



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasseri

1

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Thiruvathira¹ is over; so is Punartham². I have not touched the hoe³ during these two days and now feel lazy to take it. It is end of Dhanu⁴. Eastern wind from Palakkad is still blowing as if from a blacksmith's forge blower. If this fellow, blowing through the pass of Western-Ghats embraces you, your skin would get parched and scales develop all over your body. Even the plants would wither. How quickly the soil has become bone-dry! It is already late. The Nendran⁵ plantains need be watered in just two day's time. Velu has a total of ten trenches where Nendran is planted. I have only five. We had started the work together. Now he has only five remaining. And, I have full three to be backfilled. Still he will finish first. Bending over his hoe while digging the rocky earth with a 'ktom, ktom' sound and throwing the full scooped earth into the trenches in wide sweeps, my chum would not notice even if an elephant comes! As for me, if I peck just four hoes like that, my breath would come out as thick as from an elephant's trunk. But I would hold on. He has planted eighty suckers and I have forty. Aren't they just forty? So far there is not much of a difference in the outward appearance of our plants. Six leaf-buds have sprouted for his plantains too. How vigorously the leaves have sprung up in our plants! Never mind the tiredness. Each leaf-bud will stretch up and spread out into large leaf. The tiredness that you were feeling till then would just vanish at the sight of this heavenly green softness unfurling in front of your own eyes. It is the infatuation towards life; a never ending fancy to witness the new life playfully sprouting. No doubt, these young plantains are all beauties! Beauties all decked up!

The planting area is exposed to the scorching sun with no shade; one hundred and fifty feet long and eighty feet wide. There, they stand swaying enchantingly - a total of one hundred and twenty dainty ladies each standing ten feet apart, hand to hand with equal growth, similar attire and same movements. A new creation is taking place there; a new world. It's an ocean of new life with long green plantain leaves rising and receding like waves.

Velu had started at dawn with no sign of let up. Let him shovel! My dear friend, if you go further deep, even the roots to the earth would come out!

Look at those indents that develop behind each of his shoulder blades while shovelling. And as he pulls the hoe with a full scoop of earth, see those muscles like rubber balls that appear behind each arm! You don't pant, but man don't you even have to take a deep breath?

I could so far cover three fourth of the trench and have completed breaking of the clods in between the plants. I cannot do anymore of work. It's sunny and too hot now. When you are tired, it is a pleasure to sit under one's own plantains. Indeed, this tender plantain is an alluring lady fanning you with her upper cloth! After resting the hoe on earth, Velu let free of the handle and putting both hands near his mouth, exhaled a forced 'haa' and then rubbed his palms together to soothe his hands. Before bending over his hoe again, Velu turned to me and asked with a smile, "Why Kammall⁶, tired?"

"Yes friend, I am; and I have stopped. I'm not prepared to die like you"

Velu now stood straight. "Do say - like Sankaran Kammall..." Velu looked at that house on the north east corner of the plot. Whenever he gets tired he would speak about Sankaran Kammall. That poor guy Sankaran Nair! He was the young man from that small house. He expired last year on the fifth or sixth day after Onam⁷ festival. "He had fever just for two days; that body as strong as a palm- tree



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasseri

2

withered like a flower." Velu would say. It was Sankaran Nair who cultivated plantains here last year, forty one of them! By the time the season arrived this year for digging earth for planting, Nair's pit was already dug by fate!

Like his physique, what a zest and humour Sankaran Nair had! It was he who had first said, 'My forty one beauties.' During that summer, I used to stroll along this path every day just to see his plantain grove. He could be seen draped in a thin dhoti, strolling among the plantains gazing at them with his hands crossed. The to and fro prancing of Nair, the elegance of the plantains, the fragrance of Elanji⁸ flower which had bloomed at the corner of the grove and the receding daylight at dusk, all had held me here riveted to the ground for ten minutes at least, every day. Yes, it would make anyone stop.

It was the gleam in his eyes which I had detected - that flash of passion for the vigorously blooming nascent bud of life - which prompted me to take up banana cultivation this year. Same is for Velu also; only difference being that he does not know how to express it. But it is resonating in his mind. That's why he is uttering "Sankaran Kammall, Sankaran Kammall" at every opportunity.

No sooner did he utter, "Do say - like Sankaran Kammall..." and turned to look towards that house, a kind of weakness appeared to descend on Velu. After that he could make only a few digs with his hoe. Velu stopped working and put down the hoe, went to the adjacent plantain and sat under it. Sitting there, he lifted his hand up, felt the top of the plantain trunk with his fingers and took out a package made of thick leaf of dried areca nut palm. He opened it to prepare a mixture of its contents - betel leaf, lime, areca nut and tobacco⁹. As is his wont, whenever tired he has to chew betel leaf with areca nut and tobacco as accompaniments. While chewing, he chats for a while and lo! he is re-charged and can do that much work again as he had done so far. As for me, whenever I chew betel leaf with tobacco, I get more tired. And I always wonder as to how he can chew tobacco like this! However, tobacco is seductive. Seeing others use tobacco, one too would be tempted to use it. I fumbled in my pocket for a beedi (local cigarette) and lighted it.

Velu's chewing session is invariably followed by the unfolding of a new story. A new story, every time! Mostly, they are Velu's own experiences. But there is novelty in that too. Stories are about his encounters during night with various elves that are abundantly appearing on the sand filled banks of river Nila¹⁰. After finishing his narration, he would forcefully spit out saliva, now tinted red with the mixture in his mouth and bend over the hoe again. Then you can hear the sound the hoe makes, "ktom, ktom". Sparks would appear when the hoe touches the rocky earth!

Now that Velu is well into his elaborate chewing session, a story must follow! Sunrays are slowly getting hotter. The wind coming through the Palakkad-pass is rougher. But, the abundant coolness below the plantain would quickly remove any fatigue.

The shade at the western side of Sankaran Nair's house has become darker. It looked as if that grieved house standing still, was viewing the plantain cultivation of this year.

"Hey, Kammall, unlike you, Velu is not new to plantain cultivation. About ten to twenty years back when I was your age, I had raised Nendran for three consecutive years before dropping it." He paused for the mix in the mouth to take effect. After thorough chewing, he spat across far and full- a pool of blood-coloured spit all over the ground! He folded a piece of tobacco, pressed it with a little lime and after lifting his face, threw it inside his fully opened mouth. He then pressed his head with both hands and made the expression that he got the much anticipated elevating kick of tobacco.



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasseri

3

"So, why did you stop? Nendran cultivation was not profitable, was it"? I asked.

"No no. Price in those days was better. Today a bunch of plantain will fetch you six or seven rupees. With that, you can buy only one measure of paddy. In those days we used to get a maximum of one rupee. But with that amount, we could buy two measures of paddy!"

"Sure. Then why did you stop planting?"

"Is it enough that I just plant? I need fruit bunches also"

Correct. Nobody would plant chanting Geetha sloka "Karmanye Vadhikarasthe" meaning 'you have the right to work only, but never to its fruits'.

"But Velu, what happened to those bunches?"

"I planted well. Channels were made properly and sufficient watering was also done. When Thiruvathira Njattuvela¹ arrived, all bush and vines were green in colour with the rain, except my plantain. It developed a yellow colour - as if they were planning to go to Pazhani for a pilgrimage. It was decay. As you know, during Thiruvathira njattuvela it never rains, but pours. All ponds were full and the water in the canal was up to breast level. There was nowhere to divert water. I did not foresee this, when I dug the trenches. Even the roots of the plantains got rotted".

I looked around. This year also there will be heavy rain during Thiruvathira njattuvela. Where shall I divert the water to?

"Don't look around. I have taken care of that. The by-lane is lower. Not a drop will remain here. That's what Sankaran Kammall did last time."

Oh! God! We are saved.

"Following year also I planted. Njattuvela did not cheat me that time". Velu gave a strange laugh. "It was not even thirtieth of the month of Medam², but all ponds in this area dried up. Even after digging to the maximum, there was no sign of water in our pond! By the time the first rain arrived, there was not even a sign of the site of plantain crop!"

God almighty, you don't cheat us this year!

"I planted the third year also. Got sufficient rain; the roots were not rotted; and all plantains bore fruit bunches as well. That should have made up for the loss of two years. I built a guard house in the grove and shifted there. There were twenty eight bunches swinging like the trunks of elephants. It was in that year that I got married. I had gone to the bride's house on the fourth day of marriage as per our custom. On my return Kammall, one full row of plantains was standing shocked; as if they don't know what to tell the owner! Those fine bunches; they were stolen!"

Velu spat and rubbing both corners of his mouth said, "With that, I stopped planting."

Three consecutive and massive blows to the farmer's sense of masculinity! No surprise, if one lays down his hoe. Science teaches us how to overcome misfortunes. If there is water no matter how deep it is, we can bring it up. There are motor pumps. What about thieves who come in the night? We have a good for nothing government. During the time of famine with food available in rations only, what is actually needed is a mechanical dog that would watch the farm at night without the need to be fed. That too will materialize soon!

"Last year Sankaran Kammall had invited me many a time to join him". His face was more grave than usual. Wonder where from this enthusiasm is coming on mentioning the name of 'Sankaran Kammall'.

"It was after seeing last year's bunches that Velu got tempted, Isn't it?" I asked.

"The vigour was due to that English fertilizer, what is its name?" Velu asked.

"Ammonium Sulphate? Bone meals?"



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasseri

4

"The second one you said. It's good for bunches"

"Let's buy and apply it this year also"

"But I got inspired not by seeing Sankaran Kammall's plantains, but by seeing Sankaran Kammall himself. What a bright boy he was, like a golden bunch of paddy panicles!"

"That's right. He was fair and extremely handsome. That figure is not fading from my eyes"

"Oh. You've seen only his physique. I value his twenty-four carrot heart more. Want to hear that story?"

So, now only has Velu entered the main story. And he is starting now. There is a particular savour for that voice coming from his wide mouth in short or lengthy pitches as the situation demands. The fragrance coming from the dry clod below is providing a befitting background for the narration.

"Kammall planted forty one plants; forty Nendran plantains and one Poovan banana", Velu began his story. "Whether it is day or night, Kammall could be seen in the plantain grove. No bud had sprouted without Kammall seeing it; even a crow was not allowed to sit on the bunch-buds. Thus the buds bloomed into fruits. In each bunch, there were about seven-eight layers. Shopkeeper Moideen kutty called out one day, "Look here, Nair boy. Take good care of them. With this, your problems will be over".

"True. All his miseries were over; no more miseries are left for that Kammall in this world..."

Velu stopped. His eyes were half closed. Indeed, an unusual show of reverence before death! Generally when he starts a story, there would be no respite in between. Like water coming out from a motor pump it would pour out continuously. But, those are not stories of Sankaran Kammall!

One heavy gush of wind passed shaking even the trunks of the plantains.

"Then?" I gave a pinch to his reverie.

"Like the tusk of an elephant with good length and thickness, the fruits began to gain weight. He built a shed in the farm and stayed there all alone at night. He was neither afraid of mist nor of devil. His mother Kalyani thamburatti would come at midnight lighting a small lamp to have a look at him; her only son. He would be angry to say "The old lady will die coming out in the drizzle." But it was not the mother who died; but her son....."

Velu again paused. Even a father would not feel such an intense sentiment for his son! I looked at that house. The cobweb covered western wall of the house was standing there ashen and dark.

Velu resumed. "The fruits in the bunches matured. Kammall had no other thoughts. Ah! I forgot to tell you yet another thing. You must have seen how he gave props to the plantains. Even the plantains would not get to know of it- so gentle on them! Standing firmly on the ground he would jab with all his strength the sharpened end of the bamboo till it reached below knee level. The props would not shake even if an elephant pulls it. That was his might. Of course, such robust supports were really needed for that size of bunches! There were only one or two people in our neighbourhood, who could carry two bunches at a time". Velu glanced at his own body. I felt envy towards that self pride.

"What more to say! Despite such strong guard, two fruit bunches were stolen. Yes, two bunches on a single night." Velu looked at me, pausing; as if asking me "what would you say". What shall I say when there are sharks which can swallow the whole of the net!



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasserri

5

"That night was the new moon in the month of Karkkitakam¹³. When the day broke, it was found that two Nendran bunches were missing. Kammall wailed a lot; cursed everybody. His eyes were red with anger and he was in a belligerent mood itching for a fight. He hurried to the bazaar, checked all shops and even broke open the cages where plantain bunches were stored for ripening. It was to check whether the thief had sold bunches to any shop keeper and whether they had kept them for ripening. Finally he was about to go to the police station; but was a little hesitant. Only two bunches were stolen. Getting entangled with the police would cost much more. By nature he is a person who would die even for one rupee. So he continued running helter-skelter in search of the two bunches. Finally the thief was caught. I still don't know how he smelled the thief. By that time all the wicked people who had come to know about the theft had gathered there. They assembled there not because they were sorry for Sankaran Kammall's loss of plantain bunches. But they were happy to see a man getting into a mess. The shop was full of people. Inside was the thief with the banana bunches."

I could no longer hold up my curiosity. "Who was the thief?"

Velu remained silent for a moment. "I shall tell". He was prolonging the suspense.

"Finding that he could no longer save himself, the thief called Kammall inside and pulling him further inside, told the truth. "It's the month of Karkkitaka and it is raining without respite. Kammall, due to starving there is not a drop of blood in my body. Yesterday my daughter along with her husband came home, at dusk. She had come to her mother for first delivery. She is married to a well-to-do family. They are unaware of our financial plight. In fact no one knows about it as I managed to pull on without letting anyone know. I ran around desperately almost until ten in the night. I approached many without any result. When I go to people whom I know, they didn't have money. I did not have the guts to ask people who had money to help me. Kammal, like cutting the throat of my children, I cut two bunches of your plantain. Let Chingam come, I shall buy and return your bunch - either bunch for bunch or if you prefer cash, then that way. You decide the price! Please don't spoil my reputation. Though poor, I belong to a family with great tradition. Kammall, reputation is something which cannot be rekindled once put out. Please save me! I consider you as my father, though you're younger to me!"

When the thief remained there looking at his face pleading with folded hands, Kammall stood there for a while, stunned! By that time some started pestering the shop keeper while some others became restless for not calling the police. At last without uttering a word, Kammall, catching the thief by his hand came to the shop veranda and said. "All of you please listen", Kammall was saying this pointing out at the two fruit bunches, as if it was a very serious matter;

"You've to give me two rupees more. It is not those bunches I sold you that you cut". Those who had assembled there stood as if they had been deluded. "Then, Sankaran Nair, had you sold him those two bunches?"

"What then? if not sale? You thought it as encroachment? No; but he had not cut those bunches that I had sold. I should get two rupees more, that too right now."

The thief handed over two rupees to Nair and tucked ten rupees being the balance sale proceeds in his dhoti. Both left the shop".

Velu gazed at my face. Miser as he is, I had never expected Nair to show such magnanimity. But, Velu is a witness. What about Velu's omniscience? Or is it a story retold by Velu having heard it from Sankaran Nair himself? In that case its appeal is diminished. Anyway, my thought went to the rapture of that man of decent



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasseri

6

origin who escaped from being branded as a thief despite being one!

"So, Kammall", I woke up from my reverie. "I have planted eighty plantains. Out of it, the best forty are for Sankaran Kammall's mother. Henceforth Velu is her son."

Good Gracious! It's a kind of a 'Bhishma's'¹⁴ vow!

"I was under such circumstances where I would have to sell my repute and go begging. To such a person Kammall assigned a task on the day previous to his death." "Eighty plantains are to be planted this year. Seeds are here, and plot is also available. Forty are to be planted by Velu and forty by me. Say, you've agreed"

"Let your illness abate first, Kammall. Velu will join you to cultivate Nendran"

"Velu, even if I'm not there you should plant."

"Agreed Kammall, be rest assured of it"

"It was with that assurance that Kammall had left this world. I have planted eighty. If blood flows in my veins I will see to it that all of them bear fruit also; all eighty!"

Velu stood up and spat the remains of the betel leaf. That broad body trembling with excitement slowly leaned over the hoe. Once again I went back deep into my reverie. My mind was contemplating over the great love that tied a big thief to a hoe! One swaying young plantain leaf was rubbing against my cheek and making my reverie cool and pleasant.

"Take a break Velu; now you drink this!"

I turned back. She was walking towards us with a tea pot and two tumblers; the mother who conceived that great soul. In my mind, I prostrated before that benevolent lady. I stood up. Velu also stopped shovelling and came up silently. His heart was full. Last year at this time, at this place, that mother's hands had quenched the thirst of her own son, who was shovelling here!

She put the tea pot down and with the edge of her dhoti wiped the tears that welled up in her eyes.

Translated by Edasseri Trust Team

It is assumed that this story is written before 1940. We do not have the periodical in which this story was published first. If any of our readers has got a copy of the same, please send a scanned copy to, e.harikumar.novelist@gmail.com or emadhavan_rbi@yahoo.com

NOTES:

- 1 & 2: Thiruvathira and Punartham are two days out of the twenty eight days in a month as per Malayalam calendar. The referenced days are from the month of Dhanu. The season lasting for about two months is marked by parching and incessant winds which blow from the east. The winds enter Kerala through the mountain pass in the Western Ghats at Palakkad and blow over a few districts in Kerala in its line.
3. Hoe - Like a spade, a hoe is an ancient and versatile agricultural tool used to dig, clear or shape soil, remove weeds and harvest root crops.
4. Dhanu - is one among the twelve months as per Malayalam calendar. End of Dhanu comes during the month of January. Even though summer is yet to start, central Kerala will have very dry weather because of the dry wind coming from Tamil Nadu through the pass of Western Ghats.
5. Nendran- A variety of banana. Fruits are thick and long. This is a special type of plantain which is an essential item of food prepared by Malayalees on the auspicious day of Onam.



FORTYONE BEAUTIES ALL DECKED UP

Short Story
by Edasseri

7

6. Kammall - A salutation used to address adult Nair in the erstwhile Malabar area.
7. Onam - A festival of harvest in Kerala. This falls in the month of Chingam, the fifth month following Medam, corresponding to August-September.
8. Elanji - a fragrant flower from a tree with the same name
9. Chewing of Betal leaf: This is a traditional manner of relaxation by chewing a mixture of betal leaves, aricanut and lime. Those who are in the lookout for some experience of inebriation add tobacco also. The process of chewing involves slow crushing of the mixture in the mouth. (Those with difficulty in chewing hard particles, get this mixture ground before putting in the mouth.) The process produces lot of saliva. The saliva mixed with the crushed mixture turns dark red and is spit out. This process continues until the essence in the mixture is fully extracted. This is very popular throughout India with wide variations in the ingredients, practices, quality and cost.
10. Nila - Name of a river flowing in mid Kerala, better known as Bharatha puzha.
11. Thiruvathira Njattuvela - This is one of the cycles of agricultural seasons which start in June, when the rainy season (monsoon) starts in Kerala.
12. Medam - One among the twelve months as per Malayalam calendar. Thirtieth of Medam comes by middle of May, during the peak of summer.
13. Karkkitakam - One of the twelve months as per Malayalam calendar. This falls during the months of July-August. It is the peak month for rain in Kerala. Being an agricultural state, that month was infamous for poverty and hunger because outdoor work could not be done and as such, people will not have any income.
14. Bhishma vow - Bhishma is a character from 'Maha Bharat', one of the two great epics from India. Bhishma, despite the fact that he was the greatest of all warriors, made a vow that he would not become the king even though he is the next of kin, nor would he marry in his life, in order to assure kingdom to his father's sibling from the new marriage.