

## LITTLE MOUNT

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The hotel desk clerks had more to say about the globe-trotting Saint and his legend. They advised their guest that the cross of St. Thomas bleeds every year on the 18th day of December. "Every year, sir, the cross is bleeding," one of the clerks grinned, wobbling his head in assurance. "It is most reliable!" They gave him another pamphlet.

"Even now?" asked Thomas. "In 1985?"

The autorickshaw driver passed on more information to Thomas as they waited at a stoplight smothered in diesel bus smoke. In Tamil the hillock was called Perimalai, Big Mount, to be distinguished from Chinnamalai or Little Mount, just at the outskirts of the city of Madras. The stone cross in its Chapel bled regularly, but only in some years. Yes, the Saint's finger was most surely on display. Thomas nodded but chuckled inwardly. How on earth would St. Thomas and his finger have travelled all the way from Palestine to India? Some tourist trap, this!

After paying off the driver, Thomas squeezed between the outstretched hands of an old man and woman under the ancient and beautifully sculpted archway at the foot of stairs that disappeared upward into the early afternoon haze. He had a few coins left, and pushed twenty rupees into each hand.

In the blazing heat Thomas became dizzy by the tenth step. Consulting the tourism pamphlet, he learned an Armenian philanthropist, Usan, laid the flight of 135 steps from the foot of the hill, leaving a large sum of money in the Indian treasury to furnish their maintenance in perpetuity. Thomas squinted up and saw two almost life-sized bronze figures balanced on the

top of the blazing whitewashed sidewall. "Mary washes Jesus' feet with her hair," attested the letters painted below it.

The next set of supplicants, a withered old man and a woman, were stationed at the second cluster of statues, guarding each side of the stairs. As Thomas passed, a child emerged from the cloths around the woman. She ran out to him, clutching a tin dish, tearstains prominent over her cheeks. Spread out in front of the man were all manner of books and papers, all held down in the light breeze with pebbles. Thomas fished out another ten-rupee coin. "I gather one of the Christian apostles died at the top of the hill," he noted, as the little girl clutched at his shirttail.

The cross indeed sweated on every December 18, the old man recited, but had not really done so since 1780.

"Sweats?" asked Thomas. "Or bleeds?"

The old man wobbled his head. "A part of the Saint's finger is there also," he added, indicating the tip of his finger.

"Only a bit of it?"

He wagged his head in affirmation and thanked Thomas for the donation.

Some forty steps higher, Thomas stopped and bent over, panting. "Jesus stumbles the second time," the fading inscription announced beneath the next suite of bronze statues. "How remarkable," gasped Thomas audibly. The agony of these struggling saints, enveloped in a world ruled by faintly smiling Krishnas and wisely pot-bellied Ganeshas.

Now halfway to the top of Perimalai, Thomas took rest on the broad wall lining the stairs. He parsed open the book once again. It postulated there was a considerable body of evidence St. Thomas did indeed go to India after the resurrection of Jesus.

"The Acts of St. Thomas", a document thought to date from the early third century, says: "When the Apostles had been for a time in Jerusalem, they divided the countries among them in order that each one might preach in the region which fell to him; and India fell to the lot of Judas Thomas." The Apostle was not keen. "Whithersoever Thou wilt, O Lord, send me," the future Saint Thomas pledged, "only to India I will not go!" The Lord thought otherwise, and Thomas arrived on the west coast of India in AD 52.

Thirty-seven more agonizing stairs later, his heart pounding, Thomas encountered the disciples just after the crucifixion. "We have seen the Lord," the other disciples reported to St. Thomas in cracked lettering. "But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." Thomas Tibbitts mopped his brow, while crows squawked rudely at each other from the thickets below.

Once in India, the apostle converted thousands and founded the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Thomas learned, peeling the now sticky pamphlet open. Even now their descendants were fiercely proud of being Thomas's oldest converts, well before Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome. In the two millennia since, they spun off into a myriad of other sub-sects with progressively longer names but all being Thomas Christians.

In only fifteen more blinding-hot stairs, St. Thomas gently held his finger to Christ's flesh, saying, "My Lord and my God."

Uttering the very same words, Thomas staggered at last to the top stair and beheld the yellow walls of the tiny Portuguese church. Thinking only about coca-cola, Thomas lurched to a

fenced balustrade overlooking the vast city of ruddy brickwork and palm trees, and in the distant horizon the burnished blue sea.

According to the pamphlet, the chapel possessed as tumultuous a history as the Saint himself, which went a long way because here was a Saint who'd been exhumed and re-buried at least four times. In the pre-construction excavations in 1547, the builders discovered there had been other foundations laid before this. They recovered a stone cross reputed to be carved by the Saint himself. On being unearthed, the stone cross exuded what to all onlookers appeared to be Holy blood.

"Please, you are coming from which country?"

Thomas spun around and beheld a knot of half a dozen children. What did they want? His hand went involuntarily to the front pants pocket containing his wallet.

"Do you know this St. Thomas, then?" he enquired because he couldn't think of anything else to say. There were whispered voices as they fell into a quick huddle.

"Yes, sir," announced one. "We are knowing this one, sir, this St. Thomas."

"He is the doubting one," said the shorter one on the right.

"It is he who died in this place, sir. In a small cave."

"Yes, I know," Thomas declared, waving the guide book at them.

"Please, you are coming from which country?" The kids pressed in on Thomas. He patted his securely lodged wallet again.

"Canada?" four of them squealed. "We have two brothers in Canada. Please, we will write down their names. You will visit them! They are in this place..." There was another huddle.

"Todo.."

"Otoro..."

"Toronto," Thomas stated.

"Yes, yes, that is the one!"

"You are having some card, sir?" asked one of them breathlessly. "For writing the name," he explained, making a writing motion with his hand.

Thomas unzipped his handpouch.

"You are having a pencil, sir, or perhaps a pen?"

Thomas handed over a card and a pen which his late father had given him on his thirtieth birthday.

"We will mind your shoes," advised the tallest of the youths.

When he reached the door of the Chapel, Thomas took off his shoes as the sign bade and began to place them carefully in a small pile of footwear spanning every continent of the globe. He grunted at the kids, then entered the dim light of the interior.

Thomas stared up into the abyss of the domed ceiling while his eyes adjusted. Ignored by the other worshippers, he stepped around one man whose arms were stretched heavenward and was as motionless as the statues around him. He stumbled over a man lying prone on the cool stone floor, apparently in a trance. He breathed an apology, and then apologized for the echo that boomed from the far wall only twelve feet away.

He stole down the narrow aisle and by this time could make out a convenient bench near the rear of the chapel. Wedging himself in a sharply upright posture in the iron-hard pew offering all the apostolic suffering of its patron, Thomas dropped into a kneeling position.

Prayer did not come easily. Thomas fumbled through his bag, retrieving the wrinkled pamphlet. According to the account, the church was packed to capacity on December 18 of the year 1689. The sermon was long. The audience was restless. Then suddenly every man, woman

and child broke into cries of "Miracle!". The preacher stopped, turned around, and faced the black stone. Except that it was red. Then it became white and dazzling. Soon, something watery began trickling down on the altar.

True to the spirit of the doubting Apostle, those same believers and unbelievers and even some Protestants clambered onto the roof of the church to examine if there had been some trickery. No amount of scrutiny could detect any such fraud. The annual bleeding of the stone took place annually from 1551 all the way to 1704. And after that, for some reason, it just stopped.

"How could so many witnesses have been so misguided so often?" murmured Thomas.

The light beamed in from the narrow window. A jetliner from the nearby airport roared overhead, on the way to some London or Delhi of faxes and pagers and cocktails. A lorry, just having reached the top of the winding road up the other side of the hill, went through a series of zigzags, each time belching black smoke into the chapel - no one in 1547 had thought to provide any space for a lorry or bus to turn around. Eight familiar little silhouettes peered into the window, fingers curled around the grating.

When was the last time he'd kneeled in church? Thomas wondered. It must have been that Sunday when he was eighteen. Rev. Dr. Stone, snow-haired, eagle nosed, had faced him across the table. His wife, white-haired and erect as an ibis, sat quietly as the waiter shimmered into view and poured three glasses of water. It was after Sunday church, and he and Mrs. Stone had asked Thomas to lunch at a restaurant more than twenty blocks away. As always, the Rev. Dr. Stone wore a gray suit and black leather shoes that were as heavy and solid as his faith.

"I understand you might be considering the ministry," he'd said, a smile melting the cracks in his craggy face. He was a man who knew to come to the point when dealing with younger people.

Thomas had thought rapidly. A chemist was an alternative. But he had almost blown up the house attempting to generate a new element of gas. Or an aeronautical engineer, perhaps. He was also a gold medallist in the triathlon, thus revealing a portrait of a widely accomplished young man, mentally, physically and perhaps spiritually. No wonder they wanted him, he mused.

The Stones waited.

"Well," Thomas began.

Mrs. Stone beamed. The waiter brought buns.

Thomas raised his glass of water. Mrs. Stone raised her glass of water.

Dr. Stone leaned forward. "It would mean a great deal of preparation."

"Oh yes," Thomas had croaked.

What in heaven did Rev. Stone mean? Would it take that much more preparation, really, than being a test pilot or chemist? He squirmed in his chair.

"Faith."

"Oh that!" Thomas had laughed, greatly relieved.

He'd ended up studying biochemistry and coming to believe in evolution, natural selection and the birth of life through mere mathematics and chemistry. After abandoning the early morning services at the College Chapel, he was no longer burdened with the matter of revealed truths and needed no more to struggle in trying to reconcile what was believed and what was determined by empirical evidence. Thomas allowed a faint smile as he recalled the heady

days under Dr. Stone's wing, recalled his sense of lightness as he read the Holy text to the entire congregation the first time.

Thomas woke several minutes later, startled by the smack of his pamphlet on the stone floor. The man Thomas had tripped over was still lying motionless, his legs and feet still raised up off the floor.

He finally rose, picked his way along the pew to the aisle, and walked gingerly ahead, over massive stone slabs worn smooth by centuries of feet. As martyrs stared down from oil portraits on the walls, Thomas walked toward the front of the chapel. John the Baptist, John the Apostle, Matthew, Bartholomew, James, and of course St. Thomas were all depicted in apostolic action, with a miniature inset of the act of martyrdom that ended their respective ministries. In one an axe, another a cross, one boiled in water, several beheadings, impalements, and in still another a particularly gruesome dispatch with the aid of a large saw.

On the way to the front was a vigil, with candles stuck at various angles in a huge bath of pulpy wax, scattered with intercessionary notes. Thomas held the three candles he'd purchased during his ascent of the 135 steps, and now he used the dying flame of one staggering candle to light them and prop them up hopefully in the pool of wax. Other candles lay strewn about the altar, each fallen before its ministry had gasped out.

He approached the altar. It was to this very place St. Thomas sought escape from his pursuers, after fleeing from his cave at Little Mount. While the Apostle was praying, an assassin commissioned by King Mahadevan's priest and ministers crept up behind him and pierced him with a lance. "What on earth did St. Thomas do to curry so much disfavour?" muttered Thomas, attracting glances from a trio of blond-haired tourists.

Thomas blinked into the meager light toward a tiny capsule, not much larger than a bottle cap, embedded right into the wall. When his face was not more than six inches from its glass surface, he was able to discern a minute sliver. He glanced down at the plaque below it. It was not exactly the Saint's finger, the inscription confessed, but a portion of the spear that had impaled him. The finger had been transferred to another country somewhere in Europe. "Hah!" Thomas huffed, attracting more glances.

Once outside in the blinding light of late afternoon, Thomas scanned the pile of shoes. There were at least twenty pairs of sandals, ladies' and men's, one pair of Oxfords and several running shoes. "Where are my damn shoes?" he snapped, picturing himself cursing barefoot down all 135 steps, crippled in pain.

"My pen!" he cried, now straightening up and recalling the kids borrowing his writing instrument. He gazed around in all directions. Would the kids have safely reached the gate and disappeared to the streets? Did the 16-century church have a lost and found kiosk?

But when he turned and squinted into the sun, he was confronted by a shadow.

"Your shoes, sir." The boy held out Thomas' brown Hush Puppies. "And your pen."

"I'm sorry," said Thomas. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry?"

"Well for not believing you'd..."

As he handed Thomas back his pen, the boy shrugged.

He flushed the last coin from his pocket and handed it to the boy. It was a silver one-hundred rupee piece, and even Thomas knew it was far too much for minding a pair of Hush Puppies and a valued pen for half an hour.

### *Chapter 3: Little Mount*

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The boy stuffed the coin quickly into his front pocket, face inscrutable but glowing, and walked away to join the friends who eagerly awaited him.

