

I said feeling the cold clamminess of the marigolds around my neck. "Thank you very much, Ram Singh". "Merry Christmas to you" and I handed him an envelope with a more practical greeting inside. The door was closed softly and I sneaked a look at my watch. "Holy cow!" I blasphemously cried. "Half past seven!" I leapt right back into bed and pulled the covers over my head.

I pretended I didn't hear the next knock on the door but the knocker knew I was in there and persisted until I finally opened it. It was Bode, the sweeper, with a wide grin of betel stained teeth. He, too, had a garland for me and I, too, had an envelope for him. With the envelope pressed between flat palms held at chest level in the fashion of an Indian greeting, he backed away, bobbing up and down in deep salaams.

Before I could reach my warm and cosy bed again, there was a sharp and familiar rap and the door opened with a clatter of dishes. Santa Lal, my table bearer, swung into the room balancing on high my breakfast tray. "Heavens, breakfast so early?" I should not have been surprised. Once, I had requested it to be served at 7.45 and it has been served at that time ever since regardless of Saturdays, Sundays and now, Christmas, unless, of course, I had the forethought to request it to be brought to me later. I'd forgotten to do that. Santa Lal had a garland for me and, as he placed it on my shoulders, he greeted me with the assurance that one Christian can greet another on this joyful morn. Santa Lal was the only Christian among the servants and this gave him a special status that day.

I sat down to my breakfast. It was one for a robust appetite: fruit, pancakes, fat sausages, bacon and eggs, toast and a pot of tea. But my appetite was jaded. "Must make an effort to eat some of it", I mused. "Mustn't offend any one". I wondered how such a small piece of pancake could fill one's mouth so full. Just then a soft knock came to the door. It was Mangal Singh, the mali, holding out to me the most beautiful garland of all. He was a shy man with a sweet smile. His thinness made him appear taller than he was. His gentle demeanour belied the boldness with which he combined flowers and colours in the bouquets he daily provided for my room. I learned to appreciate the beauty of undreamed colour combinations; orange calendulas, paling pink roses, to white, reds and purples. In the dry season when all growth seemed withered and burnt, Mangal still brought flowers for my room, even if only an artistic arrangement of clover and wispy yellow weed. I have a special fondness for malis. To me they are a gentle race of men with sweet shy smiles. They have a simple dignity, never servile, never aggressive. They work

the soil of India with a quiet confidence, not shared by the agricultural specialists who regularly give warnings of famine. I was indeed happy to greet Mangal Singh this Christmas morn.

I turned to my breakfast. The pancakes were soggy, the sausages were covered in a film of waxy grease, the bacon and eggs were cold. I crunched the hard toast with my mouth and chin submerged in flowers.

A knock. This time it was the chowkidar. Many times he had rolled back the groaning iron gates of the compound when I returned home late at night. He had calmed my terror when I first heard the unearthly screams of the nocturnal jackals. As he saluted and turned to leave his place was taken by a familiar stooped figure. It was the old furnace man who stoked the outside furnace with such patient persistence in rain or in broiling sun so that we might have hot water for our baths. 'A good and faithful servant' I thought, and was glad to exchange his garland for an envelope. He shuffled off with the sound that thickly calloused feet make on stone floors.

I stepped back into the room and almost closed the door on a hand thrust into the room. From it hung a withered garland with a pungent fragrance. The hand belonged to a young man with cringing, whining mannerisms. I never knew what his duties were at the hotel. He was always under foot. He carried a rag which he applied to the dust on the window panes as he peered in at you. He always showed up to open and close doors that had already been opened and closed. His hand was always in evidence for buckshees. He irritated me no end. My Christian benevolence wavered, then firmed and I exchanged his garland for five rupees.

Leaning against the closed door I began to think this exchange could not go on indefinitely and I resolved to end it by quickly dressing and escaping into the garden to join other escapees already there, burdened with garlands up to their ears.

A knock. Oh no. Not another. I flung the door open to face a man I'd never seen before. He mumbled and grinned at me from ear to ear. A strange enlightenment possessed me. "He thinks I'm a crazy fool". At this moment Ram Singh appeared and hustled the man away.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"He's sweeper, next house," Ram Singh replied.

"What did he want?"

"Five rupees, memsahib".

K. R.
"India returned"