

Unnikatha

By Mukundan

Translated from the Malayalam by K M Sherrif & Neerada Suresh

Retold by Gita Jayaraj

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“Unni,” said his grandmother, “tell me a story.” Unni quickly put away his books. He came and cuddled up close to his grandmother. “Muthashi,” he said softly, “listen, this is a little story about a glass tree. Look!...”

As Unni pointed to the blank wall in front of her, Muthashi saw a strange sight. She saw a man who looked like a king being carried in a palanquin.

Unni began his story.

Once upon a time, there was a Chief. He was called Kuruman Panikkan. One day Kuruman Panikkan went to pray to the stone idol under the huge old Champaka tree. As he was praying, a stranger came and stood before him.

“I am Melkorran,” said the stranger. “I come from the west.”

“What do you want?” asked Kuruman Panikkan.

“Your tree is old. It will die one day,” said Melkorran, pointing to the Champaka tree, which was laden with sweet-smelling white flowers. “I can make you a beautiful new tree that will never grow old or ever shed its leaves.”

“Really?” asked Kuruman Panikkan, fascinated by the idea of a tree that would never die. “All right,” he said, with a wave of his hand, “then make me such a tree.”

Melkorran brought his axe. Soon, the old Champaka tree which had stood there for so many years came crashing down.

Nests with eggs and little chicks tumbled down. Father and mother birds rose squawking into the air.

Melkorran began work on his tree. He brought many, many pieces of coloured glass. Gently, with great care, he shaped the roots and the trunk. The branches came next. For the leaves and flowers he used green and white glass. Every vein and stem he carved with love.

One and a half years went by. The tree glittered and shone in the sun. The colours of sunrise and sunset filtered through the glass leaves. People came from far and near to see this fantastic tree. Panikkan too was very happy.

But the glass tree was only beautiful. Its flowers had no smell. Although its branches held glittering glass nests, no birds rested there. No child climbed its branches.

Can a glass tree ever be a real tree, Unni wondered as his story came to an end.

As the pictures faded from the wall, Unni turned to his Muthashi. But she was fast asleep.

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