past closing time, I badgered both Parameswaran Nair and his brother Ampaan into making me, much against their will, a glass of strong black coffee.

Nair has passed on. As has his teashop. So too have many of the ‘lads’ who were with us then. I have fond memories of the wonderful times we had together. Of those, my cousin Thampy Mammen was a dear friend who was also a friendly rival. We had similar extra-curricular interests and tried to outdo each other on the field. As university students studying in different colleges, we were often pitted against each other playing soccer for our teams. I played for the University College and he, for Mar Ivanios College. I played for the University Team and so did he, but in different years. He had the added distinction of captaining the University Team. He was also an athlete who excelled in the Long Jump. That was my forte too and there was not much to choose between us. If he outdid me in one meet, I would return the compliment in the next. He was a likable extrovert whose toothy smile never left his face. And with it, his throaty laugh that he let go loud and long.

After graduating in Economics, he left for the United States. There he earned a Ph.D. and joined the Faculty of the Wisconsin University and served them with distinction all his life. Yet, in this transition from the ‘back of beyond’ to the ‘land of opportunities’, he remained the same affable, unassuming person. He sent his children, all boys, to one of the best private schools in America, the Andover Academy. They went on to become successful doctors. Thampy and his wife, Nimmi, were very proud of their children. Thampy died in the year 2000. He had been ailing for some time. The family brought his ashes over from the States to be interred in the ancestral village. At the funeral service, I remember saying in my eulogy that there was no better way of commemorating a man’s life than that his progeny had sustained his legacy of success, a bequest that they would forever be proud.

My cousin, Yacub, has passed on, too. He was my senior by three years. He was one of a kind. He ‘taught’ me how to swim the only way he knew, letting go of me in midstream to thrash about for dear life in the deepest part of the river. His laughter at seeing me struggling to keep my head above water still rings in my years. Anyway, that act of ‘cruelty’ dispelled my fear of water once and for all. Tall, dark and handsome, in the classical mould, he was quite popular at school. He was a good athlete who excelled at track events. He played soccer too. He had a good singing voice with a wide range and could render passably the melodies of the popular Hindi crooners like Sehgal, Atma and Pankaj Mallick. The girls of the neighbourhood vied for his attention whenever he hove into sight. Incidentally, Yacube’s brother Freddie of the chicken bone fame too fancied himself as something of a lady-killer and claims several ‘scalps’ to his credit. Girls have a weakness for handsome boys, needless to say. And vice versa.

Especially the Hindu girls, who were refreshingly less inhibited than their repressed Christian counterparts, boldly eyed the neighbourhood boys with more than passing interest. I remember seeing the giggly excitement of a bevy of girls at the Chengannoor temple *kulikadavu* (bathing place in the river) for women. Some of the girls were already in the river and the others, in a state of *dishabille*, along the granite steps leading down to the river. What could have provoked their excitement? The only apparent reason was

that Yacub was rowing by in a small country canoe, his classic profile etched against the northern sky. And, why was he there? I was with him in the boat and he wanted to show off to me the girl who had taken a fancy for him, a pretty Brahmin belle in his class at the Chengannoor Government High School. Sure enough, she was there and I could see the other girls ribbing her. I forget her name. And, then there was his friend's comely sister, a *Nair* girl from *Edanadu*. He made a hit with her, too. His friend *Maadarapally Panickar* did not seem to mind his friend's cavalier attentions. To his credit, I might add that he never took undue advantage of this teenage infatuation for him. He was no cad. As his sidekick, I was often a green-eyed witness to his harmless dalliance with girls.

I do not remember the names of the girls. Yacub forgot them long before he left school, or, to be exact, before he was rusticated. Rather than hang around indefinitely to be recalled, he thought he might as well look for other options. He had been in the Sixth Form of the Ashram English High School, a boarding school that was run by a set of hand-picked martinets of the Mar Thoma Church, some of the more well-meaning of whom were disposed to be kind towards their wards but the rest, not. One of the latter tribe was the Reverend V. M. Mathen who also happened to be the warden of the Senior Home where Yacub was boarded. Outwardly, he was a mild-mannered man, but there could not have been a more apt example of the aphorism, 'Appearances can be deceptive' than he was.

Succumbing once again to the 'fatal flaw' in his character, Yacub had taken a fancy for a girl in the school neighbourhood. This time round, it was a Muslim girl hailing from a locally well-known family. He spoke to her clandestinely once or twice over the perimeter fence of the school and would have continued to do so had not the good reverend got wind of it. The upshot of it was that he was hauled over the coals for it and separated from school, since the clergyman's sense of morality had been outraged by my cousin's 'harmless' attentions. For a whole year he sat at home and twiddled his thumbs before plumping for a career in the army.

The year was 1944. Soon, he was AWOL from the training camp. The free spirit that he was, he could not reconcile himself to the diurnal rigours of an army camp. Before the Military Police could bring him to heel, he had secretly left for Kuwait to land a job in the Kuwait Oil Company. With India's independence in 1947, such deserters were given a general pardon. He married in 1953, but his wedded life turned out to be less than blissful. Some might say he got what was coming to him as a breaker of hearts. The thought that a man, of great promise such as he was, could have suffered the slings and arrows of misfortune throughout his family life is hard to accept, however! His shrewish wife it is rumoured made him a wife beater and a dipsomaniac. He smoked like a chimney. His firstborn took his own life, as he could not cope with his father's changes of mood. It was almost as if he was slowly destroying himself with a vengeance. He died of emphysema and of neglect at the age of 56 in the year 1982.

The mention of one Yacub brings to mind another Yacub, of a much earlier vintage, who sanctified the union that in time brought me into this world. He was *Al Qas Yacub Abdul Mawla*, Deputy of the Patriarch of Antioch, Syrian Orthodox Church. (*Al Qas* is an honorific title in Arabic that means 'the clergyman'.) It was he who solemnized the

marriage ceremony of my father Puthapurackal John Easaw with Najibah, daughter of Daoud Weibber and Hasoma bint Toni, at the Mar Thoma Syrian Orthodox Church, Mosul, on 22nd October 1928.

And, it was my mother's older sister, Fellam, who had brought into this world my cousin Yacub of Puthencavu. My mother's eldest sister was Madeline. All the three sisters were, by a strange quirk of fate, married to Malayalees who were working at the time for the British in Mesopotamia. My maternal uncle, Abdul Ahad Weibber, a.k.a Dominic Weibber, had migrated while he was a boy to South America, La Plata in Argentina to be precise, and was later reported to have died in his youth, struck down by a tropical malady. It is not known if he managed, before he died, to win the hand of a Senorita to keep the family line going. Sadly, therefore, I do not know if I have any trans-Atlantic first cousins I could claim on the distaff side.

Interestingly, he had left as a boy, just before the end of World War One, in the company of his father Daoud and his uncle Hanna at a time when heads of many Christian families had chosen to leave the country to escape the harassment of the Muslim Turks. Mesopotamia was then a part of the Turkish Empire. Many Mesopotamian Christians made their way to Argentina to set up businesses or to work. My mother could not remember clearly what her father looked like in real life except with the aid of a photograph. She was only five or six when they left. Years later, when the dependants of émigrés to Argentina were being permitted to join their men, my grandmother was reluctant to leave her daughters behind, two of whom had already married and the third was marking time to do so; to my father-to-be! What I was able to glean from my mother about her father is, therefore, very sketchy. I have a picture of his, which shows him as a dapper man with a receding hairline and a thick salt-and-pepper moustache. He is dressed in a three-piece suit complete with a fob watch in his waistcoat and a carnation stuck into his left lapel.

My aunt Madeline's daughter, Rose Kutty, has since visited La Plata more than once in the company of her Italian American husband Don Gaspari, in search of her 'roots' as it were. During her first visit there, she was intrigued to find many a Weibber listed in the telephone directory. Could it be that our maternal grand uncle, Hanna, married and raised a family there? Could it be that our uncle Dominic had sown his wild oats there, if he did not marry? So far, she has drawn a blank but she is not about to give up. She still keeps in touch with her mother's cousins and their progeny some of whom are now in California. Having lived in Iraq for many years, you see, she wants to maintain her links with that country as her mother did before her. By the way, to the end of her days, my aunt Madeline would not take kindly to anyone slandering Saddam Hussein! She used to say he was like a god to her. She could not believe he could be the bloodthirsty dictator that he was made out to be! Not having been brought up in Mesopotamia, unlike my Kozhikode cousins, my bond with my birthplace is rather tenuous.

Yet, the Mesopotamian connection endured, however tenuously, for a long time afterwards. On Tuesday, 30th April 1942, I was baptized along with my brother George, two years my junior, at the St. Ignatius Monastery Cathedral at Manjanikkara in Travancore. The baptizer was *Abdul Ahad Remban* of Mesopotamia. (A *Remban* is a high-ranking priest similar to an Archdeacon in the Anglican Church). Incidentally, 'Abd

ul Ahad' is Arabic for 'Servant of God'. He was later elevated to be the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church and assumed the name of Mor Ignatios Yacub II. That was the third 'Yacub' to chance upon my destiny. The reader might wonder why it took all those years for me to be baptized.

For twelve long years my parents were unable to make up their minds as to which of the two doctrines *vis a vis* baptism should prevail in our family. They were adherents of divergent religious persuasions. My mother, having been brought up in an Eastern Orthodox tradition, favoured the sacramental infant baptism in a font and my father, the adult dunking in a pond after publicly 'witnessing' to having been 'born again', in the jargon of the non-Episcopalian assemblies. My mother eventually had her way; but as the church font was too small for us, my brother George and I had to be baptized 'on our feet' so to speak. That turned out to be an excruciatingly long event. First, there was the drive from Puthencavu to Manjanikkara. We had eaten nothing in the morning, for it was taboo to break the overnight fast before one was to receive a sacrament! The drive to Manjanikkara and then up the steep gradient leading to the church had been slow, the car virtually wheezing up the slope. All of which only added to the rumble in my stomach since the morning.

After the baptism, I recall how the priest thoughtfully herded us, the newest members admitted to the Christian fold, into the vestry and gave us a share of his spare breakfast, disregarding the protests of our embarrassed aunts and uncles. Aunt Fellam's family was there in full force to give mother the moral support she needed in this anticipated 'standoff' with her husband. In the event, it turned out to be a non-starter, for my father had discreetly stayed away to keep his dignity and faith intact. Looking back, I feel I was merely a pawn in this 'standoff'. It must be said to my father's eternal credit that, after 'losing' this trial of doctrinal strength, he never stood in the way of our following our own preferences of worship although he never failed to impress upon us the unthinking repetitiveness of the liturgy and rituals of the *established churches*. *Touché!*

God knows how difficult it was for me, torn between two loyalties, to divorce myself from my father's well-reasoned conviction, as was my grandfather's before him, and to follow the dictates of my mother enamoured with superficialities. In the eyes of the self-righteous 'elect' of the Brethren Assembly, my mother's choice was nothing short of apostasy; she had fallen from Grace and out of the assured safety of Noah's ark in the language of the elect! To the end of her days she remained a member of the Kumbanad Mar Thoma parish, Kumbanattu Kudumbam's mother church.

And along with her, her ambivalent children opted for the safety of numbers and for the presumed 'honour' of eternal rest in a 'conformist' cemetery. My mother died in 1985 and is buried in the 'conformist' Mar Thoma Church cemetery. My father had passed on earlier. He died on 22nd March 1983 at the ripe old age of 90 and is interred at the Brethren Assembly Cemetery of Kumbanad.

My father was of medium height; portly of build, dark of complexion but in an indefinable way handsome, which image his fast-receding forehead did not detract from. He was a man of many 'faults' as the worldly-wise might have us believe. For a start, he was very undemonstrative and outwardly dry in manner. Although he did not

lack of personal warmth or feeling, he would not be seen showing affection publicly towards his children in any way especially after we had grown up. He was of the school that there was something unmanly about the touchy-feely show of love!

He was honourable to a fault. Whatever blandishments may have been held out to him, he had the strength of character not to compromise on his principles. In 1943, when the Second World War was still riding its roller-coaster course, times were hard in India. Although the country itself was to some extent spared the social and human cost of war, there were Indian casualties in far-distant war-fronts. Life in India during the war years was harsh what with everything from food to fuel to raw materials for industries being doled out in 'coffee spoons' by the government. Rationing was all encompassing. There was a great deal of belt-tightening, but things could be had at a price for those who had the wherewithal to grease palms or to pay black market prices.

Thus it was that a building contractor turned up at our place and temptingly placed a thick wad of one hundred Rupee notes on the table in the centre of our sitting room. At that time, Harrisons and Crosfield was the only local wholesale outlet for selling steel and iron rods, asbestos sheets, cement and other building materials, and my father was in charge of allotments. The man in question wanted to buy a larger quantity than what he had believed was the usual periodical quota stipulated. It was, however, within the discretion of my father to stretch the quota in special circumstances. My father rejected the blandishment and asked the man courteously, if rather sternly, to get up, take back the money and leave. I still vividly remember the astonished look on his face.

As he was on his way out, my father stopped him and asked him to be at his office the next day. When he turned up, to his amazement, he was officially told that he had been sanctioned all that he had earlier asked for! And, that it was within the purview of what was permissible. I have heard it said by his junior colleagues that *Easaw Saar* (the *Saar* being a corrupted form of 'Sir' to address one's seniors) could have amassed a not inconsiderable fortune if he had stooped to bend the rules or hold back information and had an eye to the main chance. The war saw many large fortunes made by many a disingenuous official. My father was not in that number.

He was also generous to a fault. I have in my possession a book, now frayed and faded, which we discovered only after he was no more, and pasted within a large number of receipts of the post office money orders he had sent to his dear ones and friends, especially the less fortunate relatives of his. Considering the buying power of money in the first quarter of the last century, it would add up to a considerable fortune. Besides, he willingly lent money, without asking questions or setting deadlines, to those that approached him. Many were the times when the money was not returned and he would not remind them of it. And if they did return it belatedly, he would still thank them for their thoughtfulness in repaying an old debt. He was a gift to his folks for his understanding and generosity when they needed help. To put it less charitably, he was a soft touch!

I remember his buying, at a cousin's behest, a one and one half acre plot of land in Aluva and transferring the title of ownership of more than a third of it to the said cousin who was at the time in financial difficulties. The said cousin soon came to enjoy improved

circumstances, as his eldest son had found gainful employment in Africa, incidentally, with my active help. When my uncle paid back at par the cost of the land some twenty years later, the value of land had appreciated by more than fifty times! My father gladly took it without demur. The said cousin's father, who was also the most impecunious of my father's uncles, P. E. Kochitty, was a regular recipient of my father's largesse, as were his other uncles P. E. Mammen and P. E. Thomas, whenever they were in need of help. Again, his brotherly love had prompted him to gift his share of the patrimony to his deceased brother Thomas's widow and their children, who were minors at the time, the eldest of whom was a girl –the aforementioned *Ponnamma Pengal*.

Many years later, soon after this niece of his was married, my father with two of his friends, *Thadi Baby* and *Kochukutty Saar*, helped set up Quilon Agencies, a trading company, and installed this niece's husband, as a paid manager. He became the managing partner as soon as he could raise the means to buy himself into the company. When later the partnership was dissolved, through the not-so-strictly scrupulous manipulations of the managing partner, my father was prepared to accept a settlement that fell far short of its market value. This was done largely in consideration of his niece's future, disregarding the remonstrance of the other partners. That in later years her sons made a hash of the business and had to sell off their family house to pay what they owed the bank is another matter. Interestingly, it was her son-in-law who had come to her rescue and had bought the house and offset the debts.

In retrospect, I suspect the fact that his nephew-in-law was a member, like him, of the Brethren Assembly, may have prompted my father's kindly disposition towards him. Their members would sometimes close ranks, rather like Free Masons, if one of their kind appeared to be insecure in any way. Had my father been a little less solicitous about his 'brotherhood' and a little more about himself and his immediate family, I have often wondered, how much better cushioned he might have been against the insecurities he himself had to cope with in his retired life. Looking back, I feel guilty for not having been able to pull my weight adequately when he needed help the most. And yet, he was loath to accepting assistance even from his children. His self-esteem would not permit that.

He never shied away from his social obligations, either. For many years he served the Quilon YMCA in various capacities. He carried out with distinction the responsibilities of the YMCA Secretary and of the Treasurer alternately for many years. As the Founder Secretary of the Harrisons & Crosfield Staff Association, through the late Forties and the early Fifties, he fought long and hard for improving the service terms and conditions of the Staff, often at the risk of incurring the displeasure of his Anglo-Saxon employers. I have heard it said that in his parleys with the employers, he was always his equable self, refusing to be provoked or intimidated by the supercilious ways of the managerial representatives. For the common cause, he bore such slights with rare courage and dignity.

This takes me back to the year 1920 when he was working with the No.3 Company, Supplies and Transport, 18th Divisional Train of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Forces in Mosul. Among other responsibilities, he was also in charge of apportioning food-supplies to the various messes of the Division. Given below is the text of a memo he

received on 21st May 1920 signed rather illegibly by a Mr. Simpson (?) and a Miss Prenders on behalf of the Works Mess. “I am sending back the meat supplied to our mess of 5 nations. It is impossible to do anything with it except to give it to the Indians or dogs. The sheep being supplied by the contractor appear to be an exceptionally poor lot and, as there has been plenty of grass feed for some time now, I fail to see why such animals are accepted”. The sheer arrogance of the white race in clubbing the Indians and the dogs together would have elicited a totally different kind of response had it happened now.

My father forwarded this memo to the Headquarters with a covering note which read, “The attached letter is forwarded for favour of disposal as you think fit. The meat has been mauled about and is not in the same state it was issued. It is forwarded herewith in the same dirty cloth in which it was sent back. The meat being supplied now is particularly good, and, the reference to Indians and dogs is not a happy one especially where Indians are employed”. He wrote this note of guarded reproof at a time when anything less than an abject apology from an Indian who dared to differ would have incensed the Imperial Powers. I do not know the sequel to this, for I do not remember his ever mentioning this incident to me. After his death, I found the exchanged notes among his papers. In passing, I may add that he was awarded the Military Service Medal with Edward VII’s profile on the obverse.

After his retirement from Harisons & Crosfield in 1955, he applied his energies to the cause of the homeless and the destitute in and around Kumbanad. That was the social gospel he chose to spread. Some years earlier, a social worker in the Person of Poozhikaalaayil P. T. Thomas had built a modest shelter, on top of a hill he had acquired, to take a few destitute men and women under his care. It was this that later grew into the Dharmagiri Agathi Mandiram (roughly translated, it means Charity-Hill Home for the Destitute) after the title of ownership to the place had been transferred to the Mar Thoma Church.

In close association with its Founder President, the Very Reverend K. E. Oommen, my father worked indefatigably first as Secretary and later as Treasurer of that Institution. To commemorate this, his children in fact donated to the institution the cost of constructing a guest-room with bath *en suite*, in *Shantibhavan*, an annexe to the Home for paying residents. So did my Puthencavil cousins as their mother, my aunt Fellam, had been taken good care of there as a paying guest for a considerable length of time.

The pity is, because he had earlier severed his links with the Mar Thoma Church, his services to this institution are not publicly recognized by some of its latter-day ‘torchbearers’. In that bigoted lot, I am ashamed to say, the name of a lay assistant of our parish, who also happens to be a cousin of mine, ‘takes pride of place’. Whoever said that blood was thicker than water? The person shall remain nameless. However, my father’s name did find honourable mention in a book titled, ‘*Dharmagiryile Thapodhanan*’ (The Hermit of Dharmagiri) based on the life of one M. K. Verughese, (a.k.a Kuttysaar) a venerable social worker who was associated with the said Charity Home from its inception until the end of his days.

As I hinted at earlier, my father had the courage of his convictions to caution us against our lemming-like rush to join the monopolizing majority of the Marthomites of Kumbanad. Although he was himself baptized a Marthomite, he was, like his father before him, disillusioned by the spiritless ways of the church and the deadening effect of its repetitive rituals. It was thus that he had joined the Brethren Assembly of Kumbanad that had by then established itself in Kumbanad. He broke bread with them until early in 1918 he left for Madras to join the Overseas Training School.

It was about that time that the First World War was drawing to a close. Iraq, which was a part of the Turkish Empire until 1918, fell to the British Expeditionary Forces. They looked to India to recruit and train staff for running their administration in Iraq. My father, had been one of those chosen, and I quote, ‘recruited from the Overseas Training School, Saidapet, Madras, as students in connection with the prosecution of War’ (vide the Resolution of the Government of India, Home Department [Establishment] No. 1099). He thus proceeded to Iraq to work for the British.

While he had been undergoing training in Madras, he was eager to break bread with the Brethren Assembly there, which I have since been able to surmise from a letter that the Elders of the Brethren Assembly in Kumbanad had written on his behalf to the Madras Assembly. I have in my possession this letter, with the writing fading fast and its edges fraying. It reads:

Kumbanadu,
Travancore,

April 26, 1918

To The Believers gathered to the Lord’s House in Madras or elsewhere.

We the undersigned on behalf of believers gathered to the Lord’s House in the Gospel Hall, Kumbanadu, heartily and lovingly commend to your love, care and fellowship our dear brother P. J. Easaw who has been in fellowship here for several years. We pray for blessings to himself and all the believers.

Affectionately,

(Sd) Edward H. Noel, P. C. John, P. E. Mammen.

He was self-effacing to a fault. He was not one of those who would use any means for ‘chief seats in the synagogues and greetings in the markets’. In this day and age when people jostle in pursuit of power and prestige but are unwilling to acknowledge the duty that accompanies their privileges, he would have been a misfit. As a member of the Brethren Assembly of Kumbanad, he worked tirelessly for their local chapter of the Stewards Association of India without seeking to be in the limelight. In the many disputes that cropped up in their assembly he was asked to arbitrate between the opposing parties, for his impartiality was taken as read. I would always remember him as one who never sought recognition for what he did for the good of others. As a selfless person, he looked with indulgence upon other people ‘poaching’ credit for what he might have

rightfully claimed as his effort. He believed that the satisfaction of having done one's duty well was reward enough. Not public recognition or applause.

He was a man of Spartan habits. He did not smoke or drink or in any way indulge himself. I remember his telling us that the one and only occasion he smoked was when his doctor in Iraq had suggested that a puff or two might help ease his asthmatic wheezing. He tried it just once, ignoring the alarm bells of his conscience; and that a cheroot, no less. A spasm of coughing was the immediate result; he did not like it and never smoked again. A fine doctor, he must have said to himself! The only concession he made to what might even remotely have been regarded as frivolousness was his child-like enjoyment of cartoon characters such as 'Mandrake the Magician', 'Phantom' and 'Lone Ranger'. In fact, the first thing he did on getting his newspapers was to scan the syndicated cartoon columns. Whether he derived any vicarious pleasure from seeing the forces of darkness vanquished, I never attempted to find out.

He was an early riser For as long as I can remember. Even after he had retired to Kumbanad. But that was too early for anyone else's comfort, for after morning ablutions he would proceed to sing a hymn or two in his tone-deaf fashion, and woe to anyone who would be in deep slumber in the adjoining room of his annexe! Which was not infrequent, especially for grandchildren on holidays?

Incidentally, the two-room annexe was a later addition to the family house, where he could go into retreat in his retirement. According to Indian tradition, on reaching seventy and having paid your dues to society, a man would enter *grihasthaasramam*, a state of well-earned rest in which a caring family would do your bidding. And later, even into *vaanaprastham*, a further transition to a life of contemplation as a solitary ascetic, far from the madding crowd. Could this have been his intent? Some say less kindly that some personal setback from the past might have continued to haunt him and, rather than getting it all off his chest, he might have chosen to keep his own counsel. And I never could ask him why.

After the solo hymn singing, he would read aloud portions from the Old Testament, the Psalms and the New Testament followed by their commentaries. More hymns were sung no less unmusically until he invariably turned religiously to reading from Herbert Armstrong's (of the Ambassador College, California) apocalyptic magazine, 'Plain Truth'. His nephew Sunny (my aunt *Glory Kochamma's* son) would unfailingly dispatch a copy of the magazine from California every month. He often disagreed with these purveyors of their cultist prognostications about the Apocalypse, but could not resist the bold print and the glossy allure of this pictorial magazine. Soon it would be time to read the newspapers. He read them from cover to cover, missing not a word. After all, with time hanging on his hands, this was but natural. He read books voraciously, but not desultorily. He read mostly religious books. That was his weakness and his passion.

For as long as he had us under his wing, before we took wing and flew away each to his own devices, he had never failed to gather us all around in the living room for morning and evening prayers. There would be a hymn sung, portions from the Bible read and explained to reinforce the do's and don'ts of life and a concluding prayer said. We children did not always partake of the religious fare with alacrity. Looking back, the

guilt-ridden recall of that ‘repast of faith’ had ironically sustained us later in life whenever we felt weak and were found wanting. True, our lukewarm response to his daily ministrations may have dismayed him at the time. Yet, I am sure he knew that although we might sometimes go astray, we would find our way in time. That each of us did so, in our different ways, is a tribute to his abiding faith.

After his retirement, he turned to farming in his modest holding. It was not as if this was new to him, for as a boy he had learned the ropes from his father whose sole sustenance was farming. From sowing, through transplanting the rice seedlings and weeding to harvesting the paddy crop, it was customary for him to oversee personally the work in progress, day after day, in his modest paddy field a mile away. This was also his morning constitutional. Besides, he would potter about the piece of land around our house to keep an eye on the bananas, the cassava, the yam, the pepper vine and the coconut palms that grew on it. To help him with all this, he relied on regular hands.

Of that lot, there was one who lived on our property and worked for us, day in and day out. He was my father’s trusty handyman. If he were not working in the paddy field, he would be busy in one or the other of the properties under my father’s care, which included the properties of his brothers who were working abroad. His name was *Kochukunju* and my father was always solicitous of his welfare. He was always paid more than the going rates, to the obvious ire of his folks for upping the ante.

Once this helper of his had a fall from a tree, a ten-foot fall. Although no bones were broken, he suffered a few abrasions and had a concussion. My father lifted him up and walked him to our house to give him first aid. He was beside himself with worry that something serious might have happened to him. For the first time in my life, I saw my father’s eyes turning misty. The man was admitted to the nearby hospital. No expense was spared. *Kochukunju* came back to work only two weeks after he was fully recovered. In the mean time, my father made sure his family was not in want for their daily sustenance. Later, he gifted him an eight-cent plot of land adjoining our paddy field and built a small house for him in it. There was a rare bond between the master and the servant. During the paddy season, not a day passed by when the two did not talk about how best to care for the crops and coax a better yield.

When my father was convinced he was no longer up to such exertions, he sold off his paddy field. He continued his morning constitutional, however, taking them in smaller measures with each advancing year. During these walks, he would call on his friends and his older relatives to ask after their welfare and share his time with them for as long as he could will himself to do it.

He was also greatly concerned with the welfare of his grandchildren. Especially in our absence from home, Ammu’s and mine that is, as expatriates in faraway Africa, the task of looking after them during their breaks from boarding school, fell to Ammu’s parents and mine. My father, ‘Baba’ as he was addressed by his children and grandchildren, was extremely fond of his grandchildren, but being averse to showing emotion in public -it was almost an article of faith with him that it was unmanly to do so- he must have been extremely dismayed at his grandchildren being in awe of him. His moments of tenderness were fleeting, when he would make an effort to thaw and bandy pleasantries

with them. In the company of his contemporaries, though, he had a talent for light-hearted conversation often peppered with wisecracks..

He had a dry sense of humour that came through in his acerbic cracks, keeping the straightest of faces, at the foibles of his grandchildren. My son Bonny tells me how on one occasion when he tried to give a lame excuse for one of his infractions, his grandfather said in a level tone, 'You are bluff personified'. His English was as chaste as it was concise. He was a prolific letter writer. He wrote regular letters to all of his children, always encouraging and sometimes reproving. The biweekly letters he unfailingly wrote me in impeccable English, during all my years of absence from home, testify to his writing skills as well. His humour could always be read between the lines in his 'epistles' of advice and admonishment. One could almost picture his writing the letters with a straight face. On the rare occasions he managed a smile, it would be a self-deprecating one at his own shortcomings. He was always quick to admit his own mistakes.

He spent the last two years of his life hardly stirring out of his annexe except on the occasion of the housewarming of our new house, 'Nadavallil', on 19th of December 1981, which he happily attended. On 1st of January, 1982 he suffered a heart attack. From that day until he passed away on 21st of March the following year he was confined to his bed.

Three years prior to that my wife, Ammu, had resigned her teaching job in Zambia to return to Kumbanad in 1980 and minister to the needs of my parents. She looked after them both with great care and concern for three years until my sister-in-law, Sunu, assumed that responsibility. Even after that, Ammu was always just a call away. Our kith and kin have nothing but a good word for the manner in which she selflessly served them both, a role model for carers. In many households of Kumbanad and beyond, the old ones, who had toiled all their working life and earned the right to be taken care of, have a different story to tell.

As mentioned, he died on 21st March 1983. Only, I did not learn about it until three days later. On the day he died, I was getting ready to board a plane in Toronto, Canada, where I had gone to present a paper at the TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Conference that had been held the week before. It was only after I got back to Zambia the following Monday that I found on my desk the fax with the message of his demise. It was too late by then to attend the burial, for he had been interred earlier. He lies at the Brethren Cemetery, Kumbanad. He had earlier expressly made his wishes known to his brother, in black and white, that under no circumstances should his mortal remains be buried anywhere else. He had probably felt that his children might act differently if they were to have their way, but my mother respected his wishes.

You might wonder why I have not said much about my mother so far. Compared to my father, who had a commanding presence in the eyes of his children, she kept a low profile and let my father play the major role in our upbringing. He was eighteen years older than her. In the first few years of their marriage, it must have taken her a great deal of conscious effort to overcome the cultural shock on finding herself in a totally strange environment, with all its attendant emotional stress. She often told us how she had felt on her being suddenly wrenched from the Semitic culture of her birth place to be thrown into

the ‘dark’ Dravidian milieu of South India. Lest any reader misunderstood me, let me hasten to add that the epithet ‘dark’ is not meant as a slur on Dravidians or even their skin pigmentation. It was more a transferred epithet to depict her state of mind at the time. In place of the relative wealth of her own people, she saw deprivation and squalor in the country of her adoption. Again, in her father-in-law she saw an irascible man whom she knew had tried everything short of disavowing his son to dissuade him from marrying her.

A little over nine months after I was born, my father, mother and I left Basra by boat for Madras, enroute to Travancore by train. It was my uncle George who received us on our alighting from the metre-gauge train that brought us from Egmore Station to Punalur. And from there to Kumbanad, more than thirty miles away, we had to trundle along rutted roads for hours on end in a covered cart drawn by bullocks. Incidentally, it was my father who some sixty-odd years later narrated this to Ammu from his sickbed, just a few months before he left us.

The sights and sounds of that long bullock-cart ride, along the unfamiliar landscape through the tropical countryside, must have been a strange experience to my mother. One can well imagine how the cart must have swayed and bounced when its wooden wheels rimmed with iron tediously grated the hard, rutted surface of the gravel road for mile after wearisome mile. And finally, late in the afternoon when we hove into sight, the first person to receive us was my granduncle P. E. Mammen of the Plymouth Brethren fame, the very one who threw his cassock away to follow the dictates of his conscience. He was far ahead of his times in matters of the heart as well.

He had erected a floral arch at the entrance to his house to receive his nephew and his wife formally. He garlanded them and then ushered them into his house, thus stealing a march over his elder brother my grandfather. He had earlier played a crucial part in talking my dithering grandfather into finally giving in and extending his reluctant approval to my father’s marrying out of the community, which he had for a long time resisted vehemently.

The two furlongs or so from my granduncle’s cheery household to my straight-faced grandfather’s sombre homestead had to be gingerly covered on foot, along a stony country path, by my anxious mother holding with both hands her chubby son sitting astride her hip.

Recalling this ‘misgiving’ years later, my mother said that at the time she had not been sure if she had felt the same warmth of welcome from her father-in-law as from his younger brother on their first meeting. Even others in the family who dropped by to ‘take a peek at’ the new arrival did not seem particularly effusive on meeting my mother for the first time. My father remembers that the only one of the elders in the family who was emphatic in his approval was *Kochupurackal Avaraappappen*. He is reputed to have told my father with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, “*Oru thakarppan pennaadaa, Kochunnoonni!*” “She’s a terrific girl, Kochunnoonni!” ‘Kochunnoonni’ was my father’s pet name.

My uncle Thomas, my father's younger brother, who was known locally as Kunjomachayan was one other person who was very considerate to my mother from the beginning and found time to initiate her into the intricacies of Malayalam language.

My uncle was a very popular art teacher employed at the very school where my father had at one time taught. Here's a testimony about my uncle from one of his old students who remembers him fondly: "Achayan was not only good as an artist, but even better than that as a story teller. I remember that every so often in his classes the boys would clamour, "Sir, Sir, tell us a story, please!", and achayan would often oblige. His early death, when only in his mid thirties, was a great shock and sorrow to every one who knew him. I remember that the entire school turned up for the funeral." My mother would often recall what a great raconteur he was. This gave him unhindered access to every Kumbanad homestead for a chinwag and a free dip into whatever goody was ready in the kitchen. Sadly, he was struck down by Typhoid, a fatal disease in those days. I have a vague recollection of his mortal remains being carried out by pall bearers from the Nadavallil homestead. This was soon after we had moved from Madras. But I am digressing.

By and by, my mother came to be accepted as one of the family. It took her a long time, though, to get to grips with the local culture and its social and linguistic nuances. That she eventually became accustomed to the ways of the people and learned the local language is a tribute to her strength of will. This extended period of orientation must have inhibited her from giving free rein to her natural maternal instincts, so she was content to play a low key role as a homemaker.

The one flaw that I found in my father was that he was often brusque in his dealings with her. I suspect that it had something to do with the male chauvinist orientation of the Plymouth Brethren. Did this unconsciously brush off on his sons? Looking back, I am ashamed to confess that her self-effacement had often led to her firstborn taking her too much for granted and failing to show her the warmth of love that was his mother's due. For one thing, I did not make my affection for her too obvious. For another, I was often thoughtlessly offhand with her. I can well imagine how she must have quietly borne a great deal of sadness on account of this. I cannot go back in time to make amends, but it brings a lump in my throat whenever I think of the many chances I lost to give her back in some measure what I had owed her while she was with us. So, were my genes to blame? Trying to rationalise one's inadequacies in retrospect is cold comfort.

What are my memories of her? She was beautiful and fair of complexion. She had a delicate, well-proportioned face. Her hair hovered between black and dark brown, which turned lustrously grey as she grew older. Vertically challenged though her five-foot frame was, she carried herself with a certain languorous dignity. Later in life, even after she grew plump and ponderous in her movements, she lost none of her unaffected charm. Her light skin made many of her neighbours, especially in Quilon where she lived for almost eighteen years, refer to her as *Madaamma*, an epithet normally reserved for European women. In our part of the country, in the back of beyond as it were, everything was relative. Even the colour of your skin. In Kumbanad, every one called her 'Mummy' after her children. The nearest anyone could come to her in plumpness and

complexion was my youngest sister Lulu. My other sisters, Marykutty and Alice, could also give them a good run for their money. And, Ammu too somewhat!

I recall an amusing wager that Lulu's son, Manoj made with my wife, Ammu. In the early 1980's, as a boy, during one of his visits to his grandmother, he asked Ammu as he usually did if he could have his favourite flavour of ice cream after lunch. 'Cassata', I think, the brand was called. Unfortunately, the nearest available outlet for it was at Tiruvalla some six miles away. At the time it did not seem to be a very clever thing to travel that distance just for an ice cream, so she said she could not oblige him then. He continued to nag her, but it was of no use. Then, suddenly he brightened up and said, 'I shall set you a riddle and if you answer it correctly, I shall go without the ice cream'.

Intrigued by the challenge and warming to the spirit of the moment, she agreed without giving it a second thought. And he asked, 'Can you name the land of the white elephants?' That was easy! At once she replied, 'Siam', but the boy shook his head. Then she said, 'Burma' and he answered in the negative. When she had exhausted all her answers, she conceded defeat and asked him to solve the puzzle. And he said, 'Hopeville, Kumbanad'. He was, of course, referring, in his naughty way, to the more than light pigmentation and the ample proportions of mummy, Alice, Mary and Lulu and, no less, Ammu herself, although she was a shade or two darker than the others! Ammu had to buy him the ice cream. My mother enjoyed that interlude thoroughly.

Talking of Manoj, another little vignette comes to mind. The year was 1978, I think. We were driving up the hill road from Gudalloor to Ooty in an old Ambassador car that had seen better days. It had a first gear that slipped without any warning. We had set out two days earlier from Belgaum with a stopover in Bangalore and was on our way to Kumbanad via Ooty. Loolu and her small children –that is Manoj and Vavadi- Ammu and I were in the car. I was behind the wheel and at one point I had to declutch and engage the car in first gear, keeping my fingers crossed. As the old rattle-trap was wheezing up that steep gradient not far from our next halt, sure enough the gear slipped again and the car began to freewheel back. By that time, the others in the car had learned the drill and knew exactly what to do. I frantically pumped the brake pedal and managed to stop it, even as the doors flew open and Ammu and Loolu were waddling about looking for stones big enough to wedge the back wheels from rolling back.

Manoj chose just that moment to implore, "*Enikku kaakaa vekkanam*" -I'm dying for a crap- and the women were tearing their hair caught between two equally urgent calls. In the event, Manoj who could hardly wait for assistance, rose to the occasion, darted across to the verge, pulled down his shorts and relieved himself behind a bush to the growing amusement of all. My mother had a quiet laugh when we narrated this to her on reaching Kumbanad.

She was almost always soft-spoken even under the most trying circumstances, unlike her two sisters who were, more often than not, garrulous and abrasive. On the rare occasions she raised her voice a decibel or two, it was clear that she was greatly provoked. Her face would turn a shade of red like a boiled lobster's. Sometimes, her children were at the receiving end, and sometimes her helpers.

On occasions Ammu too was given the treatment, but was apt to respond instinctively to what she perceived was undeserved censure. That must have also played on mummy's mind. A daughter-in-law talking back never exactly used to be the done thing in these parts. That disappointment was unconsciously reflected in her dealings with me too for a considerable length of time. This was not to say that my mother was always at odds with Ammu.

Providence works in mysterious ways. This may be a one-sided observation, but when my mother was stricken with a cerebral stroke, it was the constant care and attention that Ammu gave her that helped her recover much sooner than anyone would have dared to hope. That brought about a marked change in my mother's attitude towards Ammu. She was more favourably disposed towards her since then. Yet, I would be less than honest if I say that they always got on like a house on fire after that. They had their moments.

Mother was up and about soon. As part of her physiotherapy regimen, she would walk round and round the house, first with the help of a cane that she later discarded. Then, to her eternal credit, she willed herself to be back on her feet, doing things as before. There had been moments of agony when she was tempted to give up her resolve, but her dear ones coaxed and cajoled her to carry on. Both my brother George and I were home on vacation at that time. I, who had earlier fallen from grace in her eyes, was once again restored in her favour. I remember the occasion when she said, in the Christmas of 1983, if I remember correctly, a little over a year before she left us, 'Yoosuf is the most patient of all my sons'. I was silently thankful.

A few months later, soon after my employers, the United Nations Institute for Namibia, where I was a senior lecturer in the Social Sciences faculty, had failed to renew my contract, I received a letter from my mother. I was nearly fifty-five years old at that time and was at a loss as to how I could relocate myself professionally. The letter in effect said God worked in mysterious ways, for He knew what was best for me and that I should therefore be patient. Barely two months after I received that letter, I found a teaching position at King Saud University, Riyadh, where I was to work for the next ten years!

During this time, I managed to achieve basic competence in reading and writing my mother tongue, Arabic. I could even speak with some effort a stilted form of the language. Ammu and I had earlier been planning to get a visitor's visa for mother to visit Saudi Arabia. I had hoped I could then for the first time speak to her in Arabic, but sadly that was not to be. Whenever I think of that, my throat tightens and eyes well up. To speculate how much I could have done for her while she was alive, but could not, would now be pointless, wouldn't it? As in life, in death too she looked serene as she lay on her bier.

I have other memories of her, too. She was a wonderful cook. Over the years, she managed to master the art of conjuring up the intricate flavours of Malayalee cooking. Her cooking was always rule-of-thumb, but it never erred, as her meat curries, her *Saambaar*, her fish preparations, her *Dosa* and what have you, always came out just right. Her *Kuzhalappams* too gave her a reputation among her dear ones beyond the confines of Kumbanad. It was a kind of crunchy, savoury snack made out of rice dough, with sesame seeds, chopped shallots and a pinch of salt kneaded in. The dough would be

rolled, cut into strips and each strip twisted round the fingers into thin cylindrical rolls and deep fried in coconut oil. If on the rare occasions any of her dishes turned into ‘burnt offerings to the gods’, you may be sure, her apprentice helpers had something to do with it. I must, in passing, say something about these helpers.

There used to be a hospital, namely the P. A. Alexander Memorial Hospital, with a nurses’ training school attached, situated right across from where we lived. It has since been closed. Most of the trainee-nurses there were from disadvantaged homes. Each year, my mother would generously offer free board and lodging to two of the most promising looking ones and in return only ask them to give her a helping hand in the kitchen, mornings and evenings, for an hour or two. They were not particularly adept at cooking. If the dishes were burnt at all, the live-in helper was rarely to blame. Blame it on these part-time helpers’ lack of that delicate, rule-of-thumb skill that made all the difference to a dish rather than on lack of commitment in cooking it.

To us, mother’s exotic dishes of the Middle East were the best. Even now, my palate would tickle at the thought of it. We relished her *Dolma*, her *Kibbe*, her *Baamiyaa* curry and other Iraqi dishes that I have long forgotten the names of. The aroma of each one of them still lingers in the mind, though. These were rare treats that she gave us on special occasions, such as birthdays or feast days. But, the more frequent *Parippu Kanji* was the one dish that took the cake, in a manner of speaking. It was a complete meal in itself. I am not sure if this dish is exclusively Iraqi. The sheer simplicity of preparing it was what gave it its special appeal to us; so simple to make and yet so tasty. It was a kind of gruel made of rice and lentils, seasoned with lots of chopped onion, chillies, curry leaves and mustard seed sautéed in clarified butter. It was as wholesome as it was balanced. Usually, it was eaten out of bowls – ‘slurped’, would be nearer the mark- with our local chutney as relish, made from freshly ground coconut, ginger, chillies and salt added to taste. A wonderful fusion of the Mesopotamian (?) and the Malayalee cuisine! The dish was always made in large quantities, for rarely did anyone know when to say, ‘No more, thank you!’ to this culinary delight; for it sat as easily on the stomach as Chinese chop suey or chow mein.

She had a good singing voice. Occasionally, she would sing an Arabic song of her childhood days and grow wistful and reminisce about the places and people she had left behind. Her favourite songs were ‘*Yaa Elaahi.....mustageeb minni dua’ee*’ and ‘*Wain raayeh, wain*’ both very soulful and evocative, although I did not understand its import. You see, as children we did not have a chance to learn our mother tongue. Our mother had to learn our ‘father tongue’, instead! She could sing Malayalam songs almost without a trace of accent. However, the songs that she always sang, morning and evening, were her favourite English hymns from the *Sankey*, a book of hymns compiled by an eponymous American evangelist. She sang beautifully. The only one of her children who fully inherited her talent in singing is my sister Lulu, her youngest child.

Among mother’s rendering of the hymns, the ones that still resonate in my mind are, ‘*When upon life’s billows you are tempest torn*’, ‘*When I survey the wondrous cross*’, and ‘*Showers of blessings*’. She could hold her own in the reading of English as well, although she had not formally learned it when she was at school. At school, her second language was French, of which she remembered precious little. Her competence in

English came from regularly reading the Bible, a copy of which with bold print was given her for use by a New Zealander missionary resident in Kumbanad, a Miss Shertliff. Her spoken English had since her Madras days been up to scratch, what with her constant association with speakers of English when she was there. My father too tutored her whenever he could. I venture to say, when I was a child, this tutoring must also have rubbed off on me unconsciously in some small measure.

She may have had her human frailties, as which of us has not, but dwelling on them, apart from its being unfaithful to her, would be dishonouring her memory now that she is no longer with us. She was a woman in the classic self-sacrificing mould like many another woman the world over, only more so. She had given up so much for her family, including, most of all, the safe bosom that the land of her birth would have offered her at vulnerable moments in the land of her adoption. And there were bound to be many such moments. She may have felt hurt and bitter then, but, regardless, she stoically kept her faith to the end of her days. She died on 20th January 1985 and she lies in her final resting place at the Kumbanad Mar Thoma Valiapally Cemetery. And some cemetery that!

If the first ‘denizens’ of this ‘halfway house’ were to wake up from their places of rest now, rubbed their eyes and looked around to take in the view before they were ‘gathered’ up at Rapture to join the Heavenly host, I hardly think they would sing hallelujahs at what met their eyes. Rather, they would be dismayed with how denuded of greenery their place of rest had turned out to be. Then, it might dawn on them that their descendants, after going the way of all flesh like their forebears, after all had to scramble for resting places that was getting increasingly hard to come by as time went by. And, those tasteless common vaults that were hastily built as an afterthought to lessen the ‘load’ on the land have hardly helped to make the place any less crowded or, for that matter, less unkempt.

How ‘the risen’ must have wished that the place had instead been lovingly tended as a garden of remembrance for the dear departed! And, perhaps, even for the living marking time ‘to be in that number when the saints go marching in’, it might just as well be a bivouac or a ‘shady haunt’ to quietly come to terms with what lies ahead? Think of a stretch of grass-covered rolling plain dotted with shady trees as far as eye could see. And think of how wonderful it would be to ‘lie and let lie’ in a place such as this with no sadness for an earlier occupant having been elbowed out unceremoniously. Well, the facetious among us might be tempted to comment that it serves those ‘old geezers’ right for not having foreseen such a ‘grave’ problem while they had ‘seeing’ eyes to plump for a much larger expanse for a churchyard. At that time, land was theirs to fence off as they thought fit! Today we are at a loss, unable to stretch space even to extend our pokey little church, which we grandly continue to call ‘Valiapally’ or ‘Big Church’. And our self-important churchwardens are not any the wiser, either.

If you have had the patience to plough through these desultory jottings so far, you get full marks for persistence. I know this last chapter hasn’t exactly been a page turner, but at least I dare say it has shown you a pretty graphic picture of what Kumbanad was, as I knew it then, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter Two >>