

THE AUTHOR

Born in 1934 in a village on the sea in the eastern coast of Odisha, **Manoj Das** had a picturesque childhood – blessed with a charming environment consisting of green meadows, lotus-filled lakes and hill-like sand-dunes covered by creepers rich with varieties of delicious berries. His was an affluent house with a large estate in the Sundarbans, the abode of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

But he also witnessed the tragedy of a terrible cyclone devastating the flora and fauna, followed by a famine that wrought havoc in the region and his household twice plundered by gangs of dacoits.

No less eventful was his youth when he turned a leader with radical ideas, courting jail and taking a prominent part in the Afro-Asian Students Conference at Bandung in 1956. But his deeper quest landed him in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Puducherry in 1963 where he continues to teach at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education.

His first book in his mother-tongue Odia was published when he was fourteen and the very first short story he wrote (1950) is considered a classic in that language.

Looked upon as our country's foremost bi-lingual writer, he has received a number of accolades: the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Saraswati Samman and the Padma Award, to name only a few. The Akademi has also bestowed on him its highest honour, the Fellowship, reserved for "immortals in literature".

Five universities have decorated him with honorary D.Litt.

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Aadan Pradan

The Bridge
in the
Moonlit Night
and Other Stories



A SELECTION

BY THE

AUTHOR

MANOJ DAS

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Your Writer Speaking

“The futility of all prefaces I long ago realised,” wrote Goethe in *Poetry and Truth*, “for more a writer tries to make his views clear, the more confusion he creates.”

As is the case with so many sensible statements, this one too carries a truth that is relative. But it alerts me; I will certainly try not to confuse my readers, though I am not sure how far I will succeed in giving a substantial, if not complete statement about my creativity. For long have my readers – specially those who have chosen to pursue their academic projects for Ph.D. or M.Phil. on my fiction either in Odia or in English or in both for a comparative study – have desired such a testimony and I have avoided coming out with any, though I have been obliged to speak out in snatches in interviews. But the publishers of this representative selection of my short stories, the authorities of the National Book Trust, India, have persuaded me to face the challenge. Once a renowned professor of psychology made me aware of the law that the more aged one grew the more talkative one became about oneself. The professor himself was aged and he went on talking about himself, making me further aware of the fact that the knowledge of a weakness does not exempt one – not even a professor of psychology – from falling a prey to that weakness. I hope, my readers would not expect me to be above that law.

My publishers have their own reasons to advise me as they did. The National Book Trust, India is not just a publishing house; it is a national institution and it believes in leaving for posterity what an author had to say about his inspiration. It is, of course, a fact as well as an irony that a writer who can generate a complex

character under his creative inspiration may convey only an imperfect delineation of that inspiration – often more imperfectly than an empathetic critic can.

The NBT has yet another argument to motivate me in this regard. Over the past two decades, I have been repeatedly described by critics and commentators as a bilingual writer. That surely I am, but I am not sure if that allots me a special status or just puts me in an atypical category. Probably the question assumes some importance at a time when many are worried about the future of several Indian languages vis-à-vis English – the latter unfortunately snatching large chunks of ground from the former. I do not presume to indicate any way out of this imbroglio by virtue of being one who writes in two languages. But my avowal could come as a minor comfort to some troubled souls, had they the will to act accordingly.

We cannot wish away English; this is a truth that appears undeniable today. I believe that the time when some leading Indians were serious about the possibility of doing without it is past. At the same time, the deep-rooted impression that English was a synonym of education too is past. Born in colonial India, this author was a victim of this superstition like any other subject of Her Majesty. It took a long time and an amusing encounter one foggy morning in a London street in 1971 for that superstition to evaporate like a jinn.

One day an English friend had shown me a church of historic antiquity. A patch of ground adjoining it contained some graves and the inscription on one of them identified it as that of Oliver Goldsmith. Some days later I went out alone with a desire to photograph it. It was too early in the day for that part of the city to be crowded with men or vehicles. I asked a tall figure under an overcoat if he could direct me to Oliver Goldsmith's tomb. He thought for a moment and told me very courteously: "Proceed straight and turn right and then left. You'll find an old church. There are a few tombs around and maybe you'll find yours!"

Though the spirit of finality in the precise finish of his answer startled me for a second, I smiled and thanked him and was about to resume my walk when he politely stopped me and asked, "By the way, who was this Oliver Goldsmith?" For a moment I wondered if he was not testing me. But I answered, "Don't you really know Oliver Goldsmith the novelist, the essayist, the poet, the playwright..."

"Oh, poet and playwright! We know William Shakespeare!" He announced with disarming confidence.

That very moment I realised what a stupendous prejudice I had inherited from a few generations past – that whoever spoke English was educated. This gentleman, a watchman in front of a newspaper house, was probably no more academically educated than Shakespeare himself and was confident that having known Shakespeare he knew everything in literature he needed to know.

There is no reason for us to feel awkward about the role the English language has come to play in our life. We have bought it at a very high price – bartering our freedom for a couple of centuries. It is too costly and too precious a gain to be defamed as a colonial hangover. If any native Indian language suffers on account of the power and popularity of this imported property, the fault is not with English but with our system of education – and even more than that – the attitude of the parents of our generation. Our homes are the temples for our mother-tongues and if the parents love their language, they can, in a most spontaneous and painless way, strengthen their children’s grasp over it. The young has an uncanny capacity for learning languages; it is no toil but a natural creative joy for them. I assert this not from any theory but from my first-hand knowledge of children at the primary stages of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education when they are exposed to several languages. It is the unfounded fear of the parents that their wards would prove weak in English, the language that is a must for their career unless they speak it at home, mixed with a bit of conceit in some cases, that hinders the child’s effortless access to its mother-tongue. Even well-informed parents who know the truth that a hampered hold over its mother-tongue hampers the child psychologically, do not care. Should a deathblow come to any of our indigenous languages, it is not English, but our attitude that would invite it. My humble suggestion is, have faith in the receptivity of your child; communicate with him/her in your mother-tongue while giving English its due.

Let me return to the issue of my being a bi-lingual author. First and foremost I am an Odia writer. I began conjuring up yarns and composing verses before learning the alphabet – I am sure like many of my readers – innocent of the question if I was doing something out of the ordinary. That was partly because I was blessed with an extraordinary environment, dreamy and lyrical. My village on the sea was surrounded by sand-dunes making it inaccessible even to bullock carts. There were two natural lakes between the village and the sea, one teeming with white and the other with red lotuses. The vast grassy meadow around the lakes studded with palm trees was so homely and inviting that one cloudy afternoon I ran across it hoping to touch the end of the rainbow spanning it. Each house in the village, even that of the poorest widow, enjoyed at least a patch of kitchen garden, a pond and the boon of ever-green trees around it. Though a terrible cyclone in the year 1942 and a famine that followed devastated the environment and disoriented the people’s way of life, their basic nature – their innocence, honesty and readiness to sacrifice – hardly changed. I have recorded my real- life experiences and encounters with our folks in my collection of childhood reminiscences, *Chasing the Rainbow: Growing up in an Indian Village*.

I began writing in my mother-tongue at an early age and my unconscious focus was on that pastoral milieu. But what probably drove me to consciously

continue that in English was a piece of writing in that language by a veteran Indian author living abroad, that claimed to be an authentic picture of rural India but what in fact was its unkind caricature. I was beset with a sense of remorse. I ignored the reality that I was not educated in an English medium school nor much had I travelled in the English realm of gold or the fact that I was then only a junior student in a small-town college totally unexposed to the sophistication that went with the Indian writing in English, and decided to write in English. I knew my rural India and I knew my people.

But before long I was drawn into the vortex of political activities. Even writing in my mother-tongue that I considered to be as native a function as speaking or dreaming was interrupted for long spells of time. However, when I was a temporary student at Puri College in my fourth year graduation course, the editor of a little-known English fortnightly heard me speak somewhere and asked me to write for his journal. That was my first publication in English. And that was a time – mid-fifties of the 20th century – when we had elderly litterateurs around us to encourage a budding writer. I remember how one of the most celebrated poets of Odisha, Baikunthanath Patnaik, then the headmaster of Puri Zilla School, congratulated me within hours of the publication of the issue carrying my contribution. Interestingly, my second piece in English found publication in an Indonesian journal. I was a delegate to the Afro-Asian Students Conference (1956) at Bandung that took place trailing the Afro-Asian Summit that gave us the famous Panchsheel. As I spoke to the press one evening, the correspondent of a local daily, *Warta Bandung*, wanted something written from me. The next morning, to his surprise – I do not know pleasant or unpleasant – I handed him over a poem hailing the resurgence of Asia and Africa. The newspaper carried it and subsequently I saw it reproduced in a popular daily *Haryan Rakjat*. (That I did not continue to write poetry in English is a different issue, for I believe that poetry can best be written only in one's mother-tongue, the language of one's subconscious, of one's dreams and reveries.)

That also reminds me: the renowned diplomat-cum-author K.P.S. Menon happened to read my first short story collection in English, *A Song for Sunday and other Stories* (1967). He was a veteran of the I.C.S. and he wrote to me recollecting how in his younger days his English boss used to tell him that an Indian writing in English sounded to him like someone playing the piano not with fingers but with sticks! "But nobody will think so about your English," he wrote in conclusion.

I am sure there would be noble elders even today to encourage the young, but where is the medium to bring any young talent in English to their notice? I had chances galore to be published in widely circulated English magazines and journals like *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *Imprint*, among others. Where are they today? Our gargantuan appetite for news and gossips has swallowed them

up all – nurturing a bumper crop of news magazines. Gone are the days when every English newspaper, major or minor, carried Sunday supplements featuring short stories and poems, but few do so now and that too only occasionally. Those evocative spaces have been usurped by stuff removed as far from creativity as a gambling den was from a Himalayan valley.

If I have diverted from my line of submission, it is to acknowledge my indebtedness to the time that was. But the time that *is* is different in several other ways too. The nature of interest in creative writing and the nature of writing itself have changed not only in India, but also in the West. I am not sure if I should say it has changed in India because it has changed in the West! In the seventies and eighties of the last century, circulation of the magazines published by some of the distinguished American universities was not limited to their campus; they had an elitist readership outside. From time to time a pleasant intimation would greet me. For instance the *Malahat Review*, “An international Quarterly of Life and Letters”, chose my story, “Farewell to a Ghost”, for inclusion in its October 1975 number. As nostalgia goads me on, I find in my old racks a copy of *Brooklyn and the World*, edited by Martin Tucker, brought out by the Long Island University, as a “special anthology issue” of their magazine, *Confrontation*. That was an interesting venture – placing some of the fine contemporary writings of Brooklyn alongside a selection of what the editors thought to be valuable writings of other parts of the world in the seventies. The anthology was published in 1983. What surprised me was their choice of my story, “Lakshmi’s Adventure” – a typical rustic Indian incident with typical rustic characters. I never thought that a Western readership could appreciate it. But it did and it was reproduced in another magazine with an international circulation in another continent, Australia. That was the *Hemisphere*, a beautiful publication edited by Kenneth Russell Henderson. Earlier to that, the editor had written to me, having heard about my stories from a lady, a professor from Jerusalem, who on a visit to Pondicherry (now Puducherry) read a couple of them in the monthly *Mother India*, if I would like to contribute to his magazine. I sent two and both were published and Mr. Henderson wanted more. Their annual anthology for the year 1982–83, a large-size bulky volume of nearly 400 pages contained only one short story and that was “The Submerged Valley”. On enquiry from a reader, the editor informed him that that was the only story the magazine had carried during the whole year.

I find two of my stories, “The Last I Heard of Them” and “Old Folks of the Northern Valley” in the *Carleton Miscellany* of Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, “The Red Red Twilight” in the *Denver Quarterly* of the University of Denver. What was significant, the English department of the University of Illinois launched a magazine *Ascent* in 1975 and they chose to include in it one story from outside and their choice fell on “ANight in the Life of the Mayor”. They

placed yet another story of mine in their 3rd issue. Like our *Illustrated Weekly of India*, the U.S.A. had a journal, *The Newsart* of the New York Smith publications, that combined reflective articles on contemporary events with creative writing. They picked up *The Kite*. I also find the International Number (1979) of the *New Orleans Review*, a publication of the Loyola University of the South, New Orleans, carrying “The Bridge in the Moonlit Night”.

Several other such magazines and reviews were borrowed by research scholars who naturally forgot to return them. These ones are preserved and listed through the initiative of one of the earliest scholars to obtain Ph.D. on my fiction from the University of Madras, a creative-writer-cum professor, P. Raja.

I was in the U.K. for a few weeks in 1971 when I was introduced to a young journalist and noted social worker John Montague. That was courtesy my friend Mario Miranda, the artist nonpareil who illustrated my *Stories of Light and Delight* (National Book Trust, India) that continues to be one of the highest selling children’s books since its publication in 1970. John Montague – I did not know then that he was the future Lord Sandwich – brought one of my stories “Mystery of the Missing Cap” to the notice of Alan Maclean, editor of the prestigious annual anthology of short fiction, *The Winter’s Tales*, published by Macmillan London and St. Martin’s Press, New York. Mr. Maclean told me over a cup of tea, “For years I’ve been looking for a story that would convey the genuine Indian ethos. I’ve received so many submissions and friends have also brought so many stories to my notice. If I find the right content, I find the form and style unconvincing – and vice versa. But your *Missing Cap* fits my head so well!”

There were wonderful stories in our several Indian languages, but they were unlikely to come to the notice of editors like Mr. Maclean because we did not have their translations which seemingly effortless, must have been made with true effort.

But even if stories fulfilling the right conditions were available, there are no more demand for them. The editorial as well as the readership taste seems to have undergone a metamorphosis. *The Winter’s Tales* had ceased publication as had the *Hemisphere* and probably some of the magazines I referred to above. Once I received a cordial invitation to contribute a story to a very popular Western monthly – promising me a handsome fee. They indicated that they liked my style and for the sake of variety, they would like me to write a story exclusively for them. But I must follow their guideline for the plot I should invent! They enclosed a sample copy of their magazine. I was amidst my students. I shut it up as soon as I had opened it – before the glossy pictures, all live photographs, had been glanced at by them.

If I am crowing my own glory, it is time I must put down the reason for it: Nowadays I rarely receive a request for a story or for permission to reproduce

one from any of such publications. I was not curious, but a professor from an American university presented me with a revealing explanation of the situation. He was associated with Martha Foley, founder of the famous *Story* magazine that brought to forefront so many new authors. She used to prepare an annual list of the outstanding stories published in the U.S.A. and Canada. Her list for 1975 included all my five stories published in the U.S.A. that year. This is the substance of what the professor revealed: We believed that the Indian fiction had something very special, something with a soul. In a limited sphere some of our discerning editors had felt the vibrations of the true India in your stories. Some of us also used a bunch of them in our classes. But the kind of Indian works of fiction that have received recognition through highly publicised awards have disillusioned us, the critics. If this is Indian literature today we have enough of them at home. But it is also true that the character of American magazines have changed in keeping with the change in that sphere in other Western countries.

I asked him on his last observation if the other Western magazines had not changed keeping with the American ones. But our exchange remained inconclusive

The taste has changed, yet I believe that literature that is inspired and not invented, will prevail. There is a line of survival of the genuine parallel to the currently fascinating stuff. The history of literature bears indisputable evidence of this consoling factor.

As I stated earlier, the genuine Indian works of fiction in our different languages are yet to find capable translators. And there lies a privilege I enjoy as a bilingual writer. Stories this volume contain are there in my mother-tongue too. I cannot remember which ones were first written in Odia and which ones in English. I have not exactly translated any of them from one language into the other. If a story written in Odia was to be rendered into English, I read the original one and kept it aside and wrote it in English as if I were writing it for the first ever time. I applied the same principle for the transmutation of a story originally written in English into Odia.

Once the editor of the monthly, *Literature Alive*, published by the British Council (this too had gone the way of so many other good magazines) asked Prof. P. Raja to interview me. In the course of the exercise the scholar asked me in which language I *thought* first. “In the language of silence” I said without a moment’s silent reflection on the issue. But once uttered, its echo had sounded to me a bit vain. It is in their kindness that critics have quoted this small statement appreciatively. They must have sensed a reality in it. The very first urge behind a story – a signal that alerts the writer that he is going to be the channel for the advent and embodiment of yet another offering from the infinity, is certainly a movement in silence. Articulation follows.

It may be different with poetry. But in fiction the urge – let us now call it inspiration – requires a matter-of-fact backdrop. At an impressionable age I felt the impact and vibrations of some of the major waves of transition shaking our subcontinent, such as the partition of the country, end of the colonial rule, end of feudalism, advent of democracy and socialistic ideals and undreamt of developments in technology, among others.

The Indian society was steeped in feudal tradition since a remote past. The sudden end to the system spawned both visible and invisible hassles broadly at two planes: in the life of the princes and their puny variations – the Zamindars (landlords in a special sense) and in the life of the common people confronted with a system alien to their habits and mentality, namely a Western model of democracy that replaced the age-old feudal hierarchy. The big and educated princes – though it was not at all easy for them to get over the trauma – had both material and cerebral means enough to take advantage of the new situation by joining politics or business, but there were smaller ones who remained perplexed till the end of their life and even passed on their helplessness and melancholy to their heirs. One such character is the chief figure in my novel *A Tiger at Twilight* (now available in a combined volume along with *Cyclones* in Penguin Books). But in several of my short stories I have projected the crisis created by the transition in the lives of either the feudal lords themselves or those involved with their dynasties or their affairs. My sympathy was not with the dying feudal order but with the individuals belonging to the order or those inextricably allied with the order. “The Owl”, “The Martial Expedition”, “The Concubine”, “The Birds”, “The Naked” and “The Gold Medal” represent this group.

The sudden exposure of our people to the new political dispensation created quite a few minor and major predicaments for many. This has been the premise of “The Misty Hour”, “The Irrational”, “The Mystery of the Missing Cap”, “The Assault”, “The Brothers”, “The Old Man and the Camel” and indirectly of “The Bull of Babulpur”, “Statue-breakers are coming!” and “Two Slippers and a Soul”. I must hasten to say that these situations are by no means the *themes* of my short stories. They have constituted the context, they have provided me with the elements that form the outer sheath of the stories – like the five elements composing our body – they have provoked me, but the themes, the souls of the stories, I have always felt, have come to me as inspirations from the elusive horizons of life – or rather from the many-tiered and many-splendoured consciousness, both manifest and unmanifest, the source of our life and all life.

And this submission which I should have made at some stage for the sake of my readers and critics, applies to all the other stories outside these aforesaid specific contexts. It is the human psyche with its past, present and the future possibilities that provides me with the themes of my short stories and novels.

Folklore was an intrinsic part of the rural atmosphere in my childhood. Their classic compendiums, the *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritsagara* continue to fascinate me. Some of their stories would coax me to spin in my imagination a development beyond the points where they stopped. I cannot call that exercise inspiration – a force that had led me on to write most of my original stories. But the exercise gave me a captivating creative joy of playing with the great masters, Vishnu Sharma, Somadeva and others, and craving their indulgence.

Five of such stories are presented in this anthology as a special group. However, the first one of it, “The Lady who Died One and Half Times” is an original fantasy.

I am grateful to the authorities of National Book Trust, India, for undertaking this project. I treasure the goodwill and courtesy of the then Chairman, Prof. Bipan Chandra. My most sincere thanks go to the dynamic director of the Trust, Dr. M.A. Sikandar, an inspiring lover of literature, and Shri Manas Ranjan Mahapatra, the editor of the *Readers' Club Bulletin* and a gifted poet in Odia, my oldest friend and well-wisher in the NBT. My sincere thanks are due to the able editor of this collection, Shri Kumar Vikram. This publication celebrates my association with this institution as one of its authors from the time of its first director, the late Shri K.S. Duggal, the noted writer. I am indeed proud of my relationship with this institution that had played a unique role in making our people book-conscious through numerous national and regional book fairs, apart from international ones, and discovering talents in different disciplines, promoting creativity in the young and launching so many other constructive activities.

Godspeed, dear readers!

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The Misty Hour

In a provincial town of the third decade of the twentieth century dogs still barked at motor cars, spectators kept sitting for hours gaping at silent movies and signs of love were as simple as a rainbow: a young lady blushing violently at a fluttering look from a young man in the college corridors was evidence enough of her responding to his love. Thereafter the hero could safely take to versifying and the heroine to gazing at the sky when the sun was mellow and continuing to sigh till her friends had hit upon the mystery of her mood and took the routine initiative to bring the situation to its logical culmination. Nine times out of ten he and she belonged to the same caste. After a ritual fuss by their parents over horoscopes, dowry and date, they got married and lived happily ever after.

At seventy, Aunty Roopwati had enough bloom left in her cheeks to give the impression of blushing while reminiscing about those wonderful days when modernity meant a newly-wed lady, almost half her face revealed to the public, sharing a hand-pulled rickshaw with her husband and when a monthly magazine highlighted the phenomenon of progress on its cover by showing a young lady cycling by (though the artist had forgotten to give a touch of motion to the spokes). Hence the storm that must have been caused by the beautiful Aunty Roopwati joining the freedom struggle could be easily visualized. And she came of a well-known family and was a graduate. She claimed that she could even sing like a shehnai.

In fact she referred to a number of poems that had become immortal in our literature saying that their poets, her contemporaries, had composed them for the sole satisfaction of having them sung or recited by her.

No doubt, quite a few ladies from respectable families had come out to join the freedom struggle around that time. But none of them was as smart and dashing as Roopwati, none as fluent a speaker as was she. Thus, endowed as she was with a rich assortment of virtues, any one of which could have brought renown to a lady in those days, Roopwati, her admirers thought, was destined to conquer great heights of glory. She herself had neither any doubt nor any false humility in that regard. She was sure no position was too high for her and she made no secret of it. Those who had some knowledge about the intrinsic worth of most of the people in high places were not likely to dispute Roopwati's assertion. If there was anything wrong with her, it was her habit of extolling herself. Her colleagues in politics detested this, though the clever ones among them were adept in using others' lungs-power to broadcast their own glory. As a result, although inferior to Roopwati in many respects, they bypassed her.

Roopwati asserted that all the budding leaders of the time had been dying to marry her. A little flattery and show of credulousness induced her to come out with a volume of anecdotes narrating how those honourable suitors tried to woo her. But although Roopwati appreciated their idealism and patriotism, she had no faith in their personal integrity. There was only one young man who combined in his character both the virtues. He was Jagdishji. Roopwati at last condescended to marry him.

But the fact that she had highly underestimated Jagdishji's character became evident on the wedding night itself. This episode was not given out by her but by her confidants among her compatriots, who were now becoming fewer. Jagdishji, who was always clad in spotless white and spoke equally spotless prose, received his bride in their flower-bedecked nuptial chamber with a profound show of love and respect. After he had made her recline comfortably on the bed, what he opened with no less love and respect was a canvas bag containing three essays authored by himself, in a handwriting as distinct as his pronunciation.

A little past midnight he finished reading his first essay, a profound treatise on the socio-economic benefits of the proposed prohibition on the trade in liquor.

By 2 a.m. he finished 'Reflections on the gains of adult education'.

He had just read out the title of his third composition, 'The Role of Celibacy in Married Life', when the bride exclaimed, 'What a pity, the lamp is running out of oil!'

'Let me fetch a little more oil,' said Jagdishji enthusiastically.

'Is that really necessary? Why not let your knowledge light us as long as possible?' observed Roopwati gravely and snatched away the essays and burned them leaf by leaf.

In the spurting flames her face must have seemed as ominous as massed clouds lit up by flashes of lightning at night. In silence the couple absorbed the

realization that the fate of those learned essays was symbolic of the future of their relationship.

Also, the silence of the dawn seems to have left an indelible impact on Jagdishji. Rarely did he talk for the rest of his life, which, in any case, was not to be very long. And when he did, he forgot his grammar. He died at thirty-five.

India won freedom. Roopwati's tongue, which till then was one of the main weapons wielded by the state unit of the party against the British raj, was now vigorously active against her colleagues. Most of them had captured chunks of power, but they knew how ineffective their powers and positions were against Roopwati. She could strip layer after layer of their reputation with incredible ease, like an expert chef peeling an onion, leaving nothing at the end. The younger generation of political aspirants, who tried to buffet their way to power partly through demagoguery and partly through terrorizing or blackmailing their seniors, without the obligation to risk a thing, found it great fun to provoke Roopwati into her tirades. They flattered her by calling her Aunt. However, we pressmen felt that she had a soft corner for only one man, Chinmoy Babu, the lone gentleman in the politics of the state. No doubt Chinmoy Babu was different from the rest of his tribe. He had had a promising youth as an artist and a classical singer and had published a couple of books on literary and cultural topics. His writings had originality. But he was so reserved and humble that only those coming in close contact with him knew that he was not only talented, but also intelligent.

He had made more sacrifices for the freedom struggle than anybody else, but he hardly commanded any influence in the party. He lived shy and aloof. But a time came when people began to get disillusioned with their loudmouth leaders. The party realized that its survival warranted the resurrection of some ignored heroes of yesterday. It was at this juncture – our town had lately been declared a city – when almost all the city fathers made a beeline for the mayoral chair, each doing his utmost to thwart the others and in the process all running, so to say, naked, that some of the old freedom-fighters made it possible for Chinmoy Babu to emerge from oblivion. He became the mayor, uncontested.

Chinmoy Babu symbolized a new hope. Although such hopes came to nothing much – and the people had already come to realize this bitter truth – they needed the illusions from time to time.

Chinmoy Babu was accorded a grand reception. The mammoth public meeting was about to begin when Aunt Roopwati was seen elbowing her way towards the dais.

Chinmoy Babu felt happy to meet an old colleague and received her with a show of courtesy.

'Would you like to say a few words, say for five minutes?' the leader presiding over the meeting was obliged to ask Aunt, with what he thought was a clever

hint that she was expected to be brief. She spoke for a full hour, heaping abuses on nearly all the leaders, drawing frequent cheers from the audience, but praising Chinmoy Babu to the skies. While doing so, it appeared to us who were closer to the dais, that she herself blushed more than Chinmoy Babu.

And she continued to blush till long after the meeting had ended and Chinmoy Babu had left the venue while we sat surrounding her in a nearby restaurant and she gradually warmed up. She gave us a full dozen poignant anecdotes and, at last, over the third cup of tea, disclosed that even Chinmoy Babu had once been her lover.

A fortnight later, while Chinmoy Babu was presiding over a function held on the occasion of a foreign cultural troupe's visit to our city, Aunty pushed her way to the dais again and made for the chair by chance lying vacant by the president's side, her broad smile glittering in the floodlight.

Chinmoy Babu suffered her to sit near him, but was not as cordial as on the previous occasion. Someone had probably reported to him Aunty's latest claim.

It is difficult to say whether or not Aunty took note of Chinmoy Babu's indifference, but we observed that thereafter, on the slightest provocation, she asserted that Chinmoy Babu indeed loved her.

And six months later, when Chinmoy Babu abdicated his mayoralty in favour of his deputy and was elected to the Rajya Sabha, and chances of his induction into the ministry at the Centre looked bright, Aunty began saying impatiently, 'Had I responded to his love and wedded him, he would have become a far greater man and that too much earlier!'

'Well, Aunty, what made you reject as brilliant a suitor as Chinmoy Babu?' we made bold to ask her with our tongues in our cheeks.

What Aunty said in reply in many words came to this: Not only had all the eligible youths of the time either fallen or come close to falling in love with her, but also a much revered leader of her father's age who, at an opportune moment, had bared his bleary eyes of his thick spectacles and made a pass at her!

Aunty, after all, could have bestowed her favours only on one. Forty years after the death of her choice, Jagdishji, Aunty was eloquent in his praise. Jagdishji emerged like a figure of mythical proportions – a Leonardo da Vinci in genius, a Caesar in courage and a Rama in character.

Aunty's presence at meetings, we felt, proved more and more embarrassing for Chinmoy Babu. There were whispers and exchange of knowing looks among us. Not that Aunty was insensitive to Chinmoy Babu's discomfiture or to our amusement, but she just did not care. She always reached for Chinmoy Babu with the display of a smile that she kept in reserve only for him.

A merry floor-crossing by a group of members of the Legislature brought the state ministry crashing down. Chinmoy Babu had already been caught in the

maelstrom of politics. His reputation as an incorruptible leader was the only hope for his party's return to power. He was induced to come down from Parliament to steer his party to a victory in his home state. Needless to say, he was to be the Chief Minister.

We learnt confidentially that Aunty met Chinmoy Babu and offered to manage his election campaign. Chinmoy Babu obviously did not think that to be a wise strategy. He spoke to her of other laudable missions that awaited her stewardship. But Aunty was too shrewd to be bamboozled. She returned fuming and cursing.

Within hours she had become the prize star in the opposite camp. 'Chinmoy for Chief Ministership? Pooh! This is what happened forty years ago: The party's working committee was in session. We went on till it was dusk. Suddenly the lights went out. But we were in a spirit to defy every hurdle. Our president called upon us to continue the proceedings without bothering over the darkness. Chinmoy was by my side. He brought his hand close to mine. Slowly his fidgeting fingers crawled onto my hand. We sat like that for a full hour during which he succeeded in spreading his hand over only half of my palm,' Aunty declared.

Nobody asked how a dusky hour of four decades ago was relevant to Chinmoy Babu's claim to Chief Ministership today. Had the country not witnessed Chief Ministers unfazed by formidable records of scandals?

Curiously Aunty's statement became the talk of the town. Most probably it was because Chinmoy Babu was looked upon as a man above the propensities characterizing the ordinary mortal.

However, nobody believed that the 'scandal' would affect the margin of votes by which he was expected to win, although it saddened Chinmoy Babu most certainly.

Just then there was a bolt from the blue. The old good Dhani Chowdhury, totally out of the political scene for over two decades, came to us limping and groaned out a confession. He believed that his gesture, apart from serving the lofty cause of truth and of history, would help Chinmoy Babu regain whatever loss of face he had suffered.

Dhani Chowdhury took us back to the working committee meeting of the early thirties. It is true, he said, that Chinmoy Babu was seated beside Roopwati when the lights went out. But what Roopwati did not know was that he had to go out of the room to attend to some urgent work. The one to advance his amorous hand at Roopwati's was none other than Dhani Chowdhury, then the youthful treasurer of the party. The lights did not return before the meeting was over and hence Roopwati never found out who owned those audaciously crawling fingers.

Soon thereafter Dhani Chowdhury became the victim of a bad sort of arthritis and was deprived of all the fruits of freedom.

The remarkable gusto with which Dhani Chowdhury poured out his confession gave me the impression that he was not as remorseful as he declared he was, and that a secret sense of pride enlivened his narration. He was willing to donate a photograph of his own should Chinmoy Babu's election committee choose to print it on reasonably good quality paper carrying his confession and distribute them liberally.

But before the election committee could take a decision on the conscientious offer and before we had any time to ascertain Aunty's reaction to the confession, she came down with high fever. The diagnosis that it was pneumonia came only hours before she died.

Frankly, we, the genuine well-wishers of Chinmoy Babu, had a feeling of relief for an unguarded moment. Indeed, how easily prospects of puny gains reduce mortals like us to utter meanness!

Aunty was cremated near the ruins of a temple by the lake on the city's outskirts.

Next day we were on our way to Chinmoy Babu's constituency. While driving by the lake, I pointed out the deserted pyre to Chinmoy Babu. He nodded.

Five days of hectic campaigning, and a day more of silent anxiety during which no canvassing was allowed, preceded the polling. There was no room for any doubt regarding Chinmoy Babu's landslide victory. But he was totally exhausted. As his confidant, which I had become by that time, I arranged for his other close companions to return to the city by vans and made a comfortable car available to him. I sat beside the chauffeur.

It was evening, and cloudy and cool by the time we reached the lake. The breeze was growing erratic. I was dozing.

'Will you please halt for a while? I wish to have a stroll in solitude. The last few days have been so suffocating!' Chinmoy Babu muttered from the back seat.

I appreciated his desire and let him go out alone and resumed dozing. But, after fifteen minutes, when I noticed dark clouds closing in on the patch of sky over the lake and anticipated a shower, I stepped out to call him back.

There were only three or four men scattered around the lake and I did not see Chinmoy Babu among them. I climbed the embankment and looked towards the cremation ground lying below it on the other side. I located him near the ruins of the temple. He had gathered a bunch of flowers and was pruning them. I was going to call out to him but stopped.

He advanced towards the pile of ashes – the remains of Aunt's pyre. He knelt down and placed his bouquet on the pile. He sat quiet and wiped his eyes

again and again. Then it began to drizzle. When he was about to get up, I took a swift turn and reached the car in a few rapid strides.

It rained soon after Chinmoy Babu got into the car. We drove on in silence. The swaying trees along the road looked like phantoms whisking us away.

But the silence of that dusky hour had brewed a disturbing question in my mind: Was the confession of the former treasurer Dhani Chowdhury true?



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The Naked

Sapanpur-on-Sea, an abandoned port, showed no sign of modern times (which had just dawned elsewhere in India) touching the few old buildings left to the mercy of raging winds, the row of shops and kiosks which always appeared to be in the red and the nearby hamlet of fisherfolk.

Even the summer palace of the Rajas was fast decaying. As the end of the British rule approached Raja Sahib could foresee the end of the native states too. He seemed to lose interest in life and the mansion lay unused.

With the last Raja dead, his son did not care to visit even their erstwhile capital twenty miles away, what to speak of the summer palace. It was Bhanu Singh, the scion of the hereditary *Senapatis* – the commanders over the armies of the Rajas of yore – who looked after the palace. The abolition of feudal rule had shocked him, and his receiving a quarterly allowance without interruption from the Raja's dwindling bank balance overwhelmed him. How ardently he wished he could do something to save the state for his master – as his forefathers had done, twirling their moustaches and swishing their swords – and repay this kindness bestowed on him by the Raj family!

No wonder that a personal message from the widow of the last ruler, now known as the Rajmata (though her son never had a chance to ascend the *Rajgaddi*) should delight him. Some kind of a conference was to take place in the summer palace. He was to receive a lorry-load of ladies and gentlemen who were to camp there for a full day. The conscientious Rajmata knew only too well how difficult it would be to provide the guests with the right kind of food at a place like Sapanpur. She was arranging to send the stuff from the city. All Bhanu Singh was required to

do was to receive the visitors and to place himself at their disposal. The Rajmata had sent some money too, perhaps a little more than what he would require, to spruce up the mansion and buy some provisions.

Bhanu Singh had resolved to discharge his duty with great diligence. Half a dozen men and women were already at work inside the mansion, scrubbing the floors and dusting the walls. The Rajmata's costly letterhead carrying the insignia of her dynasty, a conch flanked by a pair of lotuses, lay on the marble table in the spacious room, once the study of the princes when they came here for a holiday.

'There!' Bhanu Singh pointed at the letter after greeting Majumdar, the headmaster of the Middle English School, the highest educational institution in the locality. 'Read it and you will know why I summoned you so urgently.'

The headmaster read and re-read the letter and appreciated the quality of the paper as he held it against the skylight. Then he looked at Bhanu Singh. While unfolding a velvet preserved with naphthalene, Bhanu Singh said, 'They will number about fifty, right? I'm hopeful of getting ready with fifty simple garlands of jasmine. Can you supply fifty boys and girls to garland them as soon as they alight from the lorry? The kids should look smart and clean. I will give you a phial of pure English talcum left here by the Rajmata some five years ago. That will do wonders for their faces.'

Majumdar's attention had gone over to the letter once again. 'Seems to be a new party of those "ists", or maybe a modern holy assembly,' he mused.

'Headmaster, why don't you consult the dictionary? I've not yet bothered about their creed.' Bhanu Singh opened the tall teakwood bookcase and identified the bulky dictionary. Majumdar dusted it and put it on the table and pored over it.

On locating the relevant word, he compared it with that in the message, pronouncing it aloud letter by letter. He nodded gravely. He was evidently no longer in any doubt about the import of the message.

His look baffled the curious Bhanu Singh. The headmaster had as if just been alerted by a team of doctors that his friend's disease had been diagnosed all right, but it was incurable.

'What is it?' Bhanu Singh grew anxious.

'It is an extremely knotty situation, Singh. "Nudist" means one who goes naked! Not a baby, mind you! In other words, you are required to receive and shake hands with a group of ladies and gentlemen, all emerging absolutely bare from the lorry.' Majumdar shut the dictionary with some force.

Bhanu Singh suddenly felt drained of all vitality. 'You mean fifty naked adults will assemble here for a conference?'

'Is it for nothing that they chose this solitude?' Majumdar sounded wise in accordance with his vocation. 'Imagine throwing garlands around the necks of

fifty men and women – they must be quite important, with impressive moustaches and lipsticks – but who do not have even a langot on them! Will it be ethical for a headmaster to lead his blameless pupils into such a predicament? Will they survive the shock? Well, brother, I must take leave of you.’

Majumdar turned to go.

But Bhanu Singh grabbed him by the shoulder. ‘Take leave of me, eh? As if we had never been friends! Can you leave me in the lurch and just walk out on me? Is it not your sacred duty, at this juncture, to advise me as to what I should do?’

‘What else is there for you to do except forget your clothes for a day and host the party?’

‘What! Do you suggest that I too must go naked?’ Bhanu sounded like one receiving a knock on the nose.

‘Isn’t that as clear as the sunlight or the roar of the sea? How can a man of your maturity fail to see the incongruity in a host clad in dhoti and kurta shaking hands with guests wearing nothing? Won’t that amount to insulting them? I’m sure the Rajmata is expecting the descendant of the brave generals of the dynasty’s ancestors to prove valiant enough for the occasion!’

Majumdar wriggled his shoulder out of Bhanu Singh’s hold and muttering some irrelevant observations on the weather and the migratory birds, retreated towards the door and slipped out.

Bhanu Singh sprawled on an old sofa. The Rajmata had been educated in Europe and was known for her avant-garde ideas. But Bhanu Singh had never foreseen a time when her modernity would suddenly engulf the forsaken summer palace at Sapanpur and hurl him into such a muddy whirlpool.

Mechanically shouting at the labourers to hurry up, he went out and walked towards Pratap Roy’s house. In the golden age of the princely rule when Raja Sahib would sit down for a few drinks with his chums and find fun in making some of his officials undress and dance before him to the rhythm of some gramophone music, Pratap Roy, the manager of the taluk, would come handy for the purpose. In fact, Pratap Roy and his colleagues were threatened with losing a few of their vital limbs if they refused to obey or failed to dance with abandon.

Pratap often came away with trophies. The retired manager now lived the life of a venerable citizen of Sapanpur. He gave a patient hearing to Bhanu Singh while enjoying a stroll in his garden.

‘How can I help you?’ he asked courteously.

‘I’m in a bit of an awkward situation. My daughter’s darling infant has taken ill. I must leave for her village tomorrow. You have to receive the august nudists. Well, Pratap, you’re no stranger to the practice of occasionally shedding your

clothes before others! In fact, you've performed far more complex feats in that condition than merely shaking hands with some guests.'

Pratap Roy laughed. 'I don't mind receiving the visitors in a manner fit for the occasion. But Bhanu, you surely haven't forgotten how the Rajmata used to address me!'

The Rajmata never cared to call an official of the Raj by his own name. She had allotted a special identity to each of them and used to call them by those exclusive names in a most natural manner. They were expected to respond in the same way.

'I remember. She called you Ravanapur.'

'Right. Pray, why?'

'Pratap, are we to expect logic in the whims of royalty?'

'Bhanu, you should not evade my question. I was, in the eyes of the Rajmata, a debauch and a demon. Now, as I see it, there will be ladies among the visitors. Will the Rajmata approve of my hobnobbing with them? Why did she send the message to you? She trusts the decently dressed Bhanu Singh as much as the naked Bhanu Singh. The same is by no means her attitude towards me!'

Pratap Roy resumed strolling. Bhanu Singh did not tarry.

The seashore was without a soul but for a group of four or five young men and women waist-deep in the water. The waves splashed weakly on the wheels of their car parked beside a sand-dune. They had come from the town. The youths of the locality were not accustomed to such scanty costumes, nor did the sexes mingle while bathing.

Those arriving tomorrow will be only a degree more modern than these bathers. These youths have a patch or two of foggy and revealing linen on them; those to come will be fully revealed. What radical difference would that make? And from a mystical point of view, even that much difference was nothing but an illusion, for all were equally naked beneath the garments.

Mingling with these people might make it easier for him to mingle with the nudists.

Bhanu Singh advanced towards their car. A man and a woman, emerging from the water, greeted him with smiles. Bhanu Singh smiled back. He felt encouraged, for he was quite at ease among them. But the depression returned soon: Would he be equally at ease when he had to shed his own clothes?

Suddenly his eyes fell on Kapil who stood on the other side of the car. Bhanu Singh knew that Kapil, a former servant in the Raj family, had been working for some time past as a kind of guide for the tourists, Indian and foreign, who were beginning to trickle into Sapanpur, and entertaining them in various ways, not all of them decent, and was earning fairly well. It was not easy to guess the lean, curly-haired Kapil's age and despite his new-found status and affluence, his humility was exemplary.

Bhanu Singh's mind became electric with a new hope.

'Kapil, my dear Kapil!' Bhanu Singh suddenly felt a great affection for him. He crooked his arm through Kapil's and led him away from his clients to brief him about the unusual situation.

'Pratap Roy is right,' he said in conclusion. "The Rajmata would not approve of his taking my place, but she would have no objection to your doing so. Besides, I'm sure, you can do it,' he concluded warmly.

'How much I wish that I could rise to the occasion, Singh Sahib! But I'm afraid, you've forgotten what the scoundrel of a bear did to me. Have you also forgotten the name by which the Rajmata used to call me?' asked Kapil remorsefully.

Bhanu Singh remembered. Kapil, in the Rajmata's nomenclature, was the Grand Neuter, an honorific earned by him after an unfortunate encounter with a haughty bear in the forest, during one of the hunting expeditions of the Raja. The beast had attacked his lower limbs and scooped out a chunk of them in such a horrid way that his survival was a miracle.

'You recollect, don't you? You realize then how ridiculous I'll look when I appear bare before those respectable nudes. I won't be surprised if they get the impression that I had been requisitioned to mock them!' Kapil sighed and, inspired by a profound goodwill, added affably, 'Of course, I don't mind baring myself before you privately.'

Bhanu Singh returned to the palace with brisk but unsteady steps. Never before had an evening by the sea appeared so desolate to him. The labourers had finished a day's work. Bhanu Singh paid them and went in, locking the gate and the main entrance behind him. He climbed to the terrace and sat there, gazing at the dark sea. He was hard put to absorb the reality that his friends had failed him in his crisis.

Would a prayer to any of the gods help? Which god? The great ones must be too busy with bigger and global problems to pay any attention to his predicament, however serious it might be for his own puny self. Whom to bother then?

The nearest shrine was that of Vishaleswar, built by a Raja in a remote past. The deity, from all accounts, seemed to have been a powerful one in days gone by. But the bigger part of the shrine had collapsed for lack of maintenance. Since Sapanpur had lost its importance, the popularity of the deity had declined considerably too, though the essential rituals necessary to retain his presence had never been interrupted.

Bhanu Singh folded his hands and sent up his obeisance to the deity. He hoped that Vishaleswar had leisure enough to pay attention to him.

His prayer should surely be able to travel two miles and infiltrate the stone walls and reach the deity's ears in toto, yet it would be much safer to submit it to him personally.

Bhanu Singh set out along the seashore. Blasts of ice-cold wind planted blows on his back. He felt like weeping, for they only reminded him of the blows given to him by his friends. His complaint to the deity grew more and more intense as the fierce wind pushed him forward faster.

He wiped his eyes as he reached the foot of the small hillock shouldering the shrine.

Some people were talking agitatedly. One of them switched on his torch straight on Bhanu Singh's face. 'Welcome, Singh Sahib, welcome! We did not know that the news would reach you so soon!'

The speaker turned his light on the other faces around him for Bhanu Singh to see them. They were respectable people of the adjacent village.

'News?' Bhanu Singh asked, intrigued.

'Oh, so you are still unaware of the fact that the deity had been robbed of all his belongings – his copper utensils, his brass bell as well as the pair of old silver coins kept before him for ages! The pity is, the robber had even snatched away the yard of yellow silk the Lord wore, leaving him naked!'

'The Lord left naked?' demanded Bhanu Singh and raced up the hillock as fast as he could, followed by the others. Inside the pitch-dark sanctum sanctorum the priest moved his small earthen lamp several times from the foot to the crown of the deity to impress upon Bhanu Singh the pitiable condition in which the granite idol had been left.

Bhanu Singh said nothing. He descended at enviable speed, skipping several steps. The gentleman with the torch asked him something, but he did not bother to answer him and was beyond the weakening focus of his torchlight in no time.

He was now pushing against the wind. That was good, for the pressing wind helped him keep bottled up within his spasmodic sobs the outcome of his intense empathy with the deity.

Soon he laughed aloud. It was a strange sensation, hitherto unknown to him. He was in a sort of trance.

Naked was the infinite sky over his head and naked the sea beside him. The Lord too had gone naked. What did he care any more? Let the naked lot of ladies and gentlemen come! He would receive them and without the slightest sign of shilly-shally, throw his clothes to the wind.

'Come, come ladies and gentlemen! No longer am I afraid of facing you!' he thundered in a kind of ecstasy, joining the chorus of the waves.

Someone seemed to be waiting for him in front of the palace.

'Singh Sahib! So, you were outside! Someone shouted something weird a minute ago and I was struck almost paralysed with fear!'

The speaker held out a telegram. 'Your family informed me that you were likely to be here.'

Bhanu Singh crossed the gate and read the message under the light on the verandah. It was from the Rajmata's secretary. The proposed conference stood cancelled!

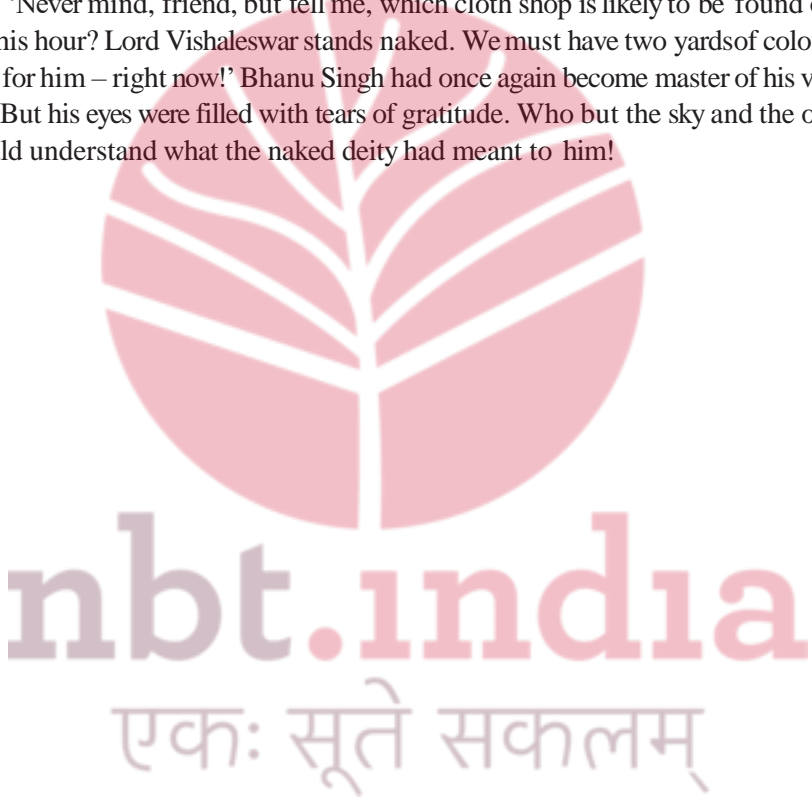
He re-read it, slowly beginning to shiver in an ecstatic reaction.

'They were frightened!' he shouted with extraordinary gusto, and laughed explosively.

'What's the matter, Sir? To be frank, I feel paralysed again!' confessed the messenger.

'Never mind, friend, but tell me, which cloth shop is likely to be found open at this hour? Lord Vishaleswar stands naked. We must have two yards of colourful silk for him – right now!' Bhanu Singh had once again become master of his voice.

But his eyes were filled with tears of gratitude. Who but the sky and the ocean would understand what the naked deity had meant to him!





The Crocodile's Lady

Miles and miles of marshland and sandy tracks, but nothing could disturb the curiosity of Dr Batstone, the distinguished sociologist from the West. After fifty miles the jeep had to be abandoned in favour of a bullock-cart, and when the cart got stuck in a stretch of mud, we had to plod on to reach our village.

Dr Batstone who had lived in a city of skyscrapers practically all his life had expressed a keen desire to experience a real Indian village.

This was before our villages suffered the intrusion of huge red triangles glorifying birth control, politicians preaching patriotism and billboards on the virtues of small savings and cigarettes, not to speak of loudspeakers blaring from community centres.

Dr Batstone relaxed in an armchair on our spacious verandah and muttered to himself, once every five minutes, 'Wonderful, fantastic!'

There was no need to ask him what was wonderful or fantastic. That one could drive for eighty miles without meeting a single automobile was wonderful. That a hundred cattle could march through fenceless paddy fields with absolute abstinence, obeying a tiny tot's hooting, was as fantastic as the Pied Piper's magic. Wonderful was the huge rainbow, fantastic the revelation that ninety-seven per cent of our villagers lived quite contented without having seen a locomotive or a cinema.

But his most wonderful experience had been an interview with the head pundit of the 'Model' Lower Primary School of our village, Shri Maku Mishra, who, Dr Batstone learnt, had taught for forty years without having heard of Hegel or Marx or Freud or Einstein, or even Bernard Shaw and Charlie Chaplin.

Nobody had ever dreamed that a day would dawn when a real Sahib would set foot on the soil of our insignificant village. The Malika, an ancient folk epic of prophecies and prognostications, which had foretold the great cyclone of half a century ago, the collapse of a local temple two decades thereafter and even the emergence of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, had failed to make a mention of such a possibility. No wonder that the two dozen daring, leaderly and scholarly males of our village sat in front of Dr Batstone throughout the afternoon doing nothing but gaping at him and smiling respectfully.

Dr Batstone realized how amused the people had been. He told me several times, 'Well, Baboo, I did not really know that I could mean so much! What a pity I can do so little to please them. I would have loved to perform acrobatics or even a dance, had I known any such art, for the sake of your wonderful people.'

Suddenly the professor asked, 'Tell me. Baboo, do all these people believe in ghosts?'

No sooner had I interpreted the Sahib's question to our people than they began shaking their heads. The professor leaned forward with a jerk. Now it was his turn to gape at the audience. 'Believe me. Baboo,' he confessed, 'your people are much more progressive than ours. At least fifty per cent of my countrymen believe in ghosts whether they admit it or not. Now, please find out for me, Baboo, do all these people believe in God?'

I translated the question. The villagers exchanged glances, but kept quiet, looking intrigued. But the professor had his own interpretation of their silence. 'Obviously, they are sceptical,' he observed. But soon, after some collective coughing, the villagers, one by one, began to explain their reactions to the question: 'Take it from us. Sahib, it is quite inadvisable to believe the ghosts. How much conscience do they possess? I tell you, absolutely nil!' declared Maku Mishra.

'Will you believe, Sahib, that he was my cousin, my very own father's own maternal uncle's own son-in-law's own nephew? And hadn't I done everything for him, from sharing my pillow with him to doing half the shopping for his marriage? Yet who in this wide world does not know that this treacherous brother-in-law of mine, I mean his ghost, chose to harass me out of all the thousands and millions of people of my village, within a week of his death? Who does not know that for a whole year, till his annual *Shraddha* ceremony had fully satisfied him – and for your information I was obliged to share half of the expense – I never stepped out of my house at night even at the most pressing call of nature?' declared Shombhudas, the moneylender.

'No, Sahib, you, after all, are a stranger to them and a visitor from across the seven seas to boot. How much do you know about the native ghosts? You ought

not to trust them. If they get a chance they twist the necks of even the exorcists!' revealed the second pundit of the school.

'Of course it would be libellous to say that there were no good-natured ghosts at all. As a boy I saw the illustrious Mahatma Languly Baba. Yes, I saw him with these very eyes. Baboo, would you kindly explain to the Sahib that the Baba were not even a piece of finger-long linen? I saw him when he was three centuries old. Isn't the history of his birth and his life most amazing? Once a terrible plague struck the land and the Mahatma's mother, taken for dead, was thrown in the cremation ground as people were fed up with burying or burning their dead with so many dying every day. And what do you think happened? The Mahatma was born right there in the cremation ground and howled for one full day and night beside his mother's corpse until he was picked up by a couple of vagrants. Tell me, who protected the Mahatma for twenty-four hours? Jackals and dogs and vultures and ravens were all there, but all sat twelve yards away, watching the Mahatma in silent awe. Tell me, who threw an invisible cordon around the infant Mahatma?' One of our prominent villagers threw this question like a challenge to all and sundry while inching nearer the professor and promptly provided the answer himself, 'Evidently, a committee of enlightened ghosts! Did Languly Baba ever care to talk to human beings or did he care to wear clothes? Never! If at all he mumbled something, it was for the invisibles around him.'

'And, Sahib, isn't the issue of believing in God or not quite absurd? Is God a moneylender or pawnbroker that the question of trust should arise? He created the earth, he brought us down here, he will take us away elsewhere, he will bring us here again, he will take us away, again he will...'

All heads swayed in rhythm suggesting general approval of the head pundit's observation.

I translated him faithfully. The professor leaned back. 'Fantastic!' he exclaimed.

'Beyond the river, Sahib, we can show you the spot where Languly Baba took birth. You can see the place for yourself if you doubt the story!'

Dr Batstone brightened up at the reference to the river. 'No hot water for me tomorrow, please,' he told me, 'I must have a dip in your sweet river. The water looks so inviting! There are no crocodiles, I hope!'

My knowledge of my village was meagre, having lived in the town since childhood. I questioned my people about crocodiles. They seemed scandalized and put this counter-question to me almost in a spirit of protest: 'Crocodiles? Of course they are very much there in the river, Baboo! They cannot live atop trees or hills, as you should know better than us having read bulky books! But do they ever harm the people of our village? What have we to fear from a crocodile as long as the Crocodile's Lady is there with us?'

Several of them pointed their fingers in a certain direction. I had no desire to

translate their statements in full. I simply informed the professor that there was no cause for fear from crocodiles.

But the professor must know everything the villagers said. Their pointing their fingers in a certain direction had not escaped his notice.

I had to tell him what I knew:

‘Dr Batstone, that is a crazy story. You know how credulous our people are. Years ago there lived an aged couple on the river-bank. They had a daughter who had been married at the age of three and had become a widow at four. She lived with her parents and, people say, grew up to be a beautiful damsel.

‘One day while bathing in the river with the other women she was dragged away by a crocodile. She was naturally given up for dead. But a decade later she suddenly reappeared in the village. Her father had died and her mother was dying. Their little hut on the river was in shreds.

‘One morning, two days later, a crocodile was found crawling on the embankment behind her hut. The earth, loose at one place, gave way under its weight. It slipped down on the village side of the embankment and the people thrashed it to death.

‘The young woman’s mother died and perhaps she was too sad to talk to anybody. She wept and kept to her hut. Somehow a strange story began to circulate: the crocodile which had carried away the girl had in due course married her. Unable to bear the separation when the lady did not return to it, the creature had arrived to take her back!’

‘Great!’ exclaimed the beaming professor.

‘And there is a sequel to the legend. Our people believe that out of respect for the woman who had once condescended to marry a member of their species, the crocodiles of the river do not harm the villagers! And this in spite of the fact that the chivalrous crocodile had been killed,’ I added.

‘And what happened to the woman?’ asked the professor, agog with excitement.

‘She is very much there – must be in her nineties – known as the Crocodile’s Lady,’ I replied. ‘By turns the villagers feed her. They also repair her hut when necessary.’

‘But what did the woman really do during that mystifying decade? What could have happened to her after the crocodile had carried her away?’

I don’t know. And I doubt if anybody ever took the trouble to investigate. She narrates some tales when asked and that satisfies our womenfolk and kids.’

‘Fantastic!’ cried the professor, ‘Please, Baboo, let us once interview the venerable lady. Let us dig out the facts. Let us solve the enigma to our satisfaction!’

Moonrise was still an hour away. I led the way with a torch. The professor stumbled twice, first against a mildly protesting dog and then against a tortoise out for a nocturnal meander. But he did not mind the inconvenience.

The Crocodile's Lady sat crouching beside a kerosene lamp in a corner of her hut, softly singing to herself, with her chin on her knees. She smiled at us most affably. We sat down facing her and poured into her ancient stone vessel some crushed rice and sweetened milk with which her toothless gums should have no difficulty. She smiled again.

'Look, Granny, here is a Sahib, not a native baboo, mind you, but a pure Sahib, who has come to us flying through the blue. He desires to hear something from you.'

She showed neither surprise nor hesitation. 'I'll tell you about the wandering prince and the princess under a wizard's charm,' she offered.

'Oh no. Granny, we would like to hear something about yourself. People call you the Crocodile's Lady, don't they? But would you tell us what happened to you during the ten years you were away from the village – where exactly did you live and what did you do?'

She had no difficulty in hearing. And what amazed me was the ease with which she spoke although her voice was no louder than a bee's drone. Dr Batstone asked me to translate every word she uttered. I did so as literally as possible:

'After the crocodile caught me, my son, he took me down, down, down – seven palm trees deep! I did not know what to do....'

'Oh no. Granny, we are not interested in tales. We wish to know what really happened. To begin with, how did you manage to escape from the crocodile?' I interrupted her.

There was no change in her tone. She continued, 'Under the seven palm trees deep water, my son, when I regained my consciousness, I saw the crocodile intently staring into my eyes. I don't know what happened to me. I could not take my eyes away from his....'

'Granny, if you don't remember how you escaped from the crocodile, at least tell us all about your life thereafter,' I interrupted her again.

'But how could have I escaped, my son?' she asked. 'Could I take away my eyes? No! Under the seven-palm trees deep water, there was no sun, no moon, no day, no night. How can I say how long I remained like that?'

I gave up, partly because I found her impossible, but mainly because of the irresistible curiosity and the rapt attention with which Dr Batstone was listening to her. I resigned myself to faithfully rendering into English whatever she said.

She talked for nearly an hour and a half. In the flickering flames of the lamp our phantom shadows danced on the mud wall and occasionally we could hear the oars stabbing the water in the river behind her hut. With great zest and

earnestness she went on narrating the story of her life with the crocodile in a deep pit at the confluence of two rivers, miles to the north of our village.

She would have tried to escape, but floating on the surface of the river she had discovered a terrible thing – she saw her reflection in the water: it was that of a crocodile! Was it when the crocodile carried her, unconscious, to his home that the change had come over her? Or was it when they remained looking at each other? She did not know.

She felt miserable and wept. The crocodile tried his best to make her accept the condition in good humour. But he did not succeed. At last the melancholy crocodile told her: ‘Well, then, take this mantra. Whenever you recite it thrice, you will resume your human form. But it will not work as long as I am near you, for, the moment you recite it, I cannot help reciting another mantra to counter its effect.’

The crocodile could not restrain his tears when he went out for his regular swim the next day. ‘I know I will not find you when I return. But take care not to recite the mantra while you are in deep water so you don’t drown! Recite it only after swimming up to your village ghat, close to the bank,’ was his parting advice.

But the crocodile found her waiting for him when he returned. He was overjoyed. And he continued to find her there day after day after day....

They swam together happily from shore to shore and from confluence to confluence. One day they entered a bigger river and swam for many miles until they arrived at the famous ghat of a holy city. The lady asked the crocodile, ‘May I go into the city for a glimpse of the deity?’ He gladly agreed and waited. She went near the ghat, recited the mantra, assumed her human form, visited the temple and returned by evening. As soon as she jumped into the water the crocodile uttered his mantra and changed her into his mate. What a delight was theirs!

This was repeated several times, and she visited several holy spots on the river. But despite her great longing, she avoided visiting her own village lest she should fail to return to her crocodile.

It was only after ten years that she felt overwhelmed by the memory of her parents. The crocodile gave her permission to go and see them upon the condition that she would return within a day. She came and found that her father had died years ago. Her mother was on the point of death with no one to attend upon her. She remained in the hut for two days until her mother breathed her last. But in the meantime the anxious crocodile had risked climbing the embankment, only to be killed.

The Crocodile’s Lady had lived alone in her hut for nearly seventy years.

A pair of jackals howled right in front of the hut and the professor woke up from his trance. The bright moonlight was softened by mist.

We walked silently. The professor stumbled against the same dog which did

not protest this time and perhaps the same tortoise now on its way back to the river. But his mind did not seem to register the encounters. He walked like a somnambulist.

He suddenly stopped on the river-bank.

'Where is that confluence?' he asked.

'Which confluence?'

'Why, where they lived – the crocodile and his lady!'

I laughed and uttered the professor's pet word, 'Fantastic!' and added, 'Dr Batstone, I'm afraid, you took Granny's tale too seriously.'

The professor grew grave. We resumed our homeward walk. But now he walked like the intellectual he was.

Years later the professor wrote to me from his city of skyscrapers: 'Often I pass into a reverie remembering the days and nights I spent in your village. Surely, I was under the spell of a mantra (who uttered it?) for a brief time. Fantastic!'





The Owl

At Vishalpur the sunset seemed to follow a certain rhythm, and the birds which flew back to their old trees on the marshland at the western end of the village, did so beating their wings in time with it. As their vigorous review of the day's events would die down, the loud call of an elder would be heard, summoning a boy who had been late in returning from the fields with the cattle.

And when there was no doubt left about the sun having set, the jackals let out their ceremonial howl from several strategic points along the marshland. It was not possible to ascertain whether the sunset gladdened them or saddened them. Perhaps what their howl signified had nothing to do with the human notions of happiness and sorrow. Nevertheless, its impact was undeniable. At once it raised the spectre of the burial ground before the dimming eyes of the old folks, and once more realizing the futility of their worldly attachments their lips began to move as they hurriedly muttered several synonyms of God.

And children had a vague feeling that the dusk which overtook them at the height of their exciting game in the cozy lap of the dusty street was fraught with fearful possibilities. But the melancholy the howl wrought in the atmosphere was soon swept out by the sound of conch-shells being blown rising in concert from different houses. Their drone restored faith and confidence.

At last, long after all the other noises had been silenced, from a hollow in the temple which stood in isolation between the village and the marshland was heard the hooting of the owl. Who all would hear the sound on a certain night depended on the course of the wind, the quality of one's sleep, and several other

factors. But all the adult villagers were familiar with the hooting and that itself was considered important. Nobody ever asked why.

This was perhaps the owl commanding the most formidable personality among all the owls of the eastern region of the country. And so far as Vishalpur was concerned, the owl was believed to be the senior-most resident of the village. The temple had been built by a landlord of bygone days who enjoyed a certain legendary reputation. After his successors ran out of luck and their estate changed hands, the upkeep of the temple naturally became the responsibility of the new landlords. But they showed no concern for it. When it appeared that its vault could collapse any moment, the priest carried away the deity, at the head of a small procession of devotees, to his own mud house. The deity took refuge in a small room the floor of which was regularly washed with cowdung water in the morning. A generation had passed.

Every five or ten years it was customary for the villagers to propose to renovate the temple through a fund-raising drive, but partly because the amount required for the purpose was considerable and partly because the deity confessed to the priest, in a dream, that he was quite content with the cowdung-washed floor, the proposal did not materialize.

In due course the temple had come under the owl's possession. A parallel opinion asserted that the owl was very much there even as a co-resident of the deity. However, whether it was the same owl, meditating on whose hooting a certain old wise villager of half a century ago could prophesy drought, cyclone and noteworthy deaths, or a new one, probably a legitimate heir to the old one, could not be resolved as the villagers were not sure of the longevity of owls in general, not to speak of an owl with an occult standing.

But the controversy did not really matter. The owl was looked upon as a supernatural presence and there was no sense in measuring the age of something supernatural.

It was a cloudy night though the clouds were not thick enough to hide the moon completely. The tree-tops formed a dark silhouette against the eerily lit sky looming over the roofs.

The hooting had duly commenced and two hoots had been heard. Just when there should have been another, a gunshot was heard. Before its echo had died down – say some villagers – they heard some indecipherable sound which could have been the owl's somewhat screech.

And an awful silence followed until inside the nearest hut, a furlong away, a new-born babe gave out its first shriek.

A group of villagers returning from the weekly market eight miles away, the wicks of their lanterns turned down, came to a dead halt. Once in a while, when the zamindar camped in his local cutcherry, gunshots were heard, coming from

the marshland, to be followed, an hour or two later, by the smell of cooked meat defiling the Vaishnavite atmosphere of the village kitchens. But never before had a shot been fired right inside the village.

The people knew about the visit of their paralysed landlord's young son. In fact the exotic perfume he diffused as he walked by hung in the air for long and that had been the talk of the village the previous evening. So the villagers, who had meanwhile raised the wicks of their lanterns, were not surprised to see him emerge from the clump of bushes behind the temple, gun in hand.

But they took time to speak. Even the prudent Balbhadra Das, who did ninety per cent of the total talking the villagers needed to do with the wide world, stood petrified.

A full year had passed since the news of the British Raj having been replaced by a native one had reached the village. People had ceased to be skeptical about the veracity of the report. They were growing conscious even of the changes taking place in their own outlook. They did not feel it necessary to prostrate themselves to the young zamindar as they were wont to do to his father.

Balbhadra Das offered a lifeless bow and asked abruptly, 'You killed the owl of the shrine, did you?'

His voice sounded uneven and unnatural.

'So what?' the young man's voice was no less awkward. He resumed walking after a moment's uncertainty.

The villagers followed him silently. Minutes passed.

'You killed the owl, did you? But how could you?' Balbhadra's tone had grown ominous.

'What happened if I did?' The young man made an effort to sound stern. He turned back and looked at them one by one, distributing his displeasure.

'What more is left to happen, Zamindar Sahib? You shot the owl of the shrine dead!'

'Whoever I shoot at falls dead. My bullet gives concession to none – bird or beast, giant or genie! Ha ha,' blustered the young man. But if his voice did not go well with his figure and gestures, his laboured laughter was at greater discord with his voice.

The villagers did not seem to disbelieve him. Challenging his statement was out of the question.

'You can kill giants and get away with that, Sir, but the question of the owl of the shrine is different!' several voices buzzed.

'But how is it different? I ask, how?' The young man's words were wispy and shaky.

'It is different, Zamindar Sahib, it is quite different.'

'O these fellows! They will drive me mad. Why are they pursuing me like

hungry hyenas?’ the young zamindar asked, looking at his clerk, the torchbearing spineless companion of his nocturnal expedition.

Only then did Balbhadra and his party grow conscious that they were heading towards the cutcherry, leaving their diverse homeward lanes behind.

Not long ago one had to think twice before passing by the cutcherry if the zamindar happened to camp there. Their own conduct now assured the villagers that times had changed. However, they turned to go away.

‘Gentlemen, listen!’ the zamindar shouted at them, and when they looked back, showed them the verandah.

It was a custom to light a hurricane lantern when the zamindar passed his night at the cutcherry. It was burning now, growling like a wounded panther, its mantle growing alternately pale and bright at regular intervals. A servant pumped it vigorously from time to time.

The villagers put down their bags and bales and sat down on a hurriedly unrolled mat.

‘What might happen if one killed the owl?’ asked the young zamindar.

‘We were raising the same question, Sir, what might not happen?’

‘Shut up!’ yelled the zamindar. ‘Tell me clearly what might happen.’

‘Catastrophe,’ quipped Balbhadra Das.

‘You recite riddles again! Do not forget that I am the son – the only son – of your master, his only heir. Had my father not fallen sick I would have returned from the town only after I had graduated in law. How dare you bully me? Am I a rustic like you? Tell me, what might happen if one killed the owl?’

Balbhadra, while trying to divert a dragonfly which was making determined dives at the lantern, told an aged man, ‘Pundit! Why don’t you answer?’

The pundit, the highly esteemed teacher in the lower primary school, suddenly broke into a loud wailing. The shadow of his gaping face, enlarged on the wall, looked even more fearful than his real face.

The landlord took away his eyes from him and enquired anxiously, ‘What is the matter?’

The pundit toned down his wailing to a whimpering and sat mute, his head resting on his unsteady knees.

‘Huzoor! The pundit’s too was an only son as you are your father’s. One moonlit night he happened to be around the temple when the owl began to hoot. The foolish lad had the cheek to mimic it. Well, the matter was clinched,’ said Balbhadra.

‘The matter was clinched! What do you mean?’

‘The lad just vanished, believe it or not.’ Balbhadra turned his palms upwards to illustrate the phenomenon and concluded, ‘He went to the same weekly market from where we have just returned, but he never returned and five years have passed. Lost, Sir, vanished!’

The pundit wailed again. From the direction of the temple came the howling of the jackals. At midnight it sounded lusty and purposeful. A quick gust put out the hurricane. Its growl was reduced to a hiss.

‘And, huzoor, you did away with the owl, killed it, murdered it!’ commented a third villager.

They now rose to leave. A couple of bats squeaked and flitted about under the roof. In the process they touched the zamindar’s head. He ducked.

‘You mean to say, I shall die!’ shouted the young man and he sat down on the verandah. The villagers stopped and looked back. It appeared they wanted to say something. But they did not. Yet another gust which burst forth as though through a breach in the clouds, swept across the banyan trees in front of the cutcherry and engaged millions of leaves in an enchanted murmuring. Like a prompt response to their action came the rustling and whistling of the bamboo grove at the back of the house. The boom of a distant thunder followed. The villagers realized the insignificance of their words before this mighty commotion in nature. They left quietly and seemed to dissolve into the night.

The servant who was trying to light the hurricane lantern failed in his effort and gave up. A swarm of dead leaves rushed onto the verandah. In the moonlight their movement struck the young zamindar as somewhat macabre. Were they hunting for something, scurrying across the verandah? He hurried into his room as if escaping their invasion.

The wind continued to blow fiercely for the rest of the night. Once at midnight the zamindar opened the door. A handful of the dead leaves at once came scampering towards him. They would have easily sneaked in had he not shut the door in time.

Through the window he observed each gust sending down showers of dry leaves from the aged banyan trees. The spiralling fashion in which they descended left no room for any doubt that although dead they were possessed by some spirit.

The wind blew with the same force throughout the next day. The sandy stretch beyond the marshland recorded radical changes. Several sand-dunes reformed their shapes. A multitude of rippled ridges disappeared giving way to new forms and geometrical designs.

Despite the difficulty he faced in keeping hold of his flapping shawl, Balbhadra Das braved the wind and showed up at the window of the zamindar’s room. From behind him peeped the pundit and a few other leading villagers.

‘You have come to ascertain if I am already dead, haven’t you?’ the young zamindar screamed, furiously tossing on his bed. His voice sounded as though it came from a remote and alien world.

The villagers said nothing. Nor was there any sign of their desire to

contradict him. Rather, there was about them an air of apology for their having to stand witness to the irresistible course of a terrible fate.

They found no cause to feel surprised at the confidential report that the zamindar had been frightened by an onrush of dead leaves at night and had contracted high fever, and that his temperature showed a continuous rise. Perhaps they would have felt intrigued had such a thing not happened.

And they did not fail to appear again in the evening. Still tossing on his bed, the zamindar was telling the village physician, 'I want to go to my mother!'

'Fie, huzoor! Should you utter words portending evil? How can a wise lad like you forget that your pious mother left for the other world a decade ago?' chided the physician apprehensively.

But the patient was in no condition to appreciate his concern.

The palanquin coming from the zamindar's house reached the cutcherry late at night. A couple of extra hurricane lanterns had come. But they gave little light though they roared loudly and had to be vigilantly guarded against the wind. The grave and tired looking doctor who came with the palanquin examined the patient and advised against carrying him home immediately.

The visiting party included an old maidservant of the zamindar's household, perhaps the patient's childhood nurse. Her moaning trickled out through the chinks in the door and windows of the patient's room.

She was heard crying at the same scale throughout the next day and till the following midnight. Then, suddenly, she burst into a loud wail.

The clouds had drifted away and the moon hung clear. The villagers had no difficulty in getting a good view of the dead young man when his body was carried into the palanquin. Some of them wiped their eyes and many more sighed.

It was a spacious palanquin and rather old; the colourful pictures of fairies dallying with flowers drawn on its planks were quite faded. During the time of the dead zamindar's grandfather, the founder of the dynasty, the palanquin was rumoured to have had strings of pearls hanging from its roof like bunches of grapes. Those who had seen the coloured glass beads decorating it until two years ago found no difficulty in accepting the legend as true.

The old maid ran behind the palanquin, sobbing. The doctor followed her, riding his bicycle whenever possible, otherwise pushing it through the sand, gasping and swearing.

With an umbrella tucked under his arm the clerk ran behind him, flashing his torch from time to time. No attempt was made to light the hurricane lanterns which the servants carried back on their heads.

The villagers followed the palanquin up to the edge of the village and then sat down on a mound not far from the temple. They sat silent, mostly gazing at the palish moon.

‘Tu-whit!’ came the call from the temple.

‘O God! The owl is not dead, after all!’ muttered Balbhadra Das, his bewildered voice cracking.

The villagers sat agape, looking at the dark temple partly visible behind a row of palm trees. Nobody spoke.

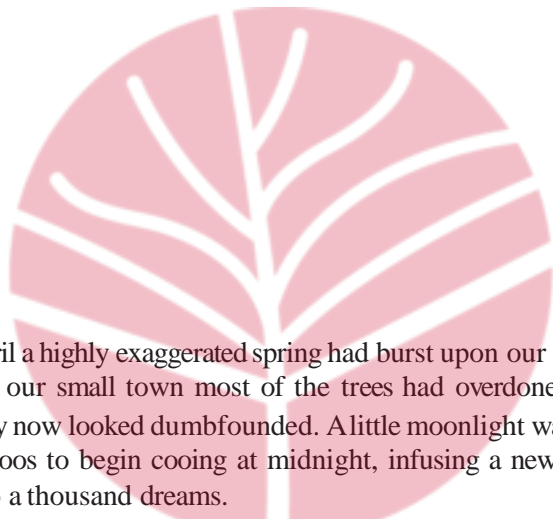
The owl hooted for five minutes and fell silent.

The pundit gave out a few dry sobs. They forgot all about time until the east began to brighten. Birds on the marshland started calling to one another.

“Is the rumour I heard in the market the other day, that the zamindari system will be scrapped, true?” someone asked.

Nobody cared to reply.





The General

That April a highly exaggerated spring had burst upon our valley. In and around our small town most of the trees had overdone their display and consequently now looked dumbfounded. A little moonlight was incentive enough for the cuckoos to begin cooing at midnight, infusing a new though disturbing element into a thousand dreams.

It was the assortment of fragrances in the breeze and the audacity of the cuckoos that had spurred us right up to the gate of the house on the hillock. Three large dogs began barking at us from the other side of the gate. But the season was in our favour. We tried to rouse their conscience through choice words and, in the process, attracted their master's attention.

'Good evening. General!' we greeted in a chorus.

General Valla looked pleased. He kept his dogs under control with one hand and opened the gate with the other.

He was almost twice our height. His moustache looked like a pair of rusty hammers joined at their handles.

'Young men, don't believe in your textbook proverb that a barking dog does not bite. It is extremely doubtful if the dog itself has any idea of the proverb, warns a great man.' The general raised his voice and laughed like one of those automatic guns in action. The dogs fell silent and wagged their tails and looked at him in appreciation.

We stepped into the compound. As we sat down on the sofas on the verandah, the general brought out a ten-rupee note from his pocket and held it out to us.

'Sir?'

‘Don’t expect more. You are the third team of holy beggars this week!’

‘But, General, we are...’

‘Different from the others! I don’t care. I don’t even wish to know whether it is a night school or a library or a Puja. I have fixed one rate for all the charity collectors.’

The dogs sensed our inability to see their master’s point. They growled.

‘Sir, we’re, uh, artistes going to stage a play. We have been regularly doing so at this time of the year and this activity of ours has come to be accepted as almost the synonym of life in this town. Here is the writer, this very fellow,’ Mardaraj said pointing at me.

‘And I happen to be, uh, the director,’ he added.

Mardaraj and I blushed together.

The general was not sure what he ought to do with the ten-rupee note and was squeezing it like a handkerchief.

‘There is a role in the third scene of the third act, that of the royal commander, and our writer has executed the character well. He bagged an award in the state drama festival last year,’ Mardaraj said again.

‘And Mardaraj is a gifted director. The weekly *Lion’s Roar* observed that a director like him could make even a dog act like a lion!’ Bantoo informed the general and blushed, for it was he who had reviewed the production under a pseudonym.

We stole glances at the dogs to see if they took offence.

‘And, Sir, pardon us if we are talking foolish, but how wonderful it would be if General Valla himself appeared in that small but cardinal role! History had probably never witnessed a true commander enacting a commander’s role,’ said I.

‘It will be a historic event, General Sir,’ said Bantoo.

‘It will be the most flattering and memorable experience for the audience, our townsfolk,’ said Mardaraj.

The general slipped the note into his pocket and gave two pats to his moustache and exploded into a laugh. So far only one bulb lighted the verandah. He switched on two more, illuminating the pictures along the wall which captured for posterity his various achievements. His face looked as chummy as a circus tiger’s.

Not knowing what his laughter and the other gestures meant – a bit nervous to be honest – we would have stood up, preparatory to our getting away. But the dogs had put their paws on our laps determined to make us pet them.

Our ordeal, however, came to an end with the general ordering his dogs to behave like gentlemen. He then called out to his cook to bring us tea and biscuits.

Then, in many words, most of them swallowed up by his laughs, he indicated his acceptance of our proposal. We left his bungalow feeling overwhelmed.

Below the hillock, the town lay snug under a shawl woven of dim lights and fog. We felt that we had earned our adulthood. He, after all, was no ordinary general. Stories galore circulated about him, stories of valour and amazing exploits. In the frontiers, during the last war, once he deemed it necessary to survey the other side of a hill. The road to the hilltop was narrow and slippery, with a precipice on one side. Observing that his driver was hesitant, the general threw him out of the vehicle, took over the steering himself and drove up like a rocket, signalling twenty other jeeps to follow him.

He realized rather too late that he had been provided with a wrong map. There was no space enough atop it for a single jeep to pause, leave alone the cavalcade following him.

His jeep rolled down along the other side. The other twenty followed suit. It so happened that an advance party of the enemy lay in ambush along the slope, with a bigger battalion behind it. The sudden cascade of jeeps so terrified them that they did not know how to escape.

The general, who comprehended the situation remarkably fast, let out a laugh which was rumoured to be the loudest laugh in the military history of the century.

Thus did the general's move, appreciated by the enemy as a daring strategic manoeuvre, won us a victory on that remote front.

No one could have thought that the general, after his retirement, would choose to settle down in our sleepy little town. But since he had done so, we desired our town to have a taste of his epoch-making laughter. No wonder we thought we should feel like conquerors.

Upon our meeting the general the next day, he suggested the rehearsals to be conducted in his bungalow. His family was away and there was no constraint on the volume of noise we could make. The suggestion was gratefully accepted.

The general's frequent laughter and the profusion of tea and biscuits soon helped us get over our shyness. There was some problem with the three dogs. Though chained up, they barked furiously when the king in our play had to thunder out his wrath, and they moaned when our whimpering princess had to expound her private anguish. But they rapidly learnt to put up with it all.

The princess had fallen in love with the enemy prince. While the battle was on, she secretly met the commander of her father's army, a great warrior, and implored him to spare the prince's life.

The commander was required to say only a few words, but laugh aloud at this strange request.

Whenever the third scene of the third act came, a polite Mardaraj would tell the general, 'Please, Sir, you don't have to stand up. You'll manage it all right.'

'Of course, I will,' the general would say, laughing. The rehearsal continued for six weeks and the general sat it out.

The news of a true commander enacting the role of the commander spread to every nook and cranny of the town. Walking through the bazar, we could feel the silent admiration with which the townsfolk looked at us.

The general must have sent the news to quarters that mattered. We saw him receiving two telegrams, one from his wife and the other bearing the names of his daughter, his son-in-law and his month-old grandson, wishing him success.

At last the big day dawned on our town and we assembled in the bungalow after hurriedly eaten breakfasts. To our consternation, we saw the general looking grave. By noon his gravity had become so formidable – we learnt from his cook – that after a hurried consultation among ourselves, we decided to question him about it. Mardaraj and I proceeded to his bungalow.

We ran into the general's close friend, Dr Ugrasen, on the steps.

'I was looking for you chaps. Can't you postpone the drama?' the doctor's words sounded ominous.

'Don't be silly. Doc!' cried out the general from behind, emerging on the verandah. His smile was more of a grimace.

'Didn't I ask you to lie down?' Dr Ugrasen's voice betrayed impatience.

'Listen to me, Doc, don't play foe to me. Haven't I been a soldier to my fingertips? You surely haven't forgotten how I blew off the aggressors and recaptured our camp on a stormy night, or how I successfully led my men through a shower of bullets to rescue a besieged outpost! Must I now retreat from a mere dramatic performance? How dare you say that I was feeling nervous? Who will believe you?'

The general pressed his hands to his chest and turned away.

'You are too obstinate for any doctor, Valla!' observed Dr Ugrasen, and he drove away.

We stood befuddled. Mardaraj scratched his tousled head. The spectre of a possible postponement of the performance, after all the preparations and publicity, was driving us crazy. True, we could do without the general. There were others who could step into his small role, even though the change would prove embarrassing. But how could we go about it unless the general himself proposed it?

The cook beckoned us and showed us to the general's room. The general lay on his bed. We who were accustomed to see him either grave or laughing, were drowned in remorse when he smiled at us.

'Doc says I'm afraid of facing an audience. Who but a numbskull can say so! I'm in fine fettle, I assure you.'

He gasped and dared us to answer, 'Do I look as though I were in a funk?'

'Ho ho! In a funk and you! Aren't they antonyms?' we said.

We took leave of him after some forced attempts at making light of the doctor's observations. Once outside, we looked like ghosts to one another.

By the evening Dr Ugrasen had been able to fetch from the neighbouring town Dr Karmakar, the noted cardiologist. Dr Karmakar was accompanied by his assistant.

The doctors took up position in the wings well ahead of time. From our side, we let two budding doctors, our friends, to amble about in the prohibited area displaying their stethoscopes. Besides, Mardaraj's father, a celebrated homoeopath, sat in a corner of the greenroom, his hand cupping his chin and his handy casket by his side.

Despite our great anxiety we acted out our roles rather well, no doubt because of the rehearsals held under the general's patronage. The general, costumed as a commander of old, looked magnificent. But he sat as still as a statue, flanked by the two veteran physicians.

Came the third scene of the third act. Mardaraj walked up to the general apologetically. But the general was alert. He stood up. So did his doctors. He stepped into the stage at the right moment. At once the buzzing audience was hushed into reverential silence.

After the brief dialogue between the princess and the commander, the princess moaned out her piteous prayer. That was the moment for the general to laugh.

But he stood silent. Slowly his right hand went up to his chest. Mardaraj looked like a pack of dry straw and I began to shake.

Dr Karmakar's assistant advanced towards the volunteer holding the curtain rope. Obviously he wanted the curtain to come down. Dr Ugrasen, unmindful of the audience, was about to rush to his friend's side.

But then the general started laughing. And what a laugh it was! The princess leaped back, startled. We stood amazed. The audience sat awe-struck.

The general laughed and laughed, much longer and vigorous than we could have hoped. The curtain came down slowly to a thunderous applause and at last he stopped. The doctors closed in upon him immediately.

The play was a grand success. The general was carried home as soon as he had done his part and confined to bed. But he laughed again and again.

'He really enjoyed his laughter,' his cook told us in confidence. 'I could smell his joy as I can smell *masala* in the curry I cook.'

His family, informed of his condition, arrived the next day, resulting in our losing access to him. We rejoiced when he recovered. But he succumbed to another heart attack six months later. The newspapers, in their obituaries, recounted several of his heroic deeds. We, however, were not quite satisfied. Bantoo drafted a letter to the editors, claiming that the late lamented general's most heroic achievement had been his participation in our drama.

But then, on second thought, we did not mail the letter.



The Murderer

The moon rose rather late. We were still expecting the murderer. Mother had kept aside for him a quantity of rice which ordinarily would have taken two men to finish, and a matching quantity of *dal* and crushed potatoes, and even a cup of thickly boiled milk.

The night was somewhat chilly. From time to time the wind howled in the bamboo grove at the back of our house. An already battered moon tried to cope with another threatening cloud. A lone moaning was heard from the bushes behind the temple of Lord Shiva, the place where we played hide-and-seek on Sundays.

‘It is a vixen,’ commented Uncle. The capacity to determine the sex of an animal from its cry revealed only the tip of Uncle’s vast knowledge.

‘It is going to rain,’ observed Mother, looking at the sudden outbreak of cockroaches all along the verandah. ‘I hope he’ll arrive before it starts pouring.’

‘What if it pours? For that matter, what if there is an earthquake or even if a world war is fought between the market and our village? Binu shall be here all right. A murderer does not go back on his word,’ announced Uncle.

Uncle was the only man in our clan to be in personal contact with the murderer. In fact, Binu bore a lot of respect for him, he claimed. That explained how Binu had instantly agreed to his offhand proposal, made when they met in the weekly market, that he could spend the night in our house.

‘There may be a storm, my child,’ Mother told me, coaxing me to go to bed.

‘But I am not scared of storms!’ I exclaimed. ‘Besides, I don’t feel sleepy.’

‘Not sleepy, eh? Two tons of sleep would descend on your eyelids as soon as it was sundown if there was the fear of the tutor making you do a little arithmetic!’ cut in Uncle and, with a chuckle, added, ‘I know what keeps you awake, son, but let me tell you that the one who is coming is to be tackled by adults only. You may not be afraid of a storm. There must be a full dozen lads in our village who are not. But how many can stand the sight of Binu? A murderer is no joke.’

I had never taken Binu to be a joke. He was the only living murderer in our region lying between the canal in the north and the sea in the south and the two weekly markets in the east and the west. Over and above that, he had murdered not just someone but the famous Dabu Sahukar, moneylender and litigant.

Dabu Sahukar, no doubt, was an evil genius. Many could recite the long list of unlucky men who had lost their houses and lands to him. To be alert enough to escape Dabu Sahukar’s trap was considered the height of prudence. People dreaded him as much as they dreaded an eclipse or the hour of Saturn.

It seems Dabu Sahukar enjoyed terrifying people. For no reason whatsoever he would snarl at a passer-by bringing one’s blood down to a freezing point. A notorious arsonist was on his payroll. To incur Dabu Sahukar’s displeasure meant to be prepared to see one’s house going up in flames, sooner or later.

For many their most pleasant daydream had been to devise interesting ways to put an end to Dabu Sahukar. But even the most imaginative dramatist, if we had any such talent in our area, could not have thought of Binu, of all persons, doing it.

An orphan, Binu had grown up a lonesome young man. He owned a small patch of land and, at thirty, could boast of a saving of two hundred rupees. The father of a sixteen-year-old deaf-and-dumb beauty named Sati had agreed to give the girl in marriage to him for half that amount.

Binu had been observed humming a tune or two during that phase of his life. ‘Pity, his bride will never be able to appreciate his trilling!’ the villagers observed sympathetically.

But Binu’s humming stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Sati had been driven into Dabu Sahukar’s household. Nobody could say exactly how much he had paid her father. But it was safe bet to assert that it was more than Binu’s entire savings.

Passers-by could see the emaciated and ever-quiet girl devoting hours in the morning and again in the afternoon to cleaning utensils in the mossy pond behind Dabu Sahukar’s house. She looked gloomy and drowsy. She looked hardly any different when, one afternoon, she was found lying with half her body in the pond, as lifeless as the utensils scattered around her.

It had not been necessary for any physician to examine her and declare her dead. It was, however, a significant coincidence that around that time a mendicant, one of the holy tribe we often saw in our childhood, was passing

along the road overlooking the pond, singing: 'The swan flies for the lotus-lake that is far; the swan of my soul flies for the lotus-feet of my Master.'

The wise ones in the village believed that Sati would not be deaf once she was dead and that the mendicant's song must have given her the guidance necessary to reach the Master's lotus-feet.

Nobody had ever heard Binu grumbling on account of Dabu Sahukar depriving him of a wife or for the fellow's inhuman treatment of the sweet Sati. Nobody had any chance to suspect that he had so much agony suppressed in his heart.

Famine struck the region not long after Sati's death. Binu himself was obliged to find shelter in Dabu Sahukar's establishment. His honesty was well known and Dabu Sahukar employed him for realizing his dues from his debtors. Also, Dabu used him as his bodyguard when he was required to travel with a fat purse.

Dabu, escorted by Binu, was returning from the sub-divisional town. He had won a victory in the court and had realized from his adversary five hundred rupees on the spot. (Another opinion put it at five thousand.) They had covered the greater part of the distance by boat and only seven miles remained to be trekked.

There was a short cut through the woods. The sun was about to set and eager to reach the village before dark, Dabu risked it.

Both entered the woods. But Binu alone came out!

Perhaps it was already night by the time Binu emerged in the locality. Next morning he was seen sitting in the verandah of the zamindar's house, which was not far from the forest.

Two days later, when Dabu Sahukar's family grew anxious and looked for Dabu at every possible place but failed to trace him, the mystery began to clear. The zamindar, Bhupal Singh, had a long-standing enmity with Dabu Sahukar. However, whether Binu killed Dabu at Bhupal Singh's instigation or he resorted to Bhupal Singh's protection only after killing Dabu on his own, was a controversial issue.

Binu had been led to the police station. As it is, he spoke little. At the police station he remained totally speechless.

It was rumoured that Bhupal Singh influenced the police to let Binu go. Nobody cared to explain why Binu should have been seen with varieties of marks on his back and with eyes and cheeks swollen if Bhupal Singh had exercised his influence. Be that as it may, if not before Dabu's murder, Bhupal Singh had developed a liking for Binu at least after that. Binu was appointed his durwan. All agreed that just as the murderer of Dabu Sahukar deserved to be the zamindar's durwan, the zamindar too ought to be proud at availing himself of the services of a murderer of Binu's stature.

There were many visitors to the zamindar's house. It was natural for all of

them to pay special attention to the extraordinary durwan. Many offered him *beedis* and betel nuts. Humbler ones even greeted him with folded palms. Kids from nearby villages, when they had nothing more interesting to do, came to have look at him.

Generally, the people made three significant comments about Binu. Maku Mishra, the head pundit, had opined that in view of his capacity to keep his thirst for vengeance suppressed for long, Binu could be described as a man of uncommon patience.

‘While the world tolerated Dabu just as it bears with the fury of nature, Binu alone had the courage to conspire against him with as high a person as the zamindar. This showed that he was the only true male in the area,’ said the proprietor of the well-known Shri Chandi opera troupe.

That Binu had succeeded in eliminating all the evidence of the murder after committing it, showed that he could have been a great lawyer, said a retired *duffadar*.

Years passed. Binu was not required to be on duty as the zamindar’s durwan all the time. He ambled about freely and partook of his lunch and dinner in respectable households, returning to the zamindar’s verandah at night, sometimes not turning up at all.

Bhupal Singh was no more. But his pious widow and conscientious sons did not interfere with the arrangements the departed soul had made. Binu continued in his position.

I do not know when I had fallen asleep while waiting for Binu’s visit to our house. Upon waking up in the morning I realized that he had duly arrived and eaten and left our house early in the morning. Uncle taunted me with a sarcastic smile and an oblique look. No doubt I deserved it.

When I reported that Binu had passed the night at our house to my classmates in the primary school, several of them confessed they had wondered why there had been so many dogs barking throughout the night.

Even later I narrowly missed a few chances to see Binu. Needless to say, the mental picture I had drawn of the murderer was marked by frightening traits.

At last, it was after fifteen years and in an unusual situation that I chanced upon him. Thirty years had passed since the murder of Dabu Sahukar.

One day an old sadhu Baba visited our area. Tall and bright, he sported a large beard and a dome of knotted locks on his head. His look was penetrating but warm. He was accompanied by a number of disciples who said that Baba, who had his hermitage in the Himalayas, was out on a tour of the country.

There was no reason for our area being included in a tourist map of India. Neither was it situated en route to any holy place. Hence the prudent widow of Bhupal Singh grew curious as soon as the Baba came to camp in her cutcherry. Her eyes were no less penetrating than the Baba’s.

‘Sadhu Baba! I think I knew you in the earlier phase of your life! Perhaps my husband and yourself looked daggers at each other!’ she observed.

‘My mother, why should I come to pay my respects to you otherwise?’ was the Baba’s cryptic comment.

‘It is your kindness that has brought you here. A hermit, you are under no bondage of any memory of the past,’ observed the enlightened widow as she prostrated herself to the holy guest.

Dabu Sahukar was not dead! He had turned into a hermit and had emerged from the Himalayas after ages! The news spread at lightning speed. Never before had our region experienced a sensation of that magnitude. People continued to wonder at the event for days together.

Several theories about the event were in hot circulation. The most credible one among them said that while crossing the forest, Dabu Sahukar had felt an irresistible urge to go inside a deserted shrine. He asked Binu to wait outside and entered the enchanted compound. Suddenly he came face to face with an ascetic. For long he could not take his eyes off him. He was experiencing an explosion in his consciousness. He shook like a blade of grass and fell at the ascetic’s feet. He got up after a full hour. The ascetic, who had been his *gurubhai* in his previous life, was making him wake up to the memory of his inner self.

At last the ascetic planted a kick on Dabu. That snapped Dabu’s last knot of attachment to his lustful life. He followed the hermit in silence. Both went out through a door opposite to the one where Binu was waiting. It was getting darker. Binu heard a lusty roar and concluded that his master was the cause of the beast’s delight. He took to his heels.

The nearest house to grant ungrudging asylum to anybody in distress was the zamindar’s. Binu had stopped there.

After the first shock had passed, our people realized the illusion Binu had unwittingly created for them. They felt amused. There were peals of laughter everywhere. People now wanted a closer look at Binu who had enjoyed the status of a murderer for three decades!

But Binu was not to be seen. By and by Sadhu Baba also heard all about Binu’s reputation. It was reported that he too had a hearty laugh and he expressed a wish to see his old servant.

The search for Binu became even more intensive, but to no avail.

Sadhu Baba’s advent had made our atmosphere festive. Hundreds came to have a look at him, among them his grandsons and relatives who returned to his camp every now and then in the hope of getting some special recognition, but went back disappointed. The disciples were chanting hymns and *bhajans* continuously, even in the dead of night. In this they had full-throated co-operation from an appreciable number of local devotees.

Then came the day for Baba's departure. More than a thousand men and women collected on the river-bank to see him off. Holidays had brought me and two other collegians of my neighbourhood home. We were not willing to admit that our interest in mysticism was anything more than academic. Besides, we had never known Sadhu Baba in the role of Dabu Sahukar and so our amazement at his transformation was less than that of our elders. Nevertheless, his magnetic personality, warm smiles and tender words cast a spell on us. We too had walked miles to have a last *darshan* of the Baba.

A sickly old man crazily elbowed his way forward and fell flat before the hermit and clutched at his feet.

'Binu!' muttered a hundred voices.

That was the first time I saw Binu. Instantly the spectre the legend of the murderer had conjured up in my imagination was shattered to pieces. We understood later that by then Binu had starved for a week, hiding in the forest.

Sadhu Baba got to his feet and released himself from Binu's clutch with great care. Thereafter Binu kept his face covered with his palms.

Sadhu Baba waited with patience, his affectionate hands resting on Binu's head. In the crowd the murmuring was growing louder, interspersed with giggles.

Sadhu Baba looked grave. Raising his head for an expansive view of the crowd, he said (he had never before sounded so loud and stern), 'Who says Binu did not kill me?'

There was a stunned silence. Said Sadhu Baba again, this time lowering his voice, 'You have no reason to laugh!'

Binu slowly revealed his face. He looked visibly reassured. His face recorded the kind of satisfaction an infant shows when an elder kicks the floor on which it had slipped. Next, Binu hopped on to the Baba's boat and refused to budge.

'Let him come!' said Sadhu Baba and the boat started to sail, amidst shouts of '*Hari bol*'.

Binu continued to be an amusing memory in our region. But once I heard a granny informing her naive grandchildren, 'Binu did, of course, behead Dabu Sahukar. It was the Grace of the ascetic that joined his trunk and head together and gave him life – a new life.'



The Bridge in the Moonlit Night

At times the moon appeared so big and so close to Ashok's balcony that he wondered if he could say hello to it and even reach it in a few bounds and shake hands with it. But since evidently it had no hands, he wondered if it would do to plant a kiss on it.

Relaxing in his easy chair Ashok loved to chit-chat with the moon, particularly when it was full. He had just told it, 'I crossed eighty some years ago. What about you?'

There were moments on such moonlit nights when he could see elves and fairies – he was surprised that they never aged – playing hide-and-peek among the silver-rimmed clouds and atop the starlit trees on the faint horizon. He enjoyed their frolic to his heart's fill, but often dozed off in the process and, what was intriguing, still continued to see them. His only problem was he could not say how much of those playful beings he saw while awake and how much while asleep.

He was aware that this queer forgetfulness had slowly begun to creep into his other activities too, even those routine in nature. For instance, this is what had happened that very evening: he had been delighted at the alluring colour of his cup of tea as it reflected the sunset sky. He had had a warm sniff of its steam. But his happiness drove him into one of those sudden snoozes. A little later, upon being reminded that his tea was going cold, he felt amazed that his satisfaction at having drunk the tea in his dream was not a whit less than the satisfaction he derived from actually drinking it.

But whatever be the condition of his memory, he was proud that age had not

dimmed his vision to any lamentable degree. He attributed this to his feeding at his mother's breast till the age of five, being her last child.

But his pride had suddenly received a jolt and that was only a while ago. The bridge on the small river two furlongs away was no longer visible to him. Each time he woke up he rubbed his bleary eyes and tried to locate the old familiar structure, but in vain. Was the moon playing tricks with him, withholding its beams? He glared at the moon. He then looked at the clump of trees on the horizon where he was accustomed to see the silhouette of the Taj Mahal.

But he could see that all right! This was an annoying problem. He solved it by quickly dozing off.

The footfalls dragging up the stairs, however, were enough to rouse him. They were Sudhir's – as familiar as the thwacks of his own walking stick. Although younger to him by a decade, Sudhir gasped for breath while climbing. But to Ashok, the ascent was hardly more difficult than a leisurely walk. What was more, he had lately begun to have most unusual experiences while climbing the steps. For example, on the last occasion he had fallen asleep midway up the stairs, although for no more than a minute. But that was sufficient for his mind to lose the entire sequence of events. He had just returned from a delightful round in his son's car. But on reaching the balcony, he had concluded that he had just got to the portico. He had looked for the car and had succeeded in rapidly recovering his sense of perspective and complimented himself on that score. To mistake ascent for descent and vice versa was no hallucination of any alarming proportion, he assured himself.

'Come, Sudhir, should we go out for a stroll?' Ashok extended his hands for Sudhir to help him stand up.

'Where on earth to go? The bridge was the only place,' Sudhir lamented, looking in the accustomed direction.

'Yes, yes, the bridge. Let us go there.'

'Look here, Ashok Bhai, you must shake off this forgetfulness of yours, what they call amnesia. Where is the blessed bridge? Why do you think we haven't enjoyed any stroll for a full month? They have pulled down the dear old bridge to its last brick. They plan to erect a new one – a stylish one with a number of jetties on both the sides for the taxpayers to enjoy their evenings around crotons and bougainvillea, cracking nuts and sucking at ice-cream sticks. In no time it will turn into a fish market, I'll bet,' Sudhir spoke with some anguish.

'So that's it! The bridge is just not there! That explains why I couldn't see it. No doubt my memory is fooling me. Your case is different. You are young!'

'Not as young as you think, Ashok Bhai, I will be eighty in a year or two.'

'Well, at your age I could...' Ashok's muttering grew feebler and he began to doze halfway through his observation.

'You are under an exaggerated impression about your age, Ashok Bhai. It's so common to read about centenarians nowadays! What are you before them? A mere octogenarian! Ashok Bhai, are you falling asleep?'

'Oh no, Sudhir, I must confess though that I doze off from time to time. But that keeps me fresh. Now, should we make a move towards the bridge?'

'Ashok Bhai, did I not tell you for the umpteenth time that the bridge had disappeared? How fast you forget things!' Sudhir sounded disappointed.

From the restless movement of his limbs it was obvious that Ashok felt embarrassed. But soon he regained his composure.

'You are right, Sudhir,' he said, 'I keep forgetting much of what people tell me. There was a time when it was necessary to forget a whole lot of things. But then the memory proved too diligent to let a single item slip from its custody. And now when it is imperative for you to remember at least a few things – who else will care to remember for you when you are old and out of tune with the rest – memory betrays you!'

'But you lack no care, Ashok Bhai! Hasn't Providence placed you amid a host of kind souls who will remember for you all you need to?'

'A host of kind but colourful souls. Despite all their goodwill for you they must dab your affairs with their own tastes, imaginations and preferences, so much so that you'll fail to recognize what was yours. No, Sudhir, others can't remember for you, just as others can't forget for you!'

'Ashok Bhai, after a long time you are talking with as much sparkle as you used to when you were our professor. How dramatic it was!'

'Dramatic, was it? I don't remember. And look here, Sudhir, on second thought, there is so much peace in forgetting things! I am at peace, believe me, with my – what d'you call – amnesia. My instant snoozes of which you complain are nothing but symptoms of my peace. Would death prove gracious enough to close in on me while I was in one of those snoozes!'

Ashok's vibrant voice assured Sudhir that he would not feel sleepy for some time to come. He dragged his chair closer to him and, after a little hemming, said, 'Ashok Bhai, for a long time I have been trying to make a confession to you. No longer can I keep the anguish bottled up in my heart. Will you kindly bear with my babbling for a few minutes?'

'Go on, Sudhir.'

Sudhir hemmed again and rolled up his sleeves and changed his position. He passed a few more seconds ensuring that there was nobody in the vicinity to overhear him except for a cat on the sofa. He wagged his stick at it and it walked away more in disgust over the familiar visitor's lack of culture than in any fear.

'Ashok Bhai, you remember Meena, don't you?'

There was no response from the listener.

'You remember her, don't you? Meena, my distant cousin, two or three years older than I, the beautiful Meena! Wasn't she a student when you were the star of our college – a young lecturer? Who could have outshone you in gait and glamour, or in that spick-and-span look you carried about you! But let me go back to Meena. We had put her up in our house. To cut the story short, I mean the very Meena you were in love with. Ashok Bhai, you are listening to me, I hope!'

'How can I do otherwise, Sudhir? Go on.'

'But will you first tell me whether you remember Meena or not?'

'What a silly question! Did you not say that I was in love with her?'

'Thank God. Yes, Ashok Bhai, you loved her and, I suspect, you grew slim yearning for her.'

'Never to grow fat again!'

'But you fattened me – and I have remained fat all my life – feeding me like a pig because you used me as the courier of your love letters to her – and how wonderful they were! I have rarely come across such stirring sentiments either in fiction or in poetry!'

'Sudhir, don't tell me you were unkind enough to read my private letters to Meena!'

'Pardon this sinner, Ashok Bhai, but I did read them. I read not only your letters but also the one – the solitary one – she had written to you in response. Of course, that was how I learned that she too had come to set her heart upon you.'

'No, Sudhir, she had not. And she did never write to me.'

'She did, Ashok Bhai!'

Ashok sat silent without taking his eyes off the moon which had grown brighter after its struggle against a fragile scrap of cloud. The lone eucalyptus that stood touching the balcony continued whispering in the ceaseless breeze. The grandfather-clock rang out a resonant half-past seven.

'I am lucky.' Ashok's voice assumed an unsuspected vivacity. 'I don't care to call for any proof for what you say, Sudhir, but I wish you had told me of her love for me earlier. I could have considered myself lucky over a longer period, that's all.'

'There lies the knot, Ashok Bhai! What do you think am I feeling so awfully guilty about? You certainly remember how shy, how delicate Meena was. But she had at last yielded to your entreaties. She had written a small but sweet reply to your epic love letters. In fact, she had agreed to meet you at the bridge.'

Sudhir paused for a moment and then resumed, 'And indeed she did come, but had to go back, mortified, for you did not turn up.'

'How do you say so, Sudhir! I never received any letter from her!' Ashok asserted in a trembling voice.

'How could you have received it, Ashok Bhai?' Sudhir faltered and tried to

clear his choking throat. 'Did it not fly away, while I was crossing the bridge, in a sudden gust of wind?'

'Fly away? Let us go and look for it!' Ashok made an effort to sit up straight.

'After sixty years?' Sudhir laughed nervously.

Ashok fell back into his chair. 'Ashok Bhai, I must confess that the letter flew away only after I had read it and torn it to shreds. In fact, I offered the shreds to the rolling flood under the bridge. I can still see them flying away in the frivolous breeze like butterflies.'

Ashok sat silent.

Sudhir hung his head and muttered on: 'I do not know why I did so. You will certainly agree that I was not villainous as such. I admit that I was deeply attached to Meena. I could not have wished for anything but her good. My affection for you was no less, but that was tinged with a sort of fear. I was perhaps afraid that Meena would be entirely lost to me, and to herself too, if she married you. My apprehension, needless to say, was sheer stupidity. In any case, I was to lose all contact with her the moment she left our house – which she did before long – on the receipt of a message about her father's fatal illness.'

Sudhir played with his stick nervously.

'Ashok Bhai,' he resumed, 'all this hardly mattered to me as long as I was engrossed in my vocation. But since retirement, whenever I visited the bridge, the memory of my treachery became a terror and haunted me like a ghost. It has plagued me for ten long years. I still feel puzzled over my conduct that evening, sixty years ago. Ashok Bhai, I wonder if you will pardon me. But believe me, if I was a rascal, over the years, by pretending to be good, I have become good.'

Sudhir stopped. Someone was climbing the steps. It was Mahindra, tired but excited.

'Ashok Babu, if I am still capable of walking quite fast and can even climb steps without much difficulty, it is entirely due to the inspiration I draw from your example. Now, tell me, Ashok Babu, how on earth could you reach home so soon? I saw you from the other side of the dismantled bridge. I called out to you. It appeared you were too engrossed in looking for something on the dry river bed to respond to my call. I just took a turn to avoid trudging through the debris and came over to your side. Alas! You were gone. You will overtake a hurricane, Ashok Babu. Who would believe that you were older than I?' observed Mahindra, still panting.

'But Ashok Bhai hasn't been out at all this evening! You must have seen someone else,' said Sudhir.

'Ha! Can I ever mistake someone else for Ashok Babu? And in this clear moonlight? Well, Ashok Babu, you must have been back here only a few seconds before me! Am I right?'

Mahindra waited for half a minute for Ashok to reply. 'Surely, he had fallen asleep!' he then observed.

'But he never sleeps so deep at this hour! Ashok Bhai, do you hear?' Sudhir called out, rather loud.

'Ashok Babu!' Mahindra joined in, louder.

'Ashok Bhai!' Sudhir gave a shake to his old professor and friend. Next moment he screamed out. 'Who is there? Phone up the doctor, quick! Where is the switch for the light, Mahindra? O God, I forget everything!'



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The Tree

Right from the time the season began changing into the monsoon the village Elders had begun to look grave. The sinister cloud formation on the mountains several miles away, and the eerie circular aura around the moon had indicated to them of terrible days ahead.

The flood came at a little past midnight. The jackals, with their long moaning howls, managed to wake up several people who called out to one another and, reassured of a collective awareness, gathered on the river-bank with lanterns or torches of dry twigs. The flames danced in the gusts of wind making their faces alternately appear and disappear.

The moon was draped in clouds and the stars were as pallid as the eyes of dead fish. Nothing much of the river could be seen, but one could sense it swell and hear it hiss like a thousand-hooded cobra. The wind carried the smell of crushed raw earth.

The flood never entered this village, although hardly a season passed without the river playing havoc with the hamlets a couple of miles downstream. Down there the people knew when to go to their roofs or perch on the trees. They would quietly descend after three or four days and take root again. But even though the flood did not enter the village, it nibbled at the high ridge and once in a while gobbled up a chunk of the grassland stretching along the bank.

The villagers felt scandalized every time the familiar tame river expanded and grew alien. It shocked them; as if a docile domestic animal suddenly went crazy, behaving wildly and not responding to any amount of endearment. One just looked on helplessly.

And that is what the villagers were doing when they suddenly realized that the situation was much more grave than they had imagined. From midstream they heard a chugging and cries already tired and cracking – as if from the world of dead. They raised their lanterns. At that the voices grew more plaintive.

The villagers strained their eyes to see through the darkness and the mist. A few of them could make out the dark shape passing by on the foaming ashen waters and shouted the only sensible advice that could be given to a boat caught up in the first rush of a flood: ‘Have patience. As soon as it is dawn people will throw ropes and save you. Keep on shouting. God be with you.’

Such boats generally came from the forest at the foot of the mountains loaded with timber.

Sometimes they were given another stock advice: ‘Throw away the load and make the vessel lighter, but don’t get too light.’ A very light vessel became a plaything for the rollicking waves.

The sounds from the darkness became faint and remote, random syllables blown away by the erratic wind.

And the wind grew stronger and colder and was soon accompanied by a thin shower. Everybody ran to take shelter under the banyan tree. The wicks of the lanterns had to be turned low so that the glass did not grow hot enough to crack at the touch of raindrops.

The leaves of the banyan tree chattered incessantly their familiar language of hope and courage. Its innumerable boughs spread out overhead had been the very symbol of protection for generations, affording shelter not only to those who bore love and regard for it, but even to those who had proved impudent towards it, of course, so far as the latter were concerned, only after humbling them to their knees. The elders would point at a mound covered with grass and shrubs, not far from the tree, while citing the ancient-most proof of this fact. The mound had decayed through centuries, but it was still ‘as tall as two men’. They did not expect anyone to ignore a fact so emphatically displayed.

The mound contained the ruins of a certain king’s palace. It was neither possible nor necessary to recall the name of the king who had built it, or whether he belonged to the Solar or the Lunar dynasty. What mattered was he had dared to cut down a few branches of the tree to make room for an extension of his palace. Perhaps he had planned to cut more, or even to totally destroy the tree, but before he could do so a terrific storm levelled the palace to the ground. The royal family survived the catastrophe only by taking shelter under the tree. The king clasped the tree and wept. The storm subsided.

Further back in time the tree had taken off and flown to the Himalayas or other such meaningful places, at the behest of a certain great soul who lived under it. But that was in the Era of Truth and, in the absence of any concrete evidence

like the mound to support this legend, elders of the present generation spoke relatively less about it than had their predecessors.

The trunk that had once been clasped by the king had decayed and disappeared long since, but after having sent down numerous shoots which had become new trunks. The tree, whose branches spread over an acre resting on these trunks, was the oldest institution in the village.

Beside one of the trunks rested the tiny Banyan Goddess. She had no regular priest attached to her. Whoever so desired could approach her and sprinkle vermilion on her of which she was extremely fond. In the course of generations the vermilion crust had come to account for the greater part of the goddess's person. Devotees ordinarily did not feel it necessary to prostrate them to her, but while passing before her bowed low enough for her to take cognizance of their respect. In matters complex and formidable, the villagers prayed for the intervention of famous deities of distant temples. But small issues were referred to her from time to time. Children of the primary school in particular found her helpful in crises arising from homework not done or the ill-humour of the teachers.

The area before another trunk was the usual site for the village meetings.

Relaxing beside a neighbouring trunk, eyes shut and jaws moving in a leisurely rhythm could be found the much-revered sacred bull. In the afternoon on market days, an old woman coming from a village on the horizon sat leaning against another trunk with a sack half-filled with greens and drumsticks. The market, still two miles away, was her goal, but her knees, she would declare with a quiet, toothless laugh, refused to serve her any more, obliging her to sell her wares cheap right there. At sunset she would rise and offer a handful of whatever still remained in her sack to the sacred bull.

In a hollow at the foot of another trunk resided a family of snakes which had earned the reputation of being gentle and courteous, and in the branches above, a legion of birds.

The tree was taken to be immortal by all without anybody having to be told about it. Immortality being an attribute of the gods, it was godly. Nobody would easily flout a decision that had been taken in a meeting under the tree, for even when the decision was unpalatable to a party, over it there was the seal of a higher power, invisible and inaudible though.

The rain stopped, though not the wind. The first touch of awe and excitement passed. They could all go back to their homes now and return in the morning. It was more out of respect for the river, to show that they had taken due note of its changing mood, than from any fear of the flood, that some people gathered at its edge.

A crashing sound stunned them. Suddenly the earth seemed to rock. The few

who were nearest the river were splashed. Had they been standing a little closer, they would have gone for ever. In the dark, no one had noticed the crack in the ground before a huge chunk of the bank slipped into the water.

Nirakar Das, the retired head pundit of the primary school, shouted, 'Come away, come away, you all!' The authoritative voice was instantly obeyed.

Some snakes crept out of the hollow under the tree and wriggled away towards the mound. Some saw only one snake, some saw two and some three; but to all it appeared the exodus of a thousand snakes, a stream of life abandoning its ancient body.

It was now near dawn. Nirakar Das advanced towards the tree and looked up for a long time. 'My eyes are gone,' he declared again as he had on countless occasions during the past decade. Scanning the people who were now beginning to extinguish their lanterns and torches, he called one of his ex-pupils, Ravindra, the founder-proprietor of the village grocery, and asked him to look up and see if there were birds in the tree. Ravindra and others gazed up into the branches and reported their finding: 'No, not a single feather!'

Nirakar Das looked glum. 'Can any of you recollect another instance like this?' he asked the people of his age-group. They too looked grave and shook their heads: 'No!'

'Far from a good sign,' Nirakar Das observed, 'snakes and birds fleeing this great sanctuary!'

Not long after this, Ravindra and others with better eyesight detected an extensive crack, in the shape of a sickle, with both its ends pointed towards the river. The semi-circle embraced the tree.

'If the tree falls, it will carry this whole huge chunk along with it into the river, for its innumerable roots have made all this earth into a single cake,' a young man explained to his two friends. They were the only boys from the village studying in a college in the town. This was their first visit home after they had grown long hair and sideburns.

'What! The tree fall? How dare you say so? How much do you know about this tree?' an old Brahmin, notorious for his temper, shouted at them.

'They had developed bones in their tongues,' commented Ravindra. 'You are in college, aren't you? Come on, save the tree with your English, algebra and what not,' he challenged them.

'Why should we?' the spokesman of the trio said sniffily.

'Why should you? As if you could only if you pleased! Is this what you imply? Well, why not do it out of pity for us, out of pity for the fourteen generations of our forefathers? Will you?'

This time Ravindra was supported by a number of people. The young man blinked and muttered, 'What I meant was, how can we!'

‘Now it’s how can we! If this much is your capacity, how did you dare to grow such obscene hair?’ demanded the ill-tempered Brahmin.

‘Look here, my young fathers! Take a solemn vow, not loudly, but silently, only inside your hearts – let none but the spirit of the tree know – that if the tree is saved you will shorten your hair! Please, my fathers, make a solemn promise,’ implored Shrikant Das, the meek and mild Vaishnav, his palms joined in the shape of a lotus bud in humility.

As the sky in the east grew brighter, it was observed that the ground between the tree and the river had tilted towards the river.

The three young men tried to appear engrossed in discussing something highly sophisticated among them.

Shrikant Das raised his voice: ‘Hearken, you all! Not only these boys, but we all have our shares of sins. And if the tree had decided to collapse, it was because it cannot bear the burden of our sins any longer. Let each one of us confess his sins, addressing the spirit of the tree, silently in our hearts! Let us pray to be pardoned! *Hari bol!* Glory to God!’

All shouted *Hari bol*. But it sounded like a whimper of lamentation.

When they stopped, the silence grew biting. As the sky brightened the seriousness of the situation became more and more apparent.

A few kites circling above the swirling waters occasionally pretended to swoop down on the crowd, as though to show their contempt for the wretched men below, they being the creatures of the sky able to see from horizon to horizon.

The crowd swelled rapidly. Almost all the villagers, women and children included, were there. In different words everyone asked the same question: ‘What is to be done?’ A part of the tree was clearly leaning towards the river.

Once the college boys had been humbled, there was no hesitation in openly discussing the impending fall of the tree. Something, no doubt, had to be done. If one only knew what that was!

The crowd instinctively looked towards those who had claims to some sort of distinction, one by one.

Shridhar Mishra was a well-known homoeopath, reputed to have pulled back a number of people from the jaws of death. When the people looked expectantly at him, his lips quivered as they always did in the process of diagnosing a disease. Patients and their relatives were accustomed to read in that quivering the promise of a remedy. But since the quivering did not stop even when the people had looked at him for a long time, they focused their attention on Raghu Dalbehera, the only villager who possessed a gun. He was rarely seen without his weapon, even though the list of his kills over two decades had been limited to a handful of birds and a greedy fox – the latter merely dazed by the sound and smoke from his weapon and killed in an operation in which many had the privilege to participate.

When Raghu realized that the crowd had already been staring at him for five minutes, he raised his gun at an audaciously swooping kite, took aim and continued to take aim.

'Don't, Raghu, don't!' warned Nirakar Das and Raghu brought down his gun with relief.

People sighed and stopped concentrating on him.

Just then someone brought the news that the honourable member of the legislative assembly had been noticed on a nearby road, perhaps heading for the next village.

'Fetch him here at once; run, boys, run!' said the elderly villagers. Three or four young men started a race.

Freed from the obligation to think or do anything now that the MLA had been located and summoned, all stood quietly looking towards the bend of the road where he was expected to appear.

The MLA arrived, walking at a running pace, his brows wrinkled.

'Do you see the situation, MLA Babu? We are doomed!' cried out more than one voice.

'Who says you are? Why this cynicism? People further down are really in trouble. The flood has entered their village and is threatening their houses. You are in paradise compared to them, and I wish you good luck,' said the MLA displaying the smile which he used to arouse the conscience of his listeners.

'We voted for you!' exclaimed a voice. The three college boys now elbowed their way forward, throwing glances back at the crowd as if defying it to stop them from confronting the leader. They were, of course, below voting age, but they were determined to regain face after their earlier humiliation.

The MLA paled, but ignored the boys. 'What would you like me to do?' he asked the elders.

There was no reply. Recovering his courage and flashing the conscience-rousing smile again, he repeated the challenge, but tenderly, 'Order me and I am ready to do it!'

'Do, eh! What can you do? Only remember that we voted for you and that it is during your reign that this divine tree, which had stood here since *Satyayug*, is going to leave us,' said an old man.

'Reign? Who reigns over our land today? Neither the British monarch nor the native Rajas. You are the rulers now and I am only your humble servant!' retorted the MLA.

'Servant, are you? Let's then see you serve us! Stop this tree from falling!' It was again one of the college trio.

The MLA suddenly grew spirited. 'Why don't we all try together? Come on,

gird up your loins. What were you fellows doing all the time? Fetch as much rope as you can – thick and strong. Run, run, I say!’ He girded up his own loins.

‘Run, run!’ shouted several others. Though everybody knew how unrealistic the proposition was and how difficult it was to obtain even a few yards of rope such as the MLA had specified, several people were about to set off under the impact of the leader’s clarion call.

But suddenly a part of the tree and the trunks it rested on slid into the river. Water shot up in fountains touching the wings of the startled kites.

‘O God, O God!’

The crowd stood thunderstruck. The silence was broken by an anxious voice: ‘What will happen to the Banyan Goddess?’

No sooner had this question been raised than the ill-tempered old Brahmin was seen rushing towards the tree. He sat down on the muddy ground – a spot lately considered dangerous even by the snakes – and mustering all his strength pulled out the stone stuck to the spot for God knew how many years.

Holding the uprooted goddess close to his bosom as though to protect her from invisible enemies he returned to the crowd that watched him breathlessly.

‘Give place to the goddess!’ the people shouted with excitement, thronging closer around the Brahmin. Someone spread a towel on the grass. The Brahmin put down the deity and patted her. All looked at her with the sympathy an orphaned infant would receive. They walked around her, stretching forward their hands in their eagerness to do something for her.

There was another terrific splashing sound. The entire tree was gone. The old branches wrestled with the mad waters, unwilling to be carried away.

‘Gone! The tree-god gone! *Hari boll Hari boll!*’

For a long time, under a continuous drizzle, they devotedly kept up the poignant chant, all of them looking stupefied and some weeping.

Old Bishu Jena had seated himself before the Banyan Goddess. Someone who noticed that he had begun to shiver, cried, ‘I think Bishu is falling into his trance!’

Several people rushed to their homes and brought out cymbals, drums and conch-shells. In days gone by, when there was no vote, no college for village boys,

Bishu used to be ‘possessed’ by the Banyan Goddess from time to time. Drums, cymbals and conch-shells had to be played close to his ears as loudly as possible. He would start with shivering. Then he would fall down in a swoon and rise up with a face beaming supernaturally, eyes wild as he underwent indescribable experiences.

Often, though not every time, he would utter words that were understood by only a few, who would listen to him and nod. Bishu was in a trance again, after at least two decades. Those who used to play the instruments close to his ears had now grown old; yet, their sagging skin flapping like empty purses, they were doing their best.

Bishu opened his mouth. The instruments stopped playing.

'I will be born again – again!' he said. He closed his mouth and eyes and resumed shivering. The instruments were played again. Again his lips parted and the instruments stopped.

'I will be born as a thousand trees – here, there, everywhere!'

'*Hari bol! Hari bol!* Hearken to the tree-god's message. He will be reborn as a thousand trees!'

The instruments played more loudly as younger hands took over from the tired old ones. Nirakar Das, Shrikanta Das the Vaishnav, and several others joined Bishu in a whirling dance, their hands raised in ecstasy. '*Hari bol! Hari bol!*'

'My God! But the sun is rising!' a little boy drew the attention of those around him to a luminous crack in the clouds and clapped his hands.





Miss Moberly's Targets

It was ten minutes to 5 p.m. and time for Miss Dolly Moberly to feel excited. She paced along the balcony throwing restless glances at the narrow street below.

Robinson was already there, gazing up with the devotion of a dog. Robinson, of course, was a dog, as were Mac and Badal who were yet to arrive. They resided in the slum not far from "The Rest". Their owners, if they had any, must be calling them by other names. One day Miss Moberly had thrown a crust of bread to a dog and the crust had smartly landed in its mouth. Delighted, she had forthwith named it Robinson. Thereafter the dog would bound up to her with wagging tail and twinkling eyes whenever she called it by that name.

One evening, while she relaxed in her easy chair on the balcony and enjoyed the dog's vigorous tail-wagging below, she gave some leisurely thought to this question: Why, of so many names, had Robinson come so readily to her tongue? It did not take long for her to remember the bewhiskered Mr. Robinson, her father's chum who sported impressive sideburns, and was secretary of the local Anglo-Indian society. On the outskirts of the town lived another Robinson whose poultry produce was famous as the Sahib's Eggs. Both had departed long since.

From the parapet a middle-aged cat – one which reminded Miss Moberly of a retired magistrate – watched the dog, disgust writ large on its chubby face. Miss Moberly always felt uneasy at the sight of this cat. "The Rest" was a home for the affluent aged and it was true that most of the inmates had no near enough relatives to care for them, but the organization which ran it was a sound one and from the attendants right up to the health officers and the prefect, everybody worked with commendable dedication. For all their goodwill, however, and for the fat chunks

they knocked off your bank-deposit month after month (or you could surrender your regular pension to them), they could not provide you with dear ones if you had none – none to visit you and warm you up with a few endearing words.

Did that mean that anyone could play uncle to you? But that was exactly what this cat was doing! It would appear on the threshold of her cabin near about midnight and give out a lusty mew which evidently amounted to 'How are you?' but which also seemed to contain an arrogant hint that you were bound to be happy under the arrangements here and that if you were not, none but yourself was to blame.

Miss Moberly used to answer the cat, 'I'm O.K. Thanks.' But despite her perfunctory tone, the cat would hop on to her bedside table and cast a piercing look at her before making a vigorous exit through the window.

In the beginning Miss Moberly had quietly put up with this odious behaviour of her nocturnal visitor, although it had not taken her long to find out that the cat had nothing to do with the management of the institution. But the night she, quite by chance, found out that it was a male cat (and realized to her own amazement that all her life she had thought of all the cats as belonging to the female sex alone), she had told it straightaway, 'Your supervising is rather uncalled for. Please leave me alone.' She repeated her protest to the cat at its subsequent visits, but in vain.

This struck her as strange, for she was certain that cats had once been much more sensitive and humble. Of course, that was seventy years ago. She remembered at least one of her mother's several cats. They had at the time a young tenant on the upper floor of their house.

'There you are!' Miss Moberly told herself and grinned. 'He was yet another Robinson!' In fact, the only Robinson that had once mattered to her!

Robinson used to return to his apartment in the evening and cook for himself, invariably inviting his landlady's cat to share his supper with him. The pussy would shoot up the stairs at his call and return an hour later, its tail raised in triumph.

After a few months devoted to an exchange of shy smiles with the tenant, Miss Moberly, then a teenager and beautiful, had tied a love letter to the cat's neck just before it was summoned upstairs. The letter was not long, but behind it lay a week's toil over numerous drafts.

When the cat returned, what it carried, tied to its tail instead of neck, was not a reply but the same letter, soiled with butter, jam and curry.

Seventy years later Miss Moberly called out from her balcony, 'Robinson!'

Robinson wagged its mangy tail and gave out a tender bark.

Once Miss Moberly had realized the significance of the name she had bestowed on it she had consciously named the second and the third dogs as Mac and Badal. Mac deceived her, after carrying on an affair with her long enough to

make it the talk of the town. It would have been hard to find a dignified match after the scandal and Miss Moberly did not bother to try.

It was a decade later that the millionaire Badal had come forward to propose to her. He was a widower with a clean reputation and, at fifty, had suddenly fallen in love, for the first time in his life, he declared on oath. 'What a headlong fall is here, my countrymen!' a professor friend used to tease them with a parody of Shakespeare. 'Then, religion, caste and kin sank down slain whilst bloody love flourished over them!'

Badal closed down his business in Saigon but on his way back died in a shipwreck.

Badal, of course, could not be grouped with Robinson and Mac. But no longer did Miss Moberly bear any resentment even against those two. Not that she had ever formally pardoned them, but God must have. That alone explains her slowly transcending her anguish.

The gallant Badal died while he was at the peak of his happiness. For a long time Miss Moberly loved to imagine that the ship had sunk while Badal was fast asleep, dreaming of her, and the next moment he had found himself in the heavens where he still awaited her, sporting the same milky smile under his bushy moustache.

But what about Mac? After he had squeezed out of her all he wanted, he joined an international gang of thugs. Injured in an encounter with the police, he died of gangrene. (Till she tired of the fantasy. Miss Moberly had nursed a faint hope that Mac's last message, to be delivered to her any day, was: 'Dolly dear, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry....')

And Robinson! Perhaps the chap had never been able to love anything better than a cat all his life. Miss Moberly was convinced, though she could not say why, that unheard and unsung, he had died of leukaemia in some mofussil town, and that his skeleton was dangling in the anatomy department of the new medical college attached to the impoverished local hospital.

Miss Moberly stopped pacing to and fro and, leaning on the railing, looked down. At once three tails began wagging and three tongues lolled. Robinson, Mac and Badal. Miss Moberly disappeared into her room and emerged, chuckling, with a small plastic tray filled with crumbs of cake, bread, and biscuit.

'Would you now set the chairs on the balcony and prepare tea?' she called faintly to her attendant. It was time for her friends to arrive. Mr Doss was already in the park below, whacking his stick in the air and killing time. That was his virtue. If he arrived even half a minute early, he would kill that half-minute prayerfully looking at his watch, outside the door. 'You are almost an Englishman, Mr Doss!' his boss used to observe when he was in service. Mr Doss took the tribute as the crowning glory of his life and was never tired of repeating it.

Mrs Sawoo should be arriving any moment, accompanied or followed by Mr Jacob. All three, now in their late eighties, were slightly older than Miss Moberly. Her father had been an influential man in the town, with varieties of achievements and a couple of titles earned from the British Raj. Her acquaintances, naturally, were numerous. But these three were the last surviving members of an inner circle which had sighed at every phase of the tragedy that dominated her life. They claimed to be younger than she in spirit and had begun to insist that she had lately been prone to mild hallucinations and should be careful about it. Mrs Sawoo, for instance, asserted that it was wrong to imagine that a male cat could ever talk! Miss Moberly should have quipped that the cat talked in its own language and not in English! But the fitting rejoinder always evaded her when most needed and occurred hours after she had been snubbed.

All that the three had done for a good many years now was to sympathize with her. At last the day had come for them to realize that it was not just sympathy that was her due; she deserved congratulations too. Henceforth no one would be able to say that her life had been nothing if not a calendar of failures. She was now ready to demonstrate to all concerned her spectacular success in striking her target.

‘Dolly darling!’

Doss, Mrs Sawoo and Jacob entered together and Mrs Sawoo gave her a noisy kiss. Miss Moberly did not neglect showing her usual warmth but she remained thoughtful. She must demonstrate her feat in an artful manner; the guests should suspect that she was making a deliberate show of it.

A crumb fell from Mrs Sawoo’s hand. Miss Moberly stooped to pick it up.

‘Sorry, but leave it there, dear,’ murmured Mrs Sawoo.

Miss Moberly smiled and holding the crumb in her hand long enough to draw everybody’s attention to it, suddenly threw it over the railing. Robinson jumped up and caught it in its mouth. Mac and Badal, knowing that their turns were coming, licked their lips and gave out subdued barks.

‘Excellent!’ said Jacob and Doss.

‘Thank you, but wait and see!’ Miss Moberly turned her chair to face the road and placing the plastic tray on her lap, began throwing the crumbs with style and verve. The dogs romped and hopped, catching the missiles with dexterity.

‘Excellent. Wonderful!’

The guests were liberal with their exclamations. Miss Moberly did not recall at what point she had stood up. The rhythm of the romping dogs found an echo in her own motions. She almost danced as she threw the crumbs.

‘Come on, Dolly, enough of it. Drink your tea!’ said Mrs Sawoo in a matronly tone.

The plastic tray had been emptied. Miss Moberly sat down, satisfaction reigning on her face like a sunrise.

‘Hah! you are surprised, aren’t you? Believe it or not, rarely do I miss my target. Who could have thought that I would be able to achieve success ninety times out of a hundred,’ she managed to say between mild gasps, and laughed.

‘Why not, Dolly!’ Mrs Sawoo remarked while stirring her tea.

Miss Moberly looked down and waved at the dogs. ‘Still there, eh! Disperse, quick! See you tomorrow!’ she said.

‘It is a regular sport with you, is it, Dolly?’ Jacob queried with a chuckle.

‘Who could have dreamed that I would be such a success at it!’ Miss Moberly trilled bashfully.

‘Well, Dolly, is there a cleverer hunter among the beasts than a dog?’ observed Doss.

‘Exactly,’ Mrs Sawoo took upon herself to elucidate the remark. ‘A dog will snap up a crumb even if you threw it with your eyes shut!’

‘Do you remember my Alsatian, Don Juan? Once he nabbed a robin from a branch two and half yards above the ground – yes – he did so while I looked on,’ reminisced Doss, drawing in the air with his stick the location of the bird’s perch and the swiftness with which Don Juan had pounced upon its prey.

‘And I believe you all remember,’ he continued, ‘Sweet Heart, my spaniel during my Simla stint, whose picture had appeared in Vol. 3, No. 7, Page 12, March 1921 number of *Dogs International*, with a feature by Mr Richard Whites. How diligently Sweet Heart would fetch the tennis ball with a bite as tender as a kiss!’ Doss kept a slice of cake under his own tender bite for a while and then resumed, ‘I just can’t help recalling again and again the observation Mr Whites had made – that looking at Mr Doss, the ideal doggy, and Sweet Heart, his regal spaniel, one could suspect that Sweet Heart was the master and Mr Doss was her dog! But I used to protest, ‘Such compliments, Sir, are not my due!’ Mr Whites would say, ‘Mr Doss! You were almost an Englishman, except for this humility of yours, ha ha!’

For the next half-hour they remained engrossed in discussing the great dogs they had known in their life.

Nobody marked how dead Miss Moberly’s face looked and how awkward the movement of her limbs had become.

The guests stood up.

‘Till next week, Dolly, darling!’ said the gentlemen, and Mrs Sawoo kissed her goodbye.

Miss Moberly, as brisk and breezy as an orchestra-conductor only minutes ago, walked into her room holding on to the wall and sprawled on the bed.

‘Despise all your glittering false teeth with which you try to smile clever, you

are a fool, Mrs Sawoo. And despite your dyed moustache which you still strive to keep forked out in your damned desire to look dashing, you are a snob, Mr Doss. And, Mr Jacob, you are a nincompoop!' mumbled out Miss Moberly and that gave her the strength to sit up for a while. She did not know when sleep overtook her.

As soon as she woke up early in the morning and saw her supper lying untouched on the table and recollected the events of the evening, she began taking determined steps to tide over her anguish. At first she reminded herself for the thousandth time that it was vain to expect true understanding from human beings, including those who had been near and dear ones for decades. Then she tried to forget the matter and, failing, set about analysing the minds of her three friends. She concluded that since they had fallen into the habit of sympathizing with her for her missing the target all her life, they had grown chronically incapable of accepting her success even when it was so glaringly evident.

She was charmed by her own power to delve into the very crux of the matter and that gave her some peace.

But she soon hit upon the real mischief the deplorable episode had done. It had bred some misgivings in her mind about her own capacity and the doubts bred a deepening sense of frustration. But could she afford to lose her self-confidence just because of casual comments by a few silly felows? 'No!' she told herself, 'No, no, no!'

She must prove, at least to herself, that her achievement was as real as her confidence in herself.

In the evening Miss Moberly stole several peeps into David Dawson's room. The retired brigadier passed his mornings in humming or whistling ancient war tunes and his afternoons in snoozing against a huge bolster.

After strolling for a while along the balcony in front of Dawson's room during which she assessed the brigadier's condition, Miss Moberly stealthily entered the room and came out in a minute. Dawson did not open his eyes.

Back on the balcony she breathed deeply, inhaling a lot of oxygen and courage. She knew under which side of the pillow Dawson kept his pistol. She wavered for a moment and then entered the room again, picked up the weapon, and tiptoed out.

Now she could prove it! The dogs might get the credit in the case of the crumbs. But surely, it could not be the same when it came to receiving a bullet! If she could hit one, it would be entirely due to her accuracy of aim, not the dog's.

Who should it be? Robinson, Mac or Badal? Any would do. Poor Badal! But what business had he to fall in love if die he must in a shipwreck? None of them deserved mercy. She could shoot down any of them. Couldn't she? Of course she could! – she assured herself, breathing in deeply several times.

‘Damn it! Who the hell took away my pistol? Good God! Dolly, you!’ Brigadier Dawson screamed and hobbled towards the door. Miss Moberly stood still, pressing the pistol to her breast, like a child stubbornly refusing to part with a toy.

‘You meant to commit suicide, Dolly? Yo ho!’ the old warrior screamed again, trembling all over.

‘Suicide?’ cried out Jayshri Mishra, former actress and one-time mistress of a prodigal prince, as she came rushing, her eyes ignited by the brigadier’s exclamation.

‘Suicide? Oh no!’ cried out in a cracking voice the retired principal Jonathan Jana, who generally kept quiet during the day but at night taught Milton in his sleep.

‘Suicide?’ shrieked Miss Moberly herself and she broke into wild sobs.

The actress and the principal tried to take hold of Miss Moberly’s tiny head. She obliged both, first leaning on the actress’s breast and then on the principal’s. She also allowed the brigadier, who showed remarkable consideration and patience in relieving her of the weapon, to fondle her.

It was the principal who first echoed her sobs. He was instantly joined by the actress and the brigadier.

Fifteen feet below, Robinson, Mac and Badal yapped politely. The well-wishers led Miss Moberly to her bed. Jayshri prepared coffee for all. The duty of hurling crumbs at the dogs was discharged by the brigadier. They all sat around Miss Moberly till late in the night, had their supper together, and talked of human goodness and God’s kindness and exchanged anecdotes of profound significance.

‘Now, go to sleep, sweet child, my very sweet child,’ said the principal stroking Miss Moberly’s head and bidding her an affectionate goodnight.

When the male cat appeared at midnight and put its usual question to Miss Moberly, she did not take offence at all. She had begun to see a guardian in everyone.

‘I’m quite all right. Thank you,’ she told the cat politely and fell asleep.



Prithviraj's Horse

It had been a fond habit with Mukund, the teacher of history and sometimes of geography, to offer his smiles to the tall, the burly and the brawny, by way of greeting them. He did not do it just as a safety measure, thin and weak though he was. 'These stalwarts roaming up and down the earth could cause even more trouble to the already harassed humanity if they so wished. But how harmlessly they move about! Don't they deserve a show of gratitude?' This was his thought. In fact, he thought on behalf of conscientious humanity.

One in every three such stalwarts acknowledging his greeting, by smiling back or giving a nod, was enough to tide him over his anguish due to the other two taking no notice of his gesture. Often he conquered those disinterested heroes with a second or third round of his undaunted smile.

Mukund was new at Parvatipuri. His lodge was four kilometres away from his school, the Goswami Academy. Far from grumbling on that account, he felt happy. Time had reduced Parvatipuri to a hick town, but it had a glorious past. And Mukund loved walking, exploring places.

What a thrill was there in finding a new route to his destination – discovering a blind lane on the way or taking a short detour for a closer look at a building that looked hoary! Who knew if the alley he had just covered did not contain the remains of a mighty warrior reduced to dust, or the nook he surveyed had not been the seat of a Yajna performed by a mythical sage? Who knew if those old monuments did not still contain a stone or two of the legendary castles which adorned the city in her remote golden age?

There was no dearth of time. He lived alone and took his food at a small

restaurant close by his lodge. His relatives had made several attempts at providing him with a consort. But in each case the prospective bride appeared to be stronger than he. After running down the sixth proposal, he had conveyed to his tired well-wishers that he had resolved to remain a bachelor for ever. The cause of his grim decision, of course, remained buried in his heart.

He had retained and reinforced his reputation as a perfect gentleman as he changed from school to school. In every farewell meeting the budding speakers, his favourite students, declared in voices choking with emotion that their only aim in life was to be as noble as their departing mentor. Mukund was the star – the polestar – to which they must hitch their wagons.

He was sure that few could equal him as a teacher – of history in particular. He tickled the dead past back to life. Students forgot even football and cricket and sat gaping at him when he spoke of the great moments of history and went on speaking till well past the bell.

The character who fascinated him most was Prince Prithviraj. He was unhappy with the lacklustre manner in which the textbooks presented the remarkable story of the hero's elopement with Princess Samyukta. He retold the story with a vengeance, so much so that the students in the first row could see his hair stand on end and he thought he could see theirs do the same.

A normal Monday suddenly became a memorable day for him when, at the end of a period, he overheard a girl whispering to another, 'It looks as though Mukund Sir was a witness to the Prithviraj-Samyukta escapade!' 'Indeed!' commented the other.

How many got to hear such splendid appreciations? Mukund felt rewarded, delighted, and grateful.

It was a quiet sunset and he took one of his newly discovered lanes leading circuitously to his lodge. More important than the lane was the novel object of adoration he had found beside it. At the very first glimpse of the man, six times his girth if not more, he had remembered the mighty Bhim of Mahabharata. But since the man was quite young, he preferred to name him Ghatotcoch, Bhim's gigantic son by his demoness consort, Hidimba.

Mukund's first smile had evidently gone unnoticed. When he smiled at him at the second opportunity, the young giant looked intrigued. His reaction was not any different even to Mukund's third attempt. But Mukund did not give up. If anything, he felt even more fascinated by that mountain of a man and looked at him like a climber measuring a defiant peak he aspired to scale.

Upon Mukund throwing his smile for the fourth time at him – that was this morning – Ghatotcoch's lips had parted and his eyes had grown rounder. Maybe that was the fellow's manner of responding to his show of affection, thought Mukund, and derived some consolation from it.

Who could the giant be? His red round eyes and long sinewy arms gave one the impression that crushing creatures with a huge mace had been his pleasant hobby till the previous week.

Mukund slowed down his pace. He spotted Ghatotcoch on the verandah of an old house, a picture of Vir Hanuman pasted on the dilapidated door behind him. A few yards away sat four or five elderly men of the same clan, playing cards. He had not seen them there before. Obviously, they were all outsiders, living scattered in the town, coming together for a relaxed evening.

As soon as Ghatotcoch's eyes fell on him, Mukund gave him the broadest ever smile.

Suddenly Ghatotcoch jumped down and held him by the arm. Mukund had a feeling that his arm was fast turning into pulp.

'Why do you laugh at me?' demanded the man in a mixed language.

This was most unexpected. Mukund, always an inspiring talker, learnt for the first time what it was like to be struck dumb. Ghatotcoch's kinsmen paused in their game and gazed at Mukund and his captor. Mukund saw in them a troop of tigers making a silent allocation of his limbs among themselves.

'You find me funny, do you?' Ghatotcoch demanded again.

'Does he possess a pair of horns?' a card-player asked Mukund, baring his vampire-like red teeth.

'Is he a creature in the zoo and are you a mere toddler to feel amused at him?' asked another.

Mukund was shaking and seeing a thousand fireflies around him in a bizarre darkness engulfing him.

Suddenly he gave out a yell. Startled, Ghatotcoch released him. Mukund ran at great speed, feeling like a shuttlecock struck by a gorilla's racket.

'What's the matter, Babu?' asked several voices, some curious and some anxious. Mukund did not stop.

On reaching home he lay down. He felt scalded.

He who had successfully survived seven conspiracies to pin him down to a marital bed, he who looked ten years younger than his age, he whose farewell meetings drew a hundred streamlets of tears and who could tell you from memory the exact dates of the Kalinga war, the coronation of Kanishka, and the confrontation between Dupleix and Clive, he who planned to go down in history as the founder-president of a cultural-cum-gymnastic club upon retirement – was about to get beaten up and unceremoniously thrown in a murky lane by a dunderhead!

Was his life a bubble for somebody to prick and see it vanish?

He was still shivering, no longer for the shock, but from a brew of bewilderment and agitation churning within him.

“Could that chap have squeezed life out of my body and dumped it on the wayside? Am I not invincible?” he asked himself and felt brave and his lips curled in disdain for Ghatotcoch. Only if the chap had heard what those sweet girls in the classroom said – that his soul dated back to the era of Prithviraj – if not to that of Vikramaditya!

And couldn't that be true? Why not?

He felt the urgency for growing sure of it once for all.

He sprang out of his bed.

It was dark by the riverside and he jogged on comfortably.

‘Tantrik-Astrologer, Gold-Medallist-Worshipper of Goddess Kali, Advisor to Kings and Emperors, Predictor of the Future, Expert in reading the Bhrigu Samhita and Revealing your Past Lives – Pundit Purandar Sharma’ announced the signboard under a flickering bulb dangling over it. The door was half open. Many times before had Mukund wished to meet this occultist. The right moment had come at last.

‘Yes?’ Sharma focused an owlish look on Mukund.

‘I wish to know who I was in my earlier incarnations.’

‘I have closed the sacred Bhrigu Samhita for the day. Once closed it cannot be opened before sunrise ordinarily, not even if King George the Fifth pleaded for it or promised a bit of his kingdom. However...’

‘All I want to know for the moment is my status in the court of Prince Prithviraj, the last of the Chauhans....’

‘Ten rupees.’

Mukund handed out the money. Sharma once again folded his legs into the lotus pose. He scribbled on a slate the numbers relating to Mukund's date and time of birth. He took the slate close to the table-lamp and mumbled something for a couple of minutes.

Mukund stood breathless. The occultist shook his head and shut his eyes. A minute passed. He opened his eyes wide and at once fixed them on Mukund's.

‘I saw you, sonny!’

‘Really? How did I look? Was I by any chance Pr... Prithvi...’

‘You were his faithful horse, my boy. Come again. The answer to the first query costs ten rupees. The subsequent ones cost only Rs.5 each.’

Sharma patted Mukund on the back. ‘Yes, you used to bear Prince Prithviraj here!’

‘And Samyukta too!’ added Mukund. The occultist nodded. It was not clear if he understood Samyukta's relevance to Prithviraj. But he exclaimed, ‘A monarch among stallions! Yes, that is what you were!’

Mukund was on the road again, his body charged with a hitherto unknown vim and vigour. He was no longer surprised over the speed at which he had run

while giving the slip to Ghatotcoch. It was an ability that had come down to him from his glorious equine past. The yell that made the would-be assailant release his arm was an atavistic outburst of his stately neighing that had struck terror in the heart of Muhammad Ghauri in the year 1192.

What a stalwart among stallions, how handsome and stately he must have looked!

The darkness was only partially dislodged by the miserly streetlights and a reluctant moon. Mukund began to run again. Despite the evolutionary metamorphosis of his two forelegs into arms, he was sure he could run like his earlier incarnation.

He was at his destination within minutes.

He peeped through the window. Ghatotcoch sat cross-legged before a lantern and munched *chapatis* meditatively.

Mukund stormed in. Ghatotcoch was taken aback.

Mukund grinned. 'So, baby, you take yourself to be really Ghatotcoch, eh? Scaring a mere teacher of Goswami Academy was as easy as shooing away a kitten, right? What a hero! Get up, boy, let's have a fight!' said Mukund, his hands resting on his waist. 'Yes, a real fight. I mean it.'

Ghatotcoch had instinctively thrown a whole *chapati* into his mouth lest an opportunity for that should never come again, and was nervously trying to swallow the lump. It got stuck in his throat. He made a gurgling noise. Mukund saw his reflection in a cracked mirror on the wall. He looked menacing and weird. He laughed lustily.

'You nincompoop, you a fat lump of ignorance, do you know who I am? Squeezing my arm, eh? Munching *chapatis*, eh? I can munch and munch and reduce you to a mouthful of syrup and gulp the whole of you down. Do you understand that?' Mukund flexed his muscles, took a step forward and gave a shake to Ghatotcoch, who slumped.

Mukund laughed aloud again and jumped down to the road. His return journey was leisurely. He even whistled and hummed a tune. He ate twice his usual meal and sank into a sound sleep.

Next day, while he was zealously explaining to his students the phenomenon of heavy rain over Cherapunji – for, strangely, the geography teacher developed a sore throat and sneezed uninterrupted whenever the Cherapunji chapter came and took leave for a day – the headmaster summoned him to report to the teachers' common room.

The septuagenarian chairman of the school managing committee said, addressing the assembly of teachers, 'You might feel amazed to learn that a certain goonda, announcing himself as a teacher of our school, manhandled a young man, a job-seeker from a faraway place. Is it not rather baffling that someone should

try to tarnish the fair image of our institution? When the victim, his guardian, and the secretary of their association brought the matter to my knowledge this morning, I straightaway offered to hold an identification parade of our teachers! Let them feel sure that we have no rowdy, no ruffian, or brigand on our payroll! Please bear with the inconvenience.'

The chairman smiled and, through the window, signalled Ghatotcoch and his guardian to come in.

Ghatotcoch looked nervous. Directed by the chairman he began surveying the teachers, one after another.

'Here...here....' he squeaked, pointing a feverishly trembling finger at Mukund.

'Who? Our Mukund Babu?' asked the amused chairman.

All the eighteen teachers giggled while the chairman and the headmaster somehow managed to look serious.

'My boy, had you accused me of the crime, that would have made some sense,' commented the venerable chairman with a sigh. He then took Ghatotcoch's guardian aside and said as politely as possible, 'I suggest, you take the young man to the hospital – I mean to the psychiatry department.'

Ghatotcoch, on the verge of weeping, was led away by his guardian. The chairman apologized to the teachers and left the common room along with the headmaster.

The eighteen teachers surrounded the blushing Mukund and burst into a laugh that surprised even the half-deaf watchman on duty at the gate a hundred yards away.

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The Strategy

It was at a serene dawn, while the last star in the eastern sky was taking leave of Gouri through her window that the brilliant idea flashed in her mind – the strategy to wake up everybody in the village, by giving them a jolt, to the fact that she was still there amidst them, as alive as ever.

The suspicion that she was being taken for granted, even cold-shouldered, had persisted in her mind for nearly a year. It was time for her to act, to shake the villagers out of their complacency. Luckily, her bones were strong under her timeworn skin and her hands, at ninety-three, were only slightly less mobile than they had been till the other day when they did their magic with women in labour.

She had tried to impart her skill and dexterity to Ahalya, a young widow who addressed her as Granny. No doubt Ahalya was developing the ability – which needed more of ardour in the heart than skill in the hands – quickly. But a big dispensary had come up in the vicinity of the village and, by and by, the job had been entirely taken over by the nurses in immaculate white.

Ahalya, however, continued to attend upon Gouri. What was it that motivated her? The few silver ornaments Gouri had? Or only love? Maybe a combination of both and there was nothing wrong in it.

Gouri could have given her even the gold ring she had once received as a reward for seeing the zamindar's daughter-in-law through a critical phase in the process of her delivery. Unfortunately, she had to sell it to save her adopted son, an orphan, from litigation. She could rescue the unworthy boy, fallen into evil company, from the clutches of law, but not from premature death.

That was half a century ago. For a while she thought that her sole interest in

the world had snapped, having lost her father even before her birth, her mother at the age of three, her husband (she had been married off by her late uncle when five) at the age of seven and her grandmother, who taught her midwifery, at sixteen.

But, to her amazement, she saw her link with the world growing stronger by the day. For all the children of the region she became the golden bridge between their mothers' wombs and Mother Earth as they descended on her palms. It was she who responded to their first cry, in which she deciphered the infant's assertion of its blind faith that there was someone to hearken to it. And in her own spontaneous loving response she heard the reassuring voice of Providence.

She emerged, every time, ennobled from the exercise. No one else was expected to know about it, but her memory teemed with numerous such moments, exhilarating and invigorating. Her days passed amidst those loving faces growing up around her and the recognition accorded her by their parents.

Times seemed to have changed. Where were those toddling golden cherubs? The one whose advent had brought her the gold ring had duly inherited his father's estates, but after the abolition of the feudal system, had grown addicted to opium. The local leader, now an MLA, whose voice resounded like that of a whole bazar, had lain voiceless and benumbed for a long time after his birth, causing great consternation in all the women gathered around his mother, except, of course, in Gouri, whose feelings were moulded from deep within and did not depend on mere external signs of a situation.

Attitude of people were no longer the same – Gouri had been aware of it for a long time – and in their eyes she was perhaps in no way different from any other aged and useless woman.

Only once during the last decade had she been treated differently when, at an appeal from the leading villagers, she willed her patch of land to be annexed by the adjacent school compound, after her death. In a public meeting held to discuss some important issues, this gesture of hers too was announced by the village chief and the audience burst into thunderous applause and a thousand eyes rolled in different directions to locate her. Some volunteers fell short of lifting her and carrying her over to the dais.

Gouri had been thrilled. At night she was unable to sleep even a wink. Sleep, of course, had been evading her lately, but that was because of her age, she had been told. And it was towards the end of one such night with very little sleep that the right strategy to shatter the callous attitude of the villagers towards her had dawned upon her.

She sat up, inspired. Before long she was on the road – pacing along with her faithful walking stick. The first man of any importance she saw was Vanbihari

Sahu, the moneylender. She saw him all right, but did he see her? He would have passed her by but for her deliberately stopping right in front of him and coughing.

‘Hello Granny! How are you?’

Gouri looked up and smiled. Does the man know that it was she who had not only presided over his birth, but also christened him with that excellent name – Vanbihari? The weeping infant of the other day had grown totally bald and half as toothless as herself! People say that he exploited his debtors mercilessly. Gouri hated such rumours regarding any of the souls born under her auspices.

So, Vanbihari was ordained to be the very first man to receive the shock she must administer! She was sorry, but she was not prepared to modify her grim decision in any manner.

‘Sonny! you ask me how am I, do you? Well, let me tell you very categorically that I won’t be amidst you for long. I am departing to the other world. Yes, I mean it!’

Gouri heaved a sigh and waited, sure of the moneylender’s strong reaction – his anxious protests, his horror at her most unexpected, most unkind proclamation, expressed through words like: ‘Oh no, no, no. Granny! How can our life be the same without you? Oh, no!’

But Sahu only nodded and looked up and made a vague gesture raising both his arms towards the sky, which could either mean that the Lord’s will be done or that it was going to rain! He then walked away.

It took almost five minutes for Gouri to bring a reasonable steadiness to her trembling walking stick.

‘I tell you, to call a minister or even the chief minister is no problem. Any of them will oblige me. The question is, why should we? I don’t believe in the formality of according receptions to anybody, however important...Who is this? Gouri Nani? Granny dear! How are you, sweet little girl?...So far as the minister’s visit is concerned, well... are you all right Granny?... Yes... we must create an occasion for the minister or the chief minister....’

Gouri had stopped at the advent of that familiar gurgling preceding the party at the bend of the road. Baidhar Mirdha, the MLA, emerged in the company of a dozen men, some tall and some short, some fat and some lean, some dark and some fair. He loved to carry with him an assortment of human specimens.

‘I can talk to the minister...but...yes...the occasion...hello Granny, do you wish to speak to me?...You are looking as bright as a damsel about to wed....So far as the minister...’

‘My boy! I am about to wed – to Death. No, I am not jesting. It’s time for me to bid farewell to you all, my children. Am I not already ninety-three?’

Mirdha laughed like the first sound of a kick-started moped.

‘Gentlemen!’ he asked his followers, ‘Do you suppose our Granny’s death could be a strong enough argument to warrant the Hon’ble chief minister’s presence?’ He laughed again and this time the specimens of humanity followed suit.

The MLA had begun to walk. ‘Ours is a democracy. Any minister is bound to...’ His voice faded like a distant thunder.

Gouri felt paralysed, a sensation she had never had before. But the zamindar’s house was close at hand. She managed to climb to the dusky verandah of his fading mansion.

The zamindar relaxed on a worn out armchair. The last servant in his household was preparing the *hookah* for him.

‘Who is it?’ he queried without looking at Gouri.

‘Nobody!’ replied the servant.

‘It is Gouri, Gouri the Midwife, Gouri Nani, Gouri Granny!’ Gouri announced aloud, correcting the servant, and added, ‘My son, I must inform you that my days are numbered. Yes, truly so. I have resolved to desert all my dear ones like you.... None can stop me!’

‘Who? What’s the matter?’ the zamindar asked again, after his first puff at the *hookah*.

‘Gouri the Midwife. She says that she is going to die,’ the servant said carrying his lips close to his master’s ear, not without some irritation.

‘Die? Was she alive?’ The zamindar shut his eyes in order to relish the gulped down smoke better.

Gouri had forgotten that the zamindar remained under the effect of opium most of time. But it would have hardly made any difference even if she had remembered it.

Nobody noticed when she left.

‘Granny!’ Ahalya, back after a day’s absence, called out early in the morning the next day. And five minutes later she was heard crying and announcing to the passers-by, ‘Granny has left us, it appears peacefully in her sleep!’



The Submerged Valley

We became conscious of our village the day our headmaster asked us, the students of Class Three, to write an essay on the topic.

So far we had taken the village for granted – like our breathing or our mothers’ love. But thereafter the elements that made the village – the trees, the pools, the Shiva temple and the hillock adjacent to it – had begun to look significant.

Our village had several other aspects to it. A lame crow perched on a crumbling stone arch of the temple and cawed on in an ominous way. Nobody ever dared to scare it away. A certain member of the Harijan community looked completely white because of congenital vitiligo. His fond grandparents had christened him Sahib. From some mysterious source he had secured a cork topee of the type the white men used in colonial India. He visited the weekly market sporting the topee and invoked in the throng something of the awe that was due to the real Sahibs who ruled the country.

The trees that stood in front of our school used to appear as human to us as the wandering bull of Lord Shiva. One of the trees looked as if it was kneeling in meditation. Two more were never tired of chattering to each other. If the teacher had scolded or thrashed us, they seemed to be sympathizing with us. At the approach of a vacation they seemed to be talking of the many sweet moments in store for us.

Last but not the least, there was an insane woman who lived on the hillock behind the temple. She had for her pets a mad dog and a mad cat. Whatever be the standard applied to measure the states of mind of the woman and her dog, it

was intriguing how our people had been sure of the lunacy of the cat. But before I was of age, all three had died.

The woman had left behind a son, crazy and no less arrogant. He chose a house a day and planted himself in its courtyard, refusing to budge until fed to his content. Somehow he had learnt to claim that jackals and ravens talked to him. His incoherent speech and enigmatic hints added a touch of weirdness to his personality and that was to his profit.

Serious-minded villagers had tried to harness him to some constructive activity. One had introduced him to the spinning wheel. He found running the wheel for its own sake good fun, but not for spinning. An affluent farmer commissioned him to guard a pile of paddy. An hour later people saw Lord Shiva's bull lying in place of the paddy ruminating with eyes closed, and the young man entertaining it to a post-banquet song.

Hence he was called Abolkara, meaning the disobedient, the funny hero of a series of folktales popular in our region.

I was five when my father, an engineer, moved our establishment to the town.

Soon the village became only a memory for me. Even so, the day I heard that a proposed large dam would submerge it, I became gloomy. Mother wiped her eyes.

By and by several respectable men of our area visited us and not one of them went back without shedding tears. Although Father was not connected with the project, my mother and the villagers prevailed upon him to exert his influence to forestall its execution.

Father had a solemn bearing and he talked or smiled little. But if the situation warranted, he could be fluent, his solemnity still intact.

Heaping their rain-soaked umbrellas and bales on our verandah, once a delegation of elderly villagers recounted to Father the glory of our ancestral area – tales of our pious forefathers who had toiled there and whose ashes had become one with the soil, of the several good gods who dwelt in the shrines even though rather ineffectual in the current Kaliyug, the era of falsehood, and of the fertility of the lands.

'Must everything end up in deluge, Babu? Despite having begotten a worthy son like you, are we so unlucky that the cruel hand of the government will so unceremoniously tear us away from our God-given lands?' they repeated as they wiped their eyes more and more frequently.

Father heard in silence and that gave us the impression that he had been moved. But once he opened his mouth, I felt a certain heartlessness not only in his speech but also in the silence that had preceded it.

'Look here, for me the whole of history is made of only two factors, construction and destruction – be the latter planned or accidental,' he said. 'Where is Harappa today and where is Babylon? Time had licked them off – just for the

sake of change. On the other hand, if we are losing our lands, it is for a change for the better, for the welfare of a larger population. And we ought not to ignore the fact that the government is ready to compensate for our loss and to provide us with every facility for rehabilitation. Who did not have pious forefathers? Where is to be found an area that had no shrines? Can a single project succeed if such sentiments were to be respected?"

Members of the delegation were too stupefied to say anything more. Mother sent tiffin and cool drinks for them through me and my younger sister, Putu. If they showed reluctance to accept them, it was surely due to Father's attitude, and if they finally accepted them, it was due to their affection for Mother.

The next two years were marked by radical developments. After holding a few unreported meetings in the village, a few hundred villagers arrived in the town bringing their own food along, and went round in a procession. It was a pitiable show. The cars and motorcycles scared them and they were too shy to raise slogans. The placards they held were written in a raw hand, with glaring spelling errors.

Their representatives met the leaders of the ruling party but their arguments lacked the earlier vigour. Before long they lost faith in their cause and were reconciled to the situation. Half of the people went over to an alternative site offered to them by the authorities, a valley eighteen miles away. They carried the deities with them and also led away the bull of Lord Shiva.

The rest chose cash compensation and scattered in bazars and towns, seeking out sundry jobs or opening petty shops.

We heard that on the eve of their departure the villagers rolled on the ground, crying and beating their heads against it and smearing themselves with dust. We never saw our village again.

Five years had elapsed since the making of the dam. Three districts had now less to fear from floods. Regulated irrigation gave some boost to agriculture, though the increase in population did not let it mean anything more than a statistical satisfaction.

Then came exciting news. The monsoon had been delayed in the distant hills. The river had grown feeble and the level of the reservoir had fallen unusually low. Consequently the top of the Shiva temple and the hillock behind it could be seen. The small news item had been despatched by a newspaper's correspondent in the dam area. Father read it out to Mother and said, 'I have to attend a committee meeting at the dam. Should you like to accompany me, I could arrange for a trip to the hillock.'

There were tears of joy in Mother's eyes.

We reached the dam the next day. The sky was overcast with more and more clouds taking up suitable positions. The locality had changed so much that Mother was expressing her shock and surprise every other minute. Two neat bungalows

stood on two ends of the majestic embankment. There was a cluster of small buildings for the dam officials.

Abazar too had cropped up. By then Father had reached the top rung of his career and there were several eager smiles and hands to accord us a warm welcome. We were accommodated in one of the bungalows. To the west stretched the vast lake. It was late in the afternoon and over the water hung a light fog. At a distance the summit of the temple and the hillocks looked melancholy though charming, like two memories emerging from the mists of time.

Some more officers were expected by sundown. Father asked his assistant to schedule the meeting in the evening and commissioned a launch for us. He was in a hurry, for he had news of heavy showers at the source of the river. The water level could rise, submerging our destination.

Our launch soon left behind the three small boats which too were heading towards the islet. And we could see two or three boats already moored at the hillock.

‘Sir, many of the former residents of this area have come rushing at the news of the old temple raising its head. They are thankful to you for allowing them to visit the sight,’ said an assistant engineer who accompanied us.

‘The permission was granted by your boss. You are being unnecessarily kind to me,’ Father cut him short. The young officer’s bright smile froze into an embarrassed grin.

The temple and the hillock had always remained green in my memory. Their reappearance in this novel setting aroused in me a strange sensation – an excitement tempered by sadness. But Putu, who was only a year old when we left the village, was even more excited. And Mother – she sat absorbed in her thoughts, her cheek resting on her hand. The clouds, the sombre lake, and her deep eyes combined to form a serene experience for me.

Visitors who had reached the hillock before us gazed at our launch with curiosity. Among them were their boatmen who told our driver how to negotiate his way close to the islet.

We were there at last! Many in the crowd greeted Father, and Father returned the greetings warmly. I was patted and Putu fondled. I could spot several familiar faces.

Some old folks clustered around Mother and let flow the final instalment of the tears first shed five years ago. They also informed her that many of those venerable people who had met Father in the town had since then departed to the world beyond.

The boats we had passed began arriving one after another. There were more smiles and tears. Voices buzzed telling of erstwhile neighbours, who’s who now and their fortunes and struggles.

'Babu, do you remember Abolkara? There he is!' Our attention was drawn to a bearded, jolly looking fellow seated on a rock.

'How is he here?' asked Father.

'Babu, perhaps you won't believe...' The observation halted midway.

Father looked at the speaker quizzically.

'He was here all along!'

Father laughed. Some others laughed too. But they did so as a courtesy towards Father. From the whispers and exchange of glances among the crowd I had gathered that quite a few of them were in favour of accepting this fantastic story as true. Some were asking Abolkara insistently, 'Do tell us – will you? – how did you manage to breathe under the water for five long years? What was your diet?'

'Like that, like that!' blabbered

Abolkara proudly, in his usual weird and indistinct tone and style, throwing his arms in the air.

Visitors who had brought light refreshments with them gave generous shares to him. The relish with which he ate only strengthened the theory that he had more or less fasted for five years, clinging to the submerged rock all the while.

Father did not pay much attention to Abolkara and discussed serious topics with the elite in the throng. Then, after concentrating for a moment on the water beating at the temple peak, he raised his voice and announced, 'Look here, everybody, the water has begun to rise. You should leave without delay.'

Father had hardly finished when a sudden gust blew away a middle-aged gentleman's shawl. He ran after it to the brink of the islet, but it gave him the slip in a highly tricky manner. I slapped Putu mildly in time to stop her from bursting into a savage laugh.

Rain came down, at first fine like dust, but soon to grow into the size of pellets. The visitors unfurled their umbrellas and boarded their boats hastily.

'Who brought Abolkara? Don't forget him, please!' Father shouted.

The boatmen of the six boats looked at one another. It was obvious that none of them was responsible for Abolkara. He must have been left there by an earlier party. However, every boat was willing to ferry him back.

'But I've been here all the time!' Abolkara repeated the statement with a chuckle, stressing each syllable. He was highly pleased with the story some innovative mind had floated.

'Is that so? Very well,' Father said derisively and then looked toward the boats and said, 'You may go. Let him suffer the rain now and whatever more is in store for him once the hillock goes under the water.'

Father hoped, as the boats would start leaving, Abolkara would come down, frightened.

The first boat left; the second, third and fourth ones followed suit but not before pleading with him to board them. Abolkara sat quiet, flashing a radiant smile from time to time, dangling his legs and throwing nuts into his mouth.

‘Come away; I say, or you’ll die!’ shouted Father, quite annoyed.

‘But I’m here for five...!’

‘Shut up!’ Father looked at the last boat. The passengers were most anxious to leave. Their oars flapped at a slight wave of Father’s hand. The leading ones among the departing passengers told Father, ‘No use wasting time on that chap, babu, better you too leave. He will return on his own – maybe by swimming.’

Father did not give up coaxing Abolkara to come down. ‘You’re dreaming of more visitors tomorrow and more offerings; aren’t you? But know that no one will be allowed to come here again. The hillock would have totally disappeared by midnight.’

There was no result. Father took a few steps towards him. Abolkara slipped over to the other side of the rock, ready to plunge into the surging water.

Father’s command and the rain had driven the assistant engineer, Mother, Putu and me into the launch. Father gave out a last roar, swore, and then joined us. The launch started.

It rained heavily and the launch pitched violently. The lake looked fearful. Putu clung to Mother.

I tried to locate the boats we must be leaving behind. I could see the blurred contours of only two.

Dropping us at the portico of our bungalow Father hurried to his meeting. He had no time even for a cup of tea.

The rain grew torrential. Through the window – we occupied the upper floor – Mother stared into the lake time and again while Putu and I sat for dinner. She could have hardly seen anything except the turbulent heart of the clouds laid bare by stabs of lightening.

‘Mummy, what will happen to Abolkara?’ It was Putu, on the verge of weeping after a smashing thunderclap. Mother walked to the telephone and tried to contact the other bungalow, the venue of Father’s meeting. But the instrument was dead.

She sent us to bed and drew her chair close to the window. Putu, I assumed, had fallen asleep. But I could not help thinking about the odd Abolkara and Father’s brusque manner, and trying to find some way of consoling Mother. In the howling wind, I heard the cries of the ghost of the drowned village.

Father returned at midnight. Thoroughly drenched, he looked exhausted.

‘Anything to eat?’ he asked.

‘Did you expect there’d be nothing?’ asked Mother in turn, ready to lay out dishes for him.

‘Not for me. I ate with the other engineers. How to inform you? The telephone wouldn’t work!’

‘So?’ Mother looked up, surprised.

‘Why don’t you go and see?’ Father pointed to the outer room.

I followed Mother. There stood Abolkara, shivering like a wet squirrel, but smiling.

‘Give him clothes to change, and a pair of blankets from the bungalow’s stock in the almirah.’ Father began to wipe himself. ‘When it was certain that the hillock would get submerged before long, I had to take out the launch again. The temple had disappeared. All that remained was the rock with this gentleman on top of it. What a welcoming smile he gave when I focused my torch on him! On our way back, the engine stopped working and we escaped an accident narrowly. Well, I must lie down now. Have your dinner alone.’

Father went in to change his clothes. While feeding Abolkara, Mother looked glorious as a goddess.

The wind had grown erratic and violent. ‘Go into Father’s room and see. If the west-side window is open, shut it.’ Mother instructed me.

While shutting the window gently, I looked at Father’s face with deep admiration.

I heard a giggle. Putu stood at the door.

‘Father is wonderful, isn’t he?’ she whispered to me.

‘Fool, how long you take to realize things that are obvious!’ I quipped and, imitating Father’s stern style, said, ‘Naughty one, will you now return to bed?’

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एकः सूते सकलम्



Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger

Bhola Grandpa and his wife lived at the western end of our village. Their hut was overshadowed by a large *bokul* tree which, with the advent of spring, grew luxuriant and continuously showered its tiny red fruit on their courtyard. The tree had become the lasting camp for a minor troop of monkeys. Bhola Grandpa and his wife did not mind it.

I vividly remember the moonlit night when we were returning from the festival in honour of Lord Shiva. Still looked upon as a child, I had chances galore to travel perched on the shoulders of able-bodied villagers. The road was long and, far above the fog, the moon looked like suffering from a bad cold. I nodded off on the village chowkidar's shoulders.

Father was looked upon with awe and reverence and the villagers considered it a privilege to walk in his company. Bhola Grandpa, senior to him by a few years, was always more prompt than the others in expressing his agreement with whatever Father uttered.

But suddenly Bhola Grandpa gave out a loud wail.

Taken aback, our party came to a halt. Enquiry revealed that Bhola Grandpa had led his daughter's son, who was of my age, to the festival. He piloted the grandson through the jostling throngs with two of the boy's fingers held tightly in his grip. He did not realize when those fingers slipped out. His grip, however, continued as before.

It was when someone queried about the content of his grip that he remembered the grandson and gave out the wail.

Father chose two keen-eyed escorts from our party and directed them to go

back with Bhola Grandpa to the fair. The grandson, who had found a congenial shelter under a cow's belly and kept blinking at the exotic and boisterous multitude passing by, was rescued before long.

I remained alert for the rest of the journey and heard Father recount the following anecdote:

Bhola Grandpa, whose father and grandfather too had been in our employment, spent most of his time in our household. One afternoon, decades ago, the young Bhola was found sprawling on a corner of our verandah with his tongue stretched out. A shiver ran through those who found him in that condition. "Gone!" was their whisper.

What, however, had happened was very different. An hour earlier someone had broached to him a proposal for his wedding. Modesty had made him stretch out his tongue. He had just forgotten to withdraw it while falling asleep.

I remember Bhola Grandpa blushing and looking down while Father narrated to an amused audience on our terrace the next day yet another episode of their younger days:

That had been a wet afternoon. Bhola Grandpa, looking wild with excitement, confided to Father and his friends that he had spied upon a gang of pirates burying a large box under one of the sand-dunes on the lonely seashore by our village. He had also watched the gang disappear into the sea, their sleek dinghy shooting like an arrow into the mist.

Father and party at once began exploring the possible spots for the hidden treasure. Evening gave way to night. There was no light save for the moonbeams filtering through the clouds and no sound except for the wind's moaning and the hooting of an owl from the hollow of a palm tree struck dead by lightning. A pack of jackals howled indicating that it was past midnight.

Suddenly Bhola Grandpa was seen collapsing on the sand. His friends rushed to his side. Bhola Grandpa never spoke a lie. He soon composed himself and confessed that it was all a dream which he had had during his mid-day nap. He had somehow mistaken the dream to be a fact.

The locale of the most significant incident in Bhola Grandpa's life had been the Sundarbans. The region was marked by clusters of thick jungle. Royal Bengal tigers stalked the picturesque islands between the narrow serpentine branches of the Ganga. My forefathers, though belonging to Orissa, were among the few landlords who owned large chunks of estates in that dangerous region of Bengal.

Bhola Grandpa was periodically sent there to manage the property.

In the Sundarbans of those days nobody would walk alone even in day-time. Tigers apart, alligators frequently sneaked in from the swamp. People took care to move about only in groups, particularly after sundown. Often they were led by a necromancer who, from time to time, gave out a piercing yell that could

not be imitated by the uninitiated. The eerie sound was believed to drive away or immobilize all beings, natural or supernatural, hostile to man.

Bhola Grandpa was returning from the weekly market in the company of a group of people belonging to the neighbourhood of our camp. He did not remember when he had fallen behind the party.

He woke up to his aloneness when, at a distance of about five yards before him, a full-grown Royal Bengal tiger gave a jolly growl, fixing his bright gaze straight on his face.

Bhola Grandpa instantly clambered up a banyan tree at hand. The tiger roared and circled the tree about a hundred times. Then it settled down under a bush and continued in that position without taking its eyes off Bhola Grandpa even for a moment.

With nightfall the forest grew dark and silent. Bhola Grandpa could hear the bored tiger beating its tail on the dry leaves and scratching the ground from time to time. He could see its bluish-yellow eyes rolling all over the tree. Hours passed.

Dawn broke with the cooing of a couple of doves. Bhola Grandpa came down.

There was a hamlet of Santhals on a mound less than a furlong away. Bhola Grandpa climbed the mound and requested the first man he saw for a little fire to light his beedi.

The man had been a witness to all that passed between the tiger and Bhola Grandpa. In fact, he had spent the whole night sitting at the threshold of his hut waiting to see what would happen next.

He eyed Bhola Grandpa with perfect bewilderment. 'What is your secret, sir, that you walked past that hungry beast and it just gaped at you and did nothing more?' he mumbled out his question at last.

Bhola Grandpa remembered the tiger and looked towards the bush. The tiger was seen stretching its limbs and yawning and preparing to leave the place as though its bewilderment was giving way to disgust.

Bhola Grandpa is said to have passed out for a moment.

Half a century later, one morning Bhola Grandpa was found to have died peacefully in his sleep. He was ninety-five. Even then we shed tears and lamented his death volubly.

But the most original of the laments came from the eighty-year-old granny, Bhola Grandpa's wife. 'The old man must have forgotten to breathe!' she said with a sigh.



Farewell to a Ghost

It was on moonlit nights that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating. From the river-bank we looked at it in long silences. When the fitful breeze made waves of the tall yellow grass around it, the house looked like a phantom castle floating on an unreal sea. Though pale, desolate and eerie, I must repeat, it was as fascinating as a fairy-tale island.

Generally we didn't talk during the night. But the next morning one of us would confide to another and we would all learn by evening that he had caught a glimpse of the girl, standing on the broken terrace gazing at the moon or looking down at the river shedding tears which fell like drops of gold.

It was nothing new, yet we were thrilled every time and would gather on the river-bank again the next evening.

Any of us village boys would have done anything to help her in some way. But we knew we could do nothing. She was so near, yet she belonged to a faraway world. Besides, we knew only too well that we ought not to be too enamoured of her. We had been repeatedly told about the gallant lad of a bygone generation who had fallen in love with her. There was a big banyan tree which stood in its mighty aloneness on the point of the river-bank closest to the villa. The lad had often slipped away from his home and climbed the tree. Settling down on a branch, he would gaze for long hours into a crumbling room on the upper floor of the villa through its weather-beaten window.

Obviously, he could see her sitting inside the room lost in her melancholy. But did she ever look at him? Yes, occasionally. Why otherwise should the lad have fallen down from the tree, unconscious, not once but thrice? It is all right as long

as you can steal glimpses of a ghost without the ghost looking at you. It is only when the ghost looks into your eyes that you faint.

Finally, one summer noon, throwing to the winds all the stern warnings of his well-wishers, the lad had crept into the villa, climbed the decrepit stairs and peeped into the room. Perhaps the girl was asleep, for it was believed that she wept the whole night and slept most of the day, sobbing in her sleep.

He should have behaved more prudently. Even a generation later we boys censored his rashness and pitied him. To be in love was risky enough. And to be in love with a ghost was surely dangerous. How could he ignore this fact?

He had rushed up and kissed her before she could stop him. She had given out a shriek. Many had heard her sobbing and her mad babbling but that was the only time anyone had heard her shriek.

The shriek probably could not have been heard by you or me, but just then a popular mendicant known for his weird ways happened to pass by. He roamed about in the cemeteries of our area, coming into the village only once in two or three days, when he was hungry. He could understand the languages of crows and cows. Evidently, he could also hear what others could not. When the villagers discussed the missing lad he revealed that he had heard the unusual shriek from the haunted villa.

A dozen brave men of our village entered the villa the next morning. They had sprinkled on their heads the sacred Ganga water and hidden pieces of iron under their girdles to check the ghost from coming too close to them. But, I can swear, no one even thought of carrying sticks or weapons. They would not do anything to offend the girl.

They found the lad prostrate on the cotton mattress that had lain unchanged for a hundred years on the cot in the room upstairs – dead. That he had kissed the girl was conclusively proved not only by the girl's sudden shriek but also by the faint streak of blood on the lad's lips which had flowed down to his chin. That, of course, was the price one must pay for kissing a ghost.

It was indeed a grim warning. But our villagers' affection for the ghost did not decline. What could she do if people fell in love with her? She had never asked them to! She had not killed the unfortunate lover! She could not undo the fatal curse that separated her world from ours. During the hundred years she had dwelt in the villa, not even once had she tried to lure anybody towards her or to possess anyone.

It could have been even more than a hundred years. Those were the days when the feringhees cultivated indigo over large tracts. They were concentrated in Bengal, but some had spread to the neighbouring lands of our state, Odisha. Their experiment did not succeed on our soil and they soon packed off, leaving behind the elegant mansion they had built.

As the legend goes, three young feringhees had brought a girl with them. Kidnapped or bought in the Sundarbans, she was the illegitimate daughter of a Sahib by a tribal woman and she combined in her the ravishing freshness and wildness of her mother's race with the light complexion of her father.

Because of her strange origin she could not mix with our womenfolk. It was out of the question for our women to approach a girl with feringhee blood.

From the very beginning the girl revolted against her masters. She was severely punished. After several attempts to escape had been foiled she pretended to have been tamed and let several months pass without a murmur.

One day her three masters had to proceed to their headquarters on business. There was an epidemic of small-pox in the villages and the feringhees, avoiding native contact, rowed themselves along the river. If the current was favourable it took only a day to reach the town.

They reached the town all right, though a little late, the next morning. A number of excited crows circled over the boat. The three young men and a crow lay stiff and cold around a carrier of half-eaten food.

The girl had prepared and packed their lunch. There was little doubt that she had prepared it with the choicest poison.

The girl had had an accomplice in her desperate bid for vengeance and liberty, the keeper of the villa, a sly little fellow who had been with the company for many years. The girl knew where her masters had hidden their gold and money. According to the pact, the girl and the keeper were to escape with the wealth and share it. But once the girl had uncovered the cache the rascal had stabbed her and fled.

Three days later some outraged feringhees, accompanied by a group of native sepoys, appeared on the scene. They forced the villagers at bayonet point to cremate the girl's body and searched every house for the killer. Potfuls of Ganga water had to be secured on loan from the neighbouring villages to purify the houses thus defiled.

But all these incidents had faded into a painless memory. It was only casually that people now referred to them. Neither the fate of the feringhees nor that of the girl's murderer interested us. It was only the girl that mattered – I mean her ghost. We always thought of her as one of us, although we knew quite well how different she was. Apart from being a ghost she was of alien blood, blood from shores beyond the seven seas. We could not help being a little more respectful towards her on that account, though we knew that blood had lost much of its relevance once she had become a ghost.

No feast in the village, be it held due to a birth or a wedding or a death, passed without the girl's share being duly offered to her. The ceremony took place in the dead of night. Some young men would carry the food in earthen pots. The

party would always be led by a respectable elderly man, generally the head pundit of the primary school. We juniors were allowed to survey their actions only from a distance. After the pots and an earthen lamp had been placed between the villa and the banyan tree, the head pundit would intone: Unhappy girl, here is your share of the feast which has been held by the benevolent so-and-so on such-and-such occasion. Be satisfied with this. And, we ask you to guard the village from evil to the extent of your capacity. We have never tried to dislodge you or disturb you, have we? No. Why not? Because we look upon you as one of our unlucky daughters. God grant you peace!

The party would leave the place without looking back.

Nobody was supposed to look into the compound thereafter. Nevertheless, hiding from our elders, from our favourite spot on the river-bank, we did look. In the flickering flame of the earthen lamp and the dance of the fluctuating shadows, we felt we saw something mysterious. Our hair stood on end.

The lamp would suddenly go out. 'She does not relish our watching her,' one of us would say, and we would leave her alone.

'But she obeys the head pundit all right, doesn't she? The pundit knows how to speak to her,' the head pundit's pet pupil would observe as we joined the feasting crowd. 'Who on earth does not obey him!' his rival would quip.

I had, however, a feeling that when the head pundit implored her to guard the village against evil what he really meant was that she herself should not cause any harm to us. His words, I felt, even implied a threat. What else did he mean by reminding her that we had never tried to dislodge or disturb her?

I felt embarrassed. She was so innocent and so good. What business had the head pundit to be hypocritical in his address?

A strong hot breeze blew during the summer noons for days on end. For an hour or two everything was quiet except for the noise made by the wind. Doors and windows of the villa had disappeared since long. As the wind violently explored every nook and corner of the building, it produced varieties of squeals and whistles.

The sounds fascinated me. My father wanted me to take a nap, but I would sit up in bed listening to them intently. Once in a while, I must confess, I felt the urge to steal into the villa, for no other reason than to give the girl a moment's silent company. But, I was afraid, she might not understand my purpose. That checked me.

One day, feeling bold and a little proud, I admitted to myself that this was almost falling in love and I blushed. Maybe, the other boys of the village also felt like me. It never occurred to us that the girl was at least a hundred years older than us. Some wise man had told us that once one had become a ghost one never grew in age.

It was when we were preparing for the middle school examination that the shocking news came. The government had decided to demolish the crumbling villa and use the land for some other purpose. No wonder that we forgot our studies and hid behind the school wall to listen to the elders discussing the issue in the evening.

‘Can’t we request the government to spare the villa?’

‘No. Once the zamindar was declared bankrupt, the land has become the government’s property. The government does not provide for ghosts,’ informed the village headman and his statement was endorsed by the head pundit with logic: “Naturally, the ghosts pay no tax.”

This was followed by a prolonged silence and intermittent coughs and yawns.

Then a lizard tick-ticked and two or three people muttered, ‘True, true!’ ‘But what will happen to the girl? She has lived there all these years and has never harmed us. Rather, there are reasons to believe that she is a benevolent ghost.’

The lizard tick-ticked again and this time more people said, and more loudly, ‘True, true!’

The discussion continued for a long time. All agreed that something had to be done for the girl. But nobody had a surplus house to offer her. However good, a ghost was still a ghost and keeping her with one’s family was not a practical proposition. But if nothing was done for her, she would naturally settle in someone’s house!

It was perhaps midnight by the time they came to a decision. By then our mothers or uncles had found us out behind the wall and had driven us back to our beds.

At the request of the villagers the demolition work was delayed for a few days. A renowned priest, well-versed in necromancy, arrived on the appointed day. He was tall and hefty, sporting a round red mark on his forehead. He wore a garland of beads which we were told were carved out of the spine of a wilful witch. He never smiled.

It was a sad day for us all. Outwardly too the day was gloomy: it was cloudy and it drizzled from time to time. Almost every family had brought some little food – rice, bananas, coconuts, sweetmeats or cakes – to offer to the girl. Nobody was barred from witnessing the ceremony and so the villagers pressed near the villa. For many, particularly women and children, it was their very first entry into the haunted compound.

The presents were arranged in a semi-circle on the verandah. The priest placed a parcel at its centre and slowly removed the red linen covering it. It was a complete human skull. He also held a stick of bone. He recited hymns while drawing figures in the air with the bone and then, his face flushing, shouted

menacingly, 'But where is she? I have already pronounced my command thrice. She should have appeared before me immediately. How dare she be so impudent?'

The headman said apologetically, 'Look, Baba, she must be asleep upstairs. She rarely sleeps at night, you know!'

'Very well, I will go up and drag her down by the ear. She must realize that I am not accustomed to going unheeded,' hollered the priest, and he climbed the stairs.

We looked at one another helplessly. I felt like crying. Should not somebody have told the priest that the girl was not to be treated rudely?

We could hear the priest's thudding footsteps upstairs. And then he roared something incomprehensible and the sound and its echo made beads of sweat break out on our faces even on that cool morning. He returned triumphantly and said in a commanding tone, 'There. Eat to your heart's content and then leave your shelter and the village!'

We had almost ceased to breathe. The priest looked at us with contempt and suddenly yelled at the top of his voice, 'What! You will not eat? Mind you, that will not soften me. Eat or not, you must leave the villa and the village now, instantly.'

The headman managed to say, 'Baba, you should perhaps wait a little. She had never disobeyed us. She will eat. Please tell her that it is our earnest request. Our womenfolk have brought these presents with so much love!'

But the priest did not seem to care. 'She is leaving. Make way!' he shouted at us. Immediately the crowd parted.

She did not eat. But when asked to leave, she did so without delay. We did not see her, true. But we knew how deeply wounded she must have felt. We felt extremely small.

'Halt! That's right. I will lead you,' the priest said, and slowly walked through the crowd showing the invisible spirit the way with the pointing bone in his right hand. With the left hand he gave some directions to his assistant, who stayed back and collected the Tantric skull and, of course, the foodstuff.

All followed the priest. The village was left behind and we walked through the meadow for nearly a kilometre, braving the drizzle and the fear of a heavy rain.

'There! Get into it!' commanded the priest, standing under a tall palm tree. Then he uttered some odd incantations and beat the tree with the bone and circled it a number of times.

'So, from now on this will be your dwelling. Understand?' the priest shouted, looking up to the top of the tree. He then grinned at us proudly and said in a pompous tone, 'She can never leave the tree. I have tied her to it!'

He turned back and we did the same. We boys walked with the women while the menfolk, surrounding the priest, strode faster and ahead of us.

We walked in silence. But at one point someone sobbed. Then everyone was weeping, though as quietly as possible.

When we reached the village the workmen had already started pulling down the villa. The rain would make their work easy, the contractor informed the headman.

After three or four days of rain the sky became clear. The moon shone bright and as on other moonlit nights we, boys, gathered in the meadow to play ha-tu-tu. But there was no life in our play. Eventually someone said, 'The ground here is swampy. Can't we go farther up where it is dry?'

No sooner had he said this than we began to run. Soon we were near the palm tree and our hearts were back in the game. We played on till late in the night, happy to be near our lonely ghost.

And we returned there every evening till the last day of the summer vacation.

After the vacation I was led to the town for admission to a high school. I had never known a town before. Soon I became engrossed in several exciting activities. I forgot the ghost.

Three months later came the Dussera vacation and I headed for home. From the bus-stop I had to walk five miles to reach my village. I was in high spirits. Suddenly, while crossing the meadow, my eyes fell on the palm tree and for a moment I felt numb. The tree was dead, struck by lightning. Its charred branches were crumbling.

With a heavy heart I resumed walking. During the fortnight's holiday none of the boys spoke of the girl. It being the rainy season there was no question of our going to play in the meadow.

Gradually I passed the age of playing ha-tu-tu and my visits to the village became rarer. And the new generation of village boys was so different, so ignorant. They were just afraid of ghosts.

एकः सूते सकलम्



Friends and Strangers

The people of our small town in the northern valley used to be classified, as anywhere else, according to their economic, social or educational status. But two of them, Tirthankar and Shivabrata, constituted an exclusive class. No third person belonged to it.

The two looked upon each other as unreal. Consequently, the townsfolk had gradually learnt to look upon both as unreal.

It was on an autumn evening that had set into motion the chain of events culminating in this bizarre situation. The moonlight on the lush outskirts of the town looked so substantial, one felt one could net a kerchiefful of it and pocket it for future use.

Tirthankar had arrived in the morning; Shivabrata in the afternoon. Year after year, around that time, they came home to spend their holidays. Every other time their visit coincided with that of a third friend, Pramath.

Pramath worked in a frontier town famous for its woollen products.

Tirthankar and Shivabrata sat on a rock, chit-chatting. The moon seemed to have risked coming so dangerously close to the tallest palm tree between the rock and the lake that the two friends feared the top branches of the tree, swaying madly, might scratch its delicate surface.

It was a forlorn locale where even a mongoose scampering between the bushes looked quite a personage.

Fifteen feet below their rock and fifty yards away was a narrow road, used more by cattle and goats than by human pedestrians.

'Isn't that Pramath?' asked Tirthankar.

Someone in impeccable white, the kind of clothes Pramath usually donned on holidays, was walking slowly, carefully locating the road half lost in the grass. The wavering shadows cast by the trees often eclipsed him.

‘Hello, Pramath!’ called out Shivabrata.

Pramath stopped and looked at the two friends on the rock.

‘Come up,’ said Tirthankar. From the tree-tops a gust of wind swooped down upon Pramath’s head and rummaged in his well-groomed hair. And there were lesser flurries around to smuggle away into the bushes half of the words from his response to the call.

But the two friends could still decipher his maimed reply. Pramath, they understood, promised to join them after handing over to Mrs Wilson the gift of a shawl he had brought for her.

‘Listen, Pramath, can’t the shawl wait till morning? Come up, it’s important!’ shouted out both the friends, putting a lot of vigour into their words to push them down through the stubborn breeze.

But Pramath said – at least that is what Tirthankar and Shivabrata understood – that the old lady had seen him on his way home from the Railway station at sundown. She must be expecting him.

The old lady was in the habit of sitting out her afternoons and the early part of the night gazing at the road. She had nothing else to do and no one to talk to. Once in a while she would ask a familiar passer-by the time or the date, or would demand of him or her some small service.

She had cajoled Pramath to agree to bring her a shawl of quality wool. That was three years ago. Pramath would forget and regret. At last he had brought it. He wouldn’t be at peace until he had delivered it to the good little lady.

Pramath resumed walking. The two friends looked at each other meaningfully.

‘Just a minute, Pramath, do you mean to say you saw Mrs Wilson? Did you really see her seated as usual?’ demanded Tirthankar.

‘I did!’ replied Pramath.

As soon as the reply, hauled up by the erratic breeze, reached the top of the rock, the two listeners felt a shiver, though as brief as Pramath’s reply.

They strained their voices and advised Pramath to pay heed to their suggestion. He should postpone his visit to Mrs Wilson to the next morning and must come over to them now.

But Pramath was adamant. He did not even care to answer them again.

Tirthankar and Shivabrata kept sitting, nonplussed. Pramath did not give them an opportunity to tell him that Mrs Wilson was no more. Two months had passed since the evening she was found dead seated in her usual posture, apparently gazing at the passers-by.

Had Pramath gone crazy? How could he assert having seen her?

Hallucination – caused by his habit of seeing her seated in that position year after year – they concluded.

They waited for Pramath to return. But their thoughts were in total disarray. They hardly talked.

Two hyenas fought and howled somewhere behind the tall bushes on the lake. Dogs in the suburbs moaned at that unfortunate strife.

And the moon slipped into a cloud.

‘A cloud in autumn!’ one of the friends murmured and both at once saw something weird in the phenomenon.

They came down from the rock and headed towards Pramath’s house, sure that he had meanwhile received the shock of his life and gone home, perhaps avoiding the lonely short-cut through the rocky dale.

Pramath’s home, consisting of his aged parents, a widowed sister, a cat and a parrot, was found plunged in gloom. His mother had been going into a swoon every half an hour since the receipt of the wire telling them that Pramath had died in an accident at noon.

The two friends left the place hurriedly and walked in silence. They took care not to look into the compound of Mrs Wilson.

It was when they passed by the rock that the moon emerged from the cloud and flashed in their faces. And it was then that, looking at each other, each felt the other to be unreal – as unreal as Pramath.

And both had parted even without saying good night to each other. In fact, they had been seen almost running to reach their homes.

Next day Tirthankar was heard trying to ascertain from the others, at first tactfully and later directly, when exactly Shivabrata had died!

Before long Shivabrata was heard making the same query about Tirthankar.

Despite overwhelming proofs of their being alive and active, each has continued viewing the other’s existence as unreal. Both were nice chaps otherwise, agreed the townsmen.

Our town, though small, had at least one wise man to explain the episode rationally. According to him the passer-by whom the two friends had supposed to be Pramath was somebody else. He must have spoken something quite different from what the two friends heard. Once they had made the mistake, the moonlight played a trick: it showed the stranger as Pramath. The rest of the mischief was done by the wayward breeze that made them hear words which they imagined they heard.

But the wise man, while presenting his thesis, made gestures that did not go well with his explanation.

On nights when the moon looked somewhat wild and the wind went crazy, the two friends, if they were in town, kept to their rooms and peeped out through their windows looking perfectly bewildered.





The Martial Expedition

The prince had begun to show signs of depression within a fortnight of his marriage. His wife was no princess, but she came of aristocratic lineage, her ancestry linked to a dynasty more hallowed than his, its founder being a sage who had temporarily consorted with a nymph. She had charmed the prince through a classical dance performance at a certain golden jubilee celebration and he had instantly resolved to marry her in total disregard of several proposals from princely families.

He had not been a loser by not marrying a princess. His father-in-law, an industrialist, was capable of buying two princely states the size of Haritpur. Besides, no princess was known to have practised Bharatanatyam or Odissi.

‘What happened to that magic of yours – I mean that which inspired me to marry you?’ the prince bluntly demanded of his wife on the tenth day after their wedding.

‘I cannot really guess what I could have lost in such a short time!’ the young lady wondered at the unexpected and embarrassing question.

However, she was intelligent enough not to remain bewildered for long. Although the prince did not quite succeed in explaining what he thought he missed, she found it out. The prince expected her to smile, move her eyes and limbs, and dress too, in the manner she did during that hour’s dance performance when she conquered his heart.

‘That’s just not practicable,’ said the lady and tried her best, through loving smiles and other means, to lessen the shock her frankness might have caused her husband.

But the prince fell into a gloom. When months passed and he refused to smile, his wife left for Europe.

Raja Sahib died. The prince formally ascended the throne and was pronounced the new raja, although the throne had been reduced to an ordinary sofa. Midway to India his wife became Rani Sahiba. On arrival at Haritpur she found Raja Sahib as colourful in his dress as April and as jubilant as the spring birds abounding in their gardens. Even a simple answer like 'I'm O.K.' to his simple question like 'How are you?' inspired a roar of laughter from him.

Before the young Rani could decide whether to be happy or concerned at this total reversal in her husband's mood, India won freedom and the princely order was abolished. Like hundreds of other native states, Haritpur ceased to be ruled by its raja, though the ex-ruler was allowed to retain his titles.

Raja Sahib refused to come out of his apartment for one full month. Those who could steal glimpses of him found it difficult to believe that he had ever laughed or even smiled in his life.

The couple moved to the city permanently.

Specialists diagnosed Raja Sahib's condition as manic depressive psychosis.

His mood alternated between melancholy and elation.

Chowdhury, an old friend of the Raj family, had gathered all this information about Raja Sahib from the latter's servant-cum-guardian, Mohan. The Rajmata had gone insane when her son was barely three. It was Mohan who had virtually taken on her role in nursing the infant prince. In fact, the prince called the bearded man Mummy till he was of alphabet-learning age.

Once the depressive phase was over, Raja Sahib indulged in a thousand lofty dreams. He planned daring business enterprises and launched a few too, shot a number of inedible birds and beasts in the forest, drove at great speed, caused accidents and reached the police station at even greater speed and reported his offences bursting with laughter and patting the officer on the back.

This, of course, was inevitably followed by a spell of depression when he either kept in bed or just blinked at everybody without uttering a word. He touched hardly anything but liquor. Mohan had to literally cry in order to persuade him to eat at least one meal a day.

Chowdhury, along with some of his friends, was then starting a new business. He wanted Raja Sahib to buy a share in the company, partly out of sympathy for the raja and partly in the company's interest.

Chowdhury's was a personality like a huge, affable pussy cat's. His voice too carried the coquetry of a mew, craving and receiving your instant indulgence.

Raja Sahib appeared happy at the revival of the acquaintance. But his spells of melancholy were growing longer. Chowdhury soon forgot the pragmatic aspect of his interest in him and grew anxious to make him reasonably jolly.

He called a meeting of the partners of his company at Raja Sahib's bungalow. Rani Sahiba was then away at her father's.

The prudent and enterprising Chowdhury had arranged for a brand of costly liquor which Raja Sahib madly loved but could not find easily. Raja Sahib came out of his gloom in one bound and was found basking in the glow from the bottles.

'Look here, Chowdhury, I'm going to treat your bloody partners to such laughter that they shall weep. I know a great joke,' Raja Sahib announced moments before the arrival of the guests. He had just gulped down a few pegs of his favourite drink.

'That'll be fine. Raja Sahib! This is the spirit we expect you to exhibit. You are so young. Why not just shrug off this corrosive melancholy?'

'Melancholy? I'll make the bellies of your bloody friends burst today. A fantastic joke; that's the bomb I'm going to explode on the numbskulls!' And Raja Sahib himself laughed wildly, holding on to his tummy.

Mohan looked at Raja Sahib with appreciation and at Chowdhury with gratefulness.

The partners arrived on time. There were eleven of them, but Raja Sahib received each with a fresh bout of laughter. He was unsteady and needed support. Chowdhury and Mohan flanked him all the time.

After the dinner had been ceremoniously laid out by the hotelier on contract, Raja Sahib stood up, supported by Mohan.

'I'll crack a joke the like of which none in your fourteen past generations could have heard.'

Raja Sahib laughed.

'Take it!' he said in a muffled tone. 'Once a certain minister was invited to address a nudist association meet. The nudists came well dressed in honour of the guest, but the minister, to honour the nudists... wait, wait a minute!'

Raja Sahib shook off Mohan's support and rushed into his room.

'Don't follow me. I'll shoot you down if you do!' he told the hapless attendant.

Chowdhury knew the climax of the anecdote. He looked apprehensive and followed Raja Sahib into his room.

This was the dialogue heard:

'Raja Sahib, what's this?'

'A joke!'

'Look here, Raja Sahib, just say that the minister went naked to greet the well-dressed nudists. That will be enough to make all these gentlemen roll with laughter. You need not emerge naked yourself.'

'This is joke, you fool! A joke is a joke!' Raja Sahib shouted.

Chowdhury called out for Mohan and leaving Raja Sahib under his care,

came out of the room and bolted it from outside. Raja Sahib soon fell asleep, his head resting on Mohan's lap.

When Chowdhury met him the next day he looked as crushed as a mountaineer who has fought an avalanche. It was impossible to drag him out of his mood. Chowdhury gave up.

Business took Chowdhury out of the city again and again. He lost contact with Raja Sahib. A year later, during the India-China conflict, Chowdhury received a message from Mohan: Raja Sahib had resolved to join the war. Mohan and Rani Sahiba were unable to dissuade him from taking the step. Would Chowdhury try?

Raja Sahib had already left for the Railway station by the time Chowdhury reached his bungalow. Raja Sahib, of course, was not heading for the frontier, but for Rohitpur, to take leave of his dear former subjects.

Chowdhury drove to the station. He discovered the inebriate prince held by Mohan on one side and Rani Sahiba on the other. They were struggling to locate his name on the passenger-lists pasted on the coaches. Raja Sahib had folded up his legs and hung in the air, reposing his entire weight on his two miserable escorts.

Chowdhury ran along the platform and found out the berth allotted to Raja Sahib. As he bent down to take hold of Raja Sahib's legs to help lift him into his compartment, the Raja smartly straightened them and stood relatively steady. His look betrayed a queer combination of pride at his ability to stand on his own feet and glee at having made fools of his wife, Mohan and Chowdhury.

Chowdhury had earlier nurtured a faint misgiving: Did Raja Sahib's disappointment at having to leave the joke incomplete or his embarrassment at his own conduct inspire him to abandon the world and proceed to the war? The latest demonstration of Raja Sahib's ingenuity, however, set him free from any such misgiving. He realized that external circumstance had little to do with the alterations in Raja Sahib's mood. The joy Raja Sahib evidently experienced by suddenly unfolding his legs seemed no less than that of the first man to set foot on Mount Everest.

'Bravo, Raja Sahib!' said Chowdhury.

Raja Sahib laughed and laughed till tears trickled from his eyes.

A week later there was an item in a minor newspaper of Raja Sahib's home-state to this effect: As the Raja Sahib of Rohitpur, fired by patriotism, was heading for the battle-front, he had summoned a meeting on the palace ground to bid him farewell. Raja Sahib presided; Raja Sahib spoke about the war. At the end, Raja Sahib distributed laddoos to his audience and moved a vote of thanks.

Unfortunately, after waiting for days, at last when Raja Sahib was able to secure a First Class A/C berth for proceeding to the capital to notify the Defence Ministry of his momentous decision, the war had been over.

Raja Sahib fell into his gloom again. This time he did not survive it.





The Irrational

Subrato Das gave a start. That was nothing unusual. He suffered a momentary panic whenever Kakoli was mentioned.

‘Kakoli? Can I make it? The winter is rather unkind this year and I must travel back to the capital after the function to attend the cabinet meeting the following morning. Otherwise our Hon’ble Chief Minister will misunderstand me,’ he said and gave out a meaningful smile.

Kakoli was an insignificant town in a faraway corner of the state, probably without any suitable bungalow for a restful night. Subrato had got habituated to his comforts. In his late sixties, after unbroken service to the country for four and a half decades, that certainly was not something to feel guilty about. Unlike several other ministers, he had not become addicted either to sycophancy or corruption. To desire a warm, clean bed and a bathroom with arrangements for hot water, or to pass a full hour sitting on the bed and leisurely sipping three or four cups of tea in the morning, as if the murmurs of a motley crowd waiting in the outer room were no different from the chattering of the birds in the garden beside it, could not be called unpatriotic.

But it was not necessary speak out all that. The possibility of the Chief Minister misunderstanding him was a tip-off expected to be appreciated by everybody, for Subrato was the only one running neck and neck with the chief minister in the race for that coveted position. In fact, the regional newspapers, whenever there was no better incident to make a handsome headline, led their readers to see a Damocles’ sword hanging over the C.M.’s head, who could be toppled any day,

and another one hanging over Subrato's head, who could be thrown out of the cabinet any moment.

Subrato, after his apparently casual statement hinting at the C.M.'s animosity towards him, would pass a quick glance over his listeners and, from their reaction, determine how devoted they were to him, or at least how eager they were to show their allegiance towards him.

Generally he found the reaction he expected. Members of the delegation from Kakoli looked and smiled at one another. Their spokesman cleared his throat in style and smiled in a manner suggesting that although what he was going to say was only a truism, he must say it, for Subrato, whose mind was preoccupied with thoughts sublime, would otherwise remain ignorant of such mundane facts.

'Does it really matter if the C.M. misunderstands you? Men, women, even children over the entire state understand you and love you. Yes, even children in their mothers' wombs, I daresay! True, today your rival lolls on that throne, but who can – ha ha! – prophesy about tomorrow? We the people know – ha ha! – we know, we know. But that's a different matter. What is relevant is we will not let you drive back all that long way at night. This does not mean you must pass your night in that haunted house called the PWD bungalow, maintained by, thanks to it, the C.M.'s very own department!'

Subrato looked at the speaker with curiosity.

'You will be put up in the guest-room of the Chowdhuries, nothing luxurious, but as neat and clean as yourself, Sir! The lady, I mean the Chowdhurani, had not lagged behind her late husband in maintaining the dignity of the house,' asserted the spokesman.

'She is noble, Sir, and she knows the difference between gold and brass. When the question whether to invite you or the C.M. for inaugurating the charitable dispensary came up and it was referred to her, she did not take even a second to announce her preference for you. She, after all, is the founder. We will be grateful to you if you respect her wish,' said a member of the delegation. His stammering had its impact.

'The entire population of Kakoli will be grateful, Sir,' said the spokesman, raising his voice. He did not relish the stammerer proving himself very original.

'Men, women and children of Kakoli had never had the privilege of listening to you,' said their other two companions, sharing the statement between them, airing the deep sense of deprivation they had put up with for long.

The dialogue continued for half an hour more, ending in Subrato condescending to oblige the men, women and children of Kakoli.

A strong determination was forming within him during that half-hour – a will to conquer a bizarre weakness he had harboured in his mind for forty-five

years. Must Kakoli continue to panic him like a ghost in the dark all his life? Yet how trivial was the episode generating that life-long trepidation! No doubt, the only other character involved in the episode, if still alive, must have forgotten it long ago.

His eventful life had been marked by one after another act of bravery; he had crossed numerous hurdles and had emerged victorious from a number of crises. But how come he had failed to shake a most irrational fear off his mind?

He was an untiring traveller. But he had never stopped at Kakoli during his long political life. If he was obliged to drive past Kakoli once in a while, that indomitable feeling would creep into him miles before entering the town. And once he entered it, he would invariably feel stripped of his clothes – a feeling that would continue to shame him till he had left the place miles behind.

He must put an end to this reflex. He must visit Kakoli and pass a full night in the town. Besides, the prospect of being put up as a guest of the Chowdhuries had a strange thrill about it.

It was about evening when, at last, his car entered Kakoli, preceded and followed by a dozen vehicles. The place did not seem to have changed much, except that new buildings had come up like anywhere else. The impressive, old-world mansion of the Chowdhuries, however, had not lost its lustre.

The PWD bungalow was the place where he was taken for his relaxation – that is the term used in his itinerary – to sit amidst the small-town dignitaries, sipping tea and drinking coconut water to strike a balance in his courtesy towards the two feuding groups in the local committee of his party, and answer a dozen questions in an optimistic vein but without making a single commitment.

Then he proceeded to the newly built charitable dispensary and inaugurated it, paying his tributes to the late Chowdhury whose memory it bore, and to his worthy widow, the Chowdhurani. The function concluded with a chorus glorifying Subrato, the lyric for which had been specially written by a local poet.

Since it was not easy for the important members of the audience to express their appreciation of his speech without each one of them making a brief speech before him, he was led once again to the same bungalow for another round of tea.

He was tired. The conscientious organizers arranged for his early dinner and retirement in the guest-room of the Chowdhuries.

But once all was quiet, which was only at midnight, he came out to the broad balcony and surveyed the area.

The row of rooms, one accommodating the clerk of the household and another the tax-collector of the zamindari, and the third one in which he had been put up for a fortnight some forty-five years ago, had disappeared.

And where were the bushes on an acre of swamp behind which he sat shivering

for hours? The swamp had become a colony of modest buildings. There were crotons and bougainvillea, but no bush.

Last but not the least, where was that beautiful girl, the Chowdhury's daughter? She must have married into another feudal family. He had always checked his temptation to make such queries, for he was keen to erase that fortnight entirely from his life.

Subrato, who came of a poor family, had joined the high school funded by the Chowdhuries as an assistant teacher. The school had not developed beyond the ninth class and the few teachers who came from outside Kakoli were provided with free board and lodging, on practical and compassionate grounds, by different affluent villagers. Subrato had the privilege to find shelter in the Chowdhury household.

The fourteen-year-old daughter of the Chowdhury was a rosy restless fairy bereft of wings.

'Sir, would you please explain this?' she asked one afternoon, sailing into Subrato's room. What she presented was a simple arithmetical puzzle and though Subrato should not have taken more than five minutes to solve it, he took, in fact, some fifty minutes.

'Sir, do you relish such stuff?' she dashed into his room another evening and heaped on his gratefully extended, slightly trembling palms, two or three varieties of berries. She ran away before he could thank her.

While munching those delicious gifts, Subrato wondered if the nectar-loving gods really deserved to be envied.

Alas, the fateful evening was only two days away.

For some reason most of the inmates and servants of the mansion were somewhere outside and all was quiet. A window of a room in the inner quarters showed the girl concentrating on a book with a lantern on her table.

Subrato stood gazing at the face from the outer verandah for five minutes. There was no movement around. The girl's face looked to him like the distant moon of his childhood which his mother's lullaby promised to fetch for him.

Perhaps it was time for him to try and catch the moon.

That was the only time his legs behaved independent of his conscious will. Suddenly he found himself right inside the girl's room, although no employee or guest was expected to enter that zone unless summoned.

He felt the surging of some alien sensation in his veins. At first it seemed to well from his heart, but before long it engulfed the heart reducing it to an island about to be submerged.

Unknown to the girl, he stood behind her chair. But then? He had no plan as such. He could surely employ his palms, which the other day had been lucky to receive those berries from her, to seal her eyes in a playful way!

He acted accordingly. He expected that the girl would giggle and feel his hands and probably her tender fingers would slowly crawl to his face, in order to guess his identity.

Alas, the girl did nothing of that kind. Instead, she gave out a shriek. Never again in his life was Subrato to know such a perplexing moment. Suddenly he discovered himself in the role of a thief or a criminal of sorts. Should he take his hands away and expose himself to her? Was there no magic way to clean disappear from the scene, even leaving his two arms behind if that was the price he must pay?

There was no time to lose, for he imagined the sound of rushing footsteps growing louder beyond the door opening to the backyard of the house.

Subrato made a bid to escape in the blink of an eye, but at the exit his dhoti snagged in a protruding wooden bar fixed to the door to serve as a latch. In the tug of war between himself and the obstinate bar, he lost his entire dhoti and sprinted into the dark.

He crouched behind a bush and shivered. For a moment he felt the impulse to continue to run through the miles and miles of paddy fields and get lost somewhere in the moonless horizon. But the coolness of the swamp was creeping into his body, almost paralyzing it, the lower half of which was bare.

He got back to his room only at midnight. Now it was panic that kept him paralyzed, as if he was to lose his head as soon as the sun rose.

Nobody came for his head, but he found it difficult to keep it straight and steady.

He left Kakoli. He got a better job in the city. The circumstances pushing him into politics, his election to the legislature and holding ministerial positions during the next twenty years, suddenly appeared to have carried only one secret behind them – his effort to recover the soiled, cheap dhoti he had lost decades ago, and all his daring moves and self-assertion were a long struggle to compensate for his bizarre humiliation of that remote evening.

The guest-room was cozy and comfortable indeed. He slept the later part of the night well, dreaming of having a thorough bath in a murmuring brook, trying to cleanse himself of something he could not see.

What was that invisible element? He analyzed his dream early in the morning and found the answer: an undercurrent of anxiety.

There was a gentle knock on the door. His personal assistant was followed by a servant carrying tea on a tray.

‘The Chowdhurani would like to meet you for a moment. Can she do so now? I’m afraid there will be hardly any time afterwards!’ said the P.A.

‘She is welcome,’ Subrato put on a shirt and moved to the sofa.

The Chowdhurani entered slowly, smiling. Subrato stood up and greeted

her with palms folded. He was ready to listen to some request, perhaps for the transfer of a nephew or a cousin to a better place or post, or a complaint that she had not been fully compensated for a land or a building acquired by the government. He must appear sympathetic and promise help.

‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Very well, madam, thank you so much.’

‘It was good that the memory of that ticklish evening forty-five years ago did not haunt you.’

Subrato straightened up. He looked at the Chowdhurani with all the concentration at his command.

‘Well... am I to believe that you...’

‘How could I expect you to discover that fickle little girl you knew – and knew so briefly – in this old lady?’ She laughed delicately and resumed, ‘I had no brother. My husband who hailed of a house of our distant relatives took over our estates and I was spared the ordeal of having to be transplanted on another family. The dispensary you inaugurated was my husband’s dream in his ailing last days.’

The Chowdhurani handed over a small parcel to Subrato.

‘Your dhoti. I had hidden it before anybody had any chance to wonder about its mysterious entanglement on my door.’ The lady laughed. ‘For many years I did not know that the leader known by that shy and timid teacher’s name was none other than the teacher himself. I knew it only after I saw your photographs in the papers.’

‘But – why should you preserve this...’

‘You are looking for logic! What was the logic behind your impulse to seal my eyes with your palms?’

She stood up. She looked as fresh and serene as the morning sky visible through the window. Subrato saw in a flash, emerging from the white hair and wrinkled face, the moon he had rushed at, once upon a time.

The Chowdhurani paused near the door.

‘It was irrational of me to shriek, it was irrational of you to run away; perhaps the most irrational part of the episode was your running away from Kakoli.’ She smiled and bade him goodbye.

Subrato stood speechless. The P.A. had to cough mildly and cough again noisily to wake him up from his reverie.

It was noon when Subrato reached the capital, a noon charged with tension. The central leadership of his party, in a surprise move, had despatched an emissary to measure the gravity of the conflict between the chief minister and Subrato. The visitor had already had a long meeting with the chief minister. He was eagerly waiting to meet Subrato.

Surprisingly, Subrato betrayed no anxiety and when, at the end of the day, he was closeted with the emissary. The meeting was very brief.

Reporters, their tape-recorders switched on, surrounded a smiling Subrato the moment he emerged from the meeting.

‘Who, according to you, commands the central leadership’s confidence – you or the chief minister?’

‘Have you accepted the chief minister’s challenge to you to prove your charges of corruption against him?’

‘How many MLAs of the party are solidly behind you?’

‘What is the size of the block of undecided members?’

‘Should the chief minister advise the governor to dissolve the assembly, are you prepared to face a by-election?’

Subrato was smiling, paying equal attention to all the questions.

‘How come you look so happy?’

‘Because no longer do I stand stripped,’ Subrato spoke at last.

The reporters laughed while groping for the meaning of Subrato’s statement which, they were sure, was figurative.

‘Will you please explain?’ asked an owl-faced senior, after casting a contemptuous look at his laughing compatriots.

‘I will. I am resigning my cabinet post, resigning my membership of the legislature and retiring from politics. This is a decision which has nothing to do with all our quarrels and conflicts, and, I assert, the decision is irrevocable.’

The reporters stood stunned for a moment.

‘Is this true?’ several voices buzzed.

‘True.’

‘What is the rationale behind it?’

‘Well, since I know no rationale for my birth, no rationale for my inevitable death, why should I look for a rationale for this and why should I be under any obligation to formulate and produce a rationale for your consumption?’

‘It appears from your answer that the decision could not have been made off the cuff. Since were you preparing for such a momentous step?’

The reporters were fast recovering from their surprise.

‘From the day I took up politics. But I was not aware of it.’

Subrato Das had nothing to offer but smiles for all the other questions while he pushed on towards his car, exuding an aura of liberation.



The Different Man

The fearful apprehension that more and more people were growing crazy, if not conspicuously lunatic, began to darken, like chunks of aggressive clouds, the otherwise sunny mind of Pratap Singh.

All that he had asked his colleague, Hemant Babu, was, 'You don't seem to suffer from any kind of cold. Why then have you started coughing at the beginning, middle and the end of every sentence you mumble out?'

That made Hemant Babu, known for his sobriety, blurt out menacingly, 'What then should I do if not cough? Yes, what else is there to do?'

Pratap Singh's was nothing more than a casual query. He was, naturally, surprised and embarrassed at that old familiar voice raising the issue to the lofty plane of the very basic whys and hows to which he had no answers.

Walking along the riverbank in the evening he had observed no less than five pedestrians engrossed in soliloquies. One of them was engaged in a loud argument with himself, gesticulating in a defiant manner. Pratap Singh hoped that the man looking a decent kind of clerk accustomed to sitting behind some glass counter, or an affable broker, would come to his senses if he knew that someone was observing him. Pratap Singh walked closer to him and deliberately looked goggle-eyed at him. But the man did not even notice him and went his way, as charmed by his own intonation as a musk deer is by its fragrance.

It was getting dark. Pratap Singh stopped near a kiosk and asked a young trio buying cigarettes, 'When did you take to smoking?'

'Well, we didn't record the date. Say, a year or two ago,' they replied, a bit intrigued.

‘My young friends, long before that the cartons had begun announcing that smoking is injurious to your health. It may be all right with those who had already grown addicted to the habit before the warning became statutory, but what about you? Why did you pledge your health to the vampire of tobacco?’ he demanded.

‘Whose health, yours or ours?’ the one who looked like the male monkey in the troop retorted with a sneer.

‘You consider yourself very clever, do you?’ shouted an irate Pratap Singh. ‘Tell me, are you the maker of your health, your body? Did you know whether you would be male or female, short or tall, fat or slim, dark or fair? Is it you who gave your body the immunity against the effects of adulteration and pollution? Must you vaunt it as your health?’

Pratap Singh seemed to have impressed his small audience, including even the shopkeeper, with his harangue. But the one who looked absolutely a nincompoop among the three, asked in a deceptively calm tone, ‘Pardon me, Sir, but are you married?’

‘What do you gain by putting such a question to a man of your father’s age?’ Pratap Singh sounded exasperated.

‘I gain nothing. But you should have gained from the statutory warning against sex pronounced by the seers and sages for thousands of years. I wonder what made you ignore that!’

The audience, led by the shopkeeper, burst into a guffaw. There was nothing surprising in the shopkeeper’s elation, for Pratap Singh’s stand went against the chap’s interest, but why should the others prove so irreverent?

‘Listen, young man,’ Pratap Singh assumed the most sagacious tone possible. ‘What you advance is hardly an argument. Nature had endowed all creatures with certain instincts. They were there even before man appeared. Can you say the same thing about the cigarette? Can you classify smoking as an instinct? Don’t make faces. Argument must be met with argument and not with giggles and guffaws!’

‘Will you please tell us what inspired you to come out with such sermons against smoking?’

‘What inspired the authorities to print the warning on the cigarette packet? Duty. Am I clear?’

‘Please go on with your duty. Cheers!’ The young men hopped on to their bicycles and pedalled away.

Pratap Singh was extremely vexed. A sage had said that five kinds of people are not expected to be governed by reason: the infant, the fool, the wicked, the lunatic and the mystic. These fellows were neither infants nor fools nor mystics. They had to be either wicked or lunatic.

He would prefer them to be lunatic rather than wicked. That way there was some hope for mankind.

He remembered his destination – a bookshop. It was closed. But the airport was nearby. He could perhaps buy the book he needed at the stall inside the airport. He bought an entrance ticket. Book or no book, he could relax for a while in the air-conditioned cool.

A major flight had been delayed. People waiting to receive the incoming passengers and those waiting to take the flight crowded the lounges. Pratap Singh saw no vacant chair. And the bookshop had hardly standing room.

But he did not mind walking up and down for a while through the rows of comfortably seated ladies and gentlemen.

Suddenly his eyes fell on a young man in an exquisite suit and gleaming shoes whose foot-long necktie looked like a tiger's tail, but whose glistening hair was like a bush ravaged by a tornado.

Pratap Singh felt uneasy. To be that Bohemian with one's hair one should be in soiled pyjamas and a tattered shirt. What sense was there in being so tiptop right from the boots to the necktie and then leaving the lush crop of hair in chaos?

In an effort to forget the nagging question he stepped into the bookshop once again, but the realization that it had not been a wise course dawned on him in no time, for he had the misfortune to see an elegantly dressed gentleman, at least twenty years older than he, turning the pages of a recently published pictorial edition of Vatsyana's Kamasutra. The walking stick dangling from his left elbow exaggerated the shaking of the hand holding that huge volume in art paper.

'Well, venerable Sir, of what use is the book to you at your age?' Pratap Singh managed to hold back his surging question and hurriedly came out of the bookshop, in the process forgetting the very purpose of his visit to the airport.

But once again his attention went over to that head with puzzling hair. The young man could not have left his hair like that for the sake of style. What then could it be?

He hit upon a probable answer. The young man, a bit late for his flight, had left home in a hurry. His wife being away at her maternal uncle's house – for the fellow did not look either a bachelor or a divorcee – there was nobody to remind him that his hair were uncombed. By the time he realized this, which was only after coming to learn that his flight was delayed, he found to his dismay that he had forgotten his pocket-comb on the dressing table. What could he do?

That's right. What could he do? The argument calmed down Pratap Singh. He went over to the small stationery shop and bought a plastic pocket-comb, paying four times more than what he would have paid for it outside.

He waited for an opportune moment for his next act. It came when the young man strained his neck to survey one who could be among the ten best-dressed women of the century yelling out her distress at the delayed flight.

Pratap Singh dropped the comb right at his feet and sat down in a chair just fallen vacant opposite him. Singh was happy when the young man noticed the comb and picked it up and held it prominently enough for those near him to mark it. Honesty, no doubt, impelled him to trace its owner. Pratap Singh had to struggle once again to check himself from blurting out, 'Young man, why don't you use it on your hair first, before thinking of giving it away?'

He was shocked to see the young man calmly put the comb in his pocket.

Did the chap forget that he had a head and that the head was blessed with a profusion of hair and that it looked uncannily uncared for in relation to the rest of his well-groomed person?

Singh tried his best to stop exercising his own head on the issue but failed. For a moment he had an impulse to ignore it all. He even walked up to the exit, but did an about-turn and was back. He had realized that to abandon his search for a key to the puzzle was simply impossible.

The chap had a glistening bush of dark hair on his head and a brand new blue comb in his pocket. What stood in the way of his applying the latter to the former?

He could feel the quiz swelling within him. Soon it seemed to take complete possession of his being. He went and stood before the young man, staring at him.

'Would you like to sit down here?' The young man was courtesy personified.

'Oh no, thank you. Please keep sitting. But if you don't mind, would you please comb your hair?' Pratap managed to say, though he sounded nervous to himself.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I mean, it looks so unkempt. Won't you care for your head?'

The young man shifted his disconcerted look from Singh's face. 'If you are speaking of my head, well, I'll beg you to leave it in peace, for it is my head!' he said, his facial muscles stiffening.

It was frustrating for Singh. Why does everybody fail to read sense in a suggestion born of plain goodwill? Why is everybody so eager to be sarcastic, ready with retorts?

But he controlled himself. 'Look here, my friend,' he began, trying to sound as affable as possible. 'How many are blessed with such a wealth of silken hair? You have not neglected an inch of your person; even the face is so well-rouged except for only one blotch of undiluted powder – never mind that – on your nose. Why should you be so unkind towards your head?'

The young man's eyes, which looked so tender with concern only a moment ago when he was appreciating the screaming lady behind him, began to give out spooky sparks.

'What had I done to you that you must deride me?' He stood up.

'Believe me, I had no intention of deriding you. I mean what I say, sincerely. You have – don't you? – a comb in your pocket, a brand new one!'

'Who said I have?' asked the young man through clenched teeth.

This was too much for Singh.

'How dare you deny a stark fact, you liar?'

'How dare you call me a liar?'

'Must you know how? Who do you think paid for the comb you have pocketed?' Singh's voice was growing shrill.

A crowd was collecting around them. It included the damsel in distress, now rapidly puffing at her cigarette and leaning against a colourful companion sporting a crimson beard, two elderly European ladies equipped with movie cameras, their arms around each other's waist, a tall Grecian figure leading a very short and fat woman in a half-veil holding a tennis racket for him, and eight or ten men and women without any special traits.

'So much ado just about a comb, eh!' commented someone.

'Not about a comb!' shouted Singh.

'Then?'

Pratap Singh began to stutter in his effort to explain.

The aged gentleman from the bookshop stepped forward, his manner suggesting that if he leaned on his stick, it was on account of the sheer weight of his wisdom.

'Who is the loser?' he asked, coughing benevolently. 'Let him come with me. I will buy a comb for him.'

'Venerable one, will you please return to the bookshop and exhaust your remaining eyesight on those erotica on Italian art paper?' shouted Singh.

'Oh, a mental case!' commented the tall man, and he left the scene, nudging the woman in veil to follow him.

'Mental case? How dare you? Do you take me for mad?' Singh was about to rush upon the man when he was stopped by an airport official. 'Excuse me, which flight are you boarding?' he asked, polite as a marriage-broker.

'No flight.'

'Which flight do you propose to attend? Two are arriving almost simultaneously.'

'How do I care!'

'Why then are you here?' The official now sounded quite matter-of-fact.

'I willed to be here; that's all! But I'm no intruder. Here is my entry ticket!'

‘Interesting!’ sighed the venerable old man, looking askance. ‘The wide world had people who would buy entry tickets in search of quarrels.’ He was sure of support and protection from his audience should Singh turn violent. His listeners exchanged smiles in mutual recognition of sanity, courtesy and such other qualities warranted in as sophisticated a place as an airport lounge. And, of course, they indicated their agreement with the observation that the world had queer people galore ready to buy quarrels.

It was announced that the delayed flight had been cancelled. The crowd dispersed and re-grouped in front of the enquiry counter.

Pratap Singh came out into the open. He felt the atmosphere outside cooler than inside, though it could not be practically possible.

He inhaled some peace and walked along the pavement skirting the dimly lighted car park.

Suddenly his eyes fell on the young man with the tousled hair about to start his car. He had rolled down the glass and was looking for passage.

Here was the fellow for whom he had been branded a mental case and a buyer of quarrels. An upsurge of vengeance maddened Singh. He thrust his hand in and caught the young man’s hair in his grip.

Panic wrought a ghostly mutation on the young man’s face. His eyes betrayed the fright of a goat about to be butchered. He started the car and shot away.

Pratap Singh stood aghast. He had never visualized such a metamorphosis. The man who slipped away from his grip seemed to have changed into a totally different man in the twinkle of an eye. Then his look turned to his own hand which for a moment looked alien to himself, like that of an assassin, for it held something unexpected, something like a part of a head – a complete wig of glistening, dark hair!

He kept standing there, absorbing the shock, and moved only when obliged to give way to a honking vehicle.

All his senses seemed to have grown mellow with a mild melancholy and a feeling of empathy. Silently he apologized to the young man and all the others concerned.

He also remembered Hemant Babu and spoke to him in his mind: ‘Cough on, my esteemed colleague, cough on! What else is there to do, after all? Indeed, yours is a million dollar question.’

Had he been familiar with the man who walked along the river-bank talking to himself, he would have given him a pat on the back and said, ‘Go on, my friend, go on with your soliloquy. To whom else but yourself can you explain yourself? Who understands whom?’



The Concubine

The small brick house with a thatched roof at the western end of Sumanpur, which one could reach by trudging past acres of marshland, had a past, but the members of the Progressive Club were not at all in favour of discussing it. Citizens of the small town, however, knew it, till 1951, as the Slaughterhouse. In order to rid them of the deplorable habit of referring to it by that uncomfortable name, my friends had crowned the house with a signboard bigger than any in the bazar, bearing their club's name, the sombre letters looking like a parade of undertakers.

As the post-independence Sumanpur had shown an encouraging growth in the number of goats along with the population of goat-eaters, the affluent and patriotic butcher had shifted his workshop to a spacious accommodation and had allowed the ambitious youths of the town to use the old place for their proposed cultural revolution.

It was my second day at Sumanpur. In the evening, one of the leading progressives, Sujan Das, cordially led me to their club. He briefed me on our way about the project to be discussed: they were going to launch a fortnightly devoted on the one hand to the wonder that was Sumanpur of yore and on the other to the burning issues of the day. The paper was also to wage a crusade against social evils like dowry, child-marriage and every kind of orthodoxy.

He also informed me that the elite of the town had been entrusted with the task of suggesting an attractive name for the journal. Among the proposals already received were 'God is Good' coming from the venerable Sanskrit scholar Pundit Pundarik Panda, which, Sujan Das confided to me, the executive committee of

the club had rejected with regrets, and ‘The Thunderclap’ and ‘The Earthquake’ suggested by two promising entrants to their club.

Under a roof that badly needed repairs, the assembled members displayed a palpable excitement on their faces. The president of the club, Makhan Roy, introduced us to the cause of that excitement – one Pradeep Bishoi – who was on the staff of a daily published from the state’s capital and who, while on a visit to his old friend Makhan Roy, had kindly consented to educate the members of the club on the making of a newspaper.

Bishoi brought out a *beedi* from a cigarette case and Makhan Roy lighted the match for him.

‘What you need for a fortnightly is not just paper or ink or a printing press, not even money, but...’ Bishoi paused to blow out an impressive puff of smoke.

All were nodding to denote their agreement with Bishoi, but when he stopped abruptly and left it to his listeners to complete the sentence, assuming the look of the chairman of a public service commission, some gave knowing nods and some others coughed, while the rest sat smiling though embarrassed.

Bishoi resumed, ‘What is needed is an extra pair of eyes. One pair won’t do, Mr Roy!’

Makhan Roy, the would-be editor, blushed. Bishoi planted a rather unkind whack on the back of his head and said again, giggling indulgently, ‘You need to cultivate a pair of eyes here, right here. Only then you’ll learn how to see, what to report!’

‘But ours is a small place, nothing more than a bazar though we flatter ourselves by calling it a town. Events to merit report rarely take place here!’ grumbled Roy.

Bishoi almost thrust his smouldering *beedi* into Roy’s face and bellowed, while the would-be editor hurriedly shut his eyes: ‘Shutting whatever eyes you have, eh?’

‘Didn’t I tell you about the need to cultivate even more eyes to do justice to a newspaper?’ Bishoi laughed but soon his voice rang with compassion. ‘Never mind, the existing pair should do. After all, even I do not possess more, do I?’

Makhan Roy looked hopeful.

Bishoi threw away the *beedi*, already reduced to a pinch, and explained: ‘What I mean is you must develop a subtle vision. You suspect dearth of news. But I tell you, I could have filled half a page of a daily with whatever I saw even while coming from your house to your club here!’

We stared at Bishoi, our looks betraying reactions ranging from total disbelief to amazement.

‘Should I give an example? Should I?’ he provoked his audience.

‘Please do,’ Roy pleaded on our behalf.

‘What happened near the sub-registrar’s office?’ Bishoi demanded, squinting meaningfully.

‘What?’ Roy stared blank.

‘Nothing?’

‘I...well...I must confess I can’t exactly remember!’

‘Ha ha! Don’t you remember that hand-pulled rickshaw with two passengers, and a third one, fat as a gorilla – you informed me that he was a local capitalist – squeezing in? Didn’t you mark the miserable condition of the rickshaw-puller struggling with the giant weight and the people around laughing, thereby obliging the capitalist to get down?’

There was a pensive silence.

‘I know you’re unable to catch the import of my observation. Listen. This should be the headline of the item, ‘People’s laughter triumphs on Broadway: Capitalist relents!’ Ha ha! Do you now realize what you were missing?’

Makhan Roy and his collaborators looked amused as well as enlightened.

‘And, needless to say, the forthcoming elections should mean a great opportunity for you.’ Bishoi rolled up his sleeves. ‘You should forthwith launch an attack on the candidature of the young prince of the erstwhile Sumanpur state. Tell the people that although the Raj had gone, as the scion of the dynasty, he was the symbol of a reactionary feudal past, a reminder of tyranny and exploitation!’

Bishoi gave attention to a fresh *beedi* as his audience sat whispering to one another.

It may be almost impossible today to discover a young man who is not aligned with one political party or the other. But the situation was different then. The progressives of Sumanpur had not yet been fired by any radical idealism. I suspect Makhan Roy alone had some ambition in that direction. However, all of them sat convinced that if Sumanpur were to find for itself a dot on the map of the modern world, it must take a big leap out of its foggy feudal past and the sooner it did so the better.

Unfortunately, the young prince appeared popular. People had forgotten, in a deplorably short period, all about the misrule of his late father.

Not that the rival candidate was a paragon of virtue. But he represented the forces of anti-feudalism, having once raised his voice against the Raj. It was not necessary that one who represented a valuable ideal should be ideal himself!

The prince had one day paid a surprise visit to the Progressive Club and had greeted the members affably and requested for their help. The overwhelmed progressives were about to promise him their support. But Roy hastened to mend matters. ‘Please don’t mind, but you were a Raja; we wouldn’t like to vote for an ex-Raja. We have no grievance whatever against you personally. It is only a question of principle.’

The prince had meanwhile pushed cigarettes into several hands. While

helping them with his gold-studded lighter, he rejoined in a remarkably calm tone, 'Mr Roy, if I say that you were once a baby and it is not proper to offer a cigarette to an ex-baby, would you appreciate my logic? I should expect you to reconsider your stand.'

The prince left Roy discomfited. The report of the encounter spread like wildfire and the people of Sumanpur were all praise for the prince's wit. The humiliation made Makhan Roy a progressive with a vengeance. He inspired his friends to resolve to work for the prince's defeat – 'if not in the forthcoming election, in the next election or in the one thereafter.'

'But the prince is hardly making any propaganda. Either he does not care or he is too shy to address the public. Others speak for him. Our womenfolk have been requested to gather tomorrow at noon in the grove on the eastern outskirts of the town,' one of the members informed.

'Who is going to address them?' Bishoi queried.

'Sati Dei.'

'Who is that?'

'Alady from the palace, a concubine of the late Raja.'

'Agolden opportunity!' Bishoi screamed out and clapped his hands.

He then briefed the youths on how to exploit the situation. Sati Dei must be exposed. She must be told to her face that she was a concubine, in the full hearing of her audience. Humiliated, she would hang her head or beat a hasty retreat. And Bishoi explained at some length how to make an exciting story of the episode for the lower half of the first page of the first issue of the fortnightly.

'Issue-oriented but imaginative, yes, that's what your paper must be – and you have to be vigilant,' was the parting advice of the valued guest.

The progressives stood up gratefully and bade Bishoi a farewell just short of tearful.

While returning from the club my companions descended on a young homoeopath of the town, Dr Subudhi, and realized from him five rupees in advance for a quarter-page advertisement in the inaugural number of the publication.

This is how Roy impressed Dr Subudhi: The print order for the first issue shall be twelve thousand copies. If one copy is read by ten people on an average, the paper will command a readership of one lakh and twenty thousand. Half of that number must be suffering from one ailment or another. At least one-third of that half, that is, twenty thousand people, must be having faith in homoeopathy. If one-fourth of them came to Dr Subudhi for treatment and if the doctor realized one rupee on the average per head, he should earn rupees five thousand. The cost of the insertion deducted, he should be left with a clean profit of four thousand nine hundred and ninety-five rupees!

The charmed physician had mildly protested, 'I'm afraid it'll be less. In case

of such a rush of patients I must appoint an assistant. Besides, we have to keep in mind the cost of the medicines.'

On the road again, I asked Roy, 'Don't you think it might prove rather tough for the lone hand-press of your town to turn out twelve thousand copies?'

'The print order of a paper is a secret,' observed Roy gravely.

I had no desire of go to confront Sati Dei. But Sujan Das and Makhan Roy would not spare me.

Among the progressives, Roy no doubt possessed a heart of steel. The others were hardly excited at the prospect of humiliating Sati Dei. It was only a sense of sacred duty towards the cause of progress as well as the demands made by the lower half of the first page of the first issue of the fortnightly that led them, profusely sweating under a stern sun, towards the grove.

Some five hundred women and a number of children had collected in the grove when we made our unexpected appearance there. They were surprised. I am afraid several members of our delegation too were growing restless.

We faltered to a halt under the gaze of the women.

'Who are you?' Sati Dei, seated in a chair under a big mango tree, threw the question at us. There was no rancour in her voice, only curiosity.

Roy took a determined step forward. 'We are the representatives of a progressive newspaper. But may I ask who are you?' Roy looked askance at us. He was in dire need of some moral support.

'Me? Well, I'm Sati Dei, of course! You kids won't know me...'

'We are no kids!' Roy tried to thunder, but his voice cracked.

'You kids won't know me,' Sati Dei continued, totally unmindful of Roy's protest. 'You were born only yesterday. Your mothers should know me.'

'But we know!' bellowed Roy mobilizing all his stamina, though gasping in the process, 'You were a concubine of the late Raja!'

'I was what, my son?'

'Concubine, that's to say, a – well – what's called a kept-a woman of the old Raja.'

We lowered our heads. There was complete silence for a moment, except for a koel calling persistently from a nearby tree.

Would this be the end of the confrontation? Would Sati Dei, exposed and insulted, sit stupefied or retreat as quickly as Bishoi had prophesied?

But we stood bewildered. The old and serene Sati Dei, in a milk-white saree, slightly stooping, was seen quietly advancing towards us, all smiles.

Makhan Roy looked back. I could feel how eager he was to locate the way out.

But there was no chance. Sati Dei caught him by his shoulder, touched his chin tenderly and patted him on the back. 'Live long, sonny, how did you know so much about me? You're right. I am the same Sati Dei.'

Her tone was marked by a deep emotion. She wiped her eyes and resumed, ‘I was under the impression that you wouldn’t recognize me at all! But, my sons, you know so much! No wonder, for you are an educated lot! While in her deathbed, the Rani had entreated me, “Sati, take care of my son!” That’s why I’m doing my bit. I go from village to village asking the women to vote for the boy. Were the Raja alive, he would have skinned me alive. But let us not speak of that demon. The boy, however, is as gentle as a calf!’

Sati Dei caressed Roy again and called out, ‘Nrutya!’

Nrutya, her servant, came rushing forward.

‘Give my children a pair of laddoos each. Don’t you see how they have come here braving the summer sun?’ She apologized for having called the meeting at noon: ‘You know, this is the only time your mothers and aunts have a little respite!’

After we had consumed a couple of laddoos each and taken leave of Sati Dei, duly bowing to her, we felt that the day had suddenly become extremely tender and pleasant.

The long silence was broken by Sujan Das. ‘I think the right thing for us will be to publish a cultural monthly and not a fortnightly newspaper.’

All the progressives jumped at the idea. Unlike on other occasions, they did not wait for Makhan Roy’s ruling on the issue. And that very evening they unanimously accepted the name I proposed for the magazine, before leaving Sumanpur, ‘The Monthly Jasmine’.

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एकः सूते सकलम्



Mystery of the Missing Cap

It is certainly not my motive, in recounting this episode of two decades ago, to raise a laugh at the expense of Shri Moharana or Babu Virkishore, then the Hon'ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts of my State. On the contrary, I wish my friends and readers to share the sympathy I have secretly nurtured in my heart for these two gentlemen over the years past.

Shri Moharana was a well-to-do man. His was the only pukka house in an area of twenty villages. Whitewashed on the eve of India achieving independence, the house shone as a sort of tourist attraction for the folks of the nearby villages. They stopped to look at it, for none could overlook the symbolism in this operation that had been carried out after half a century.

Shri Moharana had a considerable reputation as a conscientious and generous man. He was an exemplary host with two ponds full of choice fish and a number of pampered cows. He was a happy villager.

Came independence. As is well known, the ancient land of India has had four major castes from time immemorial. But during the days immediately preceding independence a new caste was emerging all over the country – that of the patriots. The 15th of August 1947 gave a big boost to their growth. In almost every village, besides the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras a couple of patriots came into being.

It was observed that the small fisheries of Shri Moharana were often exploited in honour of these new people. And observers began to notice that Shri Moharana himself was fast growing into a patriot. As I found out later, he had even nurtured an ambition to be elected to the State Legislature. The incident I relate occurred

at the outset of his endeavour in that direction. A small boy, I was then on a visit to my maternal uncle's house which was in the immediate neighbourhood of Shri Moharana's.

In those early days of indigenous ministries there were no deputy or sub-deputy ministers. All were full-fledged Hon'ble Ministers and, since Babu Virkishore hailed from our district, the sponsors of Shri Moharana thought it proper that the latter's debut into politics should have his blessings.

That was a time when a minister's daily life was largely made up of speech-making at public meetings. There was no need for any specific occasion to accord a reception to a minister. A reception was arranged for Babu Virkishore with Shri Moharana as the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee.

Shri Moharana's huge ancestral cane-chair was laid with a linen cover on which the most gifted village seamstress had laced a pair of herons holding two ornamented fish in their beaks. The children of the village lower primary school were made to practise a welcome song every afternoon for a fortnight.

Among the many strange phenomena wrought by the great spirit of the time was the composition of this song; for the composer, the head-pundit of the school, had lived for fifty-five years without any poetic activity. The refrain of the song still raises echoes in my memory. Its literal translation would be:

*O mighty minister, tell us, O tell us,
How do you nurture this long and broad universe!*

The rest of the song catalogued the great changes nature and humanity experienced on the occasion of the minister's visit: how the morning sun frequently blushed in romantic happiness, how each and every bird chanted a particular salutation-oriented *raga*, and with what eagerness and throbbing of heart the women folk waited to blow their conch-shells in unison when the minister would set his foot on village soil.

I know that nowadays ministers do not enjoy such glory. But it was very different then. We, the rustic children, wrangled over several issues: What does a minister eat? What does he think? Does he sleep? Does he ever suffer from colic or colds as ordinary mortals do?

Shri Moharana himself was excitement personified. He used to be very fond of his hour-long afternoon nap. But he gave up the luxury at least ten days prior to the day of destiny. He devoted all his time to examining and re-examining details of the arrangements; even then he looked nervous and uncertain.

At last dawned the big day. The minister got down from the jeep as soon as it reached the very first welcome arch on the outskirts of the village. He was profusely garlanded by Shri Moharana but was requested to re-enter the jeep as the destination was still a furlong away. But the minister smiled and made some statement which meant that great though destiny had made

him, he loved to keep his feet on the ground! Moharana and his friends looked ecstatic.

While hundreds applauded and shouted *Babu Virkishore ki jai* and *Bharatmata ki jai*, the minister, double the size of an average man of our village, plodded through the street, it seemed to us, to the embarrassment of the poor, naked earth. And I still remember the look of Shri Moharana when the minister's long round arm rested on his shrunken neck, a look which I have seen only once or twice later in life on the faces of dying people who had lived a contented and complete life. Shri Moharana's look suggested: 'What more, what more, O mortal me, could you expect from life? My, my!'

All the people, even invalids, for many of whom it was the experience of a lifetime – were alternately shouting slogans and gaping at the august visitor. We, the half-naked, pot-bellied, uncivilised kids walked parallel to the minister at a safe distance and could not help feeling extremely small and guilty.

At Shri Moharana's house the minister and his entourage were treated to tender-coconut water, followed by the most luxurious lunch I had ever seen, with about twenty dishes around the sweetened, ghee-baked rice mixed with nuts, cloves, etc. Soon the minister retired to the cabin set apart for him. Though it was summer, the cabin's window being open to a big pond and a grove, there was enough air to lull even an elephant to a sound sleep. Volunteers had been posted to see that no noise whatever was made anywhere in the village to disturb the ministerial repose.

I had by then separated myself from my companions. Being rather ambitious, I was eager to be as physically close to the great man as possible. And the minister sleeping was surely the most ideal condition for achieving my goal.

I mustered courage and slowly approached the window facing the pond. This was the rear side of the house. The minister's Personal Assistant and entourage were on the opposite side.

While I stood near the window, suffering the first shock of disillusionment in my life regarding great men, for the minister was snoring in the style that was ordinary and human, something most extraordinary happened. Speechless I was already; the incident rendered me witless.

Through the window I had observed that the minister's egg-bald head rested on a gigantic pillow while his white cap lay on a stool between his bed and the window. Now I saw the mischievous Jhandoo bounce towards the window like a bolt from the blue and pick up the cap. Throwing a meaningful glance at me, he disappeared into the grove.

Even when my stupefaction passed I was unable to shout, partly because of my deep affection for Jhandoo (knowing that the consequences of his crime could be fatal to him) and partly for fear that the minister's dream – must be on

a patriotic theme – might cease. At that crucial moment I was in a dilemma as to which I should value more – the great man’s cap or his snoring.

I retreated, pensive. But before long I heard an excited if subdued noise. Crossing into Shri Moharana’s compound again, I saw the minister’s Personal Assistant flitting about like a locust and heard his repeated mumbling, “Mysterious, mysterious!” The minister was obviously inside the cabin. But nobody dared to go in.

Shri Moharana stood thunderstruck, as were his compatriots. The Public Relationships Officer was heard saying, ‘The Hon’ble Minister does not mind the loss of the cap so much as the way it was stolen. Evidently there was a deep-rooted conspiracy. The gravity of the situation can hardly be exaggerated. In fact, I fear, it may have devastating effects on the political situation of our land.’

I could see Shri Moharana literally shaking. He was sweating like an ice-cream stick, so much so that I was afraid, at that rate he might completely melt away in a few hours.

The conflict within me as to whether I should keep the knowledge of the mystery to myself or disclose it was resolved. I signalled him to follow me, which he eagerly did. A drowning man will indeed clutch at a straw.

I told him what had happened. He stood silent for a moment, eyes closed.

Then wiping the sweat from his forehead, he smiled like a patient whose disease had been accurately diagnosed but was known to be incurable. He then patted me and said, ‘My son, good you told me. But keep it a secret. I will reward you later.’

The incident had thrown a wet blanket on the occasion. The sepulchral silence in the minister’s room was broken only by his intermittent coughing. Every time he coughed, a fresh wave of anxiety hit the people in the courtyard and on the verandah.

I went away to join my friends. They were wild with speculations. One said that the thief, when caught, was to be hanged on the big banyan tree beside the river. ‘Perhaps all the villagers will be thrown into jail,’ said another. Among us there were naives who even believed that the minister’s cap was a sort of Aladdin’s lamp, that anyone who put it on would find himself endowed with ministerial power the very next moment.

But the situation changed all of a sudden. I saw the minister and Shri Moharana emerging on the verandah, the former all smiles.

It was the most remarkable smile he had hitherto displayed. By then at least half a dozen caps had been secured for him. But he appeared with his head bare. Even to a child like me it was obvious that his baldpate wore an aura of martyrdom.

Not less than five thousand people had gathered in front of a specially constructed stage when the minister ascended it, that remarkable smile still clinging to his face. Shri Moharana’s niece, the lone High-School-going girl of

the region, garlanded the minister. A thunderous applause greeted the event, for, that was the first time our people saw what they had only heard in the tales of the ancient *Swayamvaras*, a young female garlanding a male in public. Then the chorus 'O mighty minister' was sung in *kirtan* style to the accompaniment of two harmoniums, a violin and a pakhauj drum.

Now it was Shri Moharana's turn to say a few words of welcome. I saw him (I stood just in front of the stage) moving his legs and hands in a very awkward manner. That was certainly nervousness. But with a successful exercise of will-power he grabbed the glittering mike and managed to speak for nearly an hour giving a chronological account of Babu Virkishore's achievements and conveying gratitude, on behalf of the nation, to the departed souls of the great man's parents but for who the world would have been without the minister.

I was happy that Shri Moharana did well in his maiden speech. But the greatest surprise was yet to come – in the concluding observations of Shri Moharana. Well, many would take Shri Moharana as a pukka politician. But I can swear that it was out of his goodness – a goodness befuddled by excitement – that he uttered the lie. He said, his voice rising in a crescendo, 'My brothers and sisters, you and the world had heard about the mysterious disappearance of the Hon'ble Minister's cap. You think that the property was stolen, don't you? Naturally. But not so, ladies and gentlemen, not so!' Shri Moharana smiled mysteriously. The minister nodded his big clean head which glowed like a satellite.

Shri Moharana resumed, 'You all are dying to know what happened to that object. Isn't that so? Yes, yes, naturally. You are dying. Well, it is like this: a certain nobleman of our locality took it away. Why? That's what you ask, don't you? Well, to preserve it as a sacred memento, of course! He was obliged to take it away secretly because otherwise the Hon'ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts, the brightly burning example of humility that he is, would never have permitted our friend the nobleman to view the cap as anything sacred!'

Shri Moharana stopped and brought out of his pocket a handkerchief containing coins and tightly tied. Dangling it before the audience, he said, 'Well, ladies and gentlemen, the nobleman has requested me to place this humble amount of one hundred and one rupees at the disposal of the Hon'ble Minister for some little use in his blessed life's mission, the service of the people, through fish and fine arts.' Shri Moharana bowed and handed over the pouch to the minister who, with a most graceful gesture, accepted it.

Applause and cries of wonder and appreciation broke out like a hurricane. Even the minister and Shri Moharana, both looking overwhelmed, clapped their hands.

The minister spoke for two and a half hours thereafter, drinking a glass of milk in between, at the end of which he declared that as a mark of respect to the

unknown lover of his, he had decided to remain bareheaded for that whole night although the good earth did not lack caps and, in fact, a surge of caps had already tried to occupy his undaunted head.

Soon my shock gave way to a double-edged feeling for Shri Moharana: praise for his presence of mind and regret for his having to spend one hundred and one rupees to cover Jhandoo the monkey's mischief. At night the respectable people of the area partook of the dinner that the Preparatory Committee threw in honour of the guest. Glances of awe and esteem were frequently cast at the minister's head and homages paid to the honourable thief. But when I saw Shri Moharana in the morning, I could immediately read in his eyes the guilt that haunted him at least whenever his eyes fell on me. Shri Moharana perhaps had never spoken a lie; and now when he did speak one, he did so before a gathering of thousands! God apart, at least there was one creature, I, who knew that he was no longer a man of truth.

The minister, however, exuded sheer delight. He did not seem to notice with what constraint Shri Moharana was conducting himself before him.

At last came the moment for the minister's departure. He was served with a glass of sweetened *lassi*. While sipping it leisurely, he said, in a voice choked with curd and emotion, 'Well, Moharana, ha ha! the way things are moving, ha ha! I'm afraid, ha ha! people would start snatching away my clothes, ha ha! and ha ha! I may have to go about, ha ha! naked! ha ha! But I don't mind! ha ha! That is the price one must pay for winning love! ha ha ha!'" The minister came out to the rear verandah facing the pond and the grove – to wash his mouth. Shri Moharana followed him with water in a jug.

Except for me, there was nobody on the verandah. My presence was not accidental. I had spied upon the rascal Jhandoo, playing with the minister's cap, slowly emerging from the grove. Seldom had I wished for anything that ardently as I wished then for Jhandoo to go unnoticed by the guest. He was a monkey not in any figurative sense, but a real one. When he was an infant his mother had taken shelter under Shri Moharana's roof in order to save her male child from the usual wrath of the male leader of her troop. Shri Moharana had not been at home and his servants killed the mother monkey. Shri Moharana felt extremely upset, did not eat for one and half days, and, to compensate for the wrong done, nurtured the baby monkey, christened Jhandoo, with great affection.

Jhandoo, when he grew up a little, would often escape into the grove. He was half domesticated and half wild. He played with everybody, and everybody tolerated him. We children were extremely fond of him.

To my horror, I saw Jhandoo rushing towards us from the other side of the pond. I made an effort to warn Shri Moharana of the impending crisis, but in vain. Jhandoo got there in the twinkling of an eye. He sat down between the

minister and Shri Moharana. He put the cap once on his own head; then taking it off, offered it to the minister in a most genial gesture

My heartbeats had trebled. Looking at Shri Moharana's face I saw an extremely pitiable image – pale as death.

The bewildered minister mumbled out, 'Er... er... isn't this one the very cap taken away by the nobleman?'

And something most preposterous came out of the dry lips of Shi Moharana who seemed to be on the verge of collapsing: 'Yes, yes, this is that nobleman...'

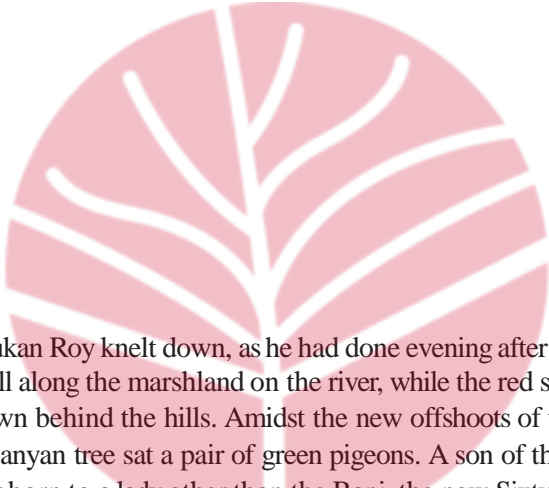
His eyes bulging out, the minister managed to ask, "What... what did you say?... Well?"

But Shri Moharana was in no condition to say anything more. He broke into tears. Next moment I saw the Hon'ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts weeping too. The Personal Assistant's voice was heard from the opposite verandah, 'Sir, the jeep is ready, Sir.' The minister gulped almost half jugful of water and plodded towards the jeep. Shri Moharana followed suit. Their reddened eyes and drawn faces were interpreted as marks of the sorrow of separation.

Shri Moharana's political endeavour is not known to have gone any farther. And it is strange that the Hon'ble Minister, Babu Virkishore, who was willing to be robbed of his clothes, was soon forgotten in politics. I have a strong feeling that it was this episode of the cap vis-a-vis Jhandoo that changed the courses of their lives.

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The Birds

Kumar Tukan Roy knelt down, as he had done evening after evening, at the end of a stroll along the marshland on the river, while the red sun, as though shot at, sank down behind the hills. Amidst the new offshoots of the top-most bough of the old banyan tree sat a pair of green pigeons. A son of the late Raja Sahib of Mandarpur born to a lady other than the Rani, the now Sixtyish Tukan Roy, who had forgotten whether it was in love-making or in hunting that his genius had bloomed first – and how easily – knew well that a pair of birds seated meditatively on a bough at that hour of the day would not choose to disperse unless provoked.

He took position as discreetly as possible. His knees had long since become immune to pricks and pebbles. He closed one eye and strained the other and took aim. Behind the birds was a patch of dark cloud, its borders gilded by the hidden sun. Roy's finger hooked the trigger.

Just then a third pigeon flew in and settled with a flutter on the branch next to the one occupied by the pair.

This was luck! A little patience and adjustment and the fall of all the three is ensured! There was no need for hurry. The calm twilight itself spread like a metaphor for patience. Roy readjusted his position as leisurely as a caterpillar and took a fresh aim covering all the three birds.

The golden line around the cloud was fading fast and the lump of cloud was swelling up. Against that quiet grandeur the three tiny heads of the birds looked like three tender bubbles offered to Roy for him to burst them at a click.

He began feeling the tinge of the thrill he always experienced when his prey came down – its wings which had flapped over hundreds of miles, from horizon

to horizon, flapping desperately for the last few times fighting the gravitational pull.

The colour of such deaths, a mix of mist and crimson, went well with that of the twilight. Over the hundreds of sunsets past, hundreds of such sweet deaths had steeped Roy's eyes in the same kind of mist and crimson.

At times dusk swooped down rather swiftly upon the valley. That is what it was doing today. For a year past Roy had been slowly losing faith in the sharpness of his own vision. He was anxious to press the trigger. But a sudden lightning tearing that apparently limp cloud dazzled his eyes for a moment. Just when his targets should have been visible to him once again, thunder-claps burst across the valley and they took off.

For a while Roy stayed put with the unashamed nothing-to-do-ness of a lizard when a fly escapes its leaping tongue. The experience was not unusual; even then it annoyed Roy every time. But it was different today. He felt no annoyance at all. Passing over the deserted bough his eyes reached the swelling cloud that now seemed like a mighty heart that had split. Birds and more birds flew across it and melted away in the frontiers of the blue and the dark.

Roy kept on gazing at the clouds and the birds. There was lightning once again; an obscure spray of rain tickled his eyes and cheeks. Yet he kept on gazing at the birds – hundreds of them.

He stood up abruptly and leaving his gun on a rock, set off running, pacing with the flight of doves. He was pacing inwardly too; for, he felt that the thrill he was experiencing was not entirely new; it inspired a remote memory. He felt a strong curiosity for tracing its origin.

He succeeded before long. It was the echo of a sensation he had had fifty years ago, when the Raja who exercised over him all the authority of a father but was not willing to allow him the status of a prince, had suddenly collapsed of a heart attack.

It was the thrill of liberatio.

The birds were in too much of a hurry. It became more and more tough to keep pace with them. Roy stopped and rolled his eyes across the sky from horizon to horizon. He had never known that his eyes were so large – that they could grasp so much of the infinite – that they were perhaps as vast as the sky itself. The birds which had just flown across the sky – across his eyes – had brushed away from his vision the accumulated dust of decades and had left them pure and young.

In spite of the deepening dusk, he spent yet another hour in the valley before returning to the palace. And, on the table, he felt no revolt against a vegetarian meal. His whole being was elsewhere – though he did not know where. But he was happy to be there.

He had captured an elegantly green parrot only a week ago. In the morning he

served it with its breakfast, a banana, and opened its cage. It hopped experimentally and took to wings in no time. It circled twice or thrice over Roy's head and then disappeared in a headlong flight towards the woods. Roy smiled and wished that he had many birds to free; rather he had the power to make every creature on earth run or fly to its heart's content towards the God-knows-where of freedom. He stood entranced in his own thoughts for quite some time.

The afternoon was cloudy again. Roy went out to the valley as usual and fired several shots. But not a single bird fell. In fact every time he fired either below or above the covey of birds, just to startle them. And after each shot he followed the flying birds on foot as far as he could.

Old Giloo (also an illegitimate son of the late Raja, though lesser in rank since his mother was only a maid servant and not one of the recognised concubines) was surprised to see Roy returning empty-handed for two consecutive evenings.

Roy was a bachelor. So was Giloo. During the good old days of the Raj these little potentates had no need to marry. But time had changed and the hoary system had collapsed. Their step-brother, the present Raja, continuously sick and sad, lived in a faraway city. The old palace of Mandarpur, a few of its corners occupied by invalid and good-for-nothing dependants apart, lay largely deserted and was believed to be freely used by ghosts who became active at night.

Apart from the invisible ghosts and for all practical purposes its equally invisible human inmates, the palace had another resident – a tiger. It was during the last days of Mandarpur State that the Raja, spurred by what was perhaps his last whim, had built a small private zoo inside the palace compound. With his small state gone, the government took charge of the animals and transferred them to a public zoo in the city. But on the insistence of Giloo they had spared a tiger cub that was unwell at the time. The cub had grown up fully and perhaps grown a bit old prematurely. Giloo, however, had fostered the animal as carefully as he could with the backing of the Shikari that was Tukan Roy.

Giloo used to cook for Roy. For two days now both had to do with vegetarian dishes since the meat Giloo could secure was barely sufficient for the tiger. Giloo was saddened at the thought that Roy was getting old, was failing as a hunter.

Roy left his bed at midnight. He tiptoed to Giloo's bedstead and removed an old key from its hook above Giloo's head and quietly stepped out.

The tiger lay asleep inside its cage. The moonlight focused on its big face. In spite of its familiarity, it would have been a fearful sight, but for the moonlight. The magic of the moon reduced it to a tiger in a dream or to one drawn in watercolour.

Roy never imagined that there could be so much joy in turning the key of a lock. In a choked voice he addressed the tiger that had just raised its head inquiringly: 'Come on, boy, you're free. Now, run into the forest. Well, don't

waste your time yawning – hope that’s what you’re doing – surely not gaping to measure my damned head! You should behave gratefully, shouldn’t you? Now, come out.’

Roy held the door wide open. The tiger stood up and with hesitant steps came out into the open and stopped, its eyes fixed on Roy’s.

Roy crossed the palace gate and stood on the road. The tiger did the same and stood behind him. Roy pointed his finger at the hills and the forest. ‘Run, boy, run. There – that’s your natural habitat.’

But the tiger only moved closer to him, fondly smelling him and swinging its tail, shilly-shallying.

‘What are you surveying? I’m tasteless. There are deer galore in the forest. Run! Forgotten to run, eh? Well, it’s like this!’ Roy began to run and soon gathered speed, for, after all, he was setting an example to a tiger! The animal overcame its hesitation or lack of practice and gathered gusto.

‘Good. Run on my boy, run on. Only a mile and you reach your ancestral home,’ said Roy as he struggled with his breath. But the tiger had stopped, motionless except for its tail.

‘Who’s there, please? Two thieves, are you?’ The exclamation, obviously made by somebody still sleepy, woke up Roy to the fact that he stood before the Police Station and the Block Development Office. A number of dogs had begun barking from several directions.

Before he could think out his next course of action, a torch flashed on him and the tiger, and the stern voice from the Police Station abruptly changed into a howl.

Roy started running again. The tiger followed suit. They ran along the rocky meadow and through the prickly bushes. Roy had realized that the tiger would not run without him. And he could not stop before convincing the tiger that it had been granted the supreme thing – its freedom. Nor could he stop before feeling sure that the dear beast had truly appreciated the gift and had been delivered to the safety of the forest.

Once reconciled to the inevitability of his having to run, Roy ran with a wild enthusiasm – with the forest ahead, the night around and the tiger sometime behind and sometime beside him.

They had run for about a quarter of an hour when he realized that a jeep was rushing up behind him. They must be the police and the officials of the Block. They were obviously pursuing them with the intention of rescuing him from the tiger!

He stopped. ‘Go ahead, you fool! Here is the forest, spread over miles – over districts. Now you must make it alone!’ His exhortation to his ward was followed by a push from him.

But the tiger did not budge. Roy had to resume running. He certainly did not wish to be discovered by the rescue party!

The jeep had moved off in a slightly different direction. Roy entered the forest. He stumbled and stopped and ran again till he came to a thicker area. No longer was it possible for him to run. A patch of moonlight showed a relatively clean block of rock. He stretched himself over it. The tiger stood close to him, surveying its novel environment and its liberator's face, alternately in the meager moonlight filtered through the foliage above.

With every cool breath of the forest air he inhaled, Roy felt like taking a dose of freedom into his veins. Great was the feeling.

He slapped the tiger. 'Still don't understand, eh? How stupid and naïve you are, my boy!' he said.

But the tiger was probably waking up to the forest of the night – the spirit that ruled it. It suddenly gave out an impressive roar.

Birds tittered and flew away from the nearby trees. Also there was the sound of panicky scampering of some minor creatures. The roar produced faint echoes in the hills.

Roy felt happy, but he slapped the tiger once again. 'You fool!' he said. 'Won't they hear you?' He pulled the animal down by the neck as though in an attempt to hide it within himself. The tiger was obliged to sit down, its forelegs on Roy's chest. Roy saw in it nothing more than an chummy cat. A wave of unfamiliar but profound tranquility caressed his eyes and he closed them.

And a hundred birds in his vision. They were of green, white, purple – and so many hues. Soon the hundreds became thousands. They were scattering into ever-expanding heights and horizons like silver arrows and golden bullets and multicoloured shots. Roy, his eyes still closed, recognised them as the vibrations of the freedom that electrified him – freedom vast and vaster.

At last the two were caught under the jeep's headlights. Next was heard a booming shot. The tiger was staring at the light. It lowered its head slowly to rest on Roy's chest.

'The scoundrel had finished Mr. Roy. After chasing him all way, at last it must have pounced upon him here.'

'He might still be alive.'

'No. Both are dead.'

'But isn't it strange that Mr. Roy seems to be without a scratch? How did he die?'

'Er – well – a ferocious beast pouncing on one was enough to cause a heart attack.'

'Pity! Giloo will cry. Both were so dear to him!'



The Shadow

Professor Anjan Sharma was on the ascent as a scientist, thinker and an articulate orator when, within an incredibly brief span of time, he practically disappeared from the public view and, before long, from the public memory.

The three independent incidents that brought this about, when viewed retrospectively, seem to have had a fearful method behind them, as if aimed at totally demolishing him. To begin with, the middle-aged Professor whose only love hitherto had been his laboratory fell madly in love with a truly charming and humane young lady and married her. Secondly, his laboratory went up in flames. Thirdly, the lady died as suddenly as she had come into his life.

Like most of his younger admirers, I too had forgotten him and could not have dreamed of waking up to his existence after thirty years and that too in a remote Himalayan valley.

It was a discovery to reckon with. A chance meeting with a classmate of mine at Simla brought me to the isolated guest house not far from Manali. The experience was exciting. My friend had been an artist. Coming to the Himalayas in search of inspiration he had stayed put, captivated by solitude and had probably forgotten his art. For a living, he looked after the solitary summer mansion of a Raja built on a lovely lake. The Raja had sold the mansion to a wealthy merchant soon after the abolition of the princely states. Lately it had been acquired by the tourism department of the government. My friend had been allowed to stay on as its manager, but rarely did any tourist avail of its comforts – Manali till then had not become a prey for pleasure-hunters – though the authorities advertised it, with expertly coined phrases, as an ideal health resort with swimming facilities in

a natural lake and the breeze and sunlight that acted like a tonic. My friend had nothing much to do. Clad in a shawl he generally passed his time gazing at the snowy hill-tops, the lush green forests frequently changing into different splendid hues and a sky which somehow looked very personal.

‘Only once in a while I receive a visitor who loves silence and solitude for their own sake. I thought of proposing to the government to close it down, but then where would Professor Anjan Sharma go?’ mused my friend, drawing my attention to the lonely figure on the other side of the lake.

‘Does he never come out of his seclusion?’ I asked my friend, looking at the lovable man in tattered pyjamas, stooping rather prematurely, ambling towards the hills. A mild gust of wild wind would be enough to sweep him into the lake, I feared. Only once earlier had I seen the genius and that was when I was in the college. ‘If any Indian scientist deserves a Nobel for his original research today, it should be Professor Anjan Sharma,’ our Principal had observed to our great amazement by way of introducing the speaker.

The Professor had just made public some hints regarding his revolutionary concept of harnessing the laws of gravitation for running factories, trains and all kinds of machines. His highly sophisticated technical thesis covered a couple of thousand pages and, what was encouraging, an inspired millionaire, a friend of his, had already come to his aid, financing him to make a few basic instruments necessary to establish his proposition. But soon it had been realised that the fabulous amount of money required for the fruition of his dream could be provided only by an affluent Western country or some international organisation.

The Professor’s well-wishers began exploring such possibilities. But catastrophe struck all of a sudden. A fire destroyed his laboratory, along with all the documents and instruments he had prepared over the years.

The Professor’s shock was beyond description. The irony was, he had seen the arsonist moving about in the moonlight and knew that he was no ghoul or zombie, but a man. He had even seen the fellow sprinkling some liquid on the laboratory. But too superstitious about human goodness, the Professor had failed to imagine that the stranger’s action could be anything but constructive.

Many of his friends felt that they could see the reflections of those flames in his bewildered eyes for days thereafter. He hardly spoke and then resigned his job.

For sometime, the arson was the talk of the town. From petty jealousy of a colleague to transcontinental conspiracy, many were the hypotheses put forth. And then the incident was forgotten.

The millionaire friend dispatched the Professor and his wife to the mansion in the Himalayan valley. Despite the changes in ownership, the Professor was not asked to leave the small suite he occupied in the upper storey of an outhouse. The millionaire paid his bill which in any case did not amount to much.

He had just settled down to a different plane of living, serene and peaceful, and the tranquillity was beginning to inspire in him some other kind of creativity, when his wife died. It was impossible for my friend to gauge the Professor's reaction to the tragedy, for there was no visible reaction!

The Professor's last companion was a faithful and intelligent dog nurtured by his wife. Depressed, the creature gave up eating and died after a month. The Professor's stoicism was shattered at last. He cried like a child.

And this is the summary of the subsequent events, as narrated by my friend:

At times Anjan Sharma took walks amidst the woods, totally oblivious of the world around him. Anybody could feel the impenetrability of the barricade of silence surrounding him.

Days passed. One afternoon, during one of his habitual strolls, he suspected that someone was following him. Needless to say, there was none and nothing but his own shadow. And he suddenly burst out, casting a stern look at his shadow, 'Why must you keep me company when everybody else – even my dog – had deserted me? Get lost, I say.'

Such was the poignancy and intensity of his admonition that his shadow leaped up, in the process suddenly getting detached from him, and scampered away and hid in a bush. The Professor could hear its faint sobs, like that of a timid child, for a while.

My friend was the only man to whom the shadowless savant had narrated this unusual incident.

The Professor stopped coming out into sunlight or moonlight. He ventured into the valley only after dusk fell or if the sky was clouded. If he observed the clouds receding, he literally ran back into his suite. If anyone knocked on his door in the evening or at night, he switched off the lights before opening the door, if at all he opened it.

'Why this caution?' I asked.

'He did not wish anyone to know that he was bereft of his shadow.'

'But you know the absurdity of the thing, don't you? Why didn't you flash a torch and convince him that his shadow was very much there with him?'

My friend, to my surprise, gave such a start as if I had proposed a treachery! 'I mean, someone should have put an end to his weird delusion!' I explained.

'Delusion?'

'What else? Surely you don't believe that one's shadow could desert one! You must have seen him with his shadow intact!'

'How could I?'

I grew impatient. 'What do you mean? You might not have seen his shadow because he did not come out into light. But did that prove his having cast his shadow away?'

My friend kept silent. I repeated my observation, hiding my uneasiness as best as I could.

‘I don’t know,’ he hissed as if under duress.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, I never put his conviction into any test.’

‘Good heaven! Where was the need for any test? What does your common sense say?’

He fell silent again. Normally it should have maddened me. But somehow it did not.

There was no exchange between us for a while. Evening was giving way to a massive darkness. A little moonlight on the nearest peaks created the illusion of their being the frontiers of some floating isles carved out of diamond. I tried to divert my attention to the strange chirpings and whistlings of birds unknown to me. Then, looking at my self-absorbed friend I told myself like a wise man that one needed some quaint notions, some fantasy, to pass one’s days in this uncanny solitude.

I departed the next day. I had a great desire to see the Professor once more, but there was no chance.

Five years later I ran into my friend once again. He had returned from his Himalayan sojourn and devoted himself to agriculture in his native village.

‘Life became intolerable once Professor Anjan Sharma was gone,’ he told me in a very natural tone,

‘Where did he go?’

‘In search of his shadow. That is the message he left for me.’

‘Then?’

‘How far could he go? We found him lying unconscious at the farthest end of the valley, at the foot of the hills. He died before long.’

‘Then?’

‘We cremated him.’

‘I hope he found his shadow!’

‘Oh no.’

‘How did you know? Did you observe his body casting no shadow even after you found him?’

‘The sky was clouded all the time. We were shivering even under our heavy overcoats.’

‘But how did you conclude that his shadow had not returned to him?’

My friend did not answer me, but I could feel that he had something to say, though was undecided whether to say it or not. Then he muttered as if in an aside, ‘I felt that I heard some faint sobs from the bushes – for days together.’

‘Do you mean to say that the Professor’s shadow was looking for its master?’

Again he avoided answering me and continued in the same vein, 'How could I live in peace? But I am not sure if I did the right thing. Sometimes I am overwhelmed by an urge to return there.'

I was going to shout him down. But suddenly my eyes fell on my own shadow. As if it forbade me to do anything rash.





Son and Father

The rain continued unabated. Through the window Samir could see the sombre contours of the distant horizon, but only occasionally, for the showers pounded by the fierce breeze wiped them off as soon as they had begun to take shape.

Alone in the forest guest house, Samir kept gazing at that drama of appearance and disappearance. Nature seemed determined to demonstrate to him how thin and flimsy was the difference between illusion and reality. If the idea of reality was highlighted when there were brighter flashes of lightning, the darkness that followed asserted the power of illusion.

Never before had Samir imagined that the sky had so much energy in store – to go on and on with the display of such awfully long fireworks of lightning, booming all the while at variant scales.

And Samir sometimes wondered which was the reality and which the illusion! The meadow extended up to the hills. Lush green palm trees stood in a scattered fashion, like a lyric broken into haphazard lines. There were dwarf rocks and bushes and shrubs galore for erratic punctuation marks.

What kind of theme and plot can make the best use of such a scene? The writer in Samir tried to figure out. Can this be the backdrop to a romance – for a chance-meeting between the hero and the heroine both taking shelter under a banyan tree, the heroine shivering partly because of cold and partly for fright? The story narrated from a third person point of view, the narrator seeing them inching closer, then losing sight of them because of a heavier shower and then finding them even more close to each other...?

Or should it begin with an emphasis on the terror the intermittent thunder aroused in such solitude?

But that strange boy approaching the bungalow at the speed of a shooting star did not leave him in peace with his musings. Samir saw him for the fifth time. He had earlier seen him flying with the wind, like its coach, as if inspiring it to gather momentum! Then he had seen him under the focus of a dazzling outburst of clouds, as if eager to catch hold of a string of lightning and swing up to the clouds!

Once again he had seen the boy climbing to his verandah and spinning around a pillar, with the dry leaves spiralling up in the whistling and howling breeze.

And during a lull in the thunderclaps, the boy had laughed. But the laughter was not meant for Samir who watched him so intently. It was an item in the lofty catalogue to which the breeze and the rain and the lightning and the thunder belonged.

Wrapped in the costly Kashmiri shawl bestowed on him at a literary conference, Samir came out to the verandah. The boy saw him but did not seem to consider him relevant to his world. Samir was disappointed, for he had never suspected his own importance. Only a few people outside the circle of top officials of the forest department were eligible to check into that bungalow. That itself should be a matter of awe for the boy, if not anything else.

But the boy's attention obviously rivetted amidst far more important events in the meadow and the forest and the hills.

'Hello, boy!' he called rather loudly. A hurried glance was all he received as the boy's response. He realised, unhappily, how futile his Kashmiri shawl, his well-built personality and his carefully groomed moustache – not to speak of his literary eminence – were. Even his baritone voice failed to elicit the respect it deserved.

'What's your name?' he asked, unwilling to give up.

'Don't know.' A gust of wind engaged the mango, the tamarind and the jackfruit trees, standing close to the bungalow, in an energetic conversation, and the boy whizzed off into the meadow. Samir kept gazing at him till he disappeared beyond a mound of earth.

Samir's friend, the chief conservator of forests, had arranged for his regular supply of food from the camp of a wealthy timber-merchant. The care-taker-cum-watchman of the bungalow arrived with his afternoon tiffin and tea, the tiffin-carrier and the flask carefully protected from the rain under a tattered raincoat. From the start Samir felt in this silent tribal the natural poise and confidence of one who never failed in his duty, but also some quality that was greater than his duty.

'Who was that?' Samir asked, pointing at the way the boy had gone.

'Son.'

‘Oh, your son, is that so? What is his name?’

‘He does not respond to any name, Sir.’

‘Don’t you – or his mother – try to keep him under check?’

‘He is motherless, Sir.’

Samir groped for words.

‘Must he romp and horse around in such riotous weather?’ he demanded at last.

The watchman made no reply. But his look dampened Samir’s spirit. He seemed to challenge Samir to explain what was wrong with the boy’s doings.

He went away. Samir shut the door and resumed reading the novel he should have finished three days ago, for he had brought seven books for his proposed seven days of solitary sojourn.

He could not proceed with the text. The nameless boy haunted him. He looked through the glasspanes again and again and, as they were hazy, he opened the window. Two dogs, miserably drenched, had taken shelter on his verandah. Suspicious of his motive, they jumped down, but just then the boy came dashing onto the verandah and the dogs, emboldened by his company, climbed it once again.

The boy was in loose shorts, perhaps gifted to him by a well-wisher, and bare-bodied for the rest. He was talking, but it was not possible to say whether to the dogs or to the trees or to the rains.

Samir could resist no more. He hurried out to the verandah even without his shawl. The wind slapped and thrashed him, but he advanced towards the boy.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Talking.’

‘To whom?’

The boy did not care to reply.

‘Won’t you tell me with whom you were talking?’

‘With me.’

‘You’re strange. Come in. You will talk to me.’

‘In the evening.’

‘Well, if you are in no mood to talk, I will talk to you. Come.’

‘In the evening.’

A fresh blaze of crisscross lightning tore the sky apart – like a demoniac wizard spreading all his ten fingers and hypnotising the prostrate earth. The boy raised his arms and darted off, as if to catch hold of the lightnings or to wrap himself up with them!

He ran through the rain. The two dogs kept pace with him. The wind seemed to change its course suddenly so that it could blow in his favour. Or was the boy pulling the wind with him?

For a moment Samir forgot himself. In fact, he was about to jump down, but the splash of rain on his face and a stronger whip of wind reminded him of his convalescence and his Kashmiri shawl. He stepped back and strained his eyes looking into the valley. The boy and the dogs had disappeared.

The boy had promised to come in the evening. Weather, of course, had changed the entire day into an elaborate evening. But the real evening was not far either – Samir's wristwatch informed him. Back in his room, he tried to concentrate on the novel, but could not. He was feeling a vague urge to write, but could not decide on a theme. He spoke aloud. That gave him some satisfaction. He realized that to express himself in some way – like the clouds or the wind or the nameless boy – had become very urgent for him.

What is it that the boy was mumbling? There was a lure in his intonation. Samir resolved to pay all his attention to him even if he talked nonsense.

It began growing dark. The rain subsided, but not the wind. Samir, waiting for the boy, had dozed off in his easy chair. More than an hour must have passed before he heard someone's footsteps and lighted the table-lamp in a hurry.

'I'm late, Sir,' said the watchman, placing the tiffin-carrier on the table. 'I reported at the merchant-Sir's house late.'

'Doesn't matter. Where is your son?'

'Gone.'

'Where?'

'Gone, Sir, with the lightnings.'

'What?' cried out a Stunned Samir.

'I found him on the river-bank, holding on to a palm tree. But he was gone – whisked away by the lightnings,' he reported.

Samir stood speechless at least for five minutes. If the news was a bolt from the blue, the father's manner of narrating it baffled and bewildered him as nothing else had done in his life.

'Where is he?' The man raised both his arms first towards the sky and then pointed at his hut.

He walked away slowly, stooping a little.

Samir collapsed into his easy chair. He passed the night in a daze. The moment he tried to think, he received a jolt equal to a fall. But the thoughts could not be warded off for long. Why was the boy there at all? What was the purpose in his appearing like a string of lightning, playing like a string of lightning and disappearing like a string of lightning?

The memory of the boy's eyes assumed some new significance. As if it asked: how could you measure me with the yardstick of your mind and thoughts? Samir wondered what those eyes could have reflected. Certainly something that was much more than a mere mind. Something deeper, luminous – something with

which one could probably gather in a brief moment experiences of aeons. Samir made a bid to find out if he too had something nearer to that splendour in himself – somewhere deep within – and in the process fell asleep under his Kashmiri shawl. By morning the sky had been thoroughly clear of clouds. Samir went out for a stroll after three days of confinement. The otherwise weak rivulet looked rejuvenated.

‘Sir!’

The watchman stood leaning on his shovel between the rivulet and a rock. Samir walked up to him. He had dug a small pit and had already lowered into it his son’s body, turned a bit bluish. Samir remembered that no relative of the watchman lived nearby. His native hamlet was on the other side of the forest, miles away.

Samir suddenly felt like his kin. As the man began filling the pit with his shovel, Samir joined him, throwing handfuls of soil into it. Soon the boy was lost to their sight. Never before had Samir known the earth to be so sublime a source of solace.

‘Whatever the sky had left, was taken over by the earth,’ observed the father, his voice calm but candid.

Samir left the bungalow the same day. He forgot the demands of his health, for such thoughts seemed utterly small and insignificant.

For long thereafter a blast of cold wind, a crack of thunder or a glimpse of the distant horizon at some lonely moment would instantly flash the son and the father in Samir’s vision. And always they looked like the elements that constituted the majesty of the horizon.

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The Gold Medal

The clouds looked like a crowd of rowdies besieging the reclining sun. But a shaft of orange-bright sunlight escaped their strategy and coloured Krishnachandra's face. He felt happy and anxious alternately, almost keeping pace with the appearance and disappearance of the sun.

No other member of his troupe, 'Jai Jagannath Opera', was likely to keep track of his changing moods. The boat had slowed down. The luggage the troupe carried was heavy. The two rowers felt the weight every time they pulled their oars. 'Babu, it had been ages since you had last played in our village -in the courtyard of the Chowdhuries,' observed the helmsman in a spurt of enthusiasm.

'Forty years ago.' Krishnachandra sounded nostalgic.

'I was then only ten or twelve. But could I ever forget you in the role of Rama? How handsome you looked!' The helmsman reminisced.

Krishnachandra smiled, concentrating on the quiet and steady flow of the river. A garland of faded jasmine was floating by. In that mellow afternoon with its pleasantly cool breeze the helmsman's comment had sounded most inviting.

Krishnachandra was in the habit of submitting, silently, any adulation he received, to the hallowed memory of his guru. He did the same now, raising his folded hands to his forehead. It was his guru, once an unrivalled dramatic genius in the region, who had authored the play – 'Janaka-Nandini' – the woes of the daughter of King Janaka, Sita. That was an era when the guru taught the art of acting and singing through a liberal application of the principles of ear-twisting and thrashing. It was through the same process that he had drawn a masterly Rama out of Krishnachandra.

The night they performed the play for the first time in public – in the presence of the illustrious zamindar Rudra Chowdhury – was still alive in Krishnachandra's memory. Tears drizzled in a thousand eyes when he had cried out, addressing Sita who, disgusted with the unworthy humanity, was about to depart into the cracking earth: 'O Janaka-Nandini, don't leave me forlorn – don't!'

'Krishna, you deserve nothing less than a gold medal!' said the young Nandan Chowdhury with a pat on his back, at the end of the performance.

Krishnachandra had been thrilled. The promise of the gold medal, like the polestar on the horizon, continued to inspire him for years. He had worked and acted with greater zeal and had passed the severe tests set by the guru and had earned the right to succeed him. But, after the guru's passing away, Krishnachandra had been obliged to withdraw from acting, gradually, for the administration of the troupe claimed his attention more and more. Once in a while he appeared in a small though significant role, but the medals went to the hero or the heroine, though only silver medals. During the past half century only one artist – his late guru – had received a gold medal from a certain zamindar who bore the title of Raja. Krishnachandra had not seen the medal believed to be too bog to be sported; nevertheless he had contributed to popularising the legend as a trusted disciple ought to do.

'Were Rudra Chowdhury alive, how delighted he would have felt today!' the helmsman commented with a sigh.

'Indeed, no longer does one meet such genuine connoisseurs of drama and music. And how generous he was towards us!' agreed Krishnachandra.

'Not that his son, Nandan Chowdhury, lacks in generosity, but...'

Krishnachandra hurriedly nodded in agreement with the helmsman, sparing him the embarrassment of explaining Nandan Chowdhury's misfortune. The zamindari was gone. Nandan, unwise in worldly matters, ran into the red. He looked like his father to the last hair of his moustache and had inherited his father's gait too, but that was all. To those who knew Rudra Chowdhury he looked like his hapless ghost.

The ghosts had as much to say as the living, but had no speech.

'Besides, he is rarely under his own control!' said the helmsman, giving a slight lurch to the boat.

'I know. What a pity!'

The boat was nearing the bank. A score of villagers stood under the Peepal tree ready to receive the party. From the branches of a banian tree a troop of monkeys looked on with curiosity. Broad smiles brightened the familiar faces.

'Welcome, Krishna Babu, most welcome. Surging clouds frightened us in the morning. But the goddess Kalika, despite our failure to repair Her shrine, proved compassionate enough to suck them off the sky. All that remains is that one dark

scrap in the west. Our goddess must be struggling with it, I'm sure,' said the old Mani Dutta – once the gumastha of the Chowdhuries and lately a minor landlord himself. The size of his belly suggested that should his heirs prove reasonably worthy, they should be able to sport the same symbol of prosperity.

Several other warm voices buzzed. Krishnachandra greeted them all with his hands folded to the shape of a lotus-bud.

But his spirit had dampened, thanks to the helmsman's last observation on Nandan Chowdhury. Krishnachandra ought to have realized the situation when he met Chowdhury a month ago, for Chowdhury did not look smarter than any old, laid up bull. But engrossed in his dream of the gold medal, Krishnachandra had neglected to take note of the condition to which opium had reduced that last scion of an illustrious family. Adding even three hundred rupees to the value of his old gold ring had not sufficed. Krishnachandra still owed the goldsmith fifty rupees. But the man had done an excellent job. The medal looked impressive. But what really mattered to Krishnachandra was an occasion for being publicly decorated by Nandan Chowdhury.

'Do you remember, huzoor? You had once promised a gold medal to this humble servant of yours!' he had made bold to ask Chowdhury after ascertaining that nobody overheard him.

'Whom else would I care to give one?' said Chowdhury warmly. 'Wait till I succeed in extracting from the Government the last instalment of the compensation for our estate,' he added and, projecting the Government as a villain, mused at length on the prospect of whipping it repeatedly till its pajamas had fallen into shreds. Then he leaned against the wall and snoozed.

Krishnachandra had caught hold of Chowdhury's hands and, Giving them a gentle shake before he had been totally lost to him, had said, 'Huzoor, nothing but the blessings of that great soul now in heaven – your father – could have enabled me to get this made. Look upon this as yours and keep it kindly. Your village has invited us for a performance. I'd consider myself the luckiest of the lucky to receive this from your hand on that occasion.'

Chowdhury gazed at the medal for a long time. He looked delighted. To Krishnachandra, Chowdhury's delight had meant nothing more than his child-like innocence. He had been thrilled at the certainty of at last realizing his long cherished dream.

Perhaps he would not have taken such a step but for the shock he had received three months ago. The troupe had been defunct for two decades. Vicissitudes had chased his colleagues and disciples away from one another. Krishnachandra joined a theatre company in the town. If he had to play harmonium for one season, he had to act as a prompter for another. From choreography to make-

up, he could extend a helping hand to everything. But he was not allowed to create an identity for himself. There was rarely a role for him in the type of plays they produced. And, of course, there was no question of their letting him direct a play.

The artiste in him revolted. He returned to his village. Goaded by an irresistible urge to reorganise his troupe, he mobilised his associates. Budding actors of the area who had seen him in their childhood or had heard their fathers praising him, flocked around him. The troupe was resurrected on an auspicious day through an invocation to Lord Ganesha. Krishnachandra's proposal to begin with his guru's 'Janaka-Nandini' had been warmly received. Then he came to allotment of roles. As he read out the first name of the dramatis personae, Rama, he looked askance at the artistes, almost beginning to blush in anticipation of a familiar reaction: 'Who but yourself?' But seconds ticked away. He raised his head and saw everybody's attention fixed on a handsome youth in his early twenties who had appeared as hero in a couple of plays and had received accolades.

Krishnachandra got a jolt – not because nobody proposed his name for the role of Rama – but because he had himself forgotten that he had long passed that age. He cursed himself. Within hours of this he was in the grip of the forgotten desire for the gold medal. He could almost see it – glimmering like a live cake of coal after a whiff of breeze had swept away the ashes hiding it.

No longer was he fit for the role of the hero! There shall be a time when he would be unfit for any role. The guru, in his last days, used to lie on a rope-cot and impart lessons to his disciples through gestures. Slowly his limbs too failed to behave. Who knows if Krishnachandra won't be reduced to a similar fate? The guru at least had a number of devotees to serve him in his time of misery. Will there be anyone for him?

With such questions crowding his mind, the dream of the gold medal overwhelmed him even more. He accepted the role of King Dasharatha and put forth his best.

'Namaskar, Ustad.' Krishnachandra was relaxing on a mat inside the school building. He intended visiting Chowdhury soon – to greet him and to remind him of his function. Had Chowdhury misplaced the medal by any chance? Krishnachandra had to muster courage to dismiss such doubts.

'How are you, Nata? Sit down.' Krishnachandra readjusted his position on the mat to make place for Natbar, the gentleman grocer. After they had been unanimous in their observations on each other's health, the success of the village deity in Her fight with the clouds and a few other issues, Natbar lowered his voice and said, 'Chowdhury had got a gold medal made for you. Believe me, I saw it with these very eyes!' Natbar pointed to his own eyes which meaningfully dazzled for a second. 'But...'

Krishnachandra heard a thud inside his own heart. He straightened up. ‘But, “what crime the starving cannot commit” – they say in Sanskrit. He asked me its approximate value now that the price of gold had risen very high. I told him that the medal ought to go to the person to whom it had been dedicated, whatever be its new price.’

Natbar paused and stole a glance at Krishnachandra. He was sure that his revelation would be interesting to the listener.

‘Then?’ asked Krishnachandra, summoning all his dramatic skill to sound absolutely casual.

‘Obviously he had run out of funds for opium. And you know what an addict can do when thirsting for his stuff – he can mortgage the apple of his own eye. Chowdhury sold it, I suppose, with the same whimsicality with which he had bought it. But medal or no medal, he loves you, one must admit...’

Natbar was fond of talking to celebrities. He went on. Krishnachandra, however, had stopped listening. He drank tea twice – the second time an extra-hot cup of it – in his effort at dispelling the cold fog invading his heart.

He was out in the street. Before the battered kachahri of the Chowdhuries, the villagers had finished hanging canopies and were busy unfolding huge rolls of carpet. Krishnachandra avoided them and advanced along a narrow shortcut. Blocking the steps leading to the verandah of the dilapidated mansion stood a pair of cows. A totally indifferent dog occupied Chowdhury’s personal cane chair. The only remaining servant of the household stood enchanted, combing his hair in the way of preparing himself as a spectator for the opera, looking into a dangerously sharp-edged broken mirror stuck in a hole on the wall. But, as Krishnachandra feared, Chowdhury was not at home.

‘He left for the town in the morning; should be back any moment,’ assured the servant with an impressive bow. His oil-soaked hair glistened even in the dusk. Krishnachandra turned back at once, facing the lone star above the tallest palm tree in the compound. ‘Should be back any moment!’ he murmured softly. He was mocking not at the servant but at himself. Krishnachandra could visualise the sequence of Chowdhury’s conduct. Someone in the town must have ditched him, buying the gold from him at the value of silver. Even then Chowdhury might have felt pleased. He must have spent the sum to its last pie in buying opium and would have swallowed a heavy dose of it. Later he must have sat down under a tree or in the cool breeze on the river, snapping all his connection with time.

Krishnachandra felt his dream melting into two streams of tears. He wiped them fast.

It was time to get ready for the performance. After some light food he concentrated on his make-up, habitually passing a scrutinising look on all the

other artistes. At frequent intervals he remembered the proverb with which the guru used to warn him: 'Nine-tenth gloom, one-tenth light; that's what makes an actor's life.' There was solace in it.

But once the play began, he was above all anguish. He acted his role with care and never slackened his vigilance on the performance of his trainees. Giving out a poignant cry for Rama whom he had been obliged to exile, Dasharatha had to die at the end of the first act. Krishnachandra was duly carried into the greenroom. Free from the wig and the dazzling coat, he covered himself with a shawl and returned to take his seat between the drummer and the clarinetist. Scene after scene was enacted, before a spellbound audience, inspiring smiles, tears and applause.

Krishnachandra had become unmindful for a moment. That was when the music played at high pitch marking the interval between the fourth and the last act. Suddenly the orchestra fell silent. There was a low hum in the audience. Krishnachandra recovered his alertness and looked up.

Nandan Chowdhury adorned the arena, his silk dhoti and the gold-embroidered prince-coat dazzling in the bright light.

'Ustad Krishnachandra!' he called out. Krishnachandra stood up and took a step into the arena, almost unaware of his own action.

'Listen, all. Charmed by the genius of Ustad Krishnachandra, a noble soul and a great guru – the crown of artistes – I reward him with this gold medal!'

Chowdhury's voice was uneven and not very loud. Yet the total silence of the audience made every word distinctly audible. He held the medal high. It trembled and looked like giving out golden sparks. An applause broke out. It grew in volume like a breaking billow.

'Huzoor', Krishnachandra broke down. Chowdhury held him in his left arm. The applause was prolonged.

'I had to go to the town to repair my coat. I should not have offered the gold medal in a tattered shirt! But, luckily, I could be back in time', Chowdhury whispered.

'What you could do, huzoor, is just great. Never in life had I done anything comparable,' Krishnachandra whispered back in a choked voice and took the medal from Chowdhury's unsteady hand and waved the audience into silence.

'Noble members of the audience', he began, but could not proceed. It seemed he would like to pin the medal to Chowdhury's princecoat. But Chowdhury took hold of him and, through the audience, led him gently onto the verandah of the kachahri and made him sit next to him facing the arena.

The audience broke into a thunderous applause again – as if the scene featuring Krishnachandra and Chowdhury was a part of the play and the two actors had excelled all.

And amidst the din, unseen by any third person, Chowdhury slipped a small packet into Krishnachandra's pocket.

'This is the value of the medal. I had promised it to you. I cannot allow you to pay for it,' he whispered.

Krishnachandra looked dumbfounded. 'Huzoor!' he tried to speak, but Chowdhury stopped him.

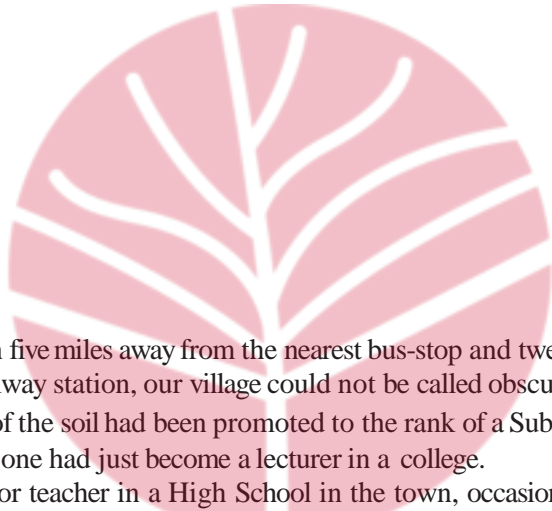
'I had to dispose of something no longer of any fancy to me: the layer of gold on the handle of my walking stick. Well, it has not refused to serve me even when denuded of its ornament!' Chowdhury tried to sound humorous.

The orchestra resumed, louder than ever, followed by a bell signalling the beginning of the last act.



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The Miracle

Although five miles away from the nearest bus-stop and twentyfive miles from the Railway station, our village could not be called obscure any longer, for a blessed son of the soil had been promoted to the rank of a Sub-Divisional Officer and another one had just become a lecturer in a college.

I, a junior teacher in a High School in the town, occasionally ran into either of them and was benignly smiled upon in exchange for my humble greetings. But even in my wildest dream I had not thought of a Mahatma or a holy soul emerging in our village.

I had seen Bulu for the first time two years ago while spending the summer vacation in the village. Haridas, the boy's father, was leading him along the village road. 'Salute him!' He directed the boy, calling his attention to me, and demonstrating how he should do it. But the boy remained stubbornly aloof.

I had the creeps. Who wouldn't have at the sight of a wee beard and moustache on the face of a boy aged eight or nine? What was more, one of his eyes was bigger than the other, arousing the suspicion that he could see what others could not and he would not care to see what others ordinarily see.

'I must have sinned in an earlier life to be condemned with an offspring like this, totally dumb and unable to comprehend a thing. I wish it had been stillborn,' moaned Haridas.

'You ought not to say so,' I admonished the hapless father. Obviously accustomed to such sage advice, he nodded, probably to mean that people not encumbered with a burden of this kind had every right to treat him to such wisw words.

The situation changed unexpectedly. Bulu came to the notice of Braj Sadhu alias Braj Vaishnav alias Brajagopal Das, another wonderful character, a soul continuously drunk with mystic devotion according to some and a madcap according to some others. If the second opinion had not gained wider currency, it was because whoever came in his personal contact began to like him. Not that he could overwhelm anybody, but he looked overwhelmed himself, continuously under the spell of the holy name of Krishna. A widower and issueless, but inheritor of a hundred acres of land, he had allowed himself to be exploited by whoever pretended to be a devotee of Krishna.

It was not in the interest of those who had already exploited him or those in the queue, to brand him mad and thereby prove themselves cheats. Such people remained non-committal in their estimate of Brajagopal.

Brajagopal was never tired of singing bhajans, often himself playing the mridangam. I had heard him two or three times and cannot say that his musical talent had impressed me, but his screaming recitations certainly inspired a sort of awe and reverence.

One day Haridas suddenly dragged Bulu into Brajagopal's courtyard and ordered the boy to prostrate himself before the gathering of pious Vaishnavs. Bulu knelt down and, his gaze fixed on Brajagopal's eyes, laughed.

That was the first ever time anybody saw him laughing. It was rumoured that the laughter had an occult language, which Brajagopal alone could decipher.

'Where were you all these days, my lord? Should you have taken such a long time to remember this humble servant of yours?' This had been the theme of the poignant lyric Brajagopal was singing when Bulu surprised him. He changed over to prose, but without introducing any change in the theme, and hugged Bulu tightly, tears rolling down his cheeks and laving the boy's uneven forehead.

Bulu continued to laugh, making some odd gurgling sound, and Brajagopal continued to weep. The few devotees present were amazed. Soon they realized that there was nothing absurd in the situation. Who but a goldsmith could identify pure gold! Bulu was one of those concealed Mahatmas who in their inscrutable whim roamed about the earth assuming deceptive forms. But he could not have deceived Brajagopal!

Bulu became Bulu Baba. He had been born on a full-moon night. Hence devotees began to collect around him on Brajagopal's courtyard on every full-moon night

Their number was limited to twenty or twentyfive until the day a certain clerk at the local Zainindar's office won a case in the court and offered a hundred rupees to Bulu Baba because he had selected his lawyer by drawing lots muttering the Baba's name. Thereafter the crowd of devotees began to swell.

Parties involved in litigations paid offerings of a rupee or two in advance. People with other kinds of desires and problems followed suit.

Some men and women beset with gout and colic confessed to having found considerable relief after making prayerful submissions to Bulu Baba. The loudest among them was the tall and robust Namdar Khan, a goonda of considerable reputation endowed with a voice as terrifying as the thunderclaps. The carbuncle that had humbled a formidable man like him must have been the monarch among carbuncles, the people were sure. Short of an Avatar, who could have cured it?

Before long Bulu Baba's reputation assumed a special colour, that he was the Avatar incarnated to fight the evil of carbuncles. This did not mean that his supernatural power was not effective against other evils.

Once the gout-ridden Zamindar decided to summon the little Baba to his mansion in order to prostrate before him in the privacy of his own house and sent his manager and his bullock cart to fetch him. While Brajagopal refused to respond to such summons and he and the manager were locked in an argument, Bulu Baba toddled towards the cart and stood looking at the handsome bullocks.

'Look here, the Baba himself is ready to go!' announced the manager and in an unforeseen move, lifted the Baba and dumped him in the cart and ordered the carter to start.

The carter duly shouted at the bullocks and whipped them and twisted their tails in great earnest; but the bullocks refused to budge.

Brajagopal laughed. The manager, red in the face, set the Baba sheepishly on the ground. The bullocks began to move.

'Who – who – who on earth can kidnap the Baba? Which vehicle can move unless he himself consented to move?' the Baba's devotees, basking in his newly acquired glory, demanded of all and sundry.

Clad in ochre silk, garlands flowing down to the floor, his forehead marked by sandalwood paste and vermilion, Bulu Baba occupied the centre of the throng of devotees and curious would-be recruits. The offerings collected were spent in feeding the poor. However, Brajagopal had no interest in publicising the amazing powers of Bulu Baba. One or two merchants, hopeful of earning fast bucks if Bulu Baba attracted more people proposed to print a booklet in verse narrating the Baba's miracles, but Brajagopal rejected their proposal.

Alas, the full-moon nights were not destined to pass smoothly forever, thanks to the inspiration Professor (even a junior lecturer enjoyed that honorific in the liberal popular parlance) Navin Ray felt for redeeming the earth from its superstitions with a bang. Since it was summer vacation and both of us were in the village, he enrolled my support in his mission. Reports of the goings-on around Bulu Baba used to reach me in the town. But 'There are more things

in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy' was the attitude I had nurtured in regard to him.

Navin Ray, however, changed my outlook. Two or three other young men of the village joined us.

We entered Brajagopal's courtyard almost unnoticed, for the congregation was in an ecstatic state of collective singing.

'Brajagopalji, which one of the scriptures declare that the new Avatar will prove his divinity by sprouting a goatee at the age of nine?' asked Ray as soon as the singing ended.

Brajagopal sat still entranced. It was difficult to say if his mind recorded Navin Ray's question.

'How did you conclude that Bulu was a prodigy in regard to the science of gout and carbuncle?'

'Haribol!' shouted Brajagopal in a choked voice and he slapped the mridangam. At once the other devotees started a new song. Bulu Baba who sat decorated like a bridegroom, looked at Navin Ray with his extra-large right eye, keeping the left one shut. Ray felt extremely awkward and we grew impatient. We tarried for a few minutes more. There was no sign of the singing coming to an end. We quit the place.

'Light carries no value in this land of the blind,' commented Ray with some anguish. 'Let India be free. Then we will see!'

We too found it convenient to repose our trust in that bright future and let Brajagopal and Bulu Baba in peace for the last phase of the British rule in India.

The vacation was over and we were back in the town. Before we had come together once again, the chapter in the history of our village dominated by Bulu Baba came to an abrupt end. This is the summary of the report I received:

Brajagopal set out for Vrindavan with Bulu Baba and twelve other members of his inner circle. While Bulu Baba rode a bullock cart, the pilgrims and those out to see them off, deposited their luggage in the cart and launched a marathon walk for the Railway station, for the lone bus that plied between the station and a market eight miles away from our village remained suspended during the monsoon. No more than four or five trains passed through the station in a day and only two of them, running in opposite directions, stopped there.

The pilgrims as well as the bullock cart were still plodding through a meadow when the train steamed into the platform. The pilgrims decided to run. Since the cart was incapable of coping with them, a giant-like devotee carried Bulu Baba on his shoulder and ran. Only three or four more devotees could keep pace with him. The forward party had just stepped into the platform when the train whistled and made jugging sounds indicating motion.

The successful runners, sweating and tightening their loins, were anxious

about their friends trailing half a kilometre behind. A grand idea flashed in the roomy encephalon of the giant devotee. Once Bulu Baba ascends the train, it cannot move away according to its own freewill, just as the Zamindar's cart had failed to do.

'Look here, fellows, the passenger train had already left. This is an Express making a halt for technical reasons. Don't board it!' the station master shouted his caution at them.

The four devotees were in no condition to heed the warning. They were agog with excitement – at the prospect of hypnotising the train partly to prove Bulu Baba's power and partly for the sake of their comrades who were now running like cattle scared by a wolf, carrying their luggage along. They managed to push Bulu Baba into a compartment and, with bated breath, waited to see the miracle.

The train began to pull out. The devotees almost pitied the engine, for, they were sure, the poor thing will hardly be able to drag Bulu Baba farther than a few feet.

At last Brajagopal and the rest of the party caught up with the forerunners. They looked on, flabbergasted and dumbfounded, as the train gathered speed and disappeared at a distant turn of the railways.

Yet another flash of idea now set the giant devotee on the run. Perhaps he intended to pull the train back by holding on to the bar of the last compartment. But he fell down, struck by an epileptic feat.

The bewildered devotees walked up and down the platform for an hour. Some of them cried. The next day Brajagopal and two other knowledgeable villagers left for the city, the final destination of all the locomotives running in that direction by the regular passenger train. They came back after a week, of course without Bulu Baba.

Brajagopal did not seem quite perturbed. 'Leela, the Play,' he said, his arms raised towards the heavens, and slipped into a trance-like silence. 'He came of his own will; of his own will he parted!' said his near ones in the way of interpreting their leader's cryptic utterance.

The rumour that Bulu Baba had somehow landed in a city orphanage where he died a year later may not be directly relevant to this narration. We were once again in the village about a month after the episode. Prof. Navin Ray found it difficult to control his laughter. The next day the professor, I and another friend were on our way to a former student's home for dinner, when the sound of devotional music, coming from Brajagopal's courtyard, brought the professor to a halt.

'Let's hear how Brajagopal explains the episode,' he proposed his voice animated with naughtiness. We followed him even though his intent appeared rather frivolous to me. Brajagopal stood up the moment he saw us entering.

'About Bulu Baba, will you please...'

But Ray could not finish his query. Brajagopal hugged him. ‘Where were you, my beloved, my lord?’ he demanded, ‘Must you play with me like a naughty little child?’ His eyes tearful, Brajagopal led the luckless Ray into the midst of the throng and dabbed sandalwood paste on his forehead and cheeks.

The devotees resumed singing with greater gusto. Brajagopal exerted pressure on Ray’s shoulders, obliging him to sit down. Ray tried to get up, but gave up after a second futile effort. Patting him on the back, Brajagopal held out a banana to his lips. Ray kept his mouth shut, but the devotees sang with great fervour how when the child Krishna refused to eat, Mother Yasoda caught hold of him and fed him forcibly. Ray swallowed the banana, though keeping his eyes shut. Someone put a garland of jasmine flowers around his neck. He did not protest. We too were entertained to bananas and pieces of coconut.

It took us an hour to come out to the street again. I was surprised that Ray did not care to wipe out the sandalwood paste or take the garland off.

‘Brajagopal is somewhat wonderful,’ I suddenly observed, spontaneously. ‘He commands some power,’ said the other friend.

Ray still kept quiet.





The Machine Gun

Had Samar Sarkar so wished, he could have got a suit specially stitched for the occasion. But he did not care. His staff should not get the impression that he was showing off. His becoming the supremo of the local branch of the company must look natural – as natural as it really was. The elevation should not appear to have affected him even slightly. Indeed, he hardly felt any thrill.

How could he? This, after all, was not the realization of his highest dream. He ought to have become a monarch. In his childhood, at the termination of a sleep, he would open his eyes slowly, to see if a cobra were guarding him with its hood unfolded on his head, for that was the omen for the windfall of a crown.

That, unfortunately, never came about. Also, he became aware before long that times had changed and it was no longer possible for one to ascend a throne even if one stumbled upon the last princess in a gymkhana, courted her and married her.

His ambition had taken a new turn while receiving applause at the end of a harangue as a student leader. He could certainly rise to a height from which he would preside over the destiny of his motherland. He could fire the nation with the magic of his personality and do what everybody else had failed to do – for he was the greatest!

But his hopes faded rapidly as he came out of the examination hall for the last time. His father held out before him an account of the instalments of money he had borrowed from their relatives in order to educate the worthy son. His newly wed wife (from a slightly different sect of his caste whom he married defying mild protests from his own parents as well as the bride's) who in her first letter to him

had promised to keep rhythmic steps with him, barefooted, in his travels through the dangerous vales and dales of life, upholding the same banner of defiance, soon started submitting such long lists of items she needed for the house she was setting up for him that it would have been well nigh impossible for her to walk with him with such loads barefooted and with one hand dedicated to grabbing the flag-pole.

He was obliged to take up a job. It was a prosperous firm and his salary was handsome. Debts incurred by his father were liquidated in a couple of years and life became smooth.

‘How many can stand comparison with Samar Sarkar? Never does he indulge in gossips against his colleagues or seniors; he and dishonesty are antonyms. And courtesy was almost a synonym of his.’ No, nobody passed such comments in his hearing, for they had no selfish motive. He occasionally overheard them – he imagined. A sincere introspection established that there was no reason for him to doubt their veracity.

But such appreciations, far from gladdening him, annoyed him. Did they think that he was just slightly different from them? They thought of him only as a goody goody official. Nobody realized what he really was.

And it was precisely his accumulated anguish over this kind of failure of the people around him that had instigated him to demolish at least half of the city with the help of a machine gun.

It was a winter midnight; yet he was sweating. But he had to control his agitation, for he did not have a machine gun. He hoped that his unrevealed genius would find a full blossoming in his only child. While the boy’s mischief drove his wife and others mad, he saw in it the unfolding of a colossal prodigy. The boy grew into a smart and suave young man and emerged from his exams with flying colours. But Sarkar was not quite impressed. He expected much more from him – his son.

And a new hope sprouted in his heart one evening. That was when the boy was declared first in an inter-college debate competition, while the local billionaire’s daughter stood second. Could there be a father anywhere under the blue sky whose chest would not expand with pride at that lovely sight of his son standing dangerously close to that beautiful girl and bowing to a thunderous applause from the audience – holding a dazzling silver cup? And which imaginative father could have checked himself from speculating over the shape of things to come when the billionaire’s daughter asked the boy for tea at her mansion the next day?

Sarkar did not have any sleep that night. His mind was feverishly engaged in conjuring up a sequence charged with romance and drama. The billionaire would of course refuse to concede to the proposed match. The girl would threaten to put on an ochre maxi, become a hermitess, and take abode on the banks of a holy

river. But Sarkar would step in and tell her, 'Care not for the world, my child, here am I – your protector. I will see to it that your stupid progenitor is transformed into my in-law. If warranted, I'll mobilize the public for a revolution.'

But the girl's wedding was duly announced. Sarkar's son, an invitee, was all agog with excitement while narrating the fanfare and the delicacies that went with it, the Kashmiri polau in particular.

At the dead of night, Sakar had looked for a machine gun for the second time in his life.

It took him a few more years to realise that the office of the general manager of the local branch of his company was the highest achievement he could aspire for. But that too was not coming. The present boss was younger than he, although alcoholism made him look more aged than a scarecrow. But don't some people die young? And don't some others renounce their worldly life? There was much to complain against the boss's character and his style of functioning. Sarkar could have taken the lead in a campaign to oust or transfer him, but to malign somebody was against his grain.

He felt restless at times, particularly when he noticed the boss snubbing his young stenographer who feigned defeat – though that was her way to conquer her boss, the whole of him, inch by inch. Should Sarkar, her new master, allow himself to be conquered by her? He should! Why to disappoint her?

He should have driven right into the garage reserved for the chief, but the familiar vehicle of the boss, for some unknown reason, continued to be there.

He parked his car on the slot allotted to him. He began climbing the steps. Today he felt it rather symbolic. His own peon saluted him as usual. He was not flattered, for he expected the other peon – the boss's – to receive him. And his own peon too ought to have done it with some more humility added to his familiar gesture.

He cast a hurried glance at the chamber he occupied for years, much smaller than the one he was now heading for. He smiled. One of his two immediate deputies would occupy his old chamber. Which one? That will depend on his recommendation.

He stood at the threshold of the chamber meant for the general manager – that is to say – himself. But the nameplate had not yet changed, thanks to the protocol's sluggishness. He parted the screen and took a step into the chamber.

But he stopped, bewildered.

'What do you mean by still being there? Were you not dead?' Sarkar blurted out.

The boss, visibly shocked, stared at him for a moment. Then, clutching his chest, he collapsed, his head resting on a file.

'Did you say something, Sir?' The boss's P.A. hurried up from the adjoining

room. He had heard Sarkar's voice, not his words. He followed Sarkar's intent if perplexed gaze and rushed near his boss.

'Sir!' he called out, his voice cracking. 'Sir, Sir, do you hear me?'

The P.A. gave the boss a mild shake. His face paled. He called the head clerk. The discreet senior examined the boss, surveyed the few colleagues who had meanwhile gathered around the chief's revolving chair, and observed, commanding utmost solemnity, 'I'm afraid, Sir had a massive heart attack.'

Doctors were summoned, but in vain.

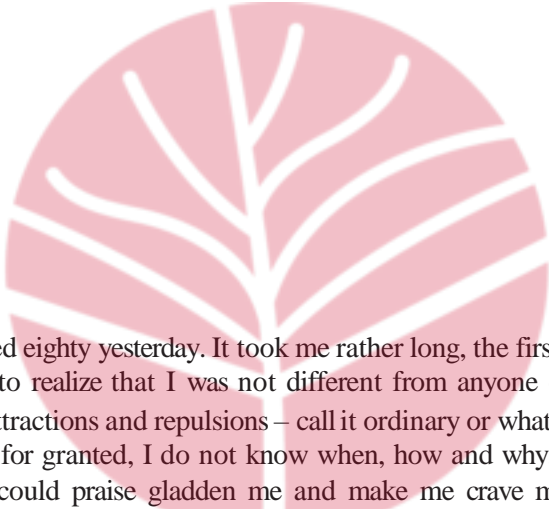
'Our Sarkar Sahib seems endowed with premonition. He shrieked as soon as his eyes fell on the boss,' the P.A. was never tired of telling people.

Sarkar should have stepped into the coveted position fallen vacant by the sudden death, but he was found to be too shy, too introvert and melancholy to be offered the burden. An equally senior executive from the head office filled up the void.

Sarkar seems to have perfectly reconciled to the situation. Occasionally, however, he sits up at night when all is quiet and shoots volleys from his machine gun, clucking his tongue at great speed to make the appropriate sound. Only a few outside his family had some inkling about it and they are too intrigued to do anything more than exchanging whispers.

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The Assault

‘I completed eighty yesterday. It took me rather long, the first sixty years of my life, to realize that I was not different from anyone else in my desires, ambitions, attractions and repulsions – call it ordinary or whatever you please. I had taken it for granted, I do not know when, how and why, that I was unique. How easily could praise gladden me and make me crave more of it and how spontaneously would I reject any criticism of my actions or wishes! Little did I care to remember that so many in this world had been a hundred times braver, nobler and more talented than I? What is more, there were so many who were less egoistic and, consequently, less stupid than I!

‘Alas, dear Avani, it took me six long decades to realize that I was hardly different from those who I thought were inferior to me. How at last this realization dawned on me is a matter too personal. It brought me surprise mixed with remorse, but it was followed by a sense of peace. To be free from the obligation to appear special in one’s speech and conduct – is that not bliss? Avani, I am happy at your success. You sought my good wishes. Well, all I can do is pray that you don’t wait till you’re sixty for a similar realization. I know that you have some truly noble qualities in you. Hence this rather unusual response to your kind communication.’

This was from a venerable freedom-fighter and a former leader.

A response like this to Avani’s formal, printed appeal for goodwill despatched to several such distinguished men and women after his victory in the elections appeared rather uncalled for, and somewhat irrelevant. But Avani was not surprised that the letter should flash in his vision today and bring him some comfort as he gazed at the serene sunset across the garden, from his bed in the nursing home.

He had remained lost in an opaque mist of surprise for days. In his befuddled mind, the mist had, at one stage, changed into an ocean. He lay floating on it, at times overwhelmed by fresh waves of surprise. Perhaps he had given vent to his feelings in a state of delirium.

‘Father, you are lying in your bed, not floating on the sea,’ his son told him.

‘Never mind. We must allow him a little more time to gain normalcy,’ the doctor told the son, politely but firmly.

‘But how long? Doctor, I don’t mind his being in the nursing home as long as he or you wish. But, I’m sure, you realise the urgency of his making a coherent statement. Please do all that’s necessary for that to be possible.’

The son meant it to be an appeal to the doctor though anxiety made him sound a bit rude.

‘We are doing our best.’ The doctor was curt.

‘Thank you. Yes, any delay would only prolong the uncertainty, the confusion.’

Avani heard their conversation. No more did he care for any confusion. He was no longer under any confusion himself. How could his son – even such a worthy son – know about the churnings he had silently gone through? The worthy son was not merely a successful contractor, but also a model citizen, acutely sensitive to his rights and duties. He had obliged an editor, who had alleged his receiving undue favours from the government because of his father’s clout, to come out with a distinctly printed apology on the front page of his journal. Avani, excited at his son’s success, had thrown a banquet for his friends, although under a different pretext, and was heard observing before his own friends, but within the hearing of his son’s pals, ‘We are lucky that our sons are not in politics. If they were, how long would they take to consign us to the dustbin of history?’

The light of the setting sun was fading out of the garden. Avani had observed that the garden had only a few birds, looking quite urbanised, to twitter and hop about in style from branch to branch. At the moment, however, there was only one present and its voice betrayed monotony and dejection. And Avani did not know why it reminded him of the ominous warning chanted by his old Sanskrit teacher time and again: Never be proud of either your wealth or your authority or your youth; in the twinkle of an eye Time can strip you of everything!

‘Father, can you make out where you are?’ the worthy son asked anxiously. The daughter-in-law had just come in and was poring over him, the velvet edge of her vanity bag tickling his cheek. ‘Can you now recollect the events, Daddy?’ she asked.

‘I can.’

‘Excellent. Unless you are feeling extremely tired, will you please tell us in brief who assaulted you and how – in that remote village? The press, the police and the people are all thirsting for the facts; we are dying with anxiety.’

But the lady's voice betrayed more curiosity than anxiety.

Avani closed his eyes. Let them think he was tired. The daughter-in-law appeared more restless than the son. She had been preparing to make her debut on the public arena, leaving it to her husband to earn enough to fuel her self-propelled launching into the firmament of power and, as a warming up exercise, had found her way to the leadership of a couple of women's organisations. Her reeking ambition was offensive even to the seasoned nostrils of Avani. She told her companion, an elderly social worker, 'Can you imagine, Aunty, the alacrity and method with which the conspirators planned their operation? Daddy was visiting the village just for a night and only a few knew about it. To gather the intelligence and despatch goondas in advance and to lure him to a lonely place and beat him up was no small villainy!'

'Certainly not, my daughter. It cannot but be the outcome of a sinister conspiracy. I won't be surprised if there was a nasty foreign hand behind it all!' the elderly lady commented gravely.

'I wish there were a few more ladies in this vast country as farsighted as you are, Aunty. There's a demand for a judicial enquiry. But would they expose all the hidden hands?' mused the daughter-in-law.

She was one of the most valuable trophies won by Avani. He was in power when his son became enamoured of this nymph. The indulgent Avani duly sent a formal proposal to the girl's father who could not have been happier if the chariot of God Indra had suddenly descended to transport him to paradise.

But Avani was to receive the shock of his life just a day before the wedding. He was sipping tea with the bride's father at the latter's house, finalising a few arrangements. The postman handed over a few letters to the would-be relative who opened one of them and, glancing through it, handed it over to Avani with a meaningful beam.

Avani had encountered numerous varieties of shameless smiles, but never anything as nauseating as this one.

'Well, it seems to be what they call... well... a sort of love letter. For whom is it meant? Why should I read it?' The puzzled Avani sought some light.

'Hah! Don't you understand? The writer is prosecuting his higher studies abroad. There was a proposal for my daughter's marriage with him. Hence he had started writing such silly stuff to her. But the moment I received your message, I told my daughter point blank that nothing doing...'

'Scoundrel!' uttered Avani in a muffled voice, though he was well-known for keeping his emotions to himself.

'Well – er – I should say he is not a bad guy. But what relevance the question of good or bad had, once there was a proposal from you?' said the proud father,

casting glances at his gate where some people had collected to have a glimpse of his V.I.P. guest.

He was perhaps feeling guilty for his inability to give any spectacular dowry, ostensibly because of Avani's statutory warning against the practice, but really because he was not that wealthy. Hence he was bent on proving the sacrifices he had made to accommodate Avani's proposal. His smile lingered on in expectation of a nod of appreciation from Avani.

Avani felt choked but as a principle he kept his mouth shut on situations that were no longer amenable to alteration. That helped keeping the catalogue of enemies or disgruntled friends shorter.

But before long he had begun to fear his daughter-in-law. Why should she not avenge herself at an opportune moment? By and by he had realised that she was far more mature than he thought her to be. Hers would be a refined revenge. She would make a thorough and gleeful use of the standing and authority he had earned through decades of labour. The secret realization sometimes chilled him.

Avani opened his eyes. A couple of streetlights flashed on the other side of the road. They were yellow. Suddenly he had the feeling that yellow was the colour of fear. He would very much like those lights switched off. But that was not possible.

He looked for his son and understood that the daughter-in-law and her 'Aunty' had left.

'Why are the windows open? Who stopped the aircon?' he demanded.

'At your instruction, Father, have you forgotten how you were keen on having natural breeze?'

'Oh!'

'Father, there is nobody else here. Will you please tell me everything in brief? You can't imagine the sensation the incident had created all over the state! Papers carrying the news and the editorial comments are all here. Your doctors have forbidden us to read them out to you now. And while you lay unconscious, what a rush of celebrities was there to enquire about your condition and to wish you speedy recovery! They included practically all the ministers of our state, and most of the MPs, MLAs and editors. There are heaps of get-well messages and bouquets in the outer room. Now, tell me, Father, who assaulted you?'

Assault! Was it not he who was an adept at it, who had refined the act to the level of art? What is art if not the capacity to appear assaulted while meting out assaults? Maybe, dramatic art.

'Father!'

'Let me recollect the sequence.'

'Did you know those hoodlums? Can you at least identify them when they are paraded? Or was it only one fellow? Do you remember his face?'

Avani felt amused and sad at the same time. The sensation was bizarre and upsetting.

Of course he remembers the face and shall always remember it. In fact, excepting for the times when he lay asleep or unconscious, it continued to dominate his memory – the sombre face, grim and adamant. He was reading numerous shades of significant messages in it. The face still continued to inspire in him dread, but from the core of that gloomy feeling emerged a luminous flame. In that he recognised a very personal communication. For him it was the dawn of wisdom.

But he would still get spasms and shivers – result of an eerie mixture of horror, humiliation and helplessness – whenever he would recollect the first moment of his meeting with his tormentor. To foresee any benefit from that crisis would have been a wild dream. But once the crisis proper was over, its memory was doing miracles in him.

‘Father!’

Avani did not respond. ‘Father, here is Jayantji!’ the son whispered in a meaningful tone.

Jayantji alone among the leading figures in the state politics had not paid him a visit till then. He had been the latest rival to be humbled by Avani.

‘Well, let’s not disturb his repose. We may, at times, fight each other on issues and ideals. That is inevitable in democratic politics. But we are friends. And friendship brooks no formality. I was in Delhi and was scheduled to return after yet another week. But concern for Navin Babu got the better of me and I obliged my friend, the civil aviation minister, to get me a seat in the flight at an hour’s notice.’

He then lowered his voice. ‘Well, how deep is the wound? Nothing irreparable, I hope.’

‘We’ll get all the reports only tomorrow. He seems to have been attacked with a forked weapon on his chest. Besides there were numerous bashings all over his body!’ The son sighed.

‘How incredibly fast things are going from bad to worse!’ Jayantji lowered his voice further and asked, ‘Someone told me about the fear of a partial paralysis. I hope it is baseless.’

‘Was he a doctor?’

‘Forget about it, friend. Let us do our duty. And that is to pray for his full recovery – and at the earliest. Can the President of the party, within a week of his assuming office, afford to become invalid? Secondly, the criminal must be ruthlessly punished. From C.B.I, to Interpol, we should leave no stone unturned to bring the culprits to book. Thirdly, kindly don’t forget to inform your father that I had come and that my heart bleeds for him and I will come again.’

‘I won’t forget, Sir.’

It was Jayantji whom Avani had defeated in the race for the party’s Presidentship. Avani felt that the rival’s receding footsteps were unusually resounding.

By then Avani had been able to recollect the entire sequence.

He had paid an unpublicised, private visit to his native village at his son’s behest. Adjacent to their ancestral compound was a small plot of land owned by an aged widow. She had no direct heir, but she was about to will her property in favour of a young relative lately looking after her.

‘Father, that land must come to us. Here is the plan for the house I intend to build in the village. Its environment would be marred if someone sets up a hut or a cowshed only twenty yards away. Once you speak to the widow personally, there’ll be no hitch. And, Father, the sooner the better.’

Avani had reached his village at sundown. He was keen to avoid any public gaze. It was a calm twilight when he left his house for the widow’s hut, situated on a hillock-like mound of earth beyond a marshland. The old woman, no doubt, would be thrilled to see before her the great man to meet whom crowds of people wait for hours. He would be kind to her and offer a generous price for her land. He was sure of the success of his mission.

Maybe the young relative of the old woman would feel disappointed, but he banished such thoughts from his mind. And he remembered how once beforehand too he had banished another uncomfortable thought – of a certain young man preparing for his examinations abroad suddenly receiving the news of his beloved marrying a V.I.P.’s son.

He felt remorseful. The aura of the setting sun – whatever of it was still left on the bushes and the trees or the mound, looked yellow. And as soon as he had reached the top of the mound and looked up, his eyes met with a pair of yellow eyes.

And they seemed to be fast changing into two yellow flickers, ready to leap onto him and destroy him. He grew panicky.

The creature facing him was a billy goat, enormous and tough. Its beard reminded him of a demoniac wizard in the Arabian Nights. He could read in the beast’s eyes an uncanny resolution to knock him down and pound and pulverise him if its whim so prompted it.

Jackals broke the silence of the hour, spraying a certain despair and cynicism in the atmosphere.

Not a soul was in sight. Every atom of Avani’s body froze. He assured himself, desperately, that he was no coward, that he had confronted numerous enemies – formidable and brilliant ones at that – and had vanquished them, that he could even activate the armed forces if warranted.

But such assurances were of no avail. He stood perplexed. How at all could

such a situation arise? He reflected, at the speed of lightning, on as many protective strategies as possible. Panic even prompted him to appease the adversary with some such words: 'Your He-goatish Majesty, did you by any chance think that I was here to buy you off the old granny for a ritual sacrifice? Oh no!'

He could have also said, 'Perhaps you don't know me. I am a V.I.P., rather a V.V.I.P. Please be reasonable and ask yourself before taking the next step: should a man of my status go down in history as one trampled by a billy goat?'

The goat took two forward steps.

Avani trembled.

The beast lowered its head and made a dash at him. He stumbled, face down, right on its back and then slipped to the ground. The beast tried to gore him. He began rolling down the mound. And with each turn of his body was peeled off a certain value he cherished, each collision with a shrub or a clod of hardened earth demolished one of the numerous monuments of his achievement. That is how he felt.

He had fainted before reaching the bottom of the mound.

'Father, come on. Let me hear your story now. The home minister has already telephoned three times. They are all set to act on a hint from you.'

Avani tried a smile. He sat up leaning on two bolsters and calmly narrated the bare truth to his son. The talking tired Avani and he fell asleep.

When he slowly woke up, he heard the son softly telling the daughter-in-law, 'What a farcical predicament! Think of the press conference in the offing! Think of the anti-climax! Oh no!'

'And do you know about the medical report? I'm afraid, Daddy would no longer be able to stand straight or walk by himself. I wonder if, for a dynamic person like him, it would be at all worth living...' the daughter-in-law observed in a whisper.

Right. It would be better to die, not because he would be unable to lead the party and consequently people would look down upon him, but because he no longer expected to learn much more in this life after the lesson imparted to him by the billy goat. And, just as he had no longer any reason to stand up or walk, he had no longer any reason to keep lying either.

The yellow eyes of the giant goat flashed in his memory once again, like the embrace of the all-swallowing Time.

'Open the windows! Let me go,' he cried out to the surprise of his son and his daughter-in-law.



The Interlopers

‘Martha had already been enamoured of India for a couple of months before she chanced upon Talkota. That was a decade before the idea of selling India to tourists from abroad had struck a few brains in New Delhi personally selected by Satan. Talkota of those days had nothing more to boast of than its palm-studded semi-circular beach cutting into the sea like a giant sickle and this solitary mansion of the Maharaja of Manaspur just turned into a hotel,’ reminisced Khanna, the founder-manager of the hotel.

He had retired, but had settled down at Talkota. The hotel he once managed had grown ten times bigger. His sons were doing well in different trades all connected with tourism, but Khanna was never tired of bemoaning the disappearance of the tranquil coast, perhaps somewhat envious of the elegant Talkota of today as well as irresistibly attracted to it.

This was not unusual. Those who initiate a process of demolition are always the most vociferous ones to lament when the process reaches its logical culmination. But I had no heart to tell this to Khanna’s face. We were out for a leisurely stroll.

‘But why should Martha die here?’ I asked when he pointed at her insignificant tomb in the cemetery adjacent to the church. He did not answer straightaway. He could not have, I realized soon. He showed me to a rock and sat down on another facing me. We were at a height from which the beach and the newly built fashionable cottages, under the smoky twilight, looked like a fading Persian carpet.

Once the flock of tourists, the fishermen and the picnickers were blotted out

of our vision, we were left with only the old church standing behind us like an unearthly sentinel and the silence of the cemetery – broken only by an occasional gust which, paradoxically, sounded like the very voice of silence.

There was an uncanny compatibility between the atmosphere and Khanna's narration – so much so that I took that almost as a genuine report.

Pravin, the only 'guide' available at Talkota in those days, honest and amiable like a child, shuffled between the city and Talkota and secured customers for the hotel. Khanna liked him very much and let him occupy a small suite in one of the outhouses of the mansion.

But Pravin suddenly became a stranger! The unfortunate change occurred after an accident which killed four tourists when their boat sank while returning from an islet some five kilometres off the shore. Pravin alone had survived the catastrophe. Remorseful and depressed, he stopped working and passed his time sitting, sprawling or sometimes even rolling on the sands where the tidal waves had hauled up the dead bodies of his clients.

One winter night Khanna was woken up by repeated knocks on his doors. He was surprised to see Pravin in a glittering nightgown.

'Do you like it? I bought it at a Paris sale, unbelievably cheap. Bon! Now to business. I have a desire to draw your sketch,' said Pravin, almost forcing his way into Khanna's room.

Khanna obviously believed in the phenomenon of the dead possessing the living. He concluded that Pravin had been possessed by M. Raymond, a French artist. In fact, Raymond had proposed drawing his sketch only hours before getting drowned. Khanna had to sit down. He watched Pravin as Pravin watched him – and Pravin surely surveyed his contours with Raymond's sight.

The rooms the foreigners occupied had not been disturbed, for if not their relatives, officials from the nearest consulates of their countries were expected any moment and take charge of their belongings. But Pravin had taken the key of Raymond's room from the dozing receptionist and had opened it and slipped on the dead artist's gown. And in the morning Khanna learnt that the receptionist was not without his share of the amazing experience. Half asleep, he was under the impression that the key was taken by Raymond himself and he had gone to sleep with that notion. He had clean forgotten – he could not explain how – all about the fatal accident.

Pravin drew Khanna's figure several times and then gave up, annoyed that he could not draw as accurately as he ought to. Perhaps the spirit could not tame the untrained fingers of Pravin beyond a certain degree.

Khanna did not know what to do. But next day, in the morning, out for a stroll along the beach, he heard a tune temporarily familiar to him, for it used to be often hummed by Mr. Barrett, drowned along with the other three. That day

Pravin greeted him exactly in Mr. Barrett's style and spoke very close to the accent of an Englishman. Even his voice seemed to have undergone a change.

The consulate officials arrived and Mr. Khanna kept busy.

The third one to have perished was a youth from a northern Indian city, son of a wealthy man. Along with his parents came a young lady who wept almost continuously. Perhaps she had been betrothed to the departed. Khanna observed that Pravin often stalked her silently, shedding tears.

Had he by then come to be possessed by the young man's spirit? No doubt he was, felt Khanna. He grew anxious, particularly when the young lady too began casting her glances at Pravin. He did everything possible to check any meeting between them. Luckily, the young man's parents, besides making some casual enquiries about the guide who had survived the tragedy, did not show much keenness to talk to him, after being confidentially informed that he had lost sanity.

The visitors left and all was quiet. Pravin looked sober. He was again becoming himself, Khanna felt, and heaved sighs of relief. He would not like the nice guy to be cast away as a lunatic.

It was at this stage that Martha descended on Talkota. Soon she was seen spending hours in Pravin's company. Khanna was not unhappy. After the trauma Pravin had suffered, he needed a woman's love. Khanna did not care even if she was a Scottish divorcee trekking in India in search of a crash course in Nirvana.

Pravin still avoided Khanna, but Martha was taking Khanna into confidence rapidly. Love was bringing visible changes in her demeanour and looks.

'Now I realise why Swami Turyananda politely declined to initiate me,' she told Khanna one evening. 'I sort of revolted when he told me that I was not yet ready for an ascetic way of life. Alas, I was not. Pravin was yet to come into my life.' She violently blushed after the confession.

'What is Pravin going to mean to you?' Khanna asked bluntly.

'Not going to. He already means everything to me, hell and heaven included.' Martha replied bluntly.

'You've said what any girl in love would say.' Khanna smiled, but did not seem impressed.

'Probably yes,' she nodded, a little disappointed over Khanna's dull reaction. 'And I also propose to do what other lovers would do. I am taking him out to a few places.'

'Bon voyage'. Khanna gave a patronising nod.

He saw Pravin only the next day when along with Martha, he was hurrying to board a taxi for the town. Even though Pravin did not have the courtesy to take leave of him, Khanna almost forcibly took him aside and said, 'Pravin, I'm happy that our guide is now out on a guided tour! I had no opportunity to talk to you all these days. That's because you were hardly in a mood to listen to me. You were—I

don't know whether you know it or not – sort of possessed. I'm pleased that you are yourself once again. Perhaps love had performed a bit of exorcism..."

Khanna's effort at arousing a little humour in Pravin failed to click. Pravin just cast a sad look at him.

Martha, unwilling to slacken her absolute hold on her lover, stepped back to reclaim him. Khanna swore mildly and waved at them lifelessly.

It was a quiet noon, a month later, when Martha suddenly popped up before Khanna, looking her own ghost.

'Where is Pravin?' she demanded.

'But won't it be more realistic for me to put that question to you?' asked Khanna. Martha did not contradict him. From what she mumbled on without the least zeal to make a coherent statement, Khanna understood that Pravin stealthily deserted her, once they had reached Rishikesh.

Martha lived only for a month more. The doctor attributed her death to a certain viral fever. But Khanna diagnosed it as a total lack of the will to live.

A few days later Pravin appeared before him and greeted him with a smile as he used to do in the past after every temporary absence.

'Get out', shouted Khanna, 'I never expected you to be so heartless and treacherous. I have no interest in any explanation, you brute.'

Pravin cast a blank look and then walked out without a murmur.

That should have been a comfortable finale to the episode, Khanna's conscience as clear as the autumn sky after his admonition to Pravin, but for his discovery of a small diary on a tall bookrack. It had been left there by Bob, the fourth member of that fatal voyage. Khanna had almost forgotten him – so quiet and unobtrusive the man had been during his stay at the hotel. The last written page of the diary read: "Talkota is fine, but I must leave for Rishikesh. From there begins the mysterious abode of the gods..."

Khanna believed that by the time Martha fell in love with Pravin, he had come to be possessed by Bob's spirit and it left him at Rishikesh.

'Poor Pravin! I was unnecessarily rude to him. I wonder if he was at all aware of the fact that his body and other faculties had become Bob's outfit and that it was Bob who had deserted Martha. I have continued to look for Pravin, but to no avail and for me that is no small cause for regret!' Khanna said as we began descending towards the hotel, almost groping our way in the dark.



The Crooked Staff

Whenever I remember that autumn evening on the river, I feel that the distant planets indeed exercised a lot of influence on the creatures of the earth and sometimes a weird conjunction among them could wreak havoc in our lives. Of course, by our lives I mean a limited sphere of mankind extending from Tom, Dick and Harry to men like, say, Mr. Thomas Jacob who retired as an Additional Secretary to the Government and over the years, through the sheer force of repetition of his complaint that a bureaucratic conspiracy stopped his promotion, had managed to cultivate in his acquaintances the respect due to a full-fledged Secretary, or Mr. Jagu Singh who, after continuing with his black gown and his status as a fourth-grade lawyer for twenty years, put on a white cap and made a first rate minister, or Harish Goswami – almost the professional good man of the town who spent his days generously presiding over public meetings of all kinds. I am not speaking of geniuses or of spiritually advanced souls.

Let me return to the autumn evening. There was nothing unusual about it. All that should happen was happening: the hawkers were doing their usual rounds with roasted groundnuts, tea and balloons and pairs of male and female of different age groups were strolling and inhaling litres of river-cooled air and we three friends were about to settle down on the most conveniently situated cement bench which we looked upon as our private property and occupied every evening and sat for an hour or two inhaling the perfumes exuded by the fashionable ones among the passing pairs, and talking of mice and men.

But we could not sit down because the bench had already been occupied by

the venerable octogenarian Rudranath, his hands and head resting on his crooked walking stick.

Among the students of an earlier generation Rudranath had gained notoriety as a tyrant of a principal, quite different from the professors and principals of our time who are so meek and accommodative. Listening to the anecdotes of his toughness from our uncles, we were astonished that he could live through the whole tenure of his professorship and principalship without even a scratch on his broad bald head.

We were obliged to occupy a bench opposite him. But however we tried to engage ourselves in our usual ritual of munching nuts and gossiping, we could not help sulking under Rudranath's latest tyranny, his uprooting us from our strategic retreat.

Well, we should have been sensible enough to do nothing more than mere sulking, but among us was Kishore, always bubbling with ideas as hot and as tempting as the nuts we were cracking. Who could have thought that his offer of a cup of tea to Rintoo, if the latter could sufficiently annoy the old man to leave the bench, would produce consequences so different from the limited fun we expected of it!

Rintoo kept bargaining till Kishore, afraid that the professor might leave the bench without giving them a chance to pull his leg, agreed to entertain him to a complete dinner in one of our favourite minor restaurants.

Rintoo set out on his mission. He ambled around for a minute and took position before the professor and coughed. The professor looked up, sported a cordial smile and was about to lower his head again on the handle of his stick when Rintoo began, 'Good evening, Sir. What attracted me to you is your walking stick. It appeared to me...' Rintoo hurriedly glanced at us while the professor raised his head and nodded with a smile. Rintoo resumed, 'It appeared to me, for its slimness, mature look and gait, that it could very well be your twin brother – or – ah – could it be a sister?'

The old man kept nodding for a moment more and broke his silence after some hesitation, or, probably reflection:

'No, the stick and I are not twins. We were seven brothers; no sister; three were older than I. The eldest, Harihar, was a deputy magistrate. I wonder if you have heard of him, clean bald, but also a clean officer. Next to him was Mahesh, the headmaster. He limped a little and after retirement grew delicious mushrooms. The third, Mahindra, was a PWD contractor working in the remote villages who once narrowly escaped being gored to death by a naughty bull notorious for its wrath against men using umbrellas. Silly, isn't it? But all the three are gone. Even from the younger lot...'

'Sir, all I wanted to say was, your stick looked exactly like you. The bend on its upper half is a perfect imitation of your stooping gait.'

‘Well, this cane, since the beginning of its career as a walking stick, had been crooked like this, but not I. In fact, at the beginning of my career as a lecturer, I was as straight as a mark of exclamation. But age reduced me to a mark of interrogation. Do you follow me, young man?’ The professor laughed in silence.

There was no sign of the old man’s legendary rage. He was bent upon removing Rintoo’s misconception as dispassionately and seriously as a barber removed a customer’s hair.

Rintoo looked utterly undone.

We pitied him.

‘Long live – you and your crooked stick, Sir!’ Rintoo saluted him and returned to us. We laughed at his discom-fiture.

‘So, Rintoo dear, be reasonable. Buy me a dinner.’ demanded Kishore.

‘Absurd! There had been no stipulation that my failure will oblige me to entertain you!’ protested Rintoo.

‘But that is understood! Whoever accepts a challenge must pay the penalty for his failure!’ said I, for I was not prepared to let go the chance of sharing the dinner as a witness to the deal.

But our argument came to a dead stop. Before us stood the professor, glaring at us through his thick glasses, the metal knob at the top of the bent handle of his walking stick confronting us like an inquisitor.

‘So young yet so wise! You saw my stick as my twin, didn’t you? The occult truth uniting me with my stick revealed itself to you. One who can realize the mystery of similes is on the pathway to Brahma-realization. No, I am not joking. This is a truth. We often compare a smile with a flower. What physical or logical similarity is there between the two? But then we not only accept the simile as natural, but also appreciate it, don’t we? Well, there is certainly something common between the two – something subtle and significant – and we feel that secret oneness at a plane of our sensibility that transcends the rational. Are you a student of philosophy?’

‘No, Sir, we are students of Law.’ We stood up.

‘Inmates of this hostel?’ The professor’s stick was raised pointing at our abode.

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Come, let’s go.’

The professor kept us button-holed for a full hour at the portico of our hostel before quitting us, half-hugging each one of us.

We did not know whether to laugh or to weep. The dispute as to who should host the dinner had died a natural death. We were content with our worthless meals at the mess.

Someone knocked on Rintoo’s door early in the morning. An incorrigible late-riser, Rintoo was naturally annoyed. But upon reluctantly opening the door,

whom should he see but Rudranath and his walking stick! Both the man and his stick seemed to have taken an early morning oil bath. Both looked bright and holy.

‘Come, my young friend, let’s enjoy a morning walk. I’ll tell you more about the unity pervading two apparently diverse objects.’

‘Sir, I’m yet to take bath.’

‘I don’t mind waiting,’ said the professor, stepping into Rintoo’s room.

Rintoo was obliged to get ready at the earliest and go out with the professor.

‘Young man, you might have forgotten about your other important observation – when you wished me and my walking stick a long life. That is to say, you attributed a certain deep intimacy to our apparently casual relationship. The more I reflected on your observation, the more enlightened I felt. In fact, I felt the thrill of a new discovery. Indeed, how is one’s stick inferior to one’s son or one’s grandson? You imagine that your son loves you. It is because of your imagination that he is dear to you, not because of his true attitude towards you of which you really know nothing. Since in any case you derive your satisfaction from your imagination, why not imagine that your walking stick loves you? The idea that your son is your support is rather figurative as well as hypothetical. But can I deny the fact that the stick is my practical support? Once in a while my son comes and stands by my side for a minute or two. But my stick? Just fork out your hands and its head is in your left or right grip. Surely, for all practical purposes, I depend more on my stick than on my son!’

The old man justified his thesis from several angles.

In the evening we abandoned our old familiar bench and selected another, almost a furlong away from it, half hidden behind a kiosk. Our engaging conversation was interrupted by a sort of eureka. ‘So, friends, you are here!’

The professor’s stick danced in his hand for a moment and he virtually drove us back to our hostel with his flowing speech.

Morning after morning the inevitable knock would oblige Rintoo to accompany the professor on his walk. Our examination was approaching. Hints of it, first made indirectly and then directly, made no difference to the professor’s zeal.

Rintoo was becoming a nervous wreck. He cursed Kishore, the original cause of his predicament. And Kishore, I could see, was truly repentant. He proposed that Rintoo stay away from the hostel for some days. We talked to a day-scholar who gladly put up Rintoo in his house.

But the irony of ironies! On the third day, the day-scholar’s father, a former student of Rudranath, met his old professor on the road and brought him over to his house for a cup of tea. ‘Hello, young man, should you have kept me in the dark about your change of residence? And what kind friends were the other two

to be totally ignorant of your new address? You cannot imagine how many miles I had walked, looking for you! Wait.'

The tea over, he led Rintoo into a nearby park. How he saw his own image in his walking stick – how the stick had inaudibly begun to talk to him – were the theme of his confidential report to Rintoo. 'I will come tomorrow,' he promised while taking leave of Rintoo.

There were only ten days left for the examination. Rintoo was banking on the fortnight preceding the examination to make up for his year-long truancy. Who could have foreseen how a little innocent mischief indulged in one autumn evening would land him in such a crisis?

But the next day brought the most unexpected news. The old professor had peacefully passed away in sleep. For a moment Rintoo was unable to read his own feelings. Was it good news for him? He wondered. But the next moment he was a sad man. He returned to the hostel.

Two days later a posh car stopped in front of our hostel. The middle-aged gentleman who descended from it introduced himself as Rudranath's son, a senior executive in a multi-national enterprise. His lawyer accompanied him.

'Are you Mr. Bhuvan Acharya?' the gentleman addressed Rintoo by his official name. He brought the familiar walking stick out from his car and respectfully handed it over to Rintoo. 'According to the will which Father made only a couple of days before his departure to heaven, this is his gift to you. I know that it was nothing more than his quirk and this is of no use to you. But so far as we are concerned, it is our duty to execute his will faithfully,' explained the dutiful son.

He invited all three of us to his father's funeral feast.

Rintoo gazed at the stick vacantly and then carried it into his room in the style of carrying a baby.

My room was beside Rintoo's and I knew that he sat pouring over the Indian Penal Code, after our dinner. At midnight I heard a suppressed cry and dashed into his room. The open book lay before him, but his gaze was fixed on Rudranath's walking stick standing in a corner of his room.

'What's the matter?' I queried anxiously. Rintoo came back to senses and looked embarrassed. Upon my insistence, he disclosed that for a moment he had an illusion; he saw Rudranath in his stick.

Kishore joined us. He laughed and so did I. Honestly, we were not amused, but we were eager to amuse Rintoo. We sent him to bed and dispersed.

It was still dark when Kishore woke me up. He signed me to follow him. We saw Rintoo out for morning walk – the stick in hand. And if both of us were not mistaken, he clearly displayed Rudranath's gait. Kishore and I looked at each other. Then, in a few bounds, we caught up with Rintoo. He was taken aback.

‘When did you develop such a keen love for morning walk, baby?’ demanded Kishore. Rintoo’s eyes betrayed confusion. Kishore suddenly snatched the stick and hurled it into the river. It floated on, its hooked upper end swaying rhythmically once to the left and once to the right. It reminded me of Rudranath’s movements despite my efforts to block my memory. We kept looking at it – till it disappeared from our sight.

‘Come on, Rintoo, let’s have tea.’ I gave a shake to Rintoo and dragged him into a nearby restaurant.

Later, often I argued with Kishore that his inspiration to throw the stick away was rather irrational, but whenever the memory of the floating stick flashed in my vision, I had the creeps, I must confess.





Creatures of Conscience

David Caxton loved the lush pine trees skirting the blue hills along the horizon and he loved the lonely nook of the Greenway Park overshadowed by the tallest of them. But what he loved more was to sit with eyes closed, ruminating on concepts that he believed to be original and exclusively personal. For instance, the argument that had lately got him under its spell was he could very well be young; his having grown old could be nothing but a dream.

It was, in fact, a mid-summer noon's dream that had inspired this suggestion in him and he had already spent seven exciting sessions mulling over it. He had dreamt that he had scored a daring goal in a football match against a formidable team and was being greeted by a thunderous applause. Delighted, he laughed. But his laughter sounded bizarre; at least that is what Miss Moberly, his neighbour in *The Rest*, the home for the aged, told him. She had come rushing into his room and shaken him up from his sleep.

'Mr. Caxton, most certainly you were being harassed by a goblin, the size of a fountain pen, weren't you? Please try to recollect, did it have ears like those of a rat? I'm afraid; it is the same mean-minded sprite that harasses me in my sleep once a week on an average. He would perch on my chest and tickle me and grin!' she had observed.

Mr. Caxton did not care to reply to the crazy little lady. He asked himself again and again, 'Who can be sure that all that he took as a dream was in fact not real?' Of course, on his table lay the beautiful card wishing him many happy returns of the day and the bottle of jam with which the inmates of *The Rest* had greeted him on his ninety-second

birthday a few days ago. But couldn't these too be only chapters in a book-long dream?

But such luxurious speculations often ran into rough weather. Settled on his favourite bench at the farthest corner of the park, he had, the other day, hazarded an opinion before Pratap Singh, a former prince and his schoolmate, junior to him by five years though: 'I wonder if you have taken note of the fact that day by day the squirrels are growing more and more audacious. I have been spending hours over here for the last fifteen years. Haven't I devoted a substantial amount of my time observing their behaviour and activities? There was a time when they felt shy, if not scared, in my presence. They would make off rapidly the moment I would arrive. Some of them would even drop hurried curtsies at me from a safe distance. But all that is a myth now. Would you believe, the other day one of them, evidently a leading member of the tribe, hopped on to this bench while I sat here as awake as you see me now and surveyed me from top to bottom for a full minute standing on his hind legs! And he did so in a manner as if he had the authority to offer me a job should he find me qualified enough for it. Impertinence!'

'It is not the squirrels who have changed, old boy, but yourself,' observed the former prince while stuffing his pipe with tobacco. 'Looking at you sprawling on the bench, lifeless, the squirrel must have concluded that somebody had left a yard or two of an alligator's skin behind him. Let us see how he would dare to fix his gaze on me!'

Mr. Caxton could not appreciate the comment. The first thing he did, after returning to his room was to stand before the mirror. His skin, to be objective, had certainly come to resemble that of an alligator, but to compare the whole of him to an alligator's skin was a glaring example of bad figure of speech. Had the prince made such a howler while Mr. Caxton was a teacher, he would have cited it to his students a full dozen times while explaining the cases of imperfect similes. Yes, that is how he would have avenged the boneheaded prince.

But, lately, he had begun to fear the squirrels. For long he had believed that the squirrels were vegetarians and that they rarely ate any stuff other than buds and nuts. Disillusionment came only two days ago when a couple of squirrels dispersed reluctantly upon his arrival, leaving behind them a drop of blood on the bench. That meant the squirrels had just killed and feasted on some tiny creature. They had scampered off with the remains of their prey.

Once Mr. Caxton himself did not mind shedding blood – of fowls in particular. But that solitary drop of blood on the bench had infused in him a subdued horror. The blood and the observation by the former prince discomfited him so much that he had almost resolved to go over to another corner of the park.

But if he still stuck to his familiar spot, it was because of his hope that the pair of lovers who occupied the other end of the bench the previous evening would

come back. Both seemed extremely shy and timorous. They had sat for a full hour, but had exchanged hardly a dozen words even though Mr. Caxton could feel how agog they were with what they would have loved to say.

But, seventy years ago, when love was a sacred and serious matter and instances of it were rare, when there were no movies to teach its techniques and language to all and sundry, Mr. Caxton had succeeded in confessing his love to Miss Zimy Biscuitwallah and proposing marriage – all in a record time. Miss Biscuitwallah, of course, had declined the proposal, saying, 'My parents belong to the most orthodox lot among the Parsees. I have to virtually rebel if I am to marry an Anglo-Indian, even a saintly one like you. I have no enthusiasm for kicking up a mushroom of dust in my community. Beside, my father is a patron of the school where you teach. One nasty word from him and you're chucked out. My conscience would not let me relish that. Be conscientious yourself, David, and bridle your passion. You play football so well. Continue to play it.'

Mr. Caxton continued with his football. But, spurred by an academic urge, he wrote to Miss Biscuitwallah at Bombay, 'It is all right if we cannot marry for technical reasons, but will you please tell me if I could expect you to love me?'

But the passionate query brought no reply. Years later, a strong sense of repentance began overwhelming Mr. Caxton. He should have inspired Miss Biscuitwallah to raise the necessary banner of revolt and to wed him, even at the risk of his losing his job. That would have been in keeping with the classic tradition of love.

Every time he was beset with the thought, he felt like giving himself a punch on the nose. Till the age of sixty, while doing his constitutional jogging along the road to the mall he would sometimes double his speed in a bid to leave this disturbing thought behind.

He took a firm decision: if the lovers came again and if he found out that they lacked the courage to rebel, he would supply them courage and strength from his personal stock. That should be an act of conscience.

The pine-tops were sprayed with gold. The blue-blooded, sensitive moon of the Himalayas had just appeared behind a peak. And to his joy Mr. Caxton noticed the lovers, bathed in that mysterious glow, slowly approaching his bench.

They hesitated for a second. Mr. Caxton, in his anxiety, was about to welcome them. But he restrained himself. He must remain as passive as possible, yes, even if he were to be mistaken for a forgotten yard or two of an alligator's skin. That was his strategy.

The two sat down on the other end of the bench. 'Do you recollect our first meeting? How elegantly the moon shone!' reminisced the young man. 'Just as it does tonight.'

The young lady blushed and fidgeted. Maybe that was Mr. Caxton's imagination, but he reassured himself of its soundness and resolved that she indeed did blush and fidget. She could not do otherwise.

'Dora, it's almost a year now that I have been trying to tell you something,' said the young man in a muffled voice.

'Are you? So am I.' responded the young lady.

Excellent! Mr. Caxton felt like clapping his hands. Go on my boy, go on my girl, never mind my presence. Do not stop! – he said in silence.

Five minutes passed.

'Why don't you speak more, you greenhorns? No command over the right kind of words, eh? How many marks did you secure in your literature papers? Haven't you read *Jane Eyre*? What did Rochester tell Jane? 'Come to me – come to me entirely, now! Make my happiness -I will make yours!' Haven't you read even *The Merchant of Venice*? What did Portia tell Bassanio? 'Though for my sake alone I will not be ambitious in my wish to wish myself much better, yet for you I would be trebled twenty times myself, a thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich, that only to stand high in your account I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends, exceed account!' Haven't you read *The Tempest* either? Don't you remember what Ferdinand, at the mercy of Prospero, had to say at his very first meeting with Miranda? If he could see her only once a day through his prison window, he would feel rewarded enough. 'All corners else o' the earth let liberty make use of; space enough have I in such a prison.' Say something similar! I should be the last person to accuse you of plagiarism – Mr. Caxton assured the pair, again in silence.

He had suddenly grown conscious of the fact, after ages, that a good quantity of blood flowed in his veins – and quite warm at that.

'Better I come to the point straight, what do you say?' asked the young man.

'I agree.'

Be quick, young man – Mr. Caxton kept prompting them silently, and he assured them that if the Hindu doctrine of rebirth were true, he would be happy to be born as their son. It ought to be a matter of pride for any couple to have him as their son – he who had risen to the position of the Principal of the prestigious Prince Albert High School at the rather young age of thirty-six. The sum-total of the clappings he had received in the football fields could make a nuclear explosion sound like a sneeze.

'What I propose is...'

The young man stammered and attempted again, 'Why not we get our separation legalised through mutual consent? Why complicate matters?'

'I agree,' the young lady yawned.

‘Excellent, Dora, you’ve always been a creature of conscience,’ the young man commented vibrantly.

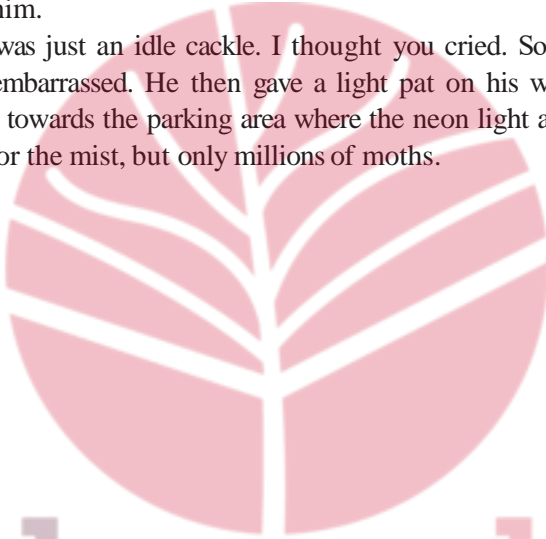
Both rose to go.

Mr. Caxton gave out a small groan – the sort of it which Miss Moberly had alleged to be the outcome of a rat-eared goblin harassing him in his dream.

‘What’s the matter, gentleman? Pain? In the chest?’ the young man turned and came close to Mr. Caxton.

‘Can we help you? Would you like to be dropped somewhere?’ the young lady leaned over him.

‘Oh! It was just an idle cackle. I thought you cried. Sorry,’ said the young man, a bit embarrassed. He then gave a light pat on his wife’s back and both walked away towards the parking area where the neon light admitted neither the moonlight nor the mist, but only millions of moths.



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एकः सूते सकलम्



The Vengeance

Vilas Singh stood dazzled for a moment. A hundred fingers of fire rent asunder the huge dome of darkness above..

He felt a yard or two of the lightning creeping into his veins, sparking off a double-edged sensation. Among the fiery designs that flashed along the horizon he saw Bahadur's face. And, the suddenness and the sharpness of the blaze reminded him of his own dagger. Surely, he could be equally sudden in handling it, in driving it across Bahadur's breast – he assured himself.

He could not sleep a wink. Despite his vigorous attempts at dispelling it, his mind remained filled with the ominous presence of Bahadur. Even the memory of the sweet little face peeping out of his home in the faraway village failed to make a little room for it.

He left the mat and began strolling along the narrow verandah of the inn. His legs were tired. But he could not afford to rest – not until he had wreaked his vengeance on Bahadur. On the verge of weeping, he repeated his oath. He must finish Bahadur off. If he had ever had one mission in life, it was this.

There was yet another flare along the horizon. Vilas Singh shut his eyes. Lightning was a disturbing reminder. It flashes and disappears. One cannot catch it. So was Bahadur who had, time and again, given him the slip. But Vilas Singh had not given up. Defeats had only made him tougher. Morning was still a couple of hours away when he resumed walking. And it was just at the crack of dawn that he reached Shashikala's hut

'Did you get him? Are you avenged and satisfied?' asked Shashikala while handing out a mugful of tea.

‘No.’ Vilas Singh’s reply sounded like an explosion. He was sprawling on the verandah. The jerk wrought by his own roar made him sit up stiff.

‘I had always a feeling that one day you will happen to pass this way and I shall avail of the opportunity to cajole you to give up your mad pursuit. You are yet to cross your youth. The whole life is before you. Just as the war is nothing more than a memory, you ought to also allow all that went with it to be buried in the past. Besides, it is hardly a year since you got married. Is it sensible for you to leave your sweet home behind and pursue an unfortunate wretch?’ Shashikala’s voice was soaked in conscience and compassion.

Vilas Singh reacted like a tickled serpent. He was ready to splash Shashikala’s face with his hot tea, but checked himself and gasped.

‘A brazen face like mine does not get scorched easily,’ Shashikala crooned and then burst into a sonorous laughter.

The meadow before the hut was marked by hedges and bushes. They had just begun recovering their individual forms out of the dusk. Against the sky over the eastern horizon could be made out the flight of the first covey of early birds.

‘Listen, Singh, pay heed to my appeal. Look how the night is nearing end. View those past two years in the frontier as a night that was over. Take note of the fresh dawn. Begin a new life, as fresh as the dawn.’ Shashikala had placed her hand on Vilas Singh’s shoulder. But Vilas Singh flung it aside and stood up.

‘Please finish your tea,’ pleaded Shashikala. Vilas Singh laughed. The laughter combined, in a dramatic fashion, abhorrence and sarcasm. ‘Shashi!’ he groaned, ‘Such sage advice are not expected from the character that you are! Hadn’t it been your dharma, throughout, to lift a cup right to one’s lips only to take it away? It is you who had led me to Sumati. Then, just when I had become entirely possessed by her, you introduced her to Bahadur. And the scoundrel bewitched her.’

Smile, like a flitting butterfly, had suddenly left Vilas Singh’s lips and alighted on Shashikala’s where it looked much more natural and purposeful.

‘Singh, while complaining, you seem to forget all about my occupation during those evil days. I used to bestow my attention equally on all. It was not with any greater affection that I had led Bahadur to Sumati. Needless to say, others had preceded you just as you preceded Bahadur. Sumati too was expected to be impartial in doling out her favours. But the poor girl miserably deviated. She fell for Bahadur. She did not realize how dangerous it was to fall for anyone in the pattern of life into which destiny had pushed her. To fall once meant to fall again. The poor creature had to pay dearly for her error. You know about that, don’t you?’ Shashikala looked askance.

‘I know. In fact, I came to know about it the very day Bahadur murdered her.’ Shashikala had come closer to Vilas Singh. Stroking his back, she whispered, ‘Let me tell you what you do not know. If you are seeking to kill Bahadur, it is not

because he took Sumati away from you, but because he killed Sumati and thereby asserted his ultimate right on her – something that you failed to do.

‘Never. I would have been the last man to murmur even if Sumati were to be shredded by a dozen hounds,’ shouted Vilas Singh. ‘How do you forget that Bahadur snatched not only Sumati away from me, but also my savings of a decade?’ Vilas Singh motioned as if he was protecting himself from some invisible enemy.

‘I’m no child, Singh, to accept your explanation. However, let me tell you that it is just impossible to claim the ultimate victory on one by killing the person. Bahadur killed Sumati spurred by a mad desire to possess her fully. But one that is dead had already given you the slip. You cannot have the satisfaction of exercising your authority on one who is not there to revolt against it. And, how on earth can you possess one who was dead? Is it not rather the privilege of the dead to possess you? I know for certain that Bahadur, after killing Sumati, had not passed a moment without longing for her. He lives in a hell of anguish.’

‘I don’t care. I told you, didn’t I? That Bahadur’s crime against me was not limited to his eloping with Sumati!’ groaned Vilas Singh.

‘I insist, Singh, that the loss of money cannot be the inspiration behind your mission. If it were so, you would have gone satisfied a year ago when you wounded him on the head,’ asserted Shashikala.

Vilas Singh laughed gleefully. ‘Shashi! Have you ever met him after my inflicting that wound on him? Do you think that the scar might heal up in his life-time?’ Vilas Singh betrayed his ardent eagerness for an answer.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Thanks!’ Vilas Singh burst into a fresh peal of laughter, more lusty than ever and, from the fold of his clothes, flashed out a dagger. He raised it for Shashikala to see it fully. Against the silent and serene dawn, the dagger looked grisly. Shashikala was beset with melancholy.

एकः सूते सकलम्

Evening had just set in when Vilas Singh stood on the outskirts of the bazar. He straightened his limbs. He knew that he was on the verge of success, at the end of a continuous chase for five months. His effort, of course, went back to five years – years of anguish, wandering and frustrations, interrupted only by a brief though dreamy period at home during which he got married.

Time and again, when he was almost sure that his net was closing in on the enemy, the latter had escaped. But, something like intuition informed Vilas Singh, there was no getting away for the fellow this time. Bahadur was under the impression that Vilas Singh himself married and declared heir to an unexpected

estate in the village, had given up the chase. In fact, Vilas Singh himself had arranged to foster this impression in him. The fellow must be caught absolutely unawares.

By the time Vilas Singh strolled into the tavern at the far end of the sleepy little town, it was past first quarter of the night. The tavern was Bahadur's haunt. He and his gang visited it regularly. Vilas Singh's disguise was perfect. He easily mingled with the few other customers, but occupied a seat right at the entrance. He must do his job as soon as Bahadur steps in. Not a second, not a word was to be wasted. Behind the tavern stretched a valley with dark ravines. There should be no difficulty in his making off. It was not likely that Bahadur's comrades would raise a hue and cry or launch a hunt for him. For, an investigation would only disclose the victim's identity, inevitably leading to the gang.

But the only ritual Vilas Singh proposed to perform was to let the dying enemy have a glimpse of his true face. The beard he wore was easily detachable.

Others in the tavern were drinking. Vilas Singh only pretended to drink. His look was glued to the door. But he knew that two or three fellows inside the tavern had begun casting suspicious glances at him. He was growing impatient.

An hour passed. Suddenly the doors of the tavern left ajar till then flung open. Vilas Singh stood up hurriedly. But none of the two visitors was Bahadur, though one was his closest collaborator. It was for this one that Bahadur had narrowly escaped death in the hands of Vilas Singh on the last occasion.

The cluster of drinkers looked at the door. Even the dim light revealed their anxiety, and the two visitors looked distressed.

"So?" asked one from the cluster.

'Finished!' the two replied.

From the reaction of the listeners it was evident that the news was not unexpected. Even then some of them sighed and everybody stood up. Vilas Singh followed them.

A vague fear was overtaking him. The road was uneven and rocky. He stumbled over several boulders as he walked behind the silent gang, shadow-like. They climbed a hillock and entered the small house atop it.

The deadbody lay on an old rope-cot. There were a number of medicine bottles and glasses around. The fellow must have suffered for long. He had been reduced to a wreck.

Someone raised a lantern.

And at once the deep scar on the corpse's forehead glimmered in the light.

There was a shriek. It was from Vilas Singh, the architect of that wound. He fumbled out into the open. He sat down and cried, looking helplessly at the darkness and the forest around. He rolled on the ground, seething with frustration, muttering curses.

If one cared one could make out the theme of his blabbering: The rascal Bahadur had given him the final slip, suddenly rendering his five-year-old enterprise futile. What was he to do? How to satisfy his smouldering wrath?

Those who heard him hardly understood the significance of his outburst.

Vilas Singh had kept on sitting on the hillock for the whole night. Neither the mist soaked in the peace of the stars nor the breeze conveying the calm of the forest could cool down the burning within him.

It was a little before sunrise, while his eyes were still fixed on the forest, that he remembered Hidamba Baba. The Baba's abode in the forest, at the foot of mount Luvurva, was not far.

* * *

Vilas Singh felt the weight of the accumulated sleep he had managed to keep at bay, as soon as he had reached the periphery of his village. Two months of stay with Hidamba Baba had diminished his inner burning, although his urge for vengeance had not been rooted out.

And he did not wish it to be rooted out. The opportunity for taking revenge on Bahadur, despite his death, was still open. Hidamba Baba alone could have given such an assurance.

Of course, he must wait.

'Vilas! Back at last!' He was warmly greeted by the villagers.

'There is hardly anything left of your mother, continuously weeping on your account.'

'And what about that unlucky girl your mother brought home? How could you afford to disappear without even notifying that sweet, sweet wife within months of the marriage? What was her fault? What had she done to deserve this?'

Vilas Singh pushed forward, head hung, through a shower of comments at once pleasant and bitter. He alone knew what his newly wed wife's fault was. She was gradually casting a spell on him. Had he submitted himself to her enchantment for a little while more, he would have forgotten his mission. He had to flee suddenly.

'Welcome home now home with a difference. You have proved yourself sneaky and treacherous. But come and see the surprise we have in store for you,' said an elderly lady.

At last he realised, while climbing the steps, that he had become a father since a month. He was being led to have the first glimpse of his son.

He was thrilled. Instantly he took a decision to do his best to sustain that sensation as long he could – forever if possible. For that it was necessary to drive all the corroding impulses out of his heart.

He was willing to do that.

A number of women were there to welcome him into the inner quarter. His wife stood up, pulling down her veil to cover her face.

The child lay asleep in a swing.

His heart throbbing in excitement, Vilas Singh cast his first ever look on the child.

Suddenly he felt like a dozen thunderbolts blasting his head. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. No, his eyes had not deceived him.

Still he made a desperate attempt at appearing composed, and brooded upon the geographical situation of his village. Was it really in the northeastern direction when viewed from Luvurva? Alas, it was.

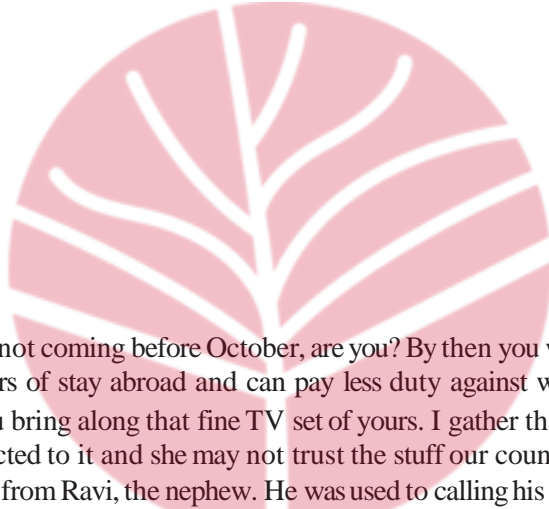
Hidamba Baba, the tantrik clairvoyant, had assured him that Bahadur's soul would creep into an infant that was about to be born in a village situated to the northeast of the forest. Further, with a meaningful snicker he had whispered to him that it should not be difficult for him to recognise Bahadur in that infant, for, the new born soul would reveal its identity by sporting a mark which Vilas Singh cannot fail to identify.

Vilas Singh looked at the infant's forehead for the third time. The mark was a delicate miniature of the wound he had once inflicted on Bahadur.

He tried to retreat into a room, but could not. He collapsed, while the women were tickling the infant to make it smile.

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एकः सूते सकलम्



The Brothers

You are not coming before October, are you? By then you will have completed six years of stay abroad and can pay less duty against whatever you bring. I suggest you bring along that fine TV set of yours. I gather that Mummy has grown addicted to it and she may not trust the stuff our country is churning out’.

A letter from Ravi, the nephew. He was used to calling his aunt Mummy. Saroj Mishra glanced quickly through the catalogue of do’s and don’ts, all concerning his homecoming. But when he came to the last passage of the letter, he slowed down. His face grew grim.

‘About father,’ the letter read, ‘I’m sorry to inform you that his sanity is on the decline. Not that he was ever perfectly sane, but lately he is growing more and more irresponsible.’

‘Irresponsible!’ muttered Saroj. There was a time when, looking at Brother, at his unkempt hair in particular, one got the impression that he perpetually carried on his head a sackful of invisible but onerous load. The surplus burdens of several organizations – burdens which did not carry with them the promise of a reward – invariably fell on him. And Bhuvan never murmured. Irresponsible, no doubt, he was from the angle of worldly prudence. And he underwent no mean humiliation on that account. Father who taught history at the Government High School had read out to his students a chapter entitled ‘Blessings of the British Rule in India’ umpteen times over the years. One of the uncles was the stenographer to the district judge. No wonder Bhuvan courting arrest for participating in a bonfire of British-made clothes would shake the family like an earthquake.

One evening, when it was dark enough for them to be unable to see each

other's face, the distressed father had told Bhuvan, 'I don't mind if you don't care two hoots for me. I can earn a rupee or two out of tuitions if they chuck me out. But should you not have some consideration for your uncle? He is the Judge Sahib's assistant. To endanger his position will amount to a massacre of his family. And must I tell you that it is sheer madness to believe that the British – over whose empire the sun finds no chance to set – will abandon India for the fear of a few gangs of crackpots? On the other hand, your conduct will invite harassment for your younger brother too. The boy has always topped in his class. But he is doomed to be in the government's secret list of suspects for no other reason than he is your brother. His future is bleak.'

'Times are changing. Who knows, in the years to come, he won't feel proud of being my brother!' Bhuvan had answered.

Father, when angry, used to stammer. 'Don't speak like Alexander the Great. Twist your ears, I say!' he blurted out with great difficulty. This was almost the last weapon the venerable history teacher had learnt to wield.

Bhuvan, after duly obeying the command, had said, 'I have twisted my ears. But Father, this is hardly a solution to the problem. To be frank, I am no less worried about the situation than yourself or my wise Uncle. The other day our leader made a most sensible suggestion. If it is followed – and I mean it when I say that it should be followed – the deal could be clinched. Our family should disown me. A similar action has earned the title of Roy Sahib to another far-sighted father. I shall be the last person to think that you crave for such trash. But you certainly desire protection for yourself and your younger brother and your younger son.'

Father only groaned. He had given up the habit of bathing in the evening for the past five years. But that evening he was observed pouring bucketfuls of cool water on his head.

Although he took such a thorough bath, he refused to sit for dinner. His wife wept. The little Saroj, insistent on eating with his mother, received a slap. Consequently he too refused to eat.

Saroj had realized for the first time that he had a 'future' and that despite his standing first in the examinations, the said 'future' had grown somewhat bleak due to his brother's conduct. He was very unhappy with Bhuvan. Nevertheless, he had a hunch that his brother was gloriously different from his father and uncle and all the rest belonging to the genre of guardians.

The uncle had returned late. Upon getting a report of the encounter between his elder brother and his nephew and its effect on the former, he had called Bhuvan into his room and said, 'You propose that we disown you, do you? Well, such forethought could be expected only from a gem of the modern youth. But don't you see the snag in the way of its execution? You are already married. Our

daughter-in-law should come to adorn our household in a year or two. I wish we could depend on your ability to maintain her in a reasonably decent manner!’

Saroj, who overheard this, could feel, even at that tender age, that the illustrious clerk-uncle’s sarcasm was unwarranted. Bhuvan could have retorted by reminding the uncle that he had not been dying to marry; his guardians had forced him into that bondage. Maintaining the daughter-in-law ought to be their business.

Bhuvan had been married when barely fourteen to a bride of nine. He turned a freedom-fighter-cum-social-reformer at seventeen. Thereafter he often took his mother to task for involving him in the sin that was the custom of child-marriage.

Bhuvan was twenty when his wife came over to their house. It did not take her long to realize that hers was not a welcome entry into her husband’s life. And, far from making any contribution to the welfare of the family, her husband, who divided his time between the party office and jail, had been the sole cause of its anguish.

She served the household with a vengeance to compensate for her husband’s lapses, suffered in silence and died eight years later, leaving a two-year-old son behind.

Around that time the country won freedom and Bhuvan’s future seemed bright. He was flooded with proposals for a fresh marriage. But he turned them down.

At the wish of their dying father it was Saroj who had to marry early so that his wife would take charge of Bhuvan’s infant son.

As Saroj reviewed the past twenty-five years, he found that his wife had discharged her duty well. Ravi, the nephew, had grown up to be a bright young man. Though a law graduate, he had preferred business to practice. He was the president of the local Rotary Club and was a loving elder brother to his three cousins – the charming daughters of Saroj.

His brother’s activities had neither lighted nor darkened Saroj’s future. He had won a scholarship at every stage of his career and had become a successful physician. He had been to the West several times.

Saroj was warmly received at the Railway station. Ravi and his wife and Saroj’s eldest daughter and her husband were there, as well as a few friends from the medical fraternity.

‘Brother is at home, is he?’ Saroj asked as he entered his nephew’s car.

‘He was. But who can guess his whereabouts! He knew of your arrival. Should he not have been here with us to receive you? In a way, of course, it was good that he did not. He has lately grown unpredictable in his talk and behaviour.’

The nephew lifted his hands from the steering wheel to make a gesture of helplessness. ‘I’m at my wit’s end. Now it is for you to do whatever is necessary,’ he said with a sigh.

‘Hm!’ Saroj kept quiet for a minute. ‘I wish I had time. I joined the hospital in the city and dumped my things at a friend’s and came over here just to meet you all. I have to report back in four days.’

‘But I am not accompanying you. After six long years in a city apartment, I just cannot bear yet another city. How sweet is our small town! Nothing had changed,’ said Saroj Mishra’s wife, surveying the environment.

‘Who will let you go even if you wanted to?’ cooed Ravi’s suave wife. They reached home. Those who had followed their car took leave of them.

‘Father is not seen yet!’ observed Ravi.

‘He should be back any moment.’ The well-bred daughter-in-law tried to play down her father-in-law’s misdemeanour.

‘Right. He must be near about,’ Saroj supported Ravi’s wife, though he was feeling piqued at his brother’s lack of interest in him.

Saroj and Ravi sat down for tea. ‘We must lead Father, somehow, to Ranchi,’ said Ravi, lowering his voice. ‘Dr. Bibhas Chowdhury – who had great respect for Father – is now the superintendent of the asylum there. Father will never subject himself to any treatment here.’

‘Let me contact Bibhas over the phone tonight,’ said Saroj. ‘Is Brother’s condition that alarming?’

‘Had I not written to you in detail all about the election episode? It was then that his insanity came out in the open. Since then...’ Ravi went on with his account of his father’s erratic behaviour. Saroj heard only in parts. His memory was stirred by several other events of the bygone days:

That was the time of the first general elections after the country won independence. When it was almost certain that Bhuvan would be the premier party’s candidate from the town constituency, his leader called him and said, ‘Listen with attention and give some thought to what I say. If elected, you are sure to become a minister. That means you will be in power. My question is, if idealists like you become prisoners of power, who will carry on constructive works among the masses or educate them in ideology? You don’t expect fake patriots like Kalu Roy to do that!’

Bhuvan was fired with idealism once again. Consequently, the one to contest and get elected and become a minister was Kalu Roy. Bhuvan was made the president of the party’s district committee. But once in power Kalu Roy managed to capture the key positions of the party for his own cronies.

Bhuvan, however, was not dropped altogether. That was unnecessary. He held the portfolio of honorary treasurer while the funds were controlled by Kalu’s henchmen.

Soon politics was reduced to an open power game. Instead of doing anything to mend the situation, the people, on their part, discharged their

duty towards democracy by according grand receptions to the leaders and ridiculing and heckling them, alternately.

Bhuvan felt himself a stranger in the changing climate. But he was readily accessible to the people as a representative of the politicians in power. He was beleaguered time and again.

He began to look bewildered. Saroj realized his condition. To Bhuvan his fellow-politicians were as honourable as himself. He had the foolishness to defend them in all earnestness before crowds which found teasing him highly entertaining. And he even took the teasing seriously and looked more and more strange and lost. It was at the beginning of this phase in Bhuvan's life that Saroj left for the West.

Soon he received an exciting account of Bhuvan's eccentricity. There was a by-election in the town. This time Kalu Roy had to face a formidable rival who roared out his greater claim to patriotism day in and day out. Kalu Roy had a stiff time counteracting his vehemence and violence.

One midnight, three days before the polling, Kalu Roy woke up Bhuvan and carried a suitcase right into his bedroom. 'This is safe in your custody, ha ha!' he said. 'This contains only papers – but of a dangerous kind. I shall need the stuff on the eve of the polling.'

An hour later, Bhuvan's water jar tumbled on the suitcase and drenched half of it. Bhuvan, in order to be sure that the papers had not been affected, struggled to open it, using whatever keys he could lay his hands on.

He succeeded ultimately. He kept staring into the suitcase for a while and then rang up Roy.

'What is the problem?' asked a sleepy Kalu Roy.

'You told me your suitcase contained papers. But it is teeming with currency notes!'

'What's currency if not a kind of paper? Didn't I add that my papers were of a dangerous kind? Ha ha! But why should a saint bother?'

'I'm afraid the stacks run to several thousand – say twenty-five!'

'Ha ha! Much more, Bhuvan!' said Roy, who knew that to divulge a secret to Bhuvan was as safe as doing so to a domestic cat.

'Fifty thousand?'

'Still more, Bhuvan! But what is that to you?'

'Could it be a lakh?' demanded Bhuvan.

'Could be. Gift from a well-wisher.'

'What do you propose to do with it, Kalu?'

'Didn't I say that it shall be put to use a few hours before the polling? Keep it a secret. Ha ha!'

'You mean to bribe the voters, do you? What the people say then are true; am I right?'

‘Ah, Bhuvan, you are incorrigible. Go to bed. I promise to explain the situation to you at a more opportune time.’

But instead of going to bed, Bhuvan carried the suitcase down, called a rickshaw and proceeded to the orphanage.

‘Feed the orphans with plenty of oranges, apples and grapes and buy half a dozen cows for providing them with pure milk,’ he told the secretary, handing out twenty-five thousand rupees to him.

He then reached the widow-welfare centre and passed forty thousand rupees to the superintendent, with the advice that each inmate of the centre be provided with a bicycle.

The district collector was jolted out of bed two hours before schedule by Bhuvan’s loud call and fierce protests from two Alsatians by chance not left loose. Bhuvan had placed thirty-four thousand rupees on the hands the collector had extended to greet the venerable freedom-fighter before he was aware of what was happening. ‘Send this to the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund,’ Bhuvan advised the puzzled officer and left.

Returning home he gave away the remaining thousand rupees to the dazed rickshaw-puller. In due time an enraged Kalu Roy shrieked and manhandled Bhuvan and tore his shirt and lost the election. Bhuvan was suspended from the party, accused of indiscipline and sabotage.

Saroj had finished his tea. He was about to go in for a bath.

‘So, you are here! Fine. Don’t get up!’ Bhuvan’s voice was as sonorous and distinct as ever. There was no subterfuge there, or reserve.

‘Out at dawn I must have walked ten miles in search of fresh butter. You still love it, don’t you? Remember how you used to cry for it and how Mother would always keep a cupful of it for you? You must have gone without it for years. This is all I got after exploring three villages of milkmen.’

‘You should not have taken such pains,’ murmured Saroj, amused and grateful.

‘Pains? People have forgotten how to take pains. I have been eagerly looking forward to your return so that we could take pains together. There is too much suffering among the poor, too much ignorance among the rich. We’ve got to do something. You must accompany me to the villages and do your bit. I don’t mean that you should stop earning. If you do, how can I have money for giving to the needy? I shall show you how true joy lies in giving, not in hoarding. Others won’t understand.’

Bhuvan talked on, non-stop, his face glowing with excitement. Saroj felt sad, but sat captivated.

Bhuvan’s monologue grew more and more incoherent. After a tirade against the practice of hoarding wealth, he went on to narrate a folk-tale featuring a certain foolish miser. Thereafter he recited nearly a hundred lines from the

Bhagavat Purana. Thence began a discourse on the wonder that was India and reflections on her future.

There was a time when Bhuvan was known as a man of few words. He dominated any gathering with his calm and poise. Today many must be looking upon him as a windbag, a buffoon. Saroj sat absorbed in his recollections of Bhuvan as he was. He had lowered his head and, unmindful of Bhuvan's speech, was lighting a cigarette. He neglected to wonder why Bhuvan had suddenly fallen silent in the middle of a sentence.

Suddenly he received a slap. He looked up, shocked. It was Bhuvan who stood before him, staring angrily.

Saroj too stood up.

'Had I not warned you of this consequence if you smoked again?' demanded Bhuvan, as the brothers stood face to face.

Indeed, Bhuvan had warned in no uncertain terms when the little Saroj had been caught red-handed in his maiden experiment with a stolen *beedi*. Bhuvan, then, had caught him by the ear and raised his hand to slap him, but had held back and released him after administering the warning. The suspended slap had now been released, forty years later.

Saroj threw away the cigarette and stood thunderstruck. But the expression on Bhuvan's face was fast changing from sternness to bewilderment.

'My God! What's this I did? How could I forget that you had grown up and were a celebrity?' Bhuvan cried out. His voice cracked. He looked horrified.

'I shall never smoke again!' muttered Saroj, as he gulped down a sob.

Bhuvan embraced him.

Ravi and his wife came in and stood surprised.

'Saroj! I'm making blunder after blunder. No wonder they think I'm going mad. They are not to blame,' Bhuvan complained against himself.

'They are to blame!' Saroj sounded solemn.

'But we never thought like that!' murmured Ravi, his head hung.

'Brother, you must accompany me to my new place of work. I will earn. You'll use my money for the needy. I have no desire to hoard. Once the period of my contract with the hospital is over, we shall return here and you'll lead me into the remote villages. My services shall be at your disposal,' Saroj declared. He sounded just like Bhuvan.

Bhuvan nodded, taking the assurance as something most natural, something expected.

'Now get ready for lunch. The butter is still fresh and frothy.' Bhuvan patted his younger brother on the back.



The Old Man and the Camel

The camel was the ship of the desert – Basu had read in his primary text book about eighty years ago. The book also contained an illustration of the animal which fascinated him even though he was not sure whether its wonderful hunch deserved pity or reverence.

He longed to see a camel. Once an illustrious Baba happened to camp in the bazaar a few miles away from his village. The Baba's party was comprised of nearly a hundred human beings who never tired of chanting holy phrases, a dozen of cows who never tired of giving milk and, for some mysterious reason, a bonny camel.

The young Basu was then down with fever, consequent to his devoting a long Sunday noon to diving in the muddy waters of the river. He could not accompany his pals who went out in their best clothes to gaze at the Baba and the camel. On their return from the bazaar the boys, their status gone higher because of their first-hand knowledge of the rare animal, had fantastic tales to tell.

One of them asserted that the camel could change its colour like a chameleon, another that its hump spread a wonderful aroma all around for it contained a large quantity of musk-like stuff.

It had taken Basu more than a year to realise that his pals were spinning yarns.

He missed the camel for the second time, narrowly again, soon after coming over to the town for study. It was a pleasant evening and he had bought a ticket for a circus-show which promised a dancing camel, among other animals.

Basu was about to leave his lodge when, like a hunted boar, someone came

darting in and slumped into his bed, gasping for breath, and mopped his face with Basu's towel.

Fresh from the village, Basu was yet to learn the ways of the town. He stood blinking at the intruder.

"When they question you, say that you saw no stranger coming this way. If they find me out, say that I am your maternal uncle from the village, suffering from asthma," whispered the man as he sprawled on the bed.

"Maternal uncle – suffering from asthma?"

"Why? What is wrong with a maternal uncle suffering from asthma?" Hardly a minute had passed when the policemen, panting and sweating, arrived there and asked him if anyone had taken shelter in his house.

"Shelter? Yes," answered Basu, still in half a mind to give away his strange unwelcome guest. But he was surprised to hear himself echoing the guest's advice: "My maternal uncle from the village, suffering from asthma."

Once the policemen were gone, the intruder sprang up to his feet. His face was beaming with the thrill of hitting a jackpot.

"You are clever indeed! The way you bamboozled them! Had you straightaway said that there was nobody inside, they might have looked in. You deserve to be rewarded. Come with me."

"But I desire no reward. It's time I go to the circus," Basu said, anxious to get rid of the stranger.

The man laughed. Basu had never known a laugh to be that meaningful and overwhelming. His embarrassment soon gave way to the realisation that there were far greater things to do than enjoy acrobatics beasts and men.

Before long his small thatched lodge became the regular haunt of the revolutionaries. Basu felt delighted and truly rewarded. In due course his den was raided and he was hounded out. But such was the modus operandi of the group that the police found it impossible to muster enough evidence to secure conviction for him.

Free, Basu worked for his cause with a vengeance – organizing secret societies in the name of clubs or gymnasia and spreading the message of an armed upsurge to secure the country's freedom. A marriage arranged by his parents and even the birth of a son did not deter him from his mission, until at last he and his compatriots were rounded up in a midnight swoop. Their conspiracy to launch a rebellion with the help of a section of the army was smashed and they got transportation – imprisonment in the Andamans.

It was in his despair and desolation in jail that the camel returned to his memory. And when a jail mate narrated to him how the camel never showed any sign of protest against being mercilessly overloaded except through sighing and shedding quiet tears, Basu had to make an effort to check his own tears.

Years later he returned to India, a ghost of himself. Lack of food and sanitation and subjection to torture had crippled him; he had grown pessimistic about the success of an armed revolution. His parents as well as his wife – he had had hardly any opportunity to know the latter properly – had died. He felt somewhat bewildered with the new generation of politicians and their approach to the issue of freedom.

One thing, however, that brought him joy was the fact that his only child had joined the freedom struggle. But if the joy itself was not short-lived, its intensity was, for, he could not appreciate the young patriot's philosophy for freedom struggle.

“How dare you say that violence was unnecessary? As long as violence is a fact of nature, your professing non-violence will mean foolishness at the best and hypocrisy at the worst,” he had observed, throwing a mild challenge to his son.

“We must face our enemy with love,” answered the astute budding leader.

Basu was struck by the young man's epigram and his glibness, but was not convinced.

“I'm afraid, your policy will only give a boost to those who are scared of force. It'll give innumerable cowards a chance to vaunt their pseudo-patriotism. I tell you, Mother India can't be appeased with counterfeit offerings, but only with the heroic sacrifice of the best of her sons,” Basu had insisted.

Times had changed. There were few to appreciate Basu's sentiments. He remained withdrawn. Often he thought of undertaking a tour of the country, partly to see if there were still some people here and there who believed in an armed revolution, and partly to spend time. The certainty of meeting camels galore in Rajasthan too was an impetus, however minor. But his physical condition stood in the way.

Time passed fast and his son was growing more and more famous. People often told him that he ought to feel proud of his son. Basu tried to rise to the occasion and feel so.

But, in a public meeting celebrating independence, he could not help giving vent to his anguish. He claimed that the barbaric communal violence and the division of the country were the results of a nationwide cowardice that had been nurtured in the name of non-violence.

“You pretended to be non-violent without attaining an iota of the spiritual equanimity necessary to realise it. No wonder that the Satan of violence who was laughing up his sleeve all the while should strike at the right moment to make you the laughing-stock of history.”

The leaders on the dais including his son – the would-be ministers – were awfully embarrassed. Never again was Basu called to address any public meeting.

His son became a deputy minister and in due course, a minister. Basu found

himself cast into the comfort of a spacious room with bath attached. Outside the room he remained forgotten though.

At times, lost in his reverie, he thought that he was in his cell in the Andamans, but he succeeded in shaking himself out of such hallucinations.

He was remembered with a bang on the occasion of the completion of a quarter-century of the country's freedom. He was led to a well-decorated dais and amidst applause, presented with a bronze plaque. He had not only refused to accept any monthly allowance, it seems he had not even been able to comprehend the proposition that he were to be paid for his sacrifices for the freedom of his motherland.

It was on that happy occasion that something slightly awkward was detected: he was growing eccentric. The smart young officer to detect the fact was his son's secretary. After receiving the plaque, he was heard murmuring, "But I thought they had brought me here to show me the camel!"

When the minister was reported of this, he remarked with a sigh, "Indeed, I have not been able to look after my father just as he had no time to look after me."

"Yes, Sir, and both for the sake of the country," commented the alert secretary.

Basu was forgotten again. He spent most of his time dozing and making his little grandson tell him fairy tales. From time to time he made the boy show him coloured pictures of the camel.

A demonstration was going on before the minister's bungalow. The squatters showed their distress by fasting for half-days at a stretch in groups. They spent such grim times playing card games or gossiping. Once in a while they raised lusty slogans hailing their own prowess and wishing death for the powers that be.

"What do they want?" Basu who had come out to the balcony asked his son. "Arise in their salary." "Why don't you give them?"

"Father, they get enough," replied the minister.

"Why do they want, then?" asked Basu.

The minister coughed.

"Let me go and talk to them," Basu proposed suddenly, groping his way with his walking stick.

"Please, father, don't bother about it. I'm going to tackle the situation. Leave it to me."

"Leave it to you? To you?" Basu shouted in disgust.

He began descending the staircase. An orderly hurtled down to help him, but the minister signed him to keep off.

Basu took almost five minutes to reach the ground floor. Suddenly his grandson came running and took hold of his hand and announced, "Grandpa, there are camels galore – camping in the valley. Won't you like to see?"

“Camels galore? I must see them. But...”

“They would be gone if you delay, Grandpa!” the boy tugged the old man’s stick.

They went out through the rear door and were driven to the river-bank. It took them half an hour. “At last, at last!” muttered the excited Basu again and again on his way.

A serene evening was setting in over the hills, a mile or two away, when the car stopped near the bridge.

“There passes the caravan!” exclaimed the boy as he stood holding his grandfather’s hand.

“Where?” asked Basu, his look flitting in every direction.

“There! Of course you don’t expect to see them clearly! Your eyes are not that good!”

“Yes, yes, I think I can see them.” The old man, all agog, was straining his eyes.

“Good. Now let’s go away,” proposed the boy.

“Go away? Why? I must see them from close quarters. They ought to be wonderful.”

“No, Grandpa, let’s go away,” insisted the boy.

Basu did not budge. He was intently looking into the light fog thinly veiling the small valley. Five minutes passed.

Slowly he turned to his grandson. “Where are camels? You were lying to me!”

He sounded ominous. The child had never known that kind of voice of his dear old pal.

“Speak out, you little wretch!” Basu screamed.

The child was on the verge of tears.

“Father gave me this and asked me to lead you out of home under the pretext of showing camels,” confessed the child, bringing out a slab of chocolate from his pocket.

“What!” burst out Basu. “I don’t mind being deceived with a plaque, for I am past. But must you lend yourself to be deceived with a chocolate – you?”

The boy was visibly frightened. He broke down.

“I don’t mind your weeping,” said Basu, himself breaking down, but hugging his grandson.

They sat down and kept sitting for long, unmindful of the chauffeur’s mild reminder that it was growing dark.



The Kite

“No halt!” shouted the havildar, making an effort to sound like a sudden crash of thunder.

Kunja took away his eyes, lazily, from the top of the palm tree and before resuming his march, tossed a pinch of smile at the alert watch.

The havildar was obliged to return at least half of the smile, for Kunja was held in a sort of affection by the jail staff. During his seven long years as a prisoner, he had neither broken a rule, nor had ever been discourteous to any of the presiding deities of law, small or big, beginning from the wardens to the Jailor Sahib.

Kunja marched on, keeping pace with the others. But he could not help straining his neck and looking back at the tree, again and again.

It was one of those desolate trees in the town condemned to stand where they did not belong, leaves pale and remorsefully drooping. But its top branch sported a rare trophy – a kite. Not one of those red or yellow spooky effeminate city stuffs. It was large and square and had an impressive tail. Must have escaped from some village in the suburbs.

Kunja had stopped once again at the turn of the road, before the tree had disappeared from his view.

“Walk straight, dear!” yelled the havildar and planted a spank on his bottom, a sign of authority diluted with kindness. A protest, hence, would be uncalled for. That the prisoners were led to their place of labour and back without handcuffs was proof enough of the benevolent trust the guardians had reposed in them. Kunja, like any other prisoner of his rank, knew how sacrilegious it was to rupture the thin veneer of that benevolence.

Kunja could not sleep a wink at night. He was tormented by nostalgia, of the phantom memory of many a kite.

In his not-too-small village he was the king over the art of kite-flyers. To earn that status one had to achieve mastery, simultaneously, in the other art of playing truant. But that had been relatively easy. He had lost his father. There was none to spy on his movements or to take him to task.

He would run for miles, holding on to the line of his kite, along the vast solitude of marshlands at noon, sometimes alone, sometimes followed and applauded by kids from the nearby villages or the cowherd boys.

He had once been taken up by the dream of flying a grand kite to crown all the kites the sky over the region had ever known. He had had to stomach the sting of a scorpion while exploring the heavy wooden box of his mother that lay in the darkest nook of the house. The few small coins he found were not enough and he had to borrow some from an admirer. Equipped with half-a-rupee, he visited the weekly market seven miles away and bought some quality thread, thick but strong. He explored several clusters of bamboos to find the right material for making a light but lasting frame. He massaged the legs of the wife of the Mahajan – the money-lender-cum village chief – for full two hours to earn a few ounces of flour with which to make a cementing paste. He bribed her eleventh and youngest child with four bunches of cane berries, spread over four days, in order to get four old sheets of a weekly newspaper.

Out of his fortnight's endeavour had emerged the giant kite, a palm-leaf contraption duly attached to it to sound like a siren.

At last, surrounded by a host of enthralled boys and girls, he had launched into the sky this symbol of his aspiration.

Raising a vibrant roar and majestically swinging its tail, the kite shot up higher and higher. Kunja heard in that roar the secret song of his still throbbing but triumphant heart. In that resounding ascent of his creation he was thrilled to feel his own incarnation.

He had remained lost in that wonder, in the thrill of taming it, for long, manipulating the rope and controlling its audacious vaults under the clouds.

Time passed as smoothly as the swift breeze on the river-bank and Kunja just did not know when twilight had overtaken the meadow. While managing the kite that still basked in the golden beam which the landscape below had already forfeited, he ran into a herd of buffaloes. He swung to a side and slackened his grip of the line. The wind had subsided and the kite was expected to make its slowly descending. But the course of a kite worth the name is necessarily unpredictable. It suddenly dived into the banyan tree inside the Mahajan's compound and its tail got entangled in a top branch. It stopped buzzing abruptly.

Kunja dashed into the well-protected compound of the Mahajan. He was followed by a dozen kids, romping and shouting.

The Mahajan chased them, screaming and gesticulating, for they had unwittingly trampled a forbidden plot of his land nurturing opium saplings.

They were driven out and Kunja forfeited his valuable thread.

They stood, helpless and glum, outside the forbidden ground, looking vacantly at the shackled and tormented kite, till it was dark.

And it was only till his face could not be seen by others that Kunja had been able to keep his tears under check.

However, soon he dried his tears with the heat of a new resolution.

It was a mildly moonlit midnight when he stole into the Mahajan's compound. He climbed the tree with great caution.

But the Mahajan's dog smelled the big rat all right. Kunja had no knowledge of its master's insomnia. Handling a large torchlight in one hand and his muzzle-loader in the other, the Mahajan followed the leadership of his dog.

Vigorously swinging the stump of its lost tail, the dog jumped and barked ferociously. Behind him leaped the Mahajan. In that impromptu performance under the tree, the man was soon joined by his servants. A number of villagers were attracted to the spot before long.

"It's sheer anarchy!" shouted the gasping Mahajan. All agreed with his observation. Kunja climbed down slowly. He was immediately tied to the tree with a string of extra-thick rope.

"I shoot!" announced the Mahajan and he raised his muzzle-loader while looking askance at the gathering. All stood hushed.

Looking wild and shrieking Kunja's mother came rushing upon the scene. She threw herself at the Mahajan's feet and wailed out her hundred apologies. Kunja was set free.

But not his kite. It continued to flutter and struggle on the banyan tree for days together. From a distance children looked on with despair as it was more and more battered day by day.

Then came the rains. It was seen no more.

Neither was Kunja seen flying kites any longer. Next year he went over to the town and enrolled himself as a labourer in a factory. He visited his village only once or twice a year, but he came with a soap in a plastic case with which he bathed in the river. He now wore sandals; his friends, naturally, did not expect him to fly kites.

One day news reached Kunja that his mother had been abused and beaten up by the Mahajan. She had a small piece of land adjacent to the Mahajan's which she had once promised to sell him. But she had second thoughts since Kunja began to earn. The incensed village tyrant had punished her.

In the meantime the country had achieved independence. The village had a Panchayat constituted of a number of people noted for their big and bright conscience. The Mahajan had lost all his teeth and he limped because of filarial legs. But, obviously, his nature stubbornly resisted any alteration.

Kunja reached home at noon. He proceeded to bathe in the river as usual. On the way he heard from a couple of villagers the details of his mother's humiliation – how she was dragged by her miserable lock of thinning white hair, whipped and almost disrobed when she collapsed.

On the river-bank stood the old temple of Shiva. The Panchayat was then in session in its precincts, discussing the incident involving Kunja's mother and the Mahajan.

Kunja bathed leisurely and then walked towards the temple. The crown of the temple had lately tumbled down. The iron trident, the sacred weapon of the Lord that used to adorn the top, lay near the entrance. Kunja picked it up casually as he entered the Mandapam.

The Mahajan was then haranguing the small audience. Kunja stopped behind him and without a word brought down the trident on his head.

One of the respectable members of the Panchayat swooned away while the others sat thunderstruck.

Kunja went home, ate his lunch answering as briefly as possible the numerous fond queries from his mother and relaxed.

The police arrived after two hours and Kunja let himself be arrested.

It was during the trial that Kunja heard from the witnesses what the Mahajan had said before toppling under the trident: "The Lord here knows that I had neither abused nor beaten up Kunja's mother. If I had, His wrath will smash my cranium to smithereens!"

Some of the witnesses naively asserted in the court that the Lord had no other go. He had to accept this brazen-faced challenge! Kunja was a mere instrument, innocent and neutral.

But the court refused to take cognizance of the factor of Lord's authorship of the killing. Kunja was sentenced to a long, rigorous imprisonment.

He borne the punishment well. He had been granted some remission on account of good conduct. Besides, there were holidays to be counted. He was to serve only a year more.

"You look sick, brother, we better request Jailor Sahib to spare you any task today," his prison-mates proposed in the morning. Kunja kept quiet.

It was a clouded twilight marked by erratic waves of cool breeze. They were returning from the second round of the day's work.

The kite still lingered atop of the desolate tree in the heart of the town. Kunja fell back. The havildar, his attention diverted to extracting a *bidi* from

a passer-by, had slackened his vigilance. On realising Kunja's default, he retraced his steps. Already resentful for failing to light the *bidi* in the face of the wind, he gave a strong push to Kunja.

A sudden gust set the kite free from the tree-top. It began to drift across a weird sky half red with an invisible sun and half dark with clouds.

Kunja started running, defying the surprised pedestrians, the shriek of the havildar and the chaos of the traffic.

His eyes were in the sky. The kite was tending to fall down – a slow and heart-rending fall.

Kunja, as though, was determined to forestall that fall. He ran with a vengeance. If the kite would merge in the horizon, he too would follow suit. The kite and himself – they were the only truths. The rest meant nothing.

Behind him was heard a surge of voices – of concern and rage and surprise – and frequent whistling of the police pursuing him, soon to be joined by a jeep. Railroads separated the town from the country. Kunja crossed the rails, escaping an express train by a hair-breadth, throwing his pursuers into a hapless detention.

The red in the sky was fast fading under the dusk. A furlong away from the railroads were sleepy hamlets and thereafter a stretch of paddy fields. The sea was two miles away.

The kite disappeared, as if immersed in the horizon over the sea.

Kunja ran into the water. But his eyes were still wandering in the sky. He leaped over the waves. He was beginning to fly, he felt.

The police jeep stopped at the brink of the water. Two perplexed fishermen pointed their fingers into the sea – into the mysteries of the vast fog and the grandeur of the roars.

The young Superintendent of Police raised his gun.

“If shoot you must, Sir, then please point the barrel upward,” mumbled the havildar, pleadingly.

There were flashes of lightning in the horizon. Thunderclaps followed. The sea began to appear dark and dangerous.

Suddenly the Jailor and the Superintendent of Police began to feel small, for no reason whatever. As though the lightning, the thunder, the laughter of the wind and the sea's roar were the kith and kin of Kunja who gave them the slip.



The Love Letter

Over that cosy little town in the northern valley the moon looked like a municipal property – as though all that was necessary to shift it to another site or to switch it off was a resolution passed by the city fathers.

While enjoying a stroll on the spacious terrace of the mansion of the Chowdhuries, Gautam was trying to figure out the right position for the moon if it were to prove aesthetically most effective. A research scholar on art-related topics though, he was primarily an artist. The urge for putting an object in the correct perspective came to him instinctively.

It was in pursuit of a variation of the same inspiration that he was here – to evaluate, in the context of her time and life, the genius of Miss Gita, who dazzled the connoisseurs by her sudden appearance in the firmament of contemporary art and then gave a stunning blow to them by dying in the exciting prime of her youth.

Gita had spent more than a year in an apartment of this mansion. Most of her last works – lately exhibited in the West with great success – had been conceived and painted here. The two rooms she occupied – with all her books, notebooks, drawings incomplete or abandoned, and the original sketches for some of her now famous works – had been so long kept under locks by Pran Chowdhury, the elderly scion of this feudal house, friends of Gita's for two generations.

Pran Chowdhury knew about Gautam's dedication and ability. Also he had no doubt about Gautam's respect for Gita and the latter's trust in him. Chowdhury had graciously handed over to him the keys of those sanctimoniously preserved rooms.

Someone was climbing the stairs. Gautam looked at the attic.

“Hello!” Gautam welcomed the most promising young vocalist of the town.

The musician spoke effusively of the recent writings of Gautam. But when Gautam began returning the compliment by praising his recitals, he grew fidgety. Gautam suspected that it was not praise in return, but something more purposeful that the musician desired of him.

“Is it true that you have discovered a letter in Miss Gita’s papers?” he asked nervously.

“Hundreds. She had numerous friends and admirers, you know!”

“I mean the letter she had written – but had not despatched – and you have not yet been able to find out for whom it was meant. . .”

Gautam gave a start. “Oh yes, rather a private letter ...”

“A love letter. You may pass that on to me!” said the vocalist, swiftly taking his look off Gautam and trying to find a retreat for it in the moon.

“Why?” Gautam did not sound any accommodative.

The musician suddenly began burbling at the speed of a burst dam:

“I can tell you in confidence that her love for my music had led her to set her heart upon me. She would sit gazing at me for long, entranced. Oh that look of hers! I understood all right, but kept aloof, never dreaming that she would write a letter to make me understand! Please, Gautamji, pass that on to me. That will be the most cherished souvenir in my life. God will bless you. I entreat you – and am willing to touch your feet. . .”

He hobbled forward.

“Stop!” Gautam shouted, stepping back. “The question of handing over the letter to you will arise only when I am satisfied, in the course of my investigation, that the letter was indeed meant for you.”

The musician seemed to be on the verge of crying. “You don’t believe me!” he muttered plaintively. “O, how to say it? Only if you knew how much fascinated she had been with me, the passion with which she used to enjoy my singing and gaze at me!”

Gautam gave an unobserved start once again. Gita’s gaze! That was surely the most unforgettable experience he himself had ever had! The revelation that this young man shared the thrill which he had taken to be exclusively his stiffened him.

“Will you please leave me alone?” Gautam sounded rude.

The vocalist, his head hung, faltered towards the attic.

Gautam had already been dismayed at noon, at Professor Dhar’s. He could not help feeling bitter now.

Professor Dhar, clever and a windbag with a style, taught Italian to Gita.

“This is only for your information, Gautam! I had an inkling of her attitude

towards me the evening I taught her the Italian equivalent of 'I love you!' You know, Gautam – who does not know – that I had been blessed or cursed with many a love. But I had never known that stealing glances at a girl blush could be so very poignant!"

The professor had continued after an impressive pause, "I don't really understand why, if at all she wrote a letter to me, she did not hand it over to me! No, Gautam, I am not prepared to pardon her. Well, well, if it is so ordained that I must receive it from you. . . "

"No, Sir, it does not seem to be so ordained at the moment. The letter is an indispensable item in my research." Gautam cut the professor's cackle.

"That's all right." Dhar was adept at stomaching an insult and feigning total innocence of it. "You know my respect for research. Who does not know? I won't mind even your mentioning my name in your thesis in connection with Gita's love letter. I deemed it my duty to provide you with the fact, for sake of objectivity."

"Thanks. I will wait for a time when you being the addressee of the letter in question will no longer remain your surmise, but emerge as fact."

"Right." Professor Dhar agreed with a loud snort.

Gautam passed some time on the terrace after the vocalist's departure. He was, of course, thinking of Gita.

He knew her well, but knew her as a formidable riddle. Leave aside her genius. Her sprightly physique, sparkling smiles, eyes that never stopped being pleasantly surprised at the world, combined with scintillating speech appeared to have been designed for some epic adventure or conquest in love. But despite a thorough probe into her diary that abounded in records of travel, interviews, encounters and reflections on art, Gautam had not succeeded in tracing a line that would speak of her special inclination towards any of her eligible acquaintances.

Gautam continued to be astonished and fascinated by her – rather more after her death.

It was midnight. Gautam had just gone over to his bed when he heard a knock on the door. "Gautam!" called out a strained voice.

"Come in, Sir!"

Gautam was at the door in a bound. There was nothing unusual in Pran Chowdhury returning home drunk at that hour, always looking a bit guilty, but he had never disturbed Gautam earlier.

But the Chowdhury was not his usual drunken self. He was smiling in spasms.

"Sit down, Sir," Gautam showed him into a chair.

Pran Chowdhury slumped into it. He closed his eyes and let five minutes pass.

"Who allowed you to make public the letter Gita had written to me?" he challenged, fluttering open his eyes.

“Sir? To you?” Gautam almost jumped out of his skin.

“To who else?” demanded Pran Chowdhury haughtily. “Don’t you have common sense? Why should she refrain from posting the letter had it been for someone else? Was she not waiting for a chance to hand it over to me personally? The chance never came though!”

Minutes passed in silence. “I was under the impression that she knew nothing of my love for her. How mistaken I was! She was so clever!” Pran Chowdhury mumbled as if out of a reverie and fell silent again. His well-groomed hair thinning rapidly, his greyish moustache, and his most unexpected statement inspired more sympathy and an awkward surprise than any annoyance in Gautam. Chowdhury’s eyes, always bleary at night, glittered with the discovery that Gita loved him.

Gautam for a moment wished that Gita had really written a letter to the gentleman!

Pran Chowdhury stood up. “Surrender the letter to me – or I’ll shoot you dead!” he yelled and brought out his pistol while trying hard to keep together his head and legs and hands that seemed anxious to reject one another.

Gautam knew it to be a deadly weapon.

“Letter?” Gautam asked feigning innocence.

“Yes, the love letter. She had written to me. Do you need witnesses? I can summon a hundred.” The Chowdhury’s words jumped in different directions. “Motia! Habul!” He shouted amidst obstinate coughs.

Motia and Habul were not there and that gave Gautam the creeps.

Pran Chowdhury held his pistol with both his hands and tried to steady it on any one limb of Gautam, demanding as if in utter helplessness again and again, “Who are you to appropriate the letter – my property?”

Gautam drew out a scrap of paper and held it before Chowdhury. At once Chowdhury dropped the pistol on the floor and grabbed at it. He then sat down and read aloud the message with stress on every syllable: “It is not correct to say that the monkey is the forefather of man.”

“Ah!” Chowdhury licked his lips and goggled, absorbing the idea. Gautam remembered that the paper had come to his table as a wrapper from the bazar.

“Although there seems to be no doubt about the fact that our remote forefathers bore a wee bit of a tail below their spines. . .”

“Ah, wee bit of a tail, a tail!” Chowdhury muttered pressing the paper to his bosom. His eyes swelled and grew moist with feeling.

“Gautam! This is mine. What more do I have in life or do I care to have?” he asked in the accent of a philosopher.

Gautam had by then kicked the pistol into a dark nook under his cot.

“Chowdhury Sahib, you were Gita’s father’s friend. How can you think of Gita ever writing a love letter to you?” he asked.

“You intend passing it on to somebody else, eh? I will never part with it, I tell you,” Chowdhury spoke like a child threatened with a forfeiture of his lollipop.

He lighted a match-stick and set the paper on fire, his face glowing with jealousy. He dropped the burning paper on the floor when the fire touched his fingers. He forgot about his pistol and toddled out of the room.

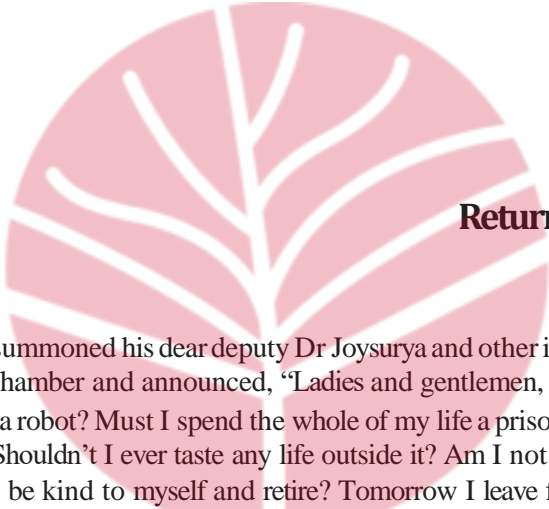
Gautam switched off the light. But a patch of moonlight fell on the ashes of the paper.

Gautam took these ashes in his slightly shaking hands. For a moment he forgot that they were the remains of an irrelevant scrap. He even forgot that he had never discovered any love letter. It was a weird inspiration that had led him to whisper the lively lie to a group of pals over tea in the restaurant. Possessed by a strange urge, he intended throwing a hint at his listeners on a more congenial occasion that Gita had addressed the letter to none other than himself!

Of course, before long he had begun feeling embarrassed of his craziness.

“Thank God, it is over!” he muttered to himself as he offered the ashes to the moonlight and breeze outside the window.





Return of the Native

Dr Saha summoned his dear deputy Dr Joysurya and other important assistants to his chamber and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, what do you think of me? Am I a robot? Must I spend the whole of my life a prisoner in this blessed institution? Shouldn’t I ever taste any life outside it? Am I not already eighty-one? Should I not be kind to myself and retire? Tomorrow I leave for my native town. Take due care of the institution. Am I clear?”

After a spell of stunning silence, the assistants and disciples began protesting. But despite all their entreaties Dr Saha left for Uttampur the very next day early in the morning. He prohibited any farewell function.

Famous all over the world today with hundreds of indisputable lunatics in its custody, the Oriental Hospital of Mental Maladies was Dr Saha’s baby. He had devoted half a century of his distinguished career to it. Apart from going to participate – that too rarely – in international seminars on his subject, he considered absenting himself from his institution a sin.

Soon the citizens of Uttampur organised a grand reception in his honour. The State’s Minister in charge of Food, Drink, Fishery and Farming, Nabghan Das, presided over the function and appealed to the poets of our land, in a tone electrified with emotion, to compose lyrics acclaiming the benefits of psychosomatic treatment. Banging on the table thrice, he prophesied that a day would dawn when Dr. Saha’s bust would adorn every public park from Uttampur to Honolulu.

Dr Saha was delighted. Having spent all his years in an abnormal atmosphere, he did not know, he informed himself, that the people of the wide world were so

kind, loving and that their love, overflowing their hearts, could so smoothly spill out of their throats.

A local revolutionary leader, Comrade Lambodar, congratulated Dr Saha “on behalf of the masses and multitudes” and soon raising his voice to a pitch where it cracked at every alternate phrase, creating a sort of paranormal effect, asserted that a government that did not respect the “mad-doctors” was as mad as a drunken monkey.

Dr Saha continued to be delighted, though many of the similes and metaphors used by the speakers intrigued him.

At first he could not decide what should be the theme of his reply to the welcome address. Should he speak a few words on his recent research on somatopsychosis? For, the lovely ladies who occupied the front row moved their hands and other limbs with such care, caution and calculation that they seemed to be under the illusion that they were made of brittle glass – a clear symptom of somatopsychosis.

But no, better he speak in a general way and offer his services to the community.

After thanking his admirers and the audience, Dr Saha said, “Dear ladies and gentlemen, most of you are sure to have a wee bit of abnormality in some part of your consciousness. Paradoxical though it may sound, the abnormal is quite normal. But there is no reason why you should not get rid of it now that this humble servant is at your disposal. I have never been idle. I cannot be so now. You are welcome to visit me between 9 a.m. and 12 noon every day. Needless to say, the service is free. Let those who bear the heavy burdens of the society – the Ministers, the Members of Parliament and Legislature, Secretaries, Principals and Professors, doctors – come first.”

A week’s idle rest and chattering of old friends had begun to tell on him. Now he could pass his time with the satisfaction that he was contributing to the soundness of his native little society. He felt happy.

By 8.45 the next morning he was ready to welcome any visitor. But time ticked away; nobody showed up. Even those friends, who flocked around him regularly and burst into peals of laughter listening to his anecdotes about the strange and funny behaviour of his patients, did not show up.

Days passed; Dr Saha’s dream of being useful to his native folks faded fast.

But he must pass time somewhat meaningfully. In response to a formal invitation, he went out one evening to attend a debate organised by the University Union. The happy organisers put up an extra seat for him on the rostrum itself and the thankful Dr. Saha sat pricking his ears.

The Union had invited Mr. Nabghan Das, the Minister for Food, Drink, Fishery and Farming, and two Opposition leaders, to debate on the food situation in the State. The Opposition leaders, one with fire in his eyes and the other with

tears, accused the Minister of criminal negligence in handling the threatened famine in several districts. Each time they raised their fists at the Minister (at which there were cheers) who sat chewing pan, apparently as unaffected by the attacks as a ruminating bull on the road was by the hooting of vehicles, Dr Saha felt a shock, for the Minister's late lamented father had been his class-mate. What an anguish the poor boy must be undergoing!

He leaned forward – and leaning forward for him meant getting thoroughly hooked up to the object of his interest – when the dear Minister stood up for replying to the criticisms.

The Minister on whose face was printed the irrevocable resolution for looking kind, come what may, spent a long time caressing and testing the microphone, coughing sweetly and straightening the sleeves of his Chapkan. Then gushed forth his tirade against the earlier speakers. Not only did he disprove the contention that a famine was looming large anywhere in the visible horizons but also proved that it was an affluent society we lived in and that those who thought otherwise were the victims of jaundice or were mental cases who should immediately consult Dr Saha whose advice was available gratis!

The Minister's humour was applauded. The absolute confidence with which he pooh-poohed all that had been said by the opposition took away Dr. Saha's breath.

As soon as the meeting was over, Dr Saha tried to see the Minister. But by the time he could free himself from some autograph-hunters, the Minister had clean disappeared from the scene.

Dr Saha could not stop feeling concerned about his dear departed friend's son. Back at home, he lost no time in trying to contact him over the telephone. But the Minister was still away, fulfilling his umpteenth engagement for the day. Since it was a call from the venerable Dr Saha, the receiver was handed over to the Minister's wife.

“So, you are Nabghan's wife, are you? Good. You are the right person to share my apprehension. You see, I suspect that our dear Nabghan had developed symptoms of acatamathesia...”

“What? A disease? I'm dead. Will you kindly elaborate?”

“Nothing to worry, my child. Acatamathesia is only an inability to properly comprehend a perceived situation or object. That's all. For example, you know, as everyone else knows, that there is severe drought in several districts resulting in untold misery for the poor folks. I have heard reliable reports to this effect from people who have recently visited those affected areas. But our Nabghan thinks that nothing of that sort could ever happen. Now, this is a psychological...hello, hello, hello...”

Dr Saha could overhear some conversation at the other end. Someone was

telling the Minister's wife: "It must be that loafer from the weekly *Bombshell*, impersonating Dr Saha, just for fun."

"Hello, hello," Dr Saha continued to shout.

"Why don't you catch that disease yourself, gentleman!" The Minister's wife retorted and slammed down the receiver. Frustrated, Dr Saha fell back into his easy-chair.

Minutes later a young man was announced to him.

"Hello, Arun, what brings you here? When are you leaving for Zurich?" Dr Saha sat up straight.

Arun, the young doctor, had worked under Dr Saha for a short period and had earned the doyen's admiration. He aspired to go abroad for higher studies. But he had missed the Government stipend for a superfluous technicality. He had recently married a millionaire's daughter – an only child – and had hoped to be helped by his father-in-law in fulfilling his ambition. But the millionaire had flatly refused to oblige him. The veteran merchant had once been cured of his hypertension by Dr Saha and Arun hoped that if the celebrity spoke to him, he would change his mind. The millionaire had come to Uttampur on business. So Arun had come rushing to Dr. Saha.

"Surely, Arun, I'll surely persuade your father-in-law to meet your expenses. I see no reason why I should not succeed."

Arun bade good-night and left. The doctor was preparing to retire to bed when the telephone rang.

"Dr Saha here."

"Good-morning, I mean Good evening. It is I."

"I?"

"Sorry, it is Hon'ble – sorry – it is your most obedient servant Minister Nabghan speaking, Sir."

"How sweet of you! I wanted to..."

"Wanted to talk to me, I know. In fact, I know everything. Ha ha! And you wanted to say something about a disease, didn't you?"

"Nothing serious, but I think..."

"I Know, in fact, I know everything. At first my wife thought somebody else was teasing her. But when I told her it could be you because we could not exchange ideas at that function, she got a novel idea. Very clever. Ha ha, very. Hello, is there anyone else there? Say, a reporter or a thing like that?"

"None."

"Understand? She got a novel idea. Now she says that it is because of that disease that I'm so callous in my attitude towards her – I don't pay any heed to her problems – don't meet her demands, etc. etc. Understand? Hello!"

"I see, but I..."

“Hello! If at all I am negligent towards her, is it not for the sake of my country, my people, my...”

“I understand, Nabghan, but I only...”

“I know. In fact, I know everything. You are new to this world. Almost a baby. From my fearless rebuff to those hyenas in that University debate you concluded that I had developed callousness towards the crisis. You are wrong. Understand? Wrong. One had to be brave in one’s statements on a public platform. That is politics. Understand? Politics. But rest assured, my government is taking such steps which will choke ten famines to death! You were my heaven-gone father’s pal. How can I lie to you?”

“Well...”

“Yes, all is well. You had lived all your life in a different world. Excuse me, I am always blunt, fearless, bold, daring, etc. This is my weakness, ha ha! Yes – you will need a lot of time to understand this normal world of ours, see!”

“I see!”

“My wife has gone to bed. Hello, asleep. Will you please ring her up tomorrow and say that what she thought earlier was correct? That is to say, it must have been that loafer from the weekly *Bombshell* who was teasing her using your name? O.K.? Please do this much favour to me. Can I do anything for you?”

“Thank you, Nabghan, it is rather late. You too should go to bed.”

“I know, in fact, I know every...”

“Goodnight!”

Early in the morning Dr. Saha drove to Arun’s father-in-law’s lodge. He was warmly received. Briefly introducing the purpose of his visit, he said, “It is not a matter of any colossal expense, you see! To be counted only in thousands. Let Arun proceed to the Jung Institute in Switzerland.”

“To be counted in thousands!”

“But you have enough, haven’t you?”

“By the blessing of Goddess Lakshmi, I have my humble share in the world’s wealth, I should not deny.”

“So?”

“So, must I squander away the goddess’s gift?”

“Not squandering, spending. You have no one to inherit your property but your daughter! True?”

“True, Doctor Sahib, please bless her and her husband. And, pray to Almighty that I can see the face of a grandson at the earliest.”

Dr. Saha smiled affectionately. “To be frank, you have developed a disease!”

“A disease again?” the millionaire shrieked out his fear.

“In a way. It is called acquisitiveness.”

“O God, is it in the heart or liver or...”

“In the whole being, specially in head and heart.”

“Save me, Doctor Sahib, is it going to be painful?”

“The disease makes its victims crazy in acquiring and hoarding more and more money. One does so without rhyme or reason. You know full well who will inherit all your wealth when you are no more. Even then you won’t spend a part of it for them when they need it for a good cause.”

The millionaire looked at Dr. Saha, his eye-balls dancing in amusement. He giggled a little. “So, it is not a painless disease!” he heaved a sigh of relief.

“But a disease, nevertheless.”

“Ha!”

“But I can cure you with a little analysis and counsel.”

“Ha, ha, counsel! Oh, Doctor Sahib!”

“And you will know what great joy lies in spending money for worthy causes.”

“Ha, ha, ha, worthy causes. Oh Doctor Sahib!”

“No, I am not joking. Your disease certainly needs treatment!”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, treatment! Oh Doctor Sahib!”

“Er – well – do you really believe that there is nothing wrong in an irrational greed for hoarding money? Strange!”

“Ha, ha, ha, strange!”

“Well, I better make a move...”

“And, ha, ha, be pleased to drop in again, ha, ha, Doctor Sahib, ha, ha! Won’t you please let me serve you with a glass of *limbupani*?”

Dr. Saha faltered into his car, pale like a fading lily.

“Where do we go now, Sir?” asked the chauffeur, and he repeated his question thrice. There was no answer. So he drove slowly towards the lake, a favourite haunt of the doctor.

“Can’t we cover about three hundred miles before the nightfall?” Dr. Saha asked, suddenly sitting up straight, while the breeze from the lake caressed his silver hair.

The chauffeur suppressed his surprise. “We can, Sir, but...”

“We can get all that is necessary on our way, can’t we? Please drive on. I have enough money in my purse.”

It was raining around the Oriental Hospital of Mental Maladies. Dr. Joysurya, its new director, tired of working till late in the evening, was about to close his chamber when he was taken aback at the sight of Dr. Saha emerging from his car.

“Good God!” Dr. Joysurya could not speak more while Dr. Saha warmly shook hands with him and embraced him.

“Let us make some coffee.” Dr. Saha pushed his pupil into his chamber.

Sprinkles of mild rain glittered on Dr. Saha’s beard like dust from a star. He sat down smiling.

“Keep it a secret, Surya,” he said in a low tone. “I’ve developed a doubt. It is about myself. After all, I spent all my life in an atmosphere of abnormalcy, didn’t I? Consequently, I’m afraid, I have developed a bit of what you can term as mental acroaesthesia. Like acroaesthesia causing increased sensitivity in the limbs, my malady has brought an aggravation in the sensitivity of my perceptual faculties. People in the world are perhaps living their life and carrying on their business all right. But I see one malady or another in practically everybody and everything!”

Dr. Saha wiped his face with a hanky, “I have come back, Surya, to place myself under your observation for a while,” he said entreatingly. “All right? But keep it a secret!” He smiled sadly.

Dr. Joysurya vigorously stirred the coffee as he struggled with two obstinate drops of tear.





A Letter from the Last Spring

To the farthest west of the metropolis, the new colony breathed calm and shone forth elegance, with mansions of sky tint or biscuit hue, a few of them as polished and enticing as grapes. The two-storied hut-shaped house that stood at the quiet end of the colony looked like a nest in a teeming wood amid creepers of affluent growth.

And like an infant bird peeping from the nest, from the balcony of the upper floor a little girl, within a riot of flowers and crotons, looked enchanted, towards the end of the long, rolling road.

Vehicles of varying trims sped along the road. Drumming and fluting and trailing a flutter of leaflets, a cart covered with colourful film posters passed by the road. At office hours, a young man and a young lady, both cyclists, made such an interesting sight that the watchman of the house, who otherwise seemed to be smoothly tossing about on the tides of time just sitting on a stool and patting his stout moustache, coughed a little; often a juvenile vagabond whistled meaningfully. Also appeared on the road, assuming a supernatural air, a tall, bearded man anxious to relieve people of their agonies and anxieties by means of love-charms and talismans.

But none of these succeeded in engaging the child's attention even for a moment.

I had formed the pleasant habit of looking at the little girl from my solitary apartment on the upper floor of a small hotel opposite her house. I had lately come to the city with a job in a private evening college, after I had retired as a professor under the Government. Much had I travelled in the realms of gold –

from Langland to Eliot. Now, except for correcting the notebooks of the students I had hardly any work to do once I was back in my hotel.

During the long idle hours of the day I had found a cocoon of rest for my eyes in that lonely little face across the road.

At times someone came to the balcony and induced her to go in. But she, as if under a spell, must stand there for at least a couple of hours in the morning and again for a similar length of time in the afternoon. Sometimes I felt the urge to observe her a bit closely, and so came out on my small balcony. In spite of the distance and my dimming sight, I saw, or rather felt, that the girl had big and beautiful but sad eyes.

But there were moments when she came out of her melancholy. Her smile suddenly sprinkled sunlight around her – when a tiny robin hopped towards her; or when a tame little monkey in the neighbourhood escaped from its chain and preferred her company from a respectable distance, while a cat bloated its tail in protest at the intruder.

But the spark was always short-lived. She relapsed into her gloom the moment her eyes fell on me. In my youth I used to act in plays as a comedian. My very appearance on the stage aroused mirth in the audience. I was, naturally, rather upset to see the little girl losing at my sight the meagre pleasure she got in the company of a robin or a monkey! Had age reduced my face to an awe-inspiring mask? I wondered.

She waited for the postman, who appeared at the distant turning a little before noon. When he came closer to her house, she leaned as far as possible over the railing and, in a voice marked by hope and apprehension, asked, “Is there a letter for me? My name is Rina.” The postman smiled and waved his hand, denoting “No”. Yet Rina continued looking on vacantly. Then she moved away slowly, I presume, with a sigh.

I did not know from whom she expected letters, or why she did not receive any. As she disappeared, I too walked back into my room.

This sequence of anxious expectations ending in a vacant look was repeated in the afternoon. She would come out once again and lean over the railing, to withdraw only when the postman, on his second round, would wave his hand negatively and cycle away. I also would turn back and prepare to leave for my college.

I had got into the habit of standing on the balcony and looking at the end of the road, when not at Rina, though I did not expect any letter, for my mail was delivered at the college. The habit grew out of my thirst for gazing at the little Rina. She too gradually felt more and more inclined to bestow her loving look upon me. At times I felt that she wanted to enquire something of me, but modesty forbade her to be so forthcoming. I felt

the delight of an inaudible exchange and knew that we had grown rather intimate with each other.

It was a summer noon and I was preparing for my usual nap when I heard a soft tapping on my door. I came out and was surprised to see the gigantic watchman of Rina's mansion standing before me. There was a smile on his face which made me aware of a character the whole of which was not represented by his defiant moustache. I led him into my room, and he handed me an open postal envelope, with Rina's name and address written on it.

I looked at the watchman but got nothing more than a fresh wave of reverential smile. I pulled the letter out of the envelope – a small blue scrap of paper. It was written from a distant sanatorium, obviously by Rina's mother. It read:

“My sweet little Rina,

“Only if you could read this letter by yourself, my having learnt to write would be rewarded. I understand that you are feeling very sorry for me. But the learned doctors say I won't have to stay here for long. And for the short time I have to be away from you, you must not, my sweet cherub, feel sad.

“You love flowers. I enclose a pair of rose petals from the lovely little garden just outside my window. The garden is all smiles with flowers today. I guess the spring is already here. This time you have to pluck flowers alone from small plants with your tiny hands. By the next spring you will be in my arms and pluck them from taller trees.

“I am always thinking of you and dreaming of you. I always look at your pictures. But I am disappointed to learn from your father's letter that because I am not there to dress you, you refuse to pose for new pictures. Please, my dear child, allow them to have a few snaps. I will love to see them as soon as possible. Then, every week I will write a letter to you. I wish I could write more. But you see, I am drained of all my strength.”

The date on the letter showed that it had been written three months ago. I knew that not even one of the eleven letters that should have reached Rina meanwhile did reach her.

I looked at the watchman's face. He was trying to avoid it being seen which, however, was too big to let his effort succeed. I had no difficulty in understanding that Rina would never get a second letter from her mother. The doctors had been right; the mother had not had to stay in the sanatorium for long.

Rina's father was rich. But all the diversions his wealth could provide had not succeeded in making his child forget to wait for the postman.

I had lost my own mother when I was a child. The traumatic memory of losing her and the momentary joys of getting her back in dreams – all this now passed like a lightning through my veins.

But I did not understand why the letter had been brought to me, and who had sent it. The watchman, checking his emotion, explained the matter: Rina had observed me waiting on my balcony, as she did on hers, day after day. She had realised that I, too, never received any letter from my mother. She felt deeply for me. But what could she do?

At last she knew the answer. She decided to offer me the only letter she had ever received from her mother. She assured me that the letter was now entirely mine and hoped that my anguish at not receiving a letter from my mother would be reduced!





Sunset over the Valley

Over the small valley the sun conducted itself like a newly wed young officer; it went home as soon as it struck four.

Brij Singh often felt jealous of the massive banyan trees atop the hill behind which the sun disappeared. The trees hid the sun, but basked in the sun's golden beams and looked pompous and puffed up. Brij Singh felt as if they misappropriated the warmth he needed so badly.

Brij Singh pulled the borders of his shawl to cover his legs and fixed his gaze on the day's last picnicking couple near the lake. The young lady who for her spotted *Saree* and swift gait reminded him of butterflies and her young man who somehow looked like an enormous frog in trousers were in no mood to take notice of his gaze. The froggy, after two abortive attempts, planted a clumsy kiss on the lady's cheek and then passed a hurried look on the surrounding with the fidgety eyes of a pick-pocket. He did not seem to think that Brij Singh's presence mattered any more than that of a boulder or a grazing bull.

Brij Singh spat on the ground. Ordinarily he did not mind the picnickers behaving as they wished. "Go to hell!" was all that he muttered when they appeared too frivolous or vulgar. His interest lay in the refreshments they brought: cakes, biscuits, fruits, cutlets and boiled eggs. Generally he received the left-over.

But he did not like the froggy kissing the lady. It was because he had begun to see in her his darling Sandhya.

"Why do you wag your tail there, you little monkey?" Brij Singh shouted at the naked boy, who had ambled close to the couple and looked like a blot on a charming picture. He was one of half a dozen urchins lately let loose on the small

valley. They ran about, bared their teeth, folded their hands and begged from the visitors. Often there was nothing left for the handicapped Brij Singh. He hated them.

The boy grinned and retreated. Brij Singh felt reassured that he was still capable of inspiring awe in some souls however insignificant. Once he was as notorious as a goonda as he was valued as an expert truck-driver. He had broken scores of limbs, himself emerging from the brawls and battles with nothing worse than a few bruises. Had not an accident damaged his legs and spine, reducing him almost to a paralytic, he would surely have used every day of the last forty years in ever-more exciting adventures.

The couple had stood up. Brij Singh felt like wailing out his protest. He did not wish Sandhya to leave so early.

Could she be really her Sandhya? Who else on earth could be so captivating revealing rainbows in smiles and moonlight in look all the while?

Soon he smiled at his own foolishness. If Sandhya were still alive, she too would be a sexagenarian like him.

Brij Singh surveyed himself with some disgust. People became incapacitated with age. So far as he was concerned he doubted if he would have ever grown aged unless first incapacitated. He had never been able to transcend his anguish, though it had mellowed over the years.

And over the years the once familiar faces had become blurred in his memory. His colleagues used to stop, when driving through the valley, and greet him. Ahmed, once his enemy, must have taken a detour and come to meet him at least twenty times during the first decade of his disability, every time with gifts of delicacies. They are all gone, he knew not when or how.

And Brij Singh remembered the young Harkishen, his protégé. The boy had learnt driving from him and used to look upon him as his guru. He too had met him twice or thrice with cash offerings.

“Come to live with me. I’ll treat you like my papa,” Harkishen used to say.

“Who knows if I won’t have to accept your offer one day when my hosts here will fail me?” used to be Brij Singh’s response. The truth was he preferred this solitude, this hiding from a lively world of which he once considered himself the indispensable hub!

Harkishen, however, did not last long. From Brij Singh he had learnt not only driving, but also dare-devilry. One evening he went out to teach a lesson to some of his rivals, and did not come back.

A long time had passed before Brij Singh heard of the tragedy. He roared in anger and writhed in agony and hurled ominous epithets, unused by him for years, at Harkishen’s killers. He flung the stones at hand in different directions.

Those living or working around the lake viewed him with alarm and

amusement. Even his hosts, who daily carried him to and fro were hesitant to come near him.

Years had rolled by. People had forgotten that last spurt of his passion. He was an old invalid: nobody remembered a thing more about him.

The little monkey of a boy who, at his outburst had moved away farther and farther, looking askance at him, amused Brij Singh. A mere shout snubbed the lad. What if the chap had chanced upon the valiant, the gallant Brij Singh of yore, the intrepid Brij Singh that always dared to dream the unattainable?

Brij Singh had dreamt of leading his life with Sandhya in a castle on a hill-top. True, a fortune was necessary to build a castle. But had he not also dreamt of hitting upon a hidden treasure in some mysterious cave that was packed to capacity with gold, sapphires, rubies, and diamonds?

Suddenly a hundred gleaming dishes filled with delicacies known and unknown flashed before his eyes. He was lolling on a divan in the inner quarters of his magnificent castle that stood atop the very hill in front of him.

He sported an elegant turban with a glittering object. What was that? Of course a diamond – he recognised with a nod.

And beside him stood Sandhya wearing a gold crown, studded with diamonds brighter and bigger than his for it was he who had secured them for his love!

“Do eat, for my sake, will you?” Queen Sandhya was pleading with King Brij Singh, drawing his attention to the exquisite dishes her docile maids had placed before him. The king was smiling, playing with an ornamented glass filled with a colourful elixir.

He looked at the young lady at the lake now busy folding up the small carpet she had spread. A crown appeared on her head at once making her his legitimate queen!

Sandhya, a millionaire’s daughter, of course, had had no occasion to know Brij Singh. In the normal course of things the chance of Brij Singh marrying her was no more practical than Shangri-La descending on his spread out arms. But had not Brij Singh visualised an appropriate situation that would have, quite logically, entitled him to win her hand?

He visualised Sandhya strolling in a garden that verged on a forest. Golden antelopes, and peacocks who never tired of dancing, gave her their jubilant company.

Sandhya who knew pretty well what to sing in such a situation, how to smile at the sylvan denizens, was totally ignorant of two things: a giant hidden in a dark cave in the high hill lustily spying upon her and the heroic Brij Singh, her would-be saviour, walking parallel to her though unseen by her.

Brij Singh had revived his dream after many years fixing his gaze on the

butterfly-like lady. He tried to keep the froggy, her jealous companion, outside the frame of his vision.

Sandhya walked entranced, listening to the melody of the birds, greeted by showers of flowers.

The young lady began walking towards her car on the other side of the road that cut through the cosy valley, close to Brij Singh.

“Dolly dear!”

Three girls called out to her from the other side of the road. They were climbing down a hillock and had just discovered a dear friend.

Sandhya was walking faster through the forest. At her sight numerous buds bloomed into flowers of wonderful hues. Her happiness was manifest in her golden smile.

In the twinkle of an eye the hidden giant descended upon her. It bared its devilish teeth, roared out its glee, and was about to pounce upon her.

Brij Singh the hero leaped out from the hiding.

Dolly, eager to join her friends, was crossing the road, but she stopped. A truck loaded with boulders was speeding down the slope towards her. A jeep was coming from the opposite direction.

The froggy on this side and the three girls on the other side stood dumbfounded. Panic petrified Dolly. The jeep had stopped, but she did not know that and so did not dare to cross it. The roaring truck could not stop. The equally panicky truck-driver was shouting out something inaudible. Dolly was in no position to appreciate that his brakes had failed, that he could neither swerve the vehicle to his left because of the static jeep, nor could he stop it on the slope.

“Begone, you nasty giant!” yelled out Brij Singh.

A miracle awaited those familiar with Brij Singh’s condition. In a swift though awkward motion he reached the hapless lady and threw her to the other side of the road, himself escaping the rolling truck by hair-breadth.

“Brij Singh! You!! But how – how on earth could you do that?”

The small crowd that collected round Brij Singh consisted of people who knew him for years – the owners and employees of the two refreshment stalls and the petrol depot. They were joined by the crest-fallen truck-driver who had managed to stop his vehicle yards down the road.

Brij Singh sat down on a rock and gasped for breath and blinked at them. Who gave these fellows the right to feel surprised over his action in rescuing his darling Sandhya from the clutches of a giant?

Dolly, accompanied by her three friends and the froggy, came closer to him. The crowd parted.

“I don’t know how to thank you adequately. I’d be crushed by now but for

you!” muttered Dolly softly, wiping her eyes with a kerchief that matched her *Saree* and blouse.

Brij Singh stared at her. He was waiting for Sandhya’s father to come running and to hug him hard and, with a profusion of gratifying words, humbly offer his daughter’s hand to him.

“Well, old boy, you really proved helpful. Here is a token in appreciation of your gallantry.”

The froggy pulled out a ten-rupee note from his purse.

“Please!” Dolly hinted her displeasure, in a suppressed tone at the inadequacy of the gesture.

The froggy gave out a snort and pulled out another and yet another note. He looked impatient after drawing the fifth piece and the butterfly decided to look in another direction.

“Your reward,” said the young man, proud of his revised consideration.

Brij Singh received the notes, still looking a bit dazed, and dumped them on a rugged slab by his side. He then composed himself and began scanning the curious faces around him to find his Sandhya.

“We’ll meet when we come here again. Bye!” said one of Dolly’s friends. They entered their cars, the froggy once waving at the crowd, and drove away.

The crowd around Brij Singh did not disperse immediately. What would those picnickers understand of their surprise at Brij Singh’s feat?

Wind loosened the thin pack of notes. Two of them fell off the slab as if to draw their new owner’s attention to their import.

“Singh! Pick them up. They might fly away,” exhorted a well-wisher.

“Away with them!” burst out Brij Singh. His scream raised a faint echo in the hill on the opposite bank of the lake.

To the crowd his angry voice did not seem any less astonishing than his feat.

A slightly more forceful wave of wind struck the valley. All the notes slipped off the slab, as if afraid of Brij Singh’s stare. Someone took charge of them.

Brij Singh lowered his head. The silent crowd decided to leave him alone.



The Bull of Babulpur

It was far from expected, but Boral, the well-known criminal lawyer, suddenly felt overwhelmed with melancholy on his way home from the court. And that happened at a time when he had every reason to feel jolly. He had just succeeded in securing acquittal for a notorious gang of inter-state opium runners and had pocketed his heaviest fee of the year.

The unexpected feeling came when a jeep speeding ahead of his car knocked down a goat that had strayed into the crowded street. This happened at 5-14 P.M. For a minute, as was his habit, Boral reflected on the legal aspect of the accident. But as his car wended its way a little farther and his eyes fell on the bewildered face of the goat it suddenly appeared unusually familiar to him. Next moment the chauffeur adjusted the rear-view mirror and Boral had had a glimpse of his own face. He was generally honest with himself. He instantly knew why the goat's face seemed so familiar.

He also realised that the resemblance was more subtle than external. It was the goat-like seriousness on his face and the goat-like detachment in his eyes that made the most important contribution to his success in inspiring an immediate trust in his clients. And the judges perhaps tended to patronise him, unconsciously though.

Boral looked at the goat again. It was dying. Its closing eyes gave out an expression of a total disillusionment with the world.

And it was then, at 5-15 P.M. that Boral felt within himself the birth of an ascetic.

He too shall one day be flattened – by a no-nonsense, no-compromise knock from the speeding time.

And the ageing Boral decided to spend the rest of his life in peace and meditation, away from the crowd and the court, somewhere in seclusion. His own native village had of late become a bazar. But Babulpur, the hamlet of his late maternal grandfather whose house and property he had inherited, should make an ideal retreat.

The first bout of ascetic fever past, he realised that it may not be easy to break away from his professional commitments all of a sudden. But he could certainly begin by spending his weekends in the village, passing the time in meaningful inaction, thereby bringing about a synthesis between his roaring practice and his new-born detachment.

It did not take him long to repair and furnish the house lying unused for years, through the good offices of an unemployed uncle.

Then, one Saturday afternoon, Boral's car made its entry into the village.

Babulpur had never experienced the advent of the wonder that was an automobile. The raw, sandy road, luckily, was broad and relatively smooth. Kids ran before and behind the car, celebrating the hair-raising event with ecstatic shouts. Folks gossiping and sharing the *hookah* on the middle of the road hurriedly cleared away, amazement writ large on their faces. Drowsy dogs stood up reluctantly and then realising the gravity of the situation ran away and barked furiously from yards afar.

The car advanced triumphantly, bellowing and honking. But that the path of ascetic meditation was not all strewn with rose petals, became evident only a furlong away from the destination.

The chauffeur honked on, but in vain.

The unemployed uncle who was racing with the car clapped his hands till his palms ached, and hissed till his tongue got tied, but again in vain.

The big bull did not bother to open its eyes. It went on ruminating.

Boral got down. "You, bull, get up, leave the road, I say!" he commanded with restraint and gravity. But since his words produced no effect, he picked up a tiny clod and threw it at the bull's tail.

"Ha ha! This monarch of bulls knows no fear, Sir, and would not care to obey even a Lieutenant Governor!" explained an elderly villager. "What to speak of a car, can even a locomotive make it shift its tail unless it was its pleasure to do so?" commented another while still sucking his hookah.

Boral felt extremely mortified. But he did not show it. He told the uncle in a tone which sounded normal, "Will you please ask the owner of the creature to drive it off the road immediately?"

The uncle looked undone. "But the owner is Lord Shiva, Sri Sri Babuleshwar, the presiding deity of the village," he muttered apologetically.

The statement engendered a strong resentment in Boral. If he had decided to come down to the village for peace and high thinking, that was his personal and private matter. So far as the villagers were concerned, they ought to feel honoured to have him amidst them. He had taken it for granted that he was going to be looked upon as the greatest single pride of the village. He suddenly and rudely woke up to the fact that he had a formidable rival – Lord Shiva – and here lay His most arrogant viceroy.

“Let the Lord’s bull do whatever it likes in the Lord’s own compound. How can it block the public road?” He observed in a matter-of-fact tone, without giving vent to his wrath. He was sure that the legal point he raised was incontestable. But another old villager disarmed him quietly and in a most casual fashion, “This whole universe is Lord’s compound, sonny.”

Boral had no equal among his colleagues in the art of self-restraint. He must not allow the smoke of the smouldering he was experiencing within to leak out. But at once he remembered an old tale his grandfather, also a lawyer, used to narrate. It was about a certain Sultan’s daughter notorious for her arrogance who was married off to a youth of extreme gentle breed. The bridegroom, however, had a lot of common sense and an undisclosed pluck. He knew that if he was to look forward to a tolerable conjugal life, he must overwhelm the bride, at their very first meeting, with his temper and personality.

Upon entering the bride’s chamber, he saw her pet cat sharing the nuptial bed. The bride paid no attention to him, but kept caressing the cat. The bridegroom paused for a moment. Then, in a flash, he unsheathed his sword, snatched the cat by the tail and cut it into two.

The overwhelming affect of the bridegroom’s action on the bride’s mind went a long way in moulding the latter’s attitude and conduct towards him – to his benefit – for all their years together.

The incident soon became the prize gossip of the town. It inspired a henpecked nobleman to carry, one niught, a cat into his bedroom and cut it down as his consort looked on.

“My dear husband! Only if you had cut the cat on our first night together!” commented the wife with a deep sigh.

It is the first impression that lasts long. Boral realised that he cannot afford to appear beaten in this crucial encounter.

“I understand that there is a police out-post recently opened here. Where is that?” he asked in a calm voice.

“There!” A dozen fingers were raised giving him a wide choice of directions.

Boral left his car and the chauffeur behind the bull and asked the perspiring uncle to lead him there. A number of villagers followed them.

“I’m Priyanath Boral, Advocate!” he informed the two constables who offered him smart salutations.

“But, Sir, the Sub-Inspector Sahib had gone to the weekly market to buy cabbage,” informed one of the constables.

“Cauliflower, Sir,” corrected the other.

“I want my car to proceed along the public road without having to face any hindrance. I ask you to do whatever is necessary.”

The uncle explained to the constables the nature of the hindrance the celebrated advocate’s car was facing. Further, he confided to them how Boral was a dear friend not only of the Superintendent of Police, but also of the Magistrate and the Judge Sahib. The constables put on their red turbans, armed themselves with clubs, and came out with the complainants, with visibly uncertain steps though. Others followed them.

A crowd had collected around the bull and the car. The constables surveyed the situation in great earnestness. But before they could do or perhaps think of doing anything, the majestic bull stood up and began moving in gait.

The welcome change in the situation seemed to give the constables a tremendous moral boost. After the ceremonial march to the spot and with that expectant crowd watching them they could not withdraw abruptly. Hence both walked ceremoniously flanking the bull. It was not clear to the crowd whether the bull was obliged to keep pace with them or they with the bull.

“So, the bull is really arrested?”

“What else? Do you think the Sipahi Sahibs and their clubs and red turbans were jokes?”

“Well, law is law.”

These brief observations were followed by some sighs and some clucks of uncertain import.

The size of the crowd swelled up, with some women in veil joining it.

The people of Babulpur had never known such an odd, novel sensation. In their memory, the bull had been an intrinsic part of the history and geography of Babulpur. Be it this bull or its late venerable sire, a bull was inevitably there, unchecked and unpredictable in its movements, verily the symbol of the free, immortal, invincible and universal soul.

The bull was approaching the end of the village when an old widow came rushing out of her lonely hut and put a garland of jasmine flowers around its horns and prostrated herself before it.

Suddenly the people shouted, “Jai Baba Babuleshwar!”

And they repeated the slogan with increasing gusto.

The bull took a turn.

From another house came some sandalwood paste which a Brahmin smeared

on the bull's forehead, and the bull showed appreciable patience in letting him complete the ceremony.

From the next house came a pair of water-melons. Again the bull showed its understanding and obliged the devotee by munching them patiently and thoroughly.

Meanwhile the constables had been provided with *chellums* of tobacco which they thankfully enjoyed before resuming their slow march with the bull.

After an hour's stroll the bull returned to the very spot from which it had started. It then slowly crouched and adjusted itself to a relaxed position and closed its eyes and continued to ruminate.

“Jai Baba Babuleshwar!”

“Jai to the great bull of the great Lord!”

Suddenly a voice with an unfamiliar accent was heard struggling to make itself prominent during the short intervals between the shouts raised by the crowd. People became curious.

“My brothers and sisters!”

All became quiet. Boral had taken his position on a small mound. He extended his arms in the style of blessing the crowd.

“My brothers and sisters! Jai to the great Lord Babuleshwar!”

“Jai, jai!”

“And Jai to the great bull of the great Lord!”

“Jai, jai!”

“My brothers and sisters! This is a historic evening. This handsome, sacred bull is the glory of our village. Let us unite under his shadow and resolve to...”

Boral kept the audience spell-bound for half an hour, for meanwhile his urge had reached a new phase. Earlier he had decided to combine asceticism with criminal law; now he saw the prospect of following a new formula bringing even a third element into his life. He planned to seek election to the State Legislature from the local constituency.



A Night in the Life of the Mayor

After his most memorable few hours Divyasimha now felt, somewhere deep within, a hitherto unknown kiss of calm.

Had the sky been always so beautifully blue and the stars so very elegant and yet tranquil? He wondered.

The little boat glided on. Each cell of his body was tickled with the gentle cool breeze. Along with the darkness that was now slowly fading, his anguish and anxiety too were leaving him. The experience was so real that he thought he could have seen them leaving him were they not immediately swallowed by the departing darkness!

What was the time? He looked at his wrist. He had forgotten that his watch too had gone along with his trousers!

But the contours of the land and the horizon, emerging from darkness, showed that it would soon be morning.

What must his family and friends and the people of Madhuvan in general be thinking now? He laughed and felt sweet, for he was laughing after so much crying. He had laughed twelve hours ago, at the meeting of the Councillors of the city Corporation. But what a difference between the two laughs! He knew he would no more laugh as of old. Streams of tears had washed away several values and attitudes from his mind-set.

Only if this experience had come to him two or three decades ago! He would not perhaps have cared for those so-called achievements to which he had devoted so many precious years. He would not perhaps be the Mayor of Madhuvan. But he would surely have lived a more meaningful life.

He had laughed last when his old professor, Sudarshan Roy, now a Councillor, had wept. Of course he had hid his laughter behind a large hanky with which he pretended to be mopping his face.

Till then he was sure that the old man, when excited, showed signs of eccentricity! Should otherwise a scholar like him, once well-known for his discourses on logic, be moved to tears while speaking of trivial and funny incidents? It is true that his defeat at the Mayoral election at the hands of Divyasimha had given him a great shock. Maybe that was the real cause of his tears. Divyasimha remembered he had tried to pacify the venerable professor, through a friend, quoting a famous Sanskrit dictum which asserted that it was glorious to be defeated by one's own son or pupil! The professor had shouted at the friend, saying, "Shut up! That maxim applies to a defeat in a contest of learning. To apply that to an election dominated by coercion and corruption is sheer indulgence in intellectual corruption."

The professor's speech at the Corporation meeting had sounded droll. He was narrating the hazards wrought by stray cows and bulls in the life of the peace-loving citizens of Madhuvan. His eerie and hyperbolic tone and style suggested as though the city had come under a siege by the Nazis in the guise of cattle! Then, when he came to narrating the mischief of a particular omnivorous cow who no doubt had lately gained wide notoriety, he could not check his tears.

Prof. Roy's dear grand-daughter was appearing for her B.A. examination with Honours in psychology. The poor girl had captured all her learning in two notebooks. In the process of transferring the knowledge into her little head, one afternoon, she had fallen asleep on the verandah of her house. When she woke up, the villainous cow was quietly making her exit. One of the notebooks had clean disappeared. Of the other, only the bare covers could be recovered.

While Prof. Roy wept in the course of narrating this crisis in the life of his grand-daughter, Divyasimha had laughed.

Had the old professor observed him laughing? Lest he should feel offended, Divyasimha, in order to explain his conduct, had walked over to him after the meeting and said, "Sir, I'm afraid, you are getting a bit too emotional!"

Prof. Roy stared angrily at him. "What makes you say so?" he asked.

"Sir, a cow, after all, is an animal!" said Divyasimha.

"I do not remember having ever contested that item of General Knowledge. My question was whether the Corporation should protect us from such an irrefutable animal or not," retorted the professor.

"Sir, I mean, a cow chewing up a sheaf of papers could not be counted any tragedy of sorts!"

"No?" The professor shouted with deep resentment "In a city with such a jubilant Corporation, a cow would dare to chew up, of all things, psychology, that

too in broad daylight and you the Mayor laugh and say that it was no tragedy?" His voice was choked.

Divyasimha laughed again, but in a subdued mode.

"You will not understand, Divyasimha, I am sorry to say, you are not capable of that. The more I think of the tragedy, the more helpless I feel." Prof. Roy sighed and continued, "All the safeguards evolved by the society over the centuries, your government and your law, nothing can help me get over this despair. Even if you were to award me two million rupees as compensation for the loss of the two notebooks, that would fail to console me. How helpless, indeed, man is!"

"Perhaps not so helpless as you think, Sir! Ha!" Divyasimha cut short his laugh with difficulty.

Prof. Roy got hold of his stick and stood up., "No, Mr. Mayor, it is not so easy to appreciate what I say. Let us not argue. Leave me alone with my tragedy." He said remorsefully and left the hall.

But Divyasimha was in one of his occasional high moods. He would have loved to argue and emerge triumphant. Frustrated, this time he laughed deliberately with some vigour, just to irritate the departing old man a little more.

Tragedy, eh? How obstinate the professor had grown! Divyasimha felt a burning sensation in his heart and he had no difficulty in diagnosing it. It was his own obstinate desire to score a victory over the professor that remained unfulfilled.

Indeed, it could not have been possible for Divyasimha to appreciate the professor's avowal twelve hours ago. Divyasimha had climbed the stair of success in life making a cautious calculation of actions and reactions at every step. Not that he never slipped, but he had made up with a vengeance.

Helplessness? No. He had never known it. He never lacked the powers that matter – of mind, men and money.

Dawn was breaking out. How sweet were the cool and quiet moments of sunrise and sunset! Divyasimha sat erect and breathed deeply.

It was to breathe deeply that he had come down to the riverbank last evening. He wanted to extinguish the burning inside his heart.

He had chosen a lonely spot. Parking his car on the grassy wasteland of the suburb he had descended into the water. He had suddenly felt an irresistible urge to plunge his birth-room-conditioned body into the free transparent flow.

Nobody came to that part of the riverbank for an evening walk leaving the well-lit long concrete promenade on the other side of the city. There was none near about to notice him. He took off his watch and tucked it into a pocket of his trousers. He stripped himself of his clothes barring the underwear and kept them on a boulder between the car and the water and then made a dash into the flow.

This had once been a familiar river – in his days as a student. There was then a

girls' hostel on the opposite bank. He and his friends would sing and shout while swimming. The sound brought only faint echoes back from the walls of the hostel but never any melodious response from beyond the walls.

Divyasimha smiled as he remembered those jolly days.

His thirst for attracting others' attention had long been satiated. The evening he returned home after delivering his maiden speech, his mother had told him, "Better do not speak in public!" "Why?" the budding orator had challenged. "Because so many eyes will scan you with envy. That may make you lose weight," explained the shy mother.

"How superstitious of you!" The defiant son had laughed.

How he wished that his mother's fear had come true! But all that had happened was he had grown fatter during the past quarter century, so much so that during the last election his opponents often referred to him as Divyahasti (the divine elephant) instead of Divyasimha (the divine lion).

He suddenly felt a tickling sensation inside his underwear. Something had crept in, maybe a tiny fish. He at once took off the garment and the sensation was gone. But the light stuff slipped out of his hand and drifted away in the steady current. He could have recovered it if he had acted promptly. But he did not care.

He smiled again. It was already dark. It should not be any problem to leave the water and slip into his trousers very fast.

He had a last dip and then he plodded towards the riverbank.

What was that indistinct apparition swaying between the water and the embankment? He hoped it was not a cow! A panic overtook him, nevertheless. In any case it could not have been the mischievous one that featured so prominently in the meeting, he assured himself.

He hurried towards the boulder on which he had deposited his clothes.

The cow had already stomached his bush-shirt and the banian and was busy making short work of the trousers.

Divyasimha screamed at the animal and splashed water at it furiously. The cow retreated, but with the trousers in her mouth.

Still knee-deep in the water, Divyasimha felt he was sweating.

He looked around. Nobody was there.

The naked Mayor rushed to confront the terrible cow. But the cow gave him the slip.

While he stood on the bank, befuddled, two beams of light focused on him – headlights of a jeep. For a second his wet body glowed in its huge bareness. He squatted instantly and, hopping like a frog, plunged into the river.

The jeep came to a halt and three men jumped out of it. From below, Divyasimha could recognise them and hear them. They were the Executive Engineer of the Corporation and his two assistants.

“What was that strange creature that sprang into the river?” asked a perplexed voice.

“God knows. Looked like a gorilla.”

“Gorilla? Since when have gorillas begun to frequent our suburbs?”

“God knows. But what other creature could resemble us so closely?”

“Could be the abominable snow man?”

Surprisingly, none of the suggestions sounded absurd or jocular in that creepy combination of space and time.

They stood in silence for some time. Then one of them asked, “Whose car is that?” Another replied, “God knows. Oh no, I too know. That is Boss’s of course!”

“How come is it left here, unlocked?” questioned the third, opening its door.

There was silence again. Then the engineer cried out, “Sir, Sir, are you somewhere around, Sir? Will you please respond, Sir?”

There was a longer silence.

“Boss is not the kind of person to leave his car in this fashion at a desolate place like this. And what business could he have here at night? Mysterious! Let’s hurry to his bungalow.”

They jumped into their vehicle. It turned and instantly gathered speed.

Divyasimha was shivering with shame. What should he do? Should he drive home? But by now the engineer must have burst a panic-shell there. The surprised members of the family must have collected at the portico. The watchman would rush forward and open the door with an awful show of reverence. Others too would rush upon him. He shut his eyes visualising the scene.

The current was slowly pushing him away. That was safer in a way, he imagined.

Only if some intimate friend happened to pass by! He could shout him to stop and then confide his plight to him. The friend could run and fetch some clothes for him!

Or couldn’t there be a miracle? Couldn’t a few yards of linen come floating by?

No. There was no help. He must tell everything to the engineer when he returns. He alone could help him. No alternative to waiting.

Light flashed at some distance. Three vehicles followed the engineer’s jeep. They stopped around his car.

The smart young European lady who jumped out of a car was his younger brother’s wife. She was followed by her husband and they joined the engineer’s party. Several policemen hopped down from a large van. And last but not the least, Prof. Roy came out with his walking stick from his car, the oldest vintage in the city.

With a mighty effort Divyasimha suppressed a surge of sobs deep down

his throat. Even if he could gather enough courage to expose himself before the European sister-in-law, he could by no means do so before Prof. Roy. It had not been even four hours when he had laughed while the old man had wept.

Divyasimha retreated farther. The leader of the police party focused his torch into the river. The engineer shouted “Sir” several times to elicit a response from him.

And soon came yet another van with more policemen.

It was no more possible for Divyasimha to suppress his sobs. Must he be hurled into such a predicament? Which were the forces working behind this? And why?

He kept floating for a while and the current led him away gently. He came upon a small boat tied to a tree on the brink of the water. He unfastened the knot and got into it.

The boat smoothly glided downstream.

Now that the search party had been left far behind, he cried boldly and loudly.

When did he cry last? He tried to recollect; it had been ages ago.

A naked babe, he had cried lying on his mother’s lap or clinging to his father. Once he had grown up, everybody, near and dear ones included, looked upon him as an institution. He was not expected to cry.

He woke up to his aloneness.

The river had narrowed. At times the drifting boat mildly dashed against the muddy edge; it circled once or twice and then continued on its course.

There were wide fields on both the sides of the river. The sky appeared to have come quite low. He felt in the river his lost mother’s lap and in the sky his father’s chest – broad and generous.

It would be foolish not to cry.

A thin sleep had crept into his tired eyes and he dreamed of a tiny bird beating its tinier wings against the rolling clouds.

He woke up to see the boat arrested at a bend. He got down, gave it a push and hopped in again.

With this little movement he felt that his body had become miraculously light. And soon he realised how light his mind too had become.

The boat stopped, touching a submerged bush. There was a hamlet close to the bank. Smoke, filtered through the thatches of the huts, was coiling up and birds had just begun to fly. The silhouette of the landscape was growing distinct and charming.

A little girl stood under a small tree, gazing at the river. Divyasimha compressed himself as much as possible inside the boat. “Listen, little one,” he said breathing in deeply, “I have no clothes, can you give me something to put on?”

The girl looked impressed, but said, “You will give me back, won’t you?”

“Oh yes,” answered Divyasingha.

“Here it is. Catch it,” the girl took off her tattered soiled frock and threw it at Divyasingha.

Divyasingha kissed the frock and wiped his last drops of tears with it. “Little one, this will not do. I am a big man!” he said.

“Big? Like father? Wait,” she ran away. After five minutes she returned with a handloom towel and threw it at the stranger.

Divyasingha put the towel around his waist. He got down and holding on to the bushes climbed up the bank.

The girl had been followed by her intrigued father.

Divyasingha did not hesitate to introduce himself. He followed the amazed fisherman into his hut and sat down near his oven and drank a cup of heated milk and narrated whatever had happened since the evening. The fisherman nodded understandingly and sympathised with him.

After an hour Divyasingha got into a mofussil bus wearing the best piece of dhoti the fisherman could provide and covering his upper body with the towel.

As soon as the bus entered the city he could see groups of people reading the morning’s *Madhuvan Voice*. The banner headline read: “Mayor Disappears Mysteriously!” The front page carried several speculations like kidnap and suicide. What made the matter complicated was, on one hand, a strange creature double the size of average human jumping into the river and on the other, discovery of the Mayor’s leather belt and a portion of his trousers on the wasteland.

Talking to a reporter, the old Prof. Roy had conjectured that the brave Mayor, his former student, after listening to his woes, might have confronted the notorious cow and the cow might have chewed up the complete Mayor.

The Professor had shed tears thereafter and had demanded immediate capture of the man-eating cow. The owner of the animal had meanwhile been interrogated and although the cow was still at large the police and the employees of the corporation had brought their net quite close on it and they were expected to swoop down on it any moment.

The local branch of the All-Faith Society had summoned a prayer meeting to plead for God’s intervention in the matter.

Divyasingha was experiencing an irrevocable calm. He did not feel any urge to give explanations to anybody. Only, he felt, he must rush to Prof. Roy and tell him, “I beg to be pardoned, Sir. Now I know what helplessness is; I believe I earned my adulthood last night.”



Statue-Breakers are Coming!

“**Y**ou want me to believe that you had never heard of Yameshwar Gupta, the great man who could have become anything, Chief Minister, ah, even Prime Minister, ah or President, had not modesty checked him? I am speaking of Ya-me-shwar Gu-pta. Got it?”

“You mean Parmeshwar Gupta, the hon’ble minister for floods and famines?”

“Damn it, Mister! I mean nothing less than Yameshwar Gupta. He is far far larger than your Parmeshwar and all the rest of the current mushrooms passing as patriots. You can’t really mean that you had never heard of him. Great things used to happen to this city during his mayoralty. Can any executive worth his salt forget the personality who headed the first-ever corporation of this city? Before him this was a town with a mere municipality. Besides, it wouldn’t be any exaggeration to say that it was he in whom pulsatated the political life of the region. Can you even now say that you were not familiar with his name and fame?”

“I’m sorry. It is not even a full month since I took over as the Superintendent of Police here. And you must be knowing what a turbulent time we are passing through. I’m afraid, I’m yet to know all the local celebrities, past and present.”

“To be honest, Mr. Super, you surprise me. Guptaji is not a local celebrity. He is renowned through Cape to Mount.”

“In that case I must have heard of him. You see, we hear so many names. But it’s not humanly possible to remember all. Am I wrong?”

“O God! His is not just one among so many names! He is an illustrious son of mother India, a truly great person – in fact greater than...”

“Excuse me. Although I asked you as soon as you called me, you haven’t yet identified yourself.”

“That’s unimportant, Mister. I am one of the hundreds of devotees and admirers of Guptaji. Did I say hundreds? What I meant is thousands, tens of thousands. They are spread all over the land. Naturally, we are concerned about Guptaji’s statue. You should know better than others how those ultra-anarchists are beheading, maiming or totally destroying the statues of great men one after another. Their bombs and hammers had already taken a heavy toll of statues. What doubt can be there that one of these nights they will attack Guptaji’s? What steps are you taking to protect this invaluable property, this pride of the nation?”

“We have arranged for keeping watch on those of the surviving statues which really matter. So far as the statue of this Gupta Sahib is concerned...”

“For heaven’s sake, do not call him Gupta Sahib! Guptaji fought valiantly against the Sahibs and even now he is a crusader against the Sahib culture. He never puts on trousers or tie or hat. He wears coat, no doubt, but that is on his dhoti.”

“I see! He’s alive!”

“You shock me, Mr. Super! Won’t the newspapers come out with their boldest and blackest banner headlines at his departure from this world? Can you or for that matter anybody else afford to miss the news of that kind of a national loss? Believe me, Mr. Super, I don’t know whether to laugh or weep at your question.”

“I’m really sorry. However, all I can promise is, I’d look into the matter. I’ll see what can be done for ensuring its safety after I had ascertained from our intelligence the degree of threat that is there to it. You said Yameshwar Gupta; right?”

“Right, right, right. There is only one Yameshwar Gupta, the illustrious one.”

“Thank you.”

“Just a suggestion, hello, hello, hello...”

The unmistakable sound of the Superintendent of Police putting down the receiver did not deter Yameshwar Gupta from trying to evoke some more attention from him, though in vain. He then opened the door and windows of his room and looked around. If at all his voice had spilled out, nobody was near enough to hear it.

He sighed again while he dropped into a sofa. Surprising – the degree of ignorance these new generation officers exhibit. Was it short of impertinence? He had been the supreme leader of this city till only two decades ago. It was only with his blessings that one could become an office-bearer of his party. And, during the first general elections, could anybody dream of getting elected to the Assembly or the Parliament from this constituency without his support? He was

the Mayor and either president or vice-president of nearly one dozen cultural and social organisations including a kids' club.

Strange and inexplicable are the tides of time. Suddenly one day he realised that he had been rapidly left out of almost every position. The realisation was duly followed by a desperate effort to butt his way into some of the lost grounds, but in vain. Although he put it vehemently before everybody concerned or unconcerned that the basic difference between his attitude and that of his 'friend Jawahar' was that he – Guptaji – was in favour of inducting absolute new blood into everything, the fact that remained secret between himself and his unobliging Destiny was that he would have loved his dear old blood to be very much there in everything.

It was an awful world, ungrateful and unpredictable.

The young S.P. must have memorised a thousand names for passing the Indian Police Service examination. Yet, only his name the chap would not know and that too when posted in this his very own city.

Guptaji flitted about along the walls inside his room for a few minutes and then shut the door and the windows once again. Perching on the table, he dialled for the home minister of the state. He succeeded in getting the line through on the eleventh attempt.

"Hello, it is important. Please put me to the minister."

"The hon'ble minister is busy with more important work."

"Listen. I'm Yameshwar Gupta. The matter is private but urgent."

"You are who?"

"Ya-me-shwa-r Gu-pta, former Mayor."

"I see. Please hold on. Let me find out the position with the hon'ble."

Five minutes later a grave voice came on the line!

"Hello, Guptaji, what news? You are hardly to be seen!"

"Pardon me. I am not Guptaji. I am only one of his admirers. Your assistant perhaps could not hear correctly."

"Oh!"

"It is about the statue of Guptaji, you see. I'm afraid, the anarchists could strike at Guptaji's statue any night. I need hardly say what a shame it would be to see the figure of a personality like Guptaji, our first Mayor, standing without an arm or maybe, even without a leg."

"Why? Don't we promptly wrap up the disfigured statues with gunny bags?"

"You do, but would it not bring tears to a thousand eyes if our beloved Guptaji's head wears a gunny bag?"

"Crazy!"

"What, what do you say?"

"Nothing!"

“Listen, Sir, I want to say...”

“Listen, whoever you are, I assure you that nobody would touch even a hair of your Guptaji’s statue. The statue-breakers are after the statues of national leaders.”

“But Guptaji is a big national leader, you see...”

“Sshh!”

The minister put down the receiver. Again Guptaji persisted with ‘hello’ for some time before giving up.

What did the minister say? ‘Sshh’? Was it the first syllable of that notorious word meaning one’s wife’s younger brother?

Guptaji wiped sweat from his forehead.

Twenty years ago this minister might have launched himself into politics wandering in a rickshaw for a whole day announcing through a microphone about a ‘mammoth’ meeting to be addressed by Guptaji. And today, he had the cheek to speak about hair on Guptaji’s statue!

Guptaji looked at the old pictures on the wall. There – the young Guptaji sits like a pet pussy at the feet of the Father of the Nation. Here he is presenting a monumental bouquet to an extremely affable Nehru. And there again – he is receiving an address from the Primary Teacher’s Federation with that unmistakable smile of a first class leader. Who is a national leader if not he?

Guptaji opened a cupboard and brought out a thick book made up of nearly a hundred clippings. Sometimes his speeches used to make even headlines. And yet the minister said ‘Crazy’!!

His eyes moistened.

Guptaji’s son had achieved success in business by dint of his own merit. He had no obligation to pay any particular attention to his father. Guptaji lived in his own house like a lonely guest. Nobody would take note of his going out for a stroll even at this hour of the night.

He wore his dhoti tightly as he used to do in the early days of the freedom struggle. Then he put on his black overcoat and quietly crossed over to the street.

He knew a short-cut, a lane that would be least frequented in a winter night. Yet he had to remain extremely alert and vigilant lest somebody should chance upon him.

It took him only half an hour to appear before his statue.

He would not have arranged for his statue to be installed here had he known that this would become a practically deserted area in a few years. Who could have thought that the Corporation office would be shifted elsewhere and that the city would expand in the opposite direction! Indeed, the growth of his city, like the course of a river, had been unpredictable. Now, there was nothing important left here except a petty branch of a bank.

The Corporation should have transplanted the statue on its new premises

or should have transferred it to some other prominent spot. But his thankless successors just did not care.

How imaginatively had he inspired the idea of erecting his statue in the minds of his nearest sycophants without himself having to pronounce the proposal! Once the idea had taken hold of them and they had proceeded to work it out, he had of course dutifully protested with broad smiles.

“We’re doing it for the sake of history. What should the posterity think of us if we did not perpetuate the sacred memory of our first Mayor? Humility is your virtue, Sir, but what right have you to check us from fulfilling our aspiration?” The office-bearers of the statue committee had argued with him.

Well, in a budding democracy, he had no such right, he had admitted with a broader smile.

The moon was bright and the statue cast a long shadow. Guptaji hesitated before treading on the majestic shadow. Then, after many years, he scanned the statue closely and anxiously.

A portion of the pedestal had cracked. He could not be sure, but a knee of the statue appeared rather decayed.

How could this happen so soon? Quite a fat fund had been collected for the purpose. Evidently his chief devotee who later proved an accomplished weathercock had gobbled up a good chunk of the collection. What a pity that a knee of his statue should crumble while his mortal knees, despite intermittent attack of rheumatism, were still going strong!

Guptaji heard some low voices. Behind the statue was a ditch. He slipped into it and knelt down on the darkest spot.

They were four, all young, clumsily dressed, restless and sensitive even to the sound of the wind and the movement of branches on a couple of roadside trees. Guptaji tried to follow their conversation, but failed. Obviously, they were talking about the statue. He could see them pointing their fingers at it. And soon they were right below it.

Guptaji waited with bated breath.

It was an eerie experience to see one of them climbing his statue. Guptaji tightened his crouch. The young climber was holding something in his hand. Was it a saw-like tool to cut the head off the figure? For a moment Guptaji had a queer sensation in his neck. The inevitable was going to happen, at last! And only hours ago the foolish home minister had the audacity to call him crazy! If only the chap were present here to see for himself whether Guptaji was a national leader or not! There are still half a dozen statues in the city standing intact. But it was his statue that had become the target of the anarchists. It was but natural, so clearly expected! After all, his statue was the symbol of the transformation of a town into

a city! It was of immense significance and if the stupid minister did not realise it, the anarchists did!

The young man balanced himself remarkably well and stood erect on the shoulders of the statue.

When will he begin cutting the head? What was he doing?

The instrument in his hand now appeared to be a pair of binoculars. The young man observed the bank building surrounded by a high brick wall. Two minutes later he conveyed something to his companions by a gesture of hand and then hopped down.

All four of them turned to go away.

“Halt!!”

The piercing cry startled and stunned the young men for a moment. They stopped defensively as though encountering an attack.

Trembling with rage Guptaji stepped up and stood below his statue, holding on to the pedestal.

“You scamps, was the statue erected for you to use it as your ladder, to stand on its shoulders and gaze around? Don’t you know whose figure is this? Haven’t you got the slightest idea about his greatness? You don’t think it worth destroying, eh? You don’t take it to be a national leader’s, eh? It is fit only to serve as your pedestal, eh? It does not deserve to be attacked, eh? I challenge you, you fools!” he shouted.

The young men were in no mood to appreciate Guptaji’s sentiments. Nervous, they hurled something towards him and ran away. Guptaji, in a reflex action, rolled back into the ditch. The next moment there was an explosion at the base of the statue. The pedestal gave away; the statue got toppled and was shattered to pieces.

Inside the ditch, Guptaji lay dazed for a while. But soon he mustered his spirit and, taking to his short-cut, managed to reach home and slip into his blanket.

The next morning and the days that followed saw Guptaji unusually bright. He breathes contentment. “Life without a statue is just wonderful!” he reminds himself at times. He spends his time visiting old friends and laughs a lot.



“Two Slippers and a Soul”

“Once his name was on the tips of a thousand tongues. But that is past. I don't blame people for forgetting Bimbadhar Bishoi, for today we are obliged to retain in our memory many more names than our forefathers were required to do. For them it was enough to remember the names of some select gods and goddesses, some mythological heroes like Bhim and Arjun and villains like Mahishasur or Ravana, and a few great men of their country and the world, apart from the names of their relatives and a few kinsmen. But we must memorise the names of numerous officials and big, medium and small leaders, film and sports stars of regional, national and international importance as well as the news-announcers on the TV and the radio. Like the old posters on the walls fading away behind the new ones, our memory too must make way for new names, pushing into background those that had ceased to be attractive,” observed Mohapatra, the brother-in-law and confidant of the late Mr. Bishoi. He wished me to write an article his dear departed.

“Mohapatra, you have written articles in newspapers more than once. If you so wish...”

“You have read them, have you?” Mohapatra was quite excited. “Which one? Was it on how to raise pumpkins – in the Yankee way published in *Our World* or the one on the place of celibacy in the nuclear age published in the *Gandhi Path* – or both?”

Well, I had merely seen the headline of one of his articles and had not read any. Hence I had to display a mysterious smile in lieu of any answer and say, “Why don't you write an article on Bishoi yourself since you are convinced that the world ought to have known him better?”

Mohapatra nodded, but it was not clear whether to convey his acceptance of my suggestion or to merely indicate that he was thoughtful.

As I took a long look at him, Mohapatra stopped nodding and acknowledged my curiosity through a very meaningful smile. “The pumpkin and celibacy articles you read were of course serious studies, as several discerning friends assured me, but all said and done, I am no professional writer like you chaps. All I can say is Bishoi was extraordinary. But I am at a loss as to how to go about highlighting that fact. That is why I remembered you...”

“I understand,” I said with the air of a doctor who had diagnosed a disease from the patient’s symptoms. “Will you please narrate one or two important events in his life?”

“I feared this,” he said, his comment overlapping my question. “I feared that you will ask me to do so and I am at a further loss to find any way to satisfy you. I know that one cannot lay claim to any kind of distinction without undergoing a period of incarceration for some well-publicised cause or without receiving some awards or picking up a sensational quarrel with some important contemporary or making some worthwhile discovery or invention. No, our Bishoi could boast of no such achievement. Even then I say that he was special.” Mohapatra paused and looked me straight in the eye. I nodded in sympathy.

“Absurd though it may sound, the two special events in his life concerned two pairs of slippers – to be more factual, two separate slippers from two pairs!”

“Slippers, you mean?” I wondered if he was waxing figurative.

Mohapatra anticipated my surprise and hence showed no reaction. Instead he made a factual elucidation of his intriguing observation the summary of which is like this:

Bishoi belonged to the endangered species of optimists who, at the mere sight of a seed, visualised a mighty deciduous teak and dreamed of relaxing on a bedstead made of it. He was gifted with a sonorous voice. After every public lecture he delivered, he emerged inspired himself and for an hour or so conducted himself towards the people he met in the streets or in the bazaar as if they had been members of his enchanted audience.

But all his acquaintances, foolish or wise, knew how good he was at heart.

Bishoi was a most sincere worker and once he had been entrusted with a task, his party could depend on him for its execution, particularly if the job concerned the welfare of the people. No wonder that his political career should appear quite promising.

But it continued to rest at that stage – like a dawn without a sunrise.

Once he was promised his party’s candidature for an Assembly constituency. But by the time he completed his round of prostrating himself to all his seniors and elders seeking their blessings, the party high command had changed its mind.

He was then offered the Chairmanship of a state-sponsored corporation which too was dismantled before inauguration. Soon he became the foremost politico with a record number of promises behind him.

But the disappointments were secretly ravaging him, not because he coveted power, but because of the treachery of his colleagues. His near ones like Mohapatra knew how his calm and fortitude were on the verge of a total collapse the day the first of the two incidents regarding slippers took place.

Mohapatra sat meditative for a moment at this point of his narration. "An earlier incident that might have unconsciously launched him on his path to disenchantment may be relevant," he said.

The central high command decided that the delegates proceeding to attend the party's annual conference ought to go through a refresher's course in the basic tenets of the party's ideology. The secretary of the state unit persuaded Bishoi to deliver two talks on the subject for the would-be delegates.

Bishoi laboured hard for a fortnight in preparing his theoretical speech. The first day of the delegates' camp was devoted to a discussion on organisational matters. From speeches, protests, boos and thumping of tables, the proceedings soon ran into wrestling and a display of one or two feats of ju-jitsu. Bishoi was heard commenting, looking at the tumult from a relatively safe distance, "It was a mistake to begin with organisational practicality. We should have begun with theory. A proper appreciation by the delegates of the principles our party stands for, would have pre-empted such violence."

Groomed and attired as a respectable speaker, Bishoi Reported at the party office the-next day on time for his speech. He was led into the hall upstairs. It was evening and there was a power-cut. The courteous party secretary rearranged his chair behind the table lighted by a candle and left the hall on some urgent business. Despite darkness Bishoi knew that the hall was packed to capacity. The total silence, the sign of receptivity in the audience, charmed him. He spoke for more than two hours.

Just when he concluded his speech thanking the audience and expecting it to burst into applause, power returned and the cosy hall was flooded with tube-lights. It was empty except for the caretaker and sweeper of the hall and the man in charge of the microphone which had remained defunct and the affluent but illiterate owner of a butcher house who had lately joined the party seated on the first row and five villagers in the last row. The villagers who had come to meet a certain local leader and had nothing to do with the meeting, had fallen asleep and one of them even snored in a subdued manner.

Obviously, the dots of light seen along the last row – they were smoking – had created the impression that they constituted the last frontier of an enraptured audience.

Bishoi had appeared to Mohapatra, who met him at the exit of the hall, like a patient entering a hospital beset with typhoid.

“Must they make me toil for a long fortnight, day and night, just to talk to darkness for two hours and five minutes?” he murmured. But his murmur too appeared to have been swallowed by the same darkness.

“Well, brother, the benefits of your study remains with you, after all,” Mohapatra had said in the way of consoling him. But Bishoi refused to take the next class scheduled for the next day and nobody seemed to mind it. Late in the afternoon the delegates boarded the train for their historic national conference.

Bishoi had forgotten his humiliation while exchanging greetings with the friendly fellow passengers. It was a bright twilight and the train was rolling through lush paddy fields.

It was an important station. Bishoi stood at the door of his compartment, enjoying the scene on the platform, when, one of his slippers fell down at the jolt he received as the train resumed its motion. He gave out an involuntary squeal and it was echoed by two or three other delegates standing behind him. The slipper lying at the end of the platform was seen by many. But three or four men made a dash at it. One of them, a middle-aged gentleman, picked it up and while restraining his folded umbrella and spectacles from falling down, ran and caught up with Bishoi’s moving compartment, holding up the slipper.

Suddenly the world began to look beautiful to Bishoi. How could it be otherwise when it had in it people who, notwithstanding the challenges posed by their dishevelled umbrellas and loose spectacles, were ready to compete with a running train to restore a slipper to a hapless passenger? Couldn’t the gentleman be a sufferer from gout or blood-pressure? But he had forgotten his affliction and ran and ran – and with a smile to boot – all for the sake of your deprived feet!

The runner came closer to Bishoi. The other two or three were running behind him as if drawn by a magnet. Should Bishoi jump down and embrace them? He wished he had a kingdom to part with half of it, along with a princess, to the middle-aged gallant!

“Ho, Sir, why don’t you throw the other slipper at me? Of what use is it to you?” the runner shouted hoarse, gasping for breath, even though he meant it to be an appeal.

Bishoi stopped short of falling from the running train. “Don’t oblige the greedy fellow,” advised the fellow-delegates standing behind him. Nevertheless, Bishoi threw his remaining slipper away. The runner caught it in the style of a soccer goalkeeper and those following him clapped their hands.

On arrival at the destination Bishoi complained of awful uneasiness. A doctor declared that he had both gout and blood-pressure.

Bishoi remained inactive for the next five years and was practically forgotten.

Then he recovered and was once again in the public gaze. In fact, some others pushed him to the forefront – for reasons best known to them.

The leader in charge of preparing the party for the ensuing General Elections was to pay a visit to the town. The finalisation of the party's nominee for the Elections depended on his recommendation. While different groups in the party violently quarrelled with one another on the choice of their candidate, someone proposed Bishoi and it was observed that he had no enemy and was acceptable to all the warring groups as, what they called a compromise-candidate.

Thus, Bishoi arrived at yet another promising phase of his life. His dying hopes were rekindled.

The Railway platform was crowded with local leaders, party men and reporters.

The train steamed in, the smiling leader already having taken position at the door of his compartment and waving to the crowd. The local leaders pushed an impressive garland into Bishoi's hands and shoved him towards the guest. Bishoi garlanded the descending leader and the leader at once took the garland off and put it around Bishoi's neck. There were clucks and exclamations in appreciation of the leader's gesture.

The leader talked to the crowd for three or four minutes and then began to walk towards the exit. The train whistled and started to crawl out of the platform.

Alack, just then a slipper fell down from a carelessly hanging foot of one of the passengers standing at one of the doors, devouring the scene on the platform. Bishoi was in a highly elated mood. His surging goodwill for humanity had neutralised his blood-pressure as well as gout.

He forgot that a long garland hung from his neck. He forgot that every little gesture of his was being observed by a large number of people.

He ran and picked up the soiled slipper, in the process letting his garland slip. He ran to restore the slipper to the passenger, as if as a protest against the conduct of that middle-aged baldy five years ago, as if to prove with a flare that the world had not gone totally bankrupt of good souls.

He had forgotten that he was not in the habit of running. The train gathered speed. Suddenly the passenger took off his other slipper and threw it at Bishoi. In a reflex action Bishoi caught it all right, but then stood almost petrified as the train crossed the platform.

"Was it necessary?" observed the leader gravely and he did not even look at Bishoi again.

Bishoi would have collapsed when he realised the terrible awkwardness of the situation, but for Mohapatra taking hold of him and leading him to a rickshaw. At night his blood -pressure rose to an all time high and he repeatedly asked

Mohapatra, “Did the leader and others think that I was running to get the other slipper from the passenger? O God!”

Mohapatra had no answer. Whatever the impression of the leader and the local politicians, Bishoi’s name ceased to figure in the race for receiving the party’s nomination.

Bishoi did not survive the impact of the incident. He died after a month.

Mohapatra asked me after a long pause, “What do you think of this? Will this make a readable biographical account?”

“Why not, but...”

“What could be a possible title? Will ‘Two Slippers and a Soul’ do?”

“That would read rather unusual,” I said and added after a moment’s reflection, “Indeed, to find a title for such an account may prove quite an arduous task.”

“Hm!” Mohapatra nodded. “Let us wait till a suitable title strikes us. What do you say?”

“That is quite acceptable to me,” I said with some relief
And there the matter remains.





A Tale of the Northern Valley

The one thing remarkable about the small town in the northern valley, nestling on hillocks five thousand feet above sea-level, was that its people lived mostly on bread and rumours.

Viewed from far the town looked like a nest. And there were clouds to behave like giant birds about to settle down in it.

Clouds and mists, some of them familiar in their contours and some strangers, brushed the town time and again. Gusts of cool wind that often accompanied them blew away jumbles of dry leaves and bougainvilleas and sometimes a kerchief or even a petticoat, in which the town abounded, into anonymous destinations. They also blew away the daily rumours into the wilderness where most probably they ended up in the chattering of a covey of partridges.

But nobody need regret such a fate of the rumours. The townsfolk apart, those gossips were not likely to be of any interest to anybody. Besides, they were meant to be short-lived, to be enjoyed and forgotten like balloons or bubbles going up and bursting into nothingness.

Except in winter and monsoon, half of the town-dwellers were outsiders looking for their missing health or in hoping for a romance with cosy solitude. But there lay the magic of the town: it did not let them feel outsiders.

But in winter and monsoon, the town was hardly more than a memory even for the villagers down the valley, let alone the people of the wide world.

The day, as usual, had begun with the townsfolk getting agog over a pretty little rumour. It was a cloudy morning. Davra, the young professor, sat on the wrecked parapet of an ancient monument in ruins and gazed at the hilltop. An

old banyan tree leaned towards him and he was tickled by showers of swirling dead leaves. The other thing to tickle him was the fluttering shawl of Ms Jolly. The shawl too was of the colour of the cloud and as soft as well, and nobody had any business to feel surprised should Davra claim that he thought it was only a wayward virgin cloud that caressed him.

The two seated like that were spied upon by Ms Jamila who had lately been seen in the intimate company of the young professor. Earlier too she had seen Davra and Jolly submerged in the silence of the ruins and the dead leaves. But all she had done was give a shrug and return home and resume her Bharatnatyam. This time, however, she was observed to shiver.

Back home she raised a howl and under some weird inspiration told her father, the headman of the town, that Davra and Jolly turned into lovely little monkeys as she looked on and the two kept sitting on the historic parapet with their distinctly identifiable tails dangling down it.

The story of the metamorphosis spread at the usual speed of rumours which was at par with the west wind. Soon a hundred people collected below the historic ruins and kept marvelling at Davra and Jolly who sat with their backs at the crowd, Jolly's shawl still tickling the professor. It was only when the two got down and walked through the crowd – Davra asking someone about time and adjusting his watch – that the crowd began to disperse. There was no change in their mood at their realising that the two went as tail-less as ever.

The townsfolk's attitude towards rumours had a sort of holiness about it. To look upon a rumour as rumour and yet to be able to enjoy it was a kind of culture that had to be cultivated with patience over a few generations.

By noon the townsfolk had forgotten all about Davra and Jolly for, they were rapidly falling into the grip of a thrilling new rumour that had brewed up late in the afternoon.

The two major shops in the town, the Rainbow and the Evening Star, were situated almost facing each other midway the road leading to the picturesque hilltop, and were arch rivals.

On the eve of the annual carnival celebrating the advent of spring Robin, the owner of the Rainbow, imported a life-size synthetic statue showing a fairy in the nude and installed it at the entrance to his showroom. A number of people graced the informal installation with their impromptu presence and many were willing to lend their hands to setting the statue in the proper position.

One of them asked Gulliver, the proprietor of the Evening Star who happened to pass by, "Won't you too put up a gorgeous thing like this?"

"Pooh! Why should I?" asked Gulliver. "Must I deceive you by putting up fake figures? Why? Won't Ms Pinquee herself appear in the nude as mannequin on the terrace of my shop, if I make a request to her?"

Ms Pinquee, the avant-garde danseuse who occupied a suite atop the Evening Star, had been observed having food, drink, and indulging in chitchat with Gulliver on more than one occasion during her fortnight's stay.

By sundown it had become the sole talk of the town: Ms Pinquee would shed her clothes and emerge atop the Evening Star.

The town had never known a sweeter twilight. The dutiful hundred gossipers who had collected below the historic monument in the morning were duly present before the Evening Star, barring only the few female members of the lot.

"What's the matter over here?" enquired the retired judge as he came dragging his feet.

"Good evening, Sir, I wondered if it is you I saw and came to check," said the old principal, his voice hallowed as usual.

Other gentlemen who too were rare in their appearance exchanged suitable words among themselves to explain their presence there. They cast only casual and fleeting glances at the elegant terrace of the Evening Star.

The twilight slowly changed into evening. In the foggy horizon stars began to twinkle, like a silent sorrow forming into drops of tears. The life of the rumour was approaching its innocuous end. The gentlemen were preparing to disperse, throwing tender smiles of courtesy at one another. This was in keeping with the tradition of the town – never to expect a rumour to be a down-to-earth factuality. But the unexpected happened. Ms Pinquee was seen pushing through the flurry.

There was a murmur. The retired judge and the old educationist wiped their spectacles.

Ms Pinquee, it seems, had just returned from a lake miles away. It had never been known who disclosed to her the mystery of the crowd. But the moment she appeared on the terrace and, her hands gracefully resting on her waist, smiled at the crowd, all the hundred smiles disappeared.

"Awfully kind of you to assemble here to see me in the nude!" she remarked and straightened herself and threw away her sparkling mink coat and opened the topmost button of her robe. Her face and neck looked like concentrated moonlight.

The retired judge felt a nasty pain. He was carried home, his pale hands clutching his chest.

By the time Ms Pinquee opened the second button, the educationist lost his walking stick. He slouched and groped for it and had to trundle a long way down the road before he could recover it and walk back home. By the time Ms Pinquee opened the third button, all had turned their backs on her. They were dispersing.

Almost all of them heard Ms Pinquee laughing behind them. Some of them, however, assert that she was crying. But everybody felt sure that she had indeed

shed her clothes, although only the blossoming stars saw her in that exquisite state.

That evening, when the sky and the stars had become closer to Ms Pinquee, the hoary life-style of the town was passing into legends. Once a rumour had become true, the townsfolk's attitude towards the fad underwent a sea-change. The age of the rumour for rumour's sake was over. They just became good and bad people, like those of any other town.



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Old Folks of the Northern Hills

“How much I miss those wonderful old people of the mountain village of the northern frontier!” sighed Mr. John. “Everyone’s youth-crazy these days: we glorify them or fear them – in any case pamper them. But who remembers the grandeur, the greenness that those aged ones I had the grand good luck to meet!” he moaned.

“Did you say greenness?” One of us murmured gently.

“I did and I meant it. Green, creative and original, that’s what they were,” Mr. John asserted, looking at us with contempt. “You chaps can never really enjoy anything innocently beautiful because you are suspicious of everything.”

There was a gust of cool breeze with a spray of crushed rain drops and we moved closer, dragging our chairs away from the window.

“The rain reminds me!” Mr. John sighed again.

We coaxed him into another drink and thereafter he went on slickly:

It reminds me of the annual festival on the small plateau up the hill. A great affair that used to be. It was for the aged only. They would gather there beating drums and blowing bugles and pass the evening frolicking like kittens and singing and shouting with abandon.

The festival commemorated the elopement of a delicate, beautiful princess with a man as ripened and haggard as a scarecrow, a stranger who happened to visit the royal palace one evening and with whom the princess fell headlong in love. None of your beauty and the beast business. The guy was neither a young prince in camouflage nor one under a witch’s spell. He remained the scarecrow he

was. The princess emptied her bucket of love on him for the sheer elegance that was his great age.

So the princess was carried off by the old swain and up the hill they went. When the surprised and curious soldiers of the tiny kingdom pursued them, the princess hid amidst the cliffs and the old man hurled abuses and rocks down at them with such fury that they beat the hastiest retreat in the history of that sky-scraping rocky region.

This glorious event of yore was commemorated through the festival.

Rarely did anybody from your effete civilisation visit the valley. When I did – decades ago – the venerable custom was still in vogue.

I was young and the young were forbidden to be anywhere in the periphery of the plateau. That was understandable. They might observe which grandma danced with which grandpa and raise a scandal. In the true tradition of the ancient lover grandsire, stones and abuses were hurled at anyone babyish trying an ascent. So far as middle-aged ones were concerned, they kept themselves aloof, perhaps looking at such seasonal frenzy of their elders with more amusement than embarrassment. However I was not only tolerated but also welcome because I convinced them that in my veins throbbed the blood of the ancient veteran for whom the drum beats.

I will not narrate to you the details of that singular festival. In fact, I am under oath to keep that banquet of an experience to myself. The colourful crowd was bathed in the lustre of the setting sun. A huge rainbow spanned the sky. All I can say is that in the midst of that hubbub I had had the most splendid hour of my life.

But I don't mind telling you what happened thereafter.

Along with the sunset the wind grew icy and it began to drizzle. Jet-black clouds appeared over the higher range of mountains behind the plateau, with fearful flashes of lightning. The old folks paid no heed to the changing atmosphere and went on with their merrymaking. But I could foresee a cloudburst and made a beeline for my car parked midway the hill.

I was not yet half the way down when the storm did indeed break. I looked over my shoulder and was amazed at the chivalry, not to mention the dexterity, with which the chipper old men supported their ladies while dispersing as fast as dry leaves in a whirlwind. In a few minutes the plateau and the road down to the valley were all empty. I was left alone holding on to the rocks and resisting the fierce wind's efforts to sweep me off.

I crouched in a narrow cave for an hour or so and let the storm subside.

But then the car would not start. I massaged it and banged it and cursed it but it remained as cold as a skeleton.

Exasperated, I got into it and let it coast down to the valley. Half way down there had been a rock-slide. I had to get out and struggle for a full hour in the teeth of the howling sharp wind to clear the passage.

I managed to reach the valley. Right at the entrance of the village was an inn. I had noticed it on my way up and with the meagre moonlight filtering through the mist could now make out its signboard depicting a chicken and a bottle.

The affable innkeeper opened the door and I almost collapsed into his arms. Though himself a bit tipsy, the old man helped me into a large cane chair.

“I am tired and hungry,” I told him. “I will feed you,” he said with what seemed to me a truly saintly smile. Along with the saints themselves that sort of smile too is lost to your world.

“That’s most kind of you. Something sizzling. Yes, a chicken and a bottle. That would be most welcome.”

I was as if fainting. You may not believe it, but that was not purely because of exhaustion, but an uncanny love for delving deeper into the luxury of the unusual space and time – whatever you bland chaps can make out of my statement. The old man threw a blanket on me and fanned the fire beside me.

More than an hour must have passed before he woke me up with a dish of steaming victual, thick slices of bread and a bottle of native elixir. Never before had food and drink meant so much to me, nor it had ever since. I finished them with the concentration of a starving dog.

“This was a dish for gods,” I told my host.

The old man nodded accepting my hyperbole without any false modesty, indeed, without modesty of any kind. “I’m glad you appreciate it. In fact, I had told Johny that it had to be heavenly!”

“I see,” I said taking a fresh sip.

“I told Johny, this is a special night. We must give a special treat to tonight’s special guest.”

“I see,” I said and looked around for Johny.

“And Johny agreed. He was all consideration and compassion.”

“So, Johny did the cooking! I must thank him.”

“You thank him all right. But I did all the cooking. Poor Johny!”

I looked around for poor Johny again. But there wasn’t a soul anywhere. “Is Johny gone?” I asked.

“Gone. Your tummy knows. I did all the cooking. I cooked Johny, the whole of poor bonny Johny, for you.”

“You mean Johny was the name of the chicken?”

“Who are we to call him a chicken? A saint among fowls. Darling Johny!”

My tummy was in turmoil. I tried to laugh, but failed miserably. In yet another attempt to make light of the situation, I said, “You speak as though Johny could talk!”

“Talk! Pearls of wisdom. It had to be heard to be believed.”

I got up and paid the bill which, I must admit, was not unreasonable considering the uniqueness of the repast.

As I went to my car I bumped into an old man. "Sorry," I said, "I didn't see you because of the car."

"Car, is it? I thought it was one of those giant turtles from our high altitude lake," he observed.

They are all drunk – but with something more than any kind of usual drink, I told myself.

The car wouldn't start. But as I stood there cursing it and cursing my fate alternately, the old man staggered forward and asked most affably, "Can I help?"

I was moved. "Very kind of you. It refuses to start. But what can be done?"

"Something can be done, of course! I have a long forgotten drink that had once revived a dead mule. Just pour a pint of it down the engine and I bet it will feel the kick of its life," he said and signalled me to follow him.

"You old folks here are an incredibly funny lot, like the innkeeper over there. He fancies that the fowl he cooked for me, called Johny, could talk!"

The would-be saviour stopped and turned slowly round and stared at me. Even in that faint moonlight I could see how wild his eyes were. "You ate up Johny?" He demanded in a frightened tone.

"Well, I suppose I must have," I croaked, trying to be brave.

The old man let out a shriek. "Then, how is the sun going to rise?" he demanded of me.

"Why shouldn't it rise?" I asked, perplexed.

He staggered off mumbling incoherently about Johny, eternal night without its cockcrow, and cannibals.

A passing horse-carriage came to my rescue. My car was tied to it and after journeying for the rest of the night and the whole of the next day, I reached my camp.

Mr. John stopped and played with the empty glass.

There was a spell of silence.

"Mr. John, won't you tell us a little more about the princess and her daring old man?" one of us asked at last.

"O, I believe I should. Well, in the morning the lover learnt that the princess was hardly young. She was an antique spinster, a lovesick aunt of the king and a formidable headache. That explains why the soldiers retreated so readily. Nevertheless, the lovers lived happily ever after. And it is precisely to celebrate a night's delusion that the old folks wax fantastic once every year. They spin long yarns and are truly under a spell and anybody who comes in contact with them comes under that spell. It required big hearts to appreciate the spirit. What a pity that all is now a remote and vanishing legend!"



The Dusky Horizon

Where do all the butterflies go during a storm? I wondered in my childhood and have continued to wonder over the decades past.

And birds caught up in a gale always saddened me. The sight of their pell-mell flight would bring to my mind a kind of modern poetry – its crazy violence against rhythm.

And if a sudden gust sent a handful of dead leaves spiralling up, I felt myself shot up too and gone with them!

But it was rather strange that storms, birds and dead leaves should tickle my memory while I read a fairy tale.

‘Atop the hill on the horizon lived a certain ogre, quite afraid of the world’, informed the novella, beginning on a somewhat unusual note.

There was a time when I bore in my mind a massive curiosity about ogres. Some of my childhood pals claimed to have bumped into an ogre or two. I did not challenge their claim. All I desired was to gather some intimate details about the ogres – their social and family background, the reasons for their invariably wearing black looks, their eyes and nostrils spouting sparks, their teeth rattling non-stop, and their not taking to farming or bee-keeping or some such blameless vocations as our fathers and uncles did.

No sooner had I read about the hill on the horizon than I remembered the hill on the outskirts of my village. Because of its resemblance to a peacock with spread-out tail it was called the Peacock Hill and though not very high, to us kids it was the Himalaya.

Although I had passed all my days since my early youth in cities where

darkness meant only the lights turned off, I had never forgotten the grandeur of the rural darkness, awfully alive, like a surging flood throbbing with impulses and emotions of its own, which, in my childhood, used to assume its most impressive and terrifying stance on the Peacock Hill.

From time to time, when the moon hung over the hill, the tall trees atop it looked like a solemn committee of supernatural beings in session, with the moon's future and several other equally important issues on their agenda.

I had heard, right from the age I was able to make out the meaning of words, that an ogre dwelt in the thicker part of the forest on our hill. Although no one ever told me much about him, I knew that thunder was his mother tongue and that his breakfast often included a naughty little fellow like me.

Peacock Hill, naturally, was a forbidden world for us despite all our fascination for it.

When I grew up and came to look upon myself as a young man with progressive ideas, I strung together such facts as, I felt, explained the genesis of the ogre legend.

It must have been long before I was born, at a time when there was no restriction on gathering wood from the forest. One winter evening, on their way home after the day's work, some woodcutters saw a column of smoke coiling up above a clump of trees. On reaching the spot they discovered a stranger – to be identified later as the ogre – huddling over a fire. The stranger had probably looked up with some surprise and let out a scream.

I analysed the sequence:

The stranger's eyes must have reflected the flames, thereby giving an impression that they spouted sparks; His scream, combined with the howling wind, must have sounded eerie and blood-curdling; since no human being was known to live on the hill, the woodcutters promptly concluded that the stranger was an ogre, or at least did not contradict their listeners when some of them acknowledged him as one.

But this was by no means the only rumour about the stranger on the hill. He was believed by some to be a fugitive from the law, an absconding gallant who had murdered ten or twenty rogues for the sake of the lady he loved. Grannies, who took a more liberal view of realism, stretched the number of his victims to one hundred and one.

My father's generation, in its youth, took pride in pointing out to their visiting relatives or friends this great attraction of our neighbourhood – the round clump of forest on the hill. But the legend of the stranger hiding there received a most unexpected turn from one of their friends, an ambitious village lad and a budding scholar in history.

Like the Tulsi plant giving out its holy fragrance from its very first sprouting,

this lad had shown the signs of his distinctiveness right from his childhood. While still a student in the Middle English School, he had begun practising Pranayam with nostrils closed, or the *Tratok* – gazing at a lamp for hours on end to muster hypnotic power of concentration – always choosing a conspicuous as well as consequential spot for his practice – such as the temple courtyard or the cemetery.

Most of the villagers believed that he would do great things when he grew up. And it augured well for such predictions when he became the first-ever youth from our area to proceed to the town for higher studies.

My father recalled that the bamboo-legged, pipe-necked youth always looked agog with exciting ideas. One summer vacation, he descended on the village with the notion, which he ‘confided’ to every second man he met, that the dweller on the hill was none other than the legendary Nana Sahib, the hero of the Sepoy Mutiny.

He must have read the accounts of Nana’s mysterious disappearance, and the arrest by the British of several lunatics and mendicants suspecting them to be the legendary leader in disguise, of Nana’s wife refusing to live like a widow, and the rumour that Nana met her secretly on the holy Shivaratri night, year after year.

The youth explained, with the help of a map he had drawn, the logic leading to his conclusion. Stammering or choking with excitement, he would indicate where Nana had last been seen fighting and would then proceed to show how in the course of his retreat the fugitive must have taken to a river-way and, his boat led by the north-wind of the season, must have touched a certain town and the town then being under the seize of the East India Company, must have followed a certain forest route and reached the outskirts of our village and at last found a haven on Peacock Hill.

But the youth’s mind must have been ruptured by a formidable conflict. He had gathered the intelligence that Nana carried with him a fabulous treasure. Should he make his way into Nana’s company, befriend him and in due course inherit his property, or should he inform the government and go satisfied with a promised reward of rupees ten thousand only?

He had at last decided in favour of the second course of action which held out not only the certainty of a reward, but also the prospect of a high-level friendship with the British which might, when matured, yield him a knighthood.

The youth secured an appointment with the English collector-cum-magistrate of our district. The sahib listened to him patiently, but finally said, ‘Baboo! Please leave the poor old Nana in peace. Goodbye, Baboo, goodbye!’

This obliged the youth to take recourse to the other option – that of befriending Nana. If only he had so requested, my father or any of his friends would have readily accompanied him to the hill. But he kept the adventure all to himself.

Though after his descent from the hill he spoke no more of Nana, to those who cared to observe him he seemed even more worked up.

In fact, a new revelation had dawned on him: the hill contained rich ores of varieties of precious metals. On condition of being allowed a regular share of the profit from their mining, he was willing to reveal his discovery to any reputable firm.

Eventually he succeeded in luring an expert from Bird & Co., a well-known British enterprise, to our village. After passing a hard day on the hill with the youth for his guide, the weary and drowsy Englishman suddenly expressed a desire to see his father.

In broken Hindi, the Sahib whispered to the eager old man: "Gentleman, your boy nourishes a bee in his bonnet. You must see to it that he got rid of it. And, confidentially, nothing would be a better cure than thrusting on him a wife. He would forthwith stop exploring the hills. Ha ha!"

The youth continued loitering on the hill for a week or so more. Nobody saw him thereafter. His old father, too unwell to go looking for him, lay on a cot under a banyan tree in front of his house and asked all and sundry if they had by any chance sighted his son. By and by his mind became so feeble that he put the question to even monkeys if his dim vision spotted one on the tree.

He did so for a long time and then gave up.

With the youth's disappearance the speculation about the dweller on the hill entered a new phase; some asserted that he was a wizard, engaged in secret rites, and the youth must have come in handy to him to be sacrificed at the altar of his deity. Some others were of the opinion that he was a Yaksha, guardian of the immeasurable wealth lying buried in the hill. Since the youth coveted the wealth, the demi-god had whisked him off to the netherworld.

By the time I was old enough to appreciate legends, the Yaksha had been reduced to an ogre once again.

Had our people's imagination been tempered by a little more empathy, they would not have let the ogre seethe in the sun and soak in the rain and shiver in the cold all alone, but would have found an ogress to keep him company.

As I pursued the fairy tale, I could not stop the solitary ogre of our Peacock Hill from coming back to my mind again and again.

* * *

The epoch-making downfall of Shri Jagatbandhu Das, a distinguished young man of our village, had occurred nearly half a century before my birth. But the episode was still discussed from time to time, often with so much animation and in such confident tones that the speakers seemed to have been witnesses to it down to the exact second of its occurrence.

Jagatbandhu's father owned a small zamindari comprising two adjacent villages. Being the only son of a reasonably affluent father, handsome and a medical student to boot, he had become a bright flame towards which the guardians of the girls of marriageable age rushed like moths, only to be thrown off with their wings of enthusiasm singed. Before some of them the proud Jagatbandhu would feign lunacy while before others he would behave like one inflamed with an insatiable greed for dowry. When in a serious mood, he would confide to the appalled parents that he had managed to banish or neutralize the planets in his horoscope which had conspired to bring about his marriage!

But, alas, no sooner had Jagatbandhu qualified as a doctor than he fell in love with a Christian nurse. For at least a fortnight from the day of that ominous news reaching our village, the solemn ones among our elders were seen walking the roads with their heads hung and their faces pulled long likerotten cucumbers.

They straightened their heads only when the progressive and ever-optimistic Jagatbandhu, appearing in the village with his bride, was not only obliged by his father to take shelter in their cowshed, but also was completely ostracized by the villagers, who showed exemplary unity on this issue.

In the cowshed Jagatbandhu's wife took ill. Nobody came to their aid. The young man was even forbidden the use of the village ponds and had to fetch water from the river himself. Respectable men from several nearby villages, umbrellas stuck under their arms, came to steal glimpses of Jagatbandhu's plight. And, of course, those among them who tried to catch his attention with meaningful coughs were the fathers of girls earlier snubbed by him.

At last, one midnight, when Jagatbandhu's father secretly entered the cowshed with a pair of blankets, some milk, fruits, and two streams of tears on his pale cheeks, Jagatbandhu could not help blurting out, 'Father! I've reconciled myself to your heartlessness, but I'm afraid your cowardice and hypocrisy will drive me mad!'

Leaving the gifts untouched, Jagatbandhu left for the town as soon as it was dawn, his wife limping behind him to the bus stop several miles away.

The father took to bed, shocked at his son's failure to realize that in the prevailing circumstances he could have hardly done anything better than revealing his tears to him only at midnight. He died a heart-broken man.

His Christian daughter-in-law followed suit. But she left behind her a son.

The son grew up into a brilliant scholar and duly married and produced a daughter. Then, along with his wife, he too bade a sudden farewell to the world.

Jagatbandhu continued to live amidst an abundance of deaths. To see him was to feel the impact of a full three-act tragedy. He wore a long gown, a round khaki cap and thick glasses. His face looked blurred behind the puffs of smoke

from his cheroot. I suspect he wished to hide himself. We saw very little of him anyway for he rarely visited the village.

The world had taken great leaps forward since the time of Jagatbandhu's revolutionary romance half a century ago, and their impact on our village was obvious. For example, several well-to-do villagers had led their families on exploratory trips to the town and had returned with family photographs with ornate frames, which decorated the walls of their homes along with the colourful portraits of gods, goddesses and King George the Sixth. One bespectacled gentleman subscribed to a weekly and carried under his arm-pit a bundle of the back numbers of the periodical wherever he went.

To top it all, a post office and a government dispensary had opened in a village notorious for its modern lifestyle, only three miles away from ours. Several gentlemen of the surrounding villages who had no reason whatever to expect a letter, made it a practice to pay occasional visits to the post office and to exchange courtesies with the postmaster, thus keeping pace with the times.

At the dispensary, not only did those running high temperatures press the thermometer under their armpit and thereby transferred their unwelcome heat into it, but also others with pains from a cut or a boil pleaded with the doctor's assistant, whose designation was Compounder but who was locally called Kuru-Pandav, to be treated with that magic glass stick. They felt great relief when obliged.

In such a changed climate there was no question of boycotting Jagatbandhu any longer. He was, rather, treated with some reverence.

But this time Jagatbandhu had not come alone. It had become easier for the elders to accept Jagatbandhu, but for us village boys – the girls did not count – the question of accepting Lily, Jagatbandhu's grand-daughter, whom we saw for the first time, was out of the question.

Firstly, she was a girl. Secondly, she wore a frock at eleven by which age all our sisters in the village had outgrown their first sarees.

Then, she was in the habit of audaciously surveying us from top to toe through her gold-rimmed glasses without the slightest regard for our budding maleness.

Moreover, she knew English and had several other dubious qualities which went with that.

Though we the village boys often quarrelled and fought among ourselves, we belonged to a single world, after all. And I have often questioned the wisdom of Providence in suddenly springing amidst us a girl from a different culture, almost from an alien world, thereby wreaking havoc in our lives.

But I did not understand why, in my eighties, the memory of Lily should disturb me while I was trying to enjoy a fairy tale.

The main character in the fiction was a shy and lonely girl. The author had

cleverly avoided telling us why on earth a sweet little thing like that should be required to live, all alone, in a forest. I suppose she had come there with her parents who had perished under some tragic circumstance, leaving her all alone. At first the girl's playmates were a few squirrels and butterflies. When she grew up a little, several hares befriended her. Later she got to know a herd of antelopes. These friends imparted to her the art of lightning quickness in her movements. A swarm of bees were her early music teachers; but soon they placed her in charge of a flock of cuckoos who, when they had taught her all they knew, guided her to a gorge amidst a row of caverns deep in the forest where the wind composed extraordinary symphonies, with a murmuring brook contributing to the melody.

Stars taught her the alphabet and she learnt love from the rainbow, smiles from the flowers, aspirations from the sunrise, sadness from the sunset and dreams from the moonlight.

Although we had no hares or antelopes in our village, we had plenty of butterflies and a notable number of squirrels. From time to time rainbows were observed and cuckoos heard. We had a river flowing by, if not a brook. And we had sunrises, sunsets, moonlight, stars and flowers galore. But I do not know if Lily was impressed.

I was away in my maternal uncle's village when Lily had arrived. On my return two days later I found the atmosphere in our boys' world tense. Our natural leader, Hatakishore alias Hatu and the deputy leader, Navin, sat under the banyan tree on the river-bank, our usual place of meeting at twilight, with faces drawn as if it were the eve of the school opening after a vacation.

'When did you return?' asked an agitated Hatu, and before I had replied, asked again, 'Have you seen the creature?'

'What?' I asked, suspecting that some new teacher had descended on us.

'Stupid!' muttered Hatu.

Hatu, being the leader, had the prerogative of making such arbitrary comments. Even so I felt a bit humiliated. My father had lately acquired a new bullock-cart and had also become the secretary of our primary school. I had expected Hatu to take note of the elevation in my status brought about by such developments.

But I always avoided quarrelling with him, partly because I was physically weaker and partly because I believed that Hatu would bully his way into a bright future.

But as they described the totally unforeseen menace that was Lily, my sense of inadequacy grew more and more acute.

'As she passed this way the other day, looking at things through her glasses with that insufferable vanity, Hatu followed her stealthily and when quite close,

gave out such a terrific scream that her spleen could have burst like a watermelon,' reported Navin.

'And would you like to know what Navin did? The little smarty had put on a dazzling new frock. Navin passed by her at great speed, in the process emptying a shellful of babul juice on it. Be sure, the stain will never vanish even if the frock is boiled down to a pulp!' added Hatu.

I understood that every member of our company worth his salt had already done his best to teach the proud Lily a lesson or two. I alone was lagging behind.

'So, that's all you fellows could do, eh? Had I been here, I would have, well, eh...' I tried to be aggressive in a bid to make up for my backwardness, but my brain, weakened by frequent bouts of malaria, failed to come up with the necessary idea to complete my sentence.

'Well, well, you are very much here now, aren't you, baby? Why don't you do what you should have already done?' retorted Navin.

'Done, eh? What could a funk, a sissy, a nanny-goat like him do?' Hatu spoke to Navin, pointing at me. 'With one look through her glasses she could teach even an expert shiverer like him how to shiver better!'

I used to feel awfully embarrassed at any reference to my shivering. God alone knew how much will power I had to muster to still my limbs when a friend or a relative visited me while I was under an attack of malaria.

'She'd look through her glasses at me? Look at me? At me? Why, don't I know how to smash her glasses?' I asserted myself.

'Cheerio, sonny, but take my advice, approach her with your shorts off. You might catch cold, for you are certain to wet your linen.' Navin laughed, inspired by his own wit.

'Never! You are welcome to feel my shorts after I had done my job!' I put a lot more vigour into my voice and that generated some self-confidence.

We set out at the crack of dawn. The crows had just begun their trial flights through the fog. Catapult in hand I advanced slowly and took position behind a bush flanked by tall tyrees. Hatu and Navin crouched under some thorny hedges a few yards away.

I had spent the first half of the night without any sleep and the latter half with bizarre dreams. Hatu and Navin had passed on the intelligence to me that Lily regularly appeared on her balcony a little before sunrise and enjoyed gazing at the eastern horizon. Although I had proclaimed my determination to smash her glasses, my leaders were considerate enough not to demand that I do it

standing face to face with her. My talent in bringing down guavas and mangoes with shots from the catapult, however, was well recognized in the village, and they had told me that it would do if I adopted the same method for achieving the current objective.

The door and the window on Lily's balcony had already been opened by their temporary servant before we took our position. Faces flushed with excitement, my captains signalled me to keep my catapult ready, for the sun was about to rise and it was time for Lily to appear on her balcony.

I tried to keep my hands steady, but they were trembling like those of one possessed by a spirit. In a nook of my heart I felt awfully unhappy at what I was going to do, but I had come to realize that on the success of this my holy mission against the arrogant and aggressive urban femininity rested not only the hoary tradition of our bravado, but also the entire edifice of masculine superiority.

Hatu and Navin suddenly seemed anxious to convey some urgent message to me with frantic movements of almost all their limbs. In my nervousness I concluded that the target had already been sighted. With my weapon raised, I strained my eyes to locate her.

In the twinkling of an eye my catapult was gone – snatched away! I whirled around.

The earth seemed to have drastically increased its rotation. Soon everything dimmed before my vision and faded out.

When I began to see again, I found myself being dragged along by a luminous being whom I could have mistaken as a supernatural phenomenon had she not been wearing glasses.

Thus was I kidnapped – and from the very midst of those in whose power of protection I had until then an unqualified faith.

After we reached a spacious room on the upper floor, Lily loosened her grip on my wrist and pushed me towards a grandfatherly chair. I dropped into it like a sandbag.

'Whom did you want to aim at – Grandpa or myself? And why? What harm have we done to you?' asked Lily in a voice that was sharp and clear as a whistle, while rubbing her glasses on her apparel.

I did something terribly embarrassing before I was aware of it. I burst into tears. And that came as such a surprise to Lily that for some time she could do nothing except rub her glasses more vigorously and mumble, 'Sorry, but I'm so sorry!' Then, in a flash, she brought out a colourful tin box and opened its lid, holding it close to my eyes.

I took time to identify as toffees what at first looked like a swarm of well-dressed bees about to take off. Not that toffees were not available in the nearest market, but I had never seen them donning colourful and dazzling paper frocks.

I quickly overcame my misgivings and picked up three of them, one after another. I felt a thrill even before I tasted them. We were under the impression that the townsfolk summoned the police even to drive flies from the tips of their noses. But Lily's gesture reassured me that she did not intend to hand me over to any such fearsome agency.

'Missing your two followers left behind behind hedges?' Lily asked and smiled. She looked beautiful.

I warmed up. Oppressed by Hatu and Navin all my life, today I was being looked upon as their leader. My satisfaction was great.

Indeed, soon I began to feel pity for Hatu and Navin. At the same time there was a feeling of revolt against them. Though they did nothing to stop Lily from catching me, they would nevertheless ridicule me savagely for my inability to escape. Little would they realize that while they stood in the damp, suffering horrendous mosquitoes and scratches from thorns, I was being feasted on the choicest toffees, being addressed respectfully and regarded as the leader of the gang. They would not believe me even if I were to swear by the presiding goddess of our village.

Lily repeated her question.

'They are Hatu and Navin, I mean Shri Hatakishore Das and Shri Navinchandra Mishra,' I replied, wiping my eyes.

'Why not call them here?'

I welcomed the idea but found myself on the verge of tears again.

'What's the matter?' enquired Lily anxiously, looking at my contorted cheeks. Although ashamed, I made bold to confess my fear that she might inform them about my crying. Lily promptly assured me under oath that she would never -never do such a thing.

We then sat in a serious discussion trying to hatch a scheme to win over Hatu and Navin. I wrote a note – that was the first ever letter I inscribed in my life -: 'I'm taken prisoner. I will be let off only if you two present yourselves here. Otherwise Lily's Grandpa will telephone to the police and that will mean our arrest as well as of our parents! I have been offered delicious toffees. The same good luck awaits you. I am hale and hearty!'

That important people of the town took recourse to a magic instrument called telephone had lately become a part of our general knowledge. And I could terrify my friend swearing by its name because we were yet to learn about the paraphernalia required for the system to operate.

At Lily's advice I rolled up two toffees in the scrap of paper carrying the message. Looking through the window, I could see Hatu and Navin, agape and drooling, gazing up at me. I signalled them to come nearer. That only enlarged the size of their gaping. They did not stir.

I smiled, relishing this diminution in their status.

After some exchange of signals, I hurled the small bundle at them. They opened it, examined the toffees with amazement and read the note with keen interest and, casting doubtful glances at me, slowly advanced towards the house. I went down to receive them.

‘Let us get away, now that you are free,’ proposed Hatu in a suppressed tone at the door.

‘That would be sheer cowardice,’ I said. ‘And what would stop them from calling the police, anyway?’ Then I whispered, ‘Tasted those toffees? She has a lot more. Think of that! And, believe me, she is an angel despite her specs.’

I led them up the stairs, enjoying the proudest moment in my life.

Lily greeted them with smiles and matronly pats. Then, holding a hanky under Hatu’s nose, she commanded, ‘Blow; do not leave it hanging like icicles!’

The idea of using a clean, scented hanky for removing his nasty mucus was a little too much even for Hatu. He blinked and obeyed the command.

‘I love to nurse patients in Grandpa’s clinic,’ said Lily, herself wiping Hatu’s nose and then throwing the hanky to a corner of the floor.

Next, her gaze was fixed on Navin.

‘Unbutton your shorts, please!’ she directed him.

Even I blushed, what to speak of the hapless Navin.

But Hatu’s natural instinct for leadership was toning up after its momentary languor.

‘Open, I say!’ he bellowed at Navin.

‘Don’t be rude!’ Lily took Hatu to task and began unbuttoning Navin’s shorts herself. Before I had grasped her intention, she pushed the soiled lower portion of Navin’s shirt into his shorts and buttoning them up, observed, ‘This is how it should be. Don’t you look smarter now?’

‘I always insert my shirt in that fashion,’ declared Hatu with a snigger, although he hardly ever put on a shirt. At the moment both he and I sported bare chests.

‘You couldn’t have had time for breakfast, I bet – why should you be nibbling your nails otherwise?’ asked Lily, looking at Hatu. At once Hatu’s hand was down.

‘Better I bring something to eat.’ She disappeared into an anteroom.

Biting his nails and spitting them out was a habit with Hatu, but now he lost no time in boasting, ‘Do you see how I made her get me breakfast?’

But I had suddenly stopped being impressed by Hatu’s glib talk and mendacity. Lily’s charm, manners and speech had started widening my horizon.

She returned with a packet of biscuits and four or five oranges. I knew that Hatu was getting ready to say something extraordinary. ‘I can’t eat much, for I

took a plateful of halwa and a pair of laddoos only half an hour ago,' he declared, fixing his greedy eyes on the items.

Hatu's breakfast generally consisted of a bowlful of leftover rice from the previous night mixed with water, salt, an onion, and a chillipod. But it was no use challenging him. His petite head could always generate an explanation like a magician producing a pigeon from his hat.

'But you must finish at least these oranges. They will rot otherwise. We brought a basketful of them with us,' said Lily. That was the first-ever time someone was coaxing us to eat such delicacies.

We complied with her request without qualms. Oranges and biscuits have never tasted the same during the next seven decades of my life.

'Do you drink tea?' asked Lily.

'No,' said Navin.

'Oh, yes,' Hatu replied smartly. 'But I don't mind going without it.'

Lily and Hatu were soon drinking tea. Hatu, no doubt, singed his lips and tongue with the first sip, but carried on with commendable composure.

Navin and I sat stunned. Until then we had regarded tea as a luxury belonging to the category of wine, enjoyed only by the elderly aristocrats. Nobody drank tea in our village. The nearest tea-drinker, one Natbar, belonged to the modern village mentioned earlier. He had served for a while in the city where he contracted the habit. To distinguish him from his several namesakes, people called him Natbar the tea-drinker.

The only child of Natbar, a girl, had married a farmer belonging to our village. The unfortunate woman did not bear any child and I had heard our aunts attributing her barrenness to a congenital defect in her system resulting from her father's addiction to tea.

It was only when her husband failed to father a child even after marrying twice more that the aunts stopped blaming Natbar the tea-drinker for the state of affairs.

We took leave of Lily after promising to come again in the afternoon. She stood near her window and waved us. We just grinned.

For some time we walked in silence. Once on the river-bank Hatu suddenly began hobbling and staggering and circling. His eyes took on a funny, glazed look. Although none of our villagers had ever got drunk, we had once seen a drunkard in a drama in the aforesaid modern village. Navin and myself exchanged meaningful glances, sure that the intoxication that was the tea had begun to act on Hatu.

We sat down under the banyan tree suppressing our amusement as well as anxiety. Hatu gambolled for a while and then jabbered meaningless phrases and boxed our ears and tore our hair. We put up with his conduct

and blushed with a faint pride to see one of us experiencing a state of high intoxication.

At last Hatu sprawled on the grass. After some brisk consultation we picked up a coconut-shell and fetched water from the river and sprinkled it on his face. He opened his eyes, feigned bewilderment and then smirked and went away.

* * *

The modern village had a Middle English School. We had heard that on Sundays the boys in the hostel indulged in a game called ludo. Lily was going to give us lessons in that pastime in the afternoon. We had all come with the bottoms of our shirts tucked into our shorts. Our mothers, pleased that we had struck friendship with Lily, had wiped our faces with wet cloths and combed our hair.

Lily was in salwar and kameej, a dress we had never seen before.

Jagatbandhu once entered our room and threw an affable smile at us. It was only Hatu, hats off to his remarkable presence of mind, who could manage to offer him a prompt salutation. We managed to bow in a haste.

Since that was the only double-storeyed house in the village, we enjoyed surveying the landscape through the window. The sun was setting and Navin suddenly clapped his hands in ecstasy, mumbling, 'All gold, all gold, the rippling river and the glittering fields beyond!'

Lily looked at him with admiration. 'You should grow into a writer or a poet. Your ears are so big!' she observed.

Navin had to frequently undergo humiliation for his big ears, for every teacher would box them till his cheeks turned red with pain. But today they turned red for a totally different reason, though because of his ears again.

We were treated to fried cashewnuts and cheese-sweets. Hatu again joined Lily in drinking tea.

'Should we go to the riverside for a stroll?' suggested Lily.

'Why not!' Navin and I jumped at the idea. In fact we were most eager for the village folk to see us in the company of Lily. But Hatu seemed determined to sabotage the plan. He said that a certain dog had lately been observed behaving rabidly and that the sight of a stranger like Lily might provoke it to attack. Also, he said, an unusually large number of snakes had lately taken to visiting one another's holes in the evening.

As Lily did not appear frightened, Hatu brought in ghosts. He narrated the story of the young widow who had been murdered along with her infant child and whose ghost was sometimes seen washing her baby in the river on moonlit nights. Any new mother who happened to see her was doomed to lose her own

child. There was also the famous old miser who forgot where he had buried his jar of gold and went on digging all over his compound till his death, whose ghost could occasionally be seen or heard, digging and searching.

‘Is there a population of ghosts in the town too?’ I asked, trying to sound chaste.

Lily answered rather sadly, ‘Yes, but perhaps not as big as you have here. I know of only one case. Years ago, there was a fair in the suburb. A photographer had camped there. One evening a gentleman, holding his infant granddaughter in his lap, posed for a picture. He did so on an impulse, for he could have surely visited a better studio. However, when the picture was ready, the photographer observed, “I don’t understand why the lady’s picture should come so indistinct.”

‘“But there was no lady with me unless you refer to this big venerable one!” commented the gentleman showing the child.

“Who then was standing behind you, holding on to your chair?” asked the surprised photographer, and showed the picture to the gentleman who, as soon as he looked at it, exclaimed astonishment and retained his balance holding on to the chair. The phantom figure was his dead daughter-in-law, that is to say, my mother. Grandpa was the gentleman and I was the baby he held.’

Lily wiped her eyes. We sat in silence while the twilight turned into evening.

‘I wish I had seen that figure. But by the time I was capable of distinguishing between things natural and supernatural, the figure had completely faded out.’

However, Lily appeared to get over her gloom in a moment. ‘You have so many ghosts here. Can’t you show me one?’ she asked with a giggle.

We welcomed the change in her mood and while we were unable to promise showing her what she would like to see, we were eager to tell her about the many wonders of Peacock Hill. In the dusk the hilltop looked like an island floating on the horizon. The forest assumed a new, even more forbidding aspect and one just could not doubt that unearthly creatures galore, goblins, ghosts or demons, corporeal or ethereal, crowded the region. Perhaps they peeped at you if you thought of them.

There was another spell of silence during which we saw a swarm of stars emerging above the hill.

Lily stood up all of a sudden, the ends of her thin dupatta flying in the breeze like two flames, and exclaimed, ‘And can’t we go there – to the hill?’

The daring suggestion startled us. At the same time, her fascination with the hill and her reckless call to adventure sent a subtle thrill coursing through our veins.

We explained to her that visiting the hill at that late hour was not practical. However, if she was keen about it, we could start early in the afternoon the next day and return before evening.

‘Well, then, you may leave now for playing ha-tu-tu. I no longer feel like strolling on the riverbank,’ she said as she stood up without looking at us.

We left her reluctantly. I had a strong feeling that she wanted to be alone in order to weep.

Hatu began to stagger as soon as we were on the road. I was in a solemn mood and Hatu’s clowning disgusted me.

‘Stop your tomfoolery!’ I shouted.

Hatu, taken aback, became sober.

‘It is a bluff that one could get drunk on tea! In the morning you showed signs of intoxication immediately. How is it that this time the signs waited for two hours to show up? And it is only because you desired to enact this farce that you dissuaded Lily from coming out for a stroll, didn’t you? You are a wretched liar. Lily would be the last person to drink tea if it had such a bad effect!’ I blurted out.

Hatu flinched and couldn’t reply for a few seconds. He must have felt the very ground on which his hitherto unchallenged leadership, his false superiority rested, slipping away.

‘Shut up,’ he shouted back finally. ‘Lily would not drink tea if its effect were this bad? As if you know every bit of Lily! Is she a nincompoop like you? How do you forget that she is a town-girl? She can drink even wine! Yes, wine! It is called – I bet you have never even heard the word – brandy! How much of the goings-on of this wide world do you know?’

‘Stop.’ Navin joined me in shouting Hatu down. ‘We will ask her tomorrow! She never drinks wine, I’ll pledge my head to prove it.’

‘Ask her, would you? I’ll murder you!’ yelled Hatu with appropriate histrionics.

‘But what about those signs of drunkenness in you?’ I demanded with a chuckle.

‘Why, here they are!’ Hatu resumed staggering and humming to himself.

We let him stagger and went our way.

एकः सूतः सकलम्

Throughout the forenoon I was in a state of exhilaration – the kind of feeling which in later years had visited me only for brief moments, at a sudden touch of the spring breeze or at a whiff of the fragrance of some forgotten flower.

We had visited Peacock Hill only twice or thrice before, needless to say through the courtesy of the elders and under their stewardship. To launch an independent expedition was an event of untold significance in the process of our personal evolution. We could not have dreamt of the adventure but for Lily’s inspiration.

Hatu’s face looked as fresh as morning, unmarred by any trace of discomfiture

or embarrassment. People born to be leaders must be endowed with a special kind of forgetfulness.

The sun had just begun its westward slant when we set out upon our journey, giving no hint of our plans to anyone else. Lily, with a winning smile, told Jagatbandhu, 'Grandpa! I'm going for an outing with these my most dependable friends. You should not worry if I am a bit late in coming home. Is that all right?'

'Well, well, worry of course I must. But you can go,' he replied, returning the smile.

We put the biscuits and the last few oranges into a bag and left. We followed an unused track and, after crossing the village, abandoned it and took a shortcut through the paddy fields.

It must have been quite trying for Lily. But she never murmured, not even while climbing the hill.

Midway to the top, we relaxed on a rock and ate the oranges. Below, the green crops in the fields rippled and swayed without losing their tranquillity. A couple of birds flew by at our level.

In keeping with the mood of the hour, Lily narrated to us the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, which were like nothing we had ever heard and hence even Hatu listened with rapt attention. At our demand Lily told us a few other stories as well.

I had a feeling that we were floating weightlessly high above the earth, wafted by the erratic breeze. Until then we had not realized how treacherously swift the hours could be if they got a chance. By the time we reached the top, the sun was already disappearing at the remote edge of the forest.

But the sun, pursued by an armada of ominous clouds, looked very pale, as if it knew that with its declining prowess it could hardly withstand their attack.

There were some clouds, like a few shovelfuls of dust flung into the sky, even when we had set out. We had chosen not to notice them. But now they had swelled to menacing proportions.

'We had better hurry back,' I was prompted to suggest. Navin supported me. But Hatu silenced us, saying, 'Cowards, what then are we going to show her? Now that the biscuits and oranges are finished, you are ready to hurry back, aren't you? Why did you come at all?'

We understood that he had not quite forgotten his humiliation of the previous evening and was now determined to take it out on us.

Lily looked embarrassed. No doubt she appreciated our fear, but since Hatu opposed us swearing by her name and also perhaps because she was curious to see a bit more of the hill, she proposed a compromise: 'Let us just have a peep into the forest and then we'll leave.'

We had hardly spent fifteen minutes when the wind suddenly turned cold and cruel. The trees raised a terrific chorus of a thousand hissing voices and waved their branches frantically, signalling us to flee immediately. We huddled under a big tree.

‘Are you all afraid? This is only a passing phenomenon,’ announced Hatu like a master in all the secrets of the elements.

Soon there came lightning and thunderclaps. I had never seen such dazzling flashes nor heard such deafening sounds before. The rain falling like cascades followed. The familiar fields at the foot of the hill and the faint contours of our village beyond them disappeared completely. And as soon as that happened we felt cut off, as if deprived of our sole link with life.

The wind was intent on tearing us away from our shelter, but we had nowhere else to go. We clung on to the tree-trunk.

‘My glasses! O God, they are gone,’ Lily cried out suddenly. Then the downpour became even heavier and I stood blinded.

A large branch of the tree came crashing down.

‘We must get away and descend through the Snail’s Route,’ proposed Hatu, lest the whole tree should fall.’

The so-called Snail’s Route that was too difficult to climb from the foot of the hill, but provided a short-cut down, was quite near our shelter. We took Hatu’s advice and followed him. He was relatively more familiar with the route.

‘Forget your glasses. Let us first get out,’ I advised Lily when I located her, screaming to be heard above the storm.

‘But I am practically blind without them!’ she cried in despair. I could hear nothing more, for the howling wind swallowed up her words.

‘Hold on to me,’ I shouted and extended my right hand. She caught it and followed me, stumbling again and again.

We reached the descent. Climbing down was not possible with the use of only one hand. We had to clutch at plants and rocks. I removed my hand from Lily’s.

‘Follow us and do as we do,’ we told her and began the difficult and risky negotiation with all the concentration we could muster. The rain and wind continued unabated while one cloud after another seemed to burst on us like shells.

Separated from one another and with our limbs strained, cramped and badly bruised, we continued our descent, for the most part keeping our faces towards the slippery rock and holding on as tightly as we could to the bushes which did not spare us their biting thorns.

At last we reached the base. It was far too dark to see anything at all. Hatu tried to grasp my hand with his stiff fingers and asked, ‘Where is Lily?’

I did not know. Even my memory seemed frozen. The storm, after barely a minute's respite, was evidently entering a new phase through the display of a fresh series of lightning. And every time the lightning flashed, it seemed to reveal to us the tribe of demons, the beings of darkness, chuckling around us, as if they could throttle the lot of us any moment and fling us into some darker pit like dead lizards.

* * *

I sat on my bed, tucked under a blanket, drinking a glass of hot milk and refusing to reply to any of the numerous questions asked by my parents.

A torch flashed on our verandah. Father went out and held the lantern high. I saw Jagatbandhu, slightly stooping, water dripping from his raincoat. The storm had subsided.

'Where is Lily?' he aimed his question at me. Behind him stood Hatu and Navin, their fathers and a few other villagers. I did not know what my friends had said. As soon as my eyes met Navin's, we both burst into wailing. Hatu wiped his eyes repeatedly without looking at us.

Jagatbandhu did not ask us many questions. Accompanied by a dozen men including Hatu, Navin and myself and half a dozen lanterns protected by palm-leaf raincoats, he proceeded towards the hill. Two young men stayed on at his house. One of them was to run and inform us, shouting his utmost all the while, in case Lily managed to return home on her own.

Hatu, Navin and I, brave explorers only a few hours ago, were now carried on the shoulders of three able-bodied villagers. We had no strength to walk.

The climb was forbidding and long. They began by searching the small area on the top to which our movement had been limited. Jagatbandhu called out for Lily repeatedly and frantically, his voice growing louder and louder till it cracked.

And then all was silent except for the big drops of water dripping from the upper layers of leaves to the lower and, from some distance in the woods, an intermittent moaning of some beast in agony.

The party started descending through the Snail's Route. We three boys had to repeat our performance. All the bushes and dark areas on the way were thoroughly searched. Jagatbandhu had fallen silent, but the others had resumed calling out for Lily.

Midway down the route was a precipice on one side, perhaps made by a landslip in the primeval past. Jagatbandhu focused his torch down it. It slipped from his trembling hand.

But it continued to focus on the object he had located even when it lay on

the patch of grass below. And looking down, we could see Lily's small face, quiet as a flower.

All hurried down, Jagatbandhu with the support of others. He sat down and examined his granddaughter – perhaps the last case in his career as a physician – and continued to sit still.

It drizzled for a while even after that. The lanterns gave out one by one. The moaning from the forest appeared to come closer. But Jagatbandhu, Lily's head in his lap, sat like a statue. None dared to disturb him.

The next day, Lily was buried on that very spot. Jagatbandhu then left the place and, in a few hours, the village. It was a cloudy morning and the whole village lay as though in a stupor, fallen under a spell of silence.

Once before too he had left our village, in a somewhat similar situation, half a century ago. But then he had in him the spirit of a rebel, the dream of leading a life free of everything rotten he was leaving behind.

It was so different today! We stood at a distance and looked on as he got into a bullock-cart. Later in life, often when I had occasions to pray, I said, 'Grant me, O Lord, that never again should I see a man as forlorn as Jagatbandhu!'

* * *

The fairy tale lay in my lap, I don't know for how long, while Lily dominated my mind as the full moon dominates the sky.

Then I forced myself to finish the book.

Upon the hill, skirted by a deep wood, lived the strange ogre. Once every year the people of the kingdom came there to enjoy tormenting the creature that hid in a cavern to save himself from the fireballs they hurled at him. Not that the people really wanted him to come out. But his cry of agony thrilled them.

The gathering dispersed after sunset.

One day, the sweet little girl who lived in the forest came upon the scene, attracted by the crowd. She stood on a rock and observed the festival and shed tears silently.

She stood there even after the crowd had left, the hullabaloo receding farther and farther.

At midnight the wounded ogre emerged from the cavern. It was a full-moon night and the ogre could read the empathy in the girl's eyes. Her beneficent influence dissolved the curse that lay upon him and he was transformed into a charming lad.

Deer and hares and peacocks and squirrels saw them strolling towards the golden clouds on the horizon, hand in hand, and they were never seen again.

That was the gist of the fable. I did not know when and how the lonely girl of the unusual work of fiction became identified with Lily in my memory.

A full hour spent on a stroll up and down my verandah failed to curb my restlessness. Rather it grew more and more intense as the day wore on.

Late in the afternoon, I drove along one of the main roads of the city and stopped in front of 'Good Morning Publications'.

They were about to close. A elegantly dressed gentleman as old as me, somehow reminding me of a brown eagle, was skipping down the steps. His portfolio sported his designation – Manager.

'Excuse me, I wonder if I could meet the author of this publication of yours,' I said, respectfully showing him the novella.

'Who is the author?' he asked me like a quizmaster.

'Well, the book carries a strange name, "Butterfly"! Obviously a pseudonym!' I replied.

'Even so you don't understand, or do you? If the author wanted every Brown, Jones and Robinson to be able to haul him out and give him a hug, why on earth should he use a pseudonym?' the manager, his eyes twinkling in appreciation of his wit, dared me to give a fitting reply.

'To be honest,' I fumbled out, 'such a question had not struck me.'

'Obviously.' The manager resumed hopping down the steps.

I was about to drive off when a young lady, a witness to my encounter with the manager gracefully signalled me to wait. 'May I know in which direction you are going?' she asked most politely.

'Towards the lake.'

'Would you mind giving me a lift? I have an important appointment close to the lake and it is so hard to get a cab at this hour!'

'With pleasure.'

The merry little lady, who turned out to be one of 'Good Morning's editors, sat down by my side.

'I will tell you where our author, Butterfly, lives. Our manager had odd ideas. I'm yet to know an author who is not delighted to meet an admirer.' She gave me elaborate instructions for locating 'Butterfly's residence.

She got down near the lake and there was no difficulty in my driving to 'Butterfly's doorstep. I did not encounter any hurdle in meeting the author either. We shook hands and I asked calmly, 'How are you, Navin?'

'Butterfly' gazed at me for a full minute and then hugged me. 'I cannot say why, but I had a strong feeling that in discovering the author of this work I was going to discover something wonderful' I said.

Navin had no words. He hugged me again and again.

Fifty years ago I had taken a job with a foreign shipping company and had

been abroad for the greater part of my life. I had managed even the sale of our small property in the village, after my parents' death, through a power of attorney. There had neither been an occasion nor any need for me to be there. When I had time after I retired, my interest had died. I had lost track of Hatu and Navin.

I found out that Navin had done well as an author and an editor. As for Hatu, all I could gather from Navin was, while in college he joined a group of political anarchists and spent a term in prison. After release he had simply vanished!

We talked on till midnight. I learnt that our village was now linked with the town by a good road.

'Why don't we take a trip to Peacock Hill?' I proposed. Navin was enthusiastic. There was no need for rationalizing our decision.

It was twilight when, on the following day, we were near the hill.

A small crowd had gathered around a newly built hut. We learnt that the hermit had been dwelling there for some weeks. He had sensed the presence of a goddess at the foot of the hill and wished to erect a small shrine to her. The villagers were only too willing to help him.

We were amazed to find that the spot marked for the shrine was the very spot at the bottom of the precipice where, about seventy years ago, Lily had been buried.

We caught a glimpse of the hermit and returned to our car. I drove slowly, savouring the exhilarating breeze to my heart's content.

'Stop!' Navin shouted suddenly. 'We must go back!'

'Why?' I slowed down.

'The hermit. I'm afraid, we did not have a close enough look at him,' Navin stammered with excitement.

'Suppose,' I said with a smile, 'your guess is right and the hermit is none other than Hatu, what do you propose to do? Nobody can recognize me. But people know you. If you talk to Hatu and his identity is revealed, do you think he will thank you for it? Give it a second thought. We can always return some other day when Hatu is more or less alone, if you so desire.'

Navin kept quiet and I drove faster. Soon the hill was lost in the fog and the dusk.

'Hatu is doing penance in his own way. You paid your tribute to Lily by recreating her as the charming heroine of your fairy tale. But what about me?' I asked, and to my own great surprise, began to weep.

'If only I could weep like you! It is not so easy at eighty, you know!' said Navin with a sigh.



The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times

In the folklore of Orissa Samant is an aristocrat with vast knowledge who had travelled all over the country several times. He is keen to be out once again, but because of advanced age needs a companion to carry his luggage and serve him in other ways. The young Abolkara – the name literally means the Stubborn – agrees to accompany him on the condition that whenever he saw something intriguing or interesting, Samant must tell him the story behind it. He would not budge from the spot otherwise. These two characters play only the prelude to the story that follows.

Abolkara hoped that once they had crossed the inhospitable forest, they would find a reasonably fine locality, in keeping with the law of a dawn emerging after a night.

And, no doubt, the land they entered was charming. Abolkara occasionally made a comment or two, which he was sure, were quite valuable, on the flora and fauna, and followed his master with dainty steps.

But they had to halt close by a scenic park, for what wended its way from the opposite direction was a silent and dignified procession, headed by the king who dismounted from his elephant and placed a bouquet on a tomb at the centre of the park. He then knelt down and so did the others. They passed a few moments in silence and then departed.

“The king looked more like a sage, if not a hermit, than a potentate,” observed Abolkara. “Whose is this tomb, Sir?”

“Of a one-and-half-times dead lady,” answered Samant, almost lost in some remote reverie.

They sat down under a banyan tree, close to a cool lake, for a frugal lunch, but as Samant finished with his last bite, Abolkara crooned very warmly, “Sir!”

“Yes!”

“I keep sitting.”

“I can very well see that!”

“I don’t feel like getting up.”

“Look here, Abol, is it terribly important that you must preface your demand with that uncanny and dead beat threat? Since I’d unwittingly uttered a rather intriguing phrase, I must give out the story behind it!”

Samant then went on:

Not far from the city of Labang was Sage Dhiman’s hermitage ideally located in a lush green forest. Among his disciples was Tanmoy, brilliant at studies and adept at Yoga. He was dear to all for his courtesy and kindness.

The river Kshipra, flowing by the hermitage, was in spate. An ace swimmer, Tanmoy loved to float with or against the strong currents for long stretches of time. The river had turned like a sickle a furlong beyond the bathing ghat used by the inmates of the hermitage. Tanmoy, about to emerge from the waters after a swim at dawn, was surprised by a meek and mild cry and before he had been able to trace its source, what got entangled round him was not exactly a creeper, but almost rivalling it in tenderness, a damsel.

Tanmoy was about to lose his balance, but with a masterly manipulation of vigour and strategy, managed to fling the damsel to the shallow margin of the stream. In the process he slipped and was swept away for a few yards, but steadied himself in time before falling into a whirlpool.

He could bail out himself from the current, but not from the one he saved. The grateful Susmita, the adopted daughter of the Tantrik Chandagauranga residing in a relatively dense part of the forest, began conquering, chunk by chunk, his heart and his mind. No wonder, for her body was like a Champak flower, her eyes a pair of glittering stars. While sometimes they twinkled like diamonds, at some other times they were as mild and inviting as two drops of dew.

The phase of familiarity when they would meet on the riverbank, in the light of a setting sun or under the colourful canopy spread by a cluster of Krishnachura trees, either keeping their exchange to a few indistinctly uttered words or entrusting the cuckoos the task of speaking on their behalf, gave way to the intimate phase when Tanmoy paid his first visit to her home and paid obeisance to her foster-father, Chandagauranga. Susmita’s wit and suavity impressed Tanmoy more and more and her love and concern for him swayed him deeply.

“Father says, you have, hidden in you, a great capacity for practising Tantra.

You can do that with ease and become a past-master in the lore like himself,” Susmita informed him.

“I have neither the audacity to refute your father’s estimate of my capacity nor the courage to take to the practice of Tantra,” replied Tanmoy.

“But why?”

“My guru had once briefly explained to me the philosophy of Tantra. There lies a Divine principle at the root of every phenomenon. The Tantriks involve themselves in and delve deep into the very attractions, which the spiritual seekers of other disciplines are keen to avoid. The Tantriks enter the dusky tunnel of occult laws with the aim of emerging into the sunlight of Truth at its other end, but only one in ten thousand succeed in that. The rest are lured and diverted by false lights emanating from the numerous labyrinths branching out of the tunnel, lights of puny *Siddhis* or powers for performing miracles. They go in quest of truth, but become slaves of *Avidya* – tricks performed by the lower Nature. I do not think I will be able to pass that severe test. In any case, my guru himself would have directed me to your father had he known that to be my *Svadharmā*.”

If anything, Susmita’s was a mysterious smile of relief. “Well, if it is not your intention to lead a life of rigorous askesis, then ...” she blushed at her own unspoken proposition.

“Surely, I intended pursuing Yoga seriously, if not the perilous path of Tantra. But that was before meeting you....”

That was early in spring. There was only sporadic blossoming of flowers, hinting at far greater possibilities – at a future season of rainbows on the ground. The buds whispered to the lovers not to divulge all their dreams at once. In fact the two were dreaming of a spring that could have no end.

Sage Dhiman was then preparing to take a break in the Himalaya. Tanmoy was required to be at his beck and call before his departure. He could not meet Susmita for five days. But when he met her at last, Susmita looked somewhat dazed, as if petrified on the frontiers of dream and wakefulness. “You look rather strange!” observed Tanmoy. “Do I? Then it is for your sake.”

Tanmoy stood puzzled, but his eyes were forceful enough to elicit from her an annotation of her riddle. Unknown to her father, Susmita had performed a Tantrik rite with Tanmoy as its focus. It could ensure him a throne.

It is difficult to say how much importance Tanmoy gave to it.

“Is it possible to change one’s destiny through a Tantrik rite?” he asked. “No, nothing can truly change one’s destiny but either one’s own Karma – or the Divine’s Grace.” Susmita admitted.

“Well, I don’t see any reason for the Divine’s Grace to intervene in my destiny. And so far as my own Karma is concerned, it is hardly likely to secure me a crown.”

“Are you sure?” demanded Susmita. “Isn’t your relation with me a Karma?”

Is that not capable of influencing your destiny? And haven't you consciously embraced this Karma?"

Tanmoy had no answer. Only if one could draw a line between one's conscious actions and actions guided by forces beyond one's control! At which point could he check the Karma to which Susmita alluded – his burgeoning relationship with her?

"Father once told me that your destiny is marked by two possibilities. You are likely to become either a king or a spiritual Guru. People may view the position of a king with awe but viewed from a higher plane, the kingship is nothing more than one of the several phases of experience for the soul's progress through numerous lives. Your becoming a king need not be beyond your Karma."

A charmed Tanmoy realised the limitation of his own knowledge. "But how could you perform the rite? Isn't Tantra I prohibited zone for women?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Superstition," commented Susmita. "What is the very basis of Tantra? Is it not *Shakti*, the feminine principle active as Nature? My father had initiated and turned into *Vairavis* quite a few women! There are, of course, some specific rites forbidden for women, but they don't include one which is performed for the benefit of someone else, in a spirit of selfless goodwill."

What Tanmoy wished to ask but did not, was, "Was yours nothing more than pure selfless goodwill for me? Did it not hide in itself the pride of moulding someone's destiny as well as a desire to share his changed life?"

"Whatever I have done, I've done for you – nothing for me!" said Susmita, perhaps under a compulsive feeling to justify her extraordinary action.

Tanmoy laughed cautiously. "But will the throne to the king's left remain vacant? Unlike Lord Rama, I'm not the one to remain content with a golden image for my consort!" he said and both of them blushed.

"I'm in total darkness about my own destiny. If I ask Father, he either makes light of it or avoids speaking about it. But soon thereafter he resigns to a sort of gloom. Since this has happened several times, I cannot say that his mood was unrelated to my query." Susmita looked gloomy herself.

Tanmoy could not understand why, but he was overwhelmed by a bizarre feeling while leaving Susmita. There was no longer any thrill in him in anticipation of a delightful future. He felt grateful to Susmita, but inexplicably sad too. It was always risky to intervene through occult means in the natural passage of one's destiny. Why did his darling Susmita take recourse to that kind of a bold but impudent act? He did not fail to observe how Susmita herself had stopped smiling spontaneously as she used to.

It was evening. Sage Dhiman summoned Tanmoy and focussed his eyes on his face with an intriguing concentration. Tanmoy lowered his eyes.

“My boy, accustomed as you are to long spells of meditation, it should not be difficult for you to confine yourself to your dwelling tomorrow, right from the sunrise till the sunset. It will be good for you,” he said.

Tanmoy looked up, surprised. But the Guru walked away, indicating that he was not disposed to give any reason for his unusual advice.

There was no question of Tanmoy disobeying the Guru. He, as usual, took bath at dawn and entered his cave, which was mid-way up a low hill and sat down and shut his eyes, but only to realise before long how difficult it was to concentrate on his inner being once the habit had been broken by concerns passionate in nature. He felt embarrassed. At the same time he could not curse himself for his condition, for that would mean cursing Susmita – who had usurped the part of meditation in his life.

However, determined to revive the practice, by and by he got immersed in a light trance.

A sudden burst of unusual noise and hullabaloo compelled him to return to the surface of his consciousness. He stood up and stepped out of his cave, still in a state of stupor, still insensitive to space and time. Sunset was only a moment away. A massive elephant, bedecked with jewellery and garlands, was walking briskly at the head of a glittering procession comprising the Prime Minister, the General, the Kotwal, the Chief Priest and a hundred-strong line of courtiers and nobles followed by a thousand curious commoners.

The elephant suddenly came to a halt. And, before Tanmoy had comprehended the situation, it raised its trunk holding a golden pitcher and poured its content – fragrant water sanctified by certain rites – on Tanmoy’s head.

Thunderous applause and shouts of joy shook the forest and were echoed in the hills. The Prime Minister, the General, the Kotwal and the priest hurriedly climbed the rocks and greeted Tanmoy with impressive humility.

“Your Majesty, be pleased to mount the elephant!” was their submission.

“What for?” asked Tanmoy, totally bewildered.

“You’re our new king, as ordained by Providence!” revealed the Prime Minister. “Probably you’re not aware of the fact that our noble king passed away without leaving any male heir!” observed the General.

“And, in keeping with the hoary tradition, we left the choice of the new king to the royal elephant which had to go through some exclusive rites to awaken its capacity in that regard. In fact, we were wondering why the grand animal entered the forest! But it knew!” added the Kotwal.

“Pardon us, but Your Majesty must hurry, for it is only after your coronation that the mortal remains of our late king can be consigned to flames. Who but a king can order the disposal of another king’s body!” explained the priest and he added, “The auspicious hour for the cremation is approaching.”

The Prime Minister and the General almost pushed Tanmoy towards the elephant and a dozen trained attendants vied with one another in putting him on the throne fixed on the animal's back.

The elephant trumpeted and made a turn and headed towards the palace. The orphaned princess Haimavati – the queen had died earlier – received the incumbent to her father's throne by garlanding him and bowing to him.

The hapless Tanmoy was obliged to bear with the strenuous process of coronation. He was then made to pass his first order as the monarch – to remove his predecessor's dead body from the palace for funeral rites.

All through the chanting of the hymns by the priest and heaping of lyrical praise by the court-poets, Tanmoy thought of nothing else but Susmita. How effective proved the rites she had performed for him! The only other thought that amazed and pained him was the foresight of his Guru, Sage Dhiman. The Guru had forbidden him to come out of his cave before sunset. Obviously the Guru did not desire this to happen to him.

"I must go and meet my Guru, I had no time to seek his sanction and blessings before stepping into this role," Tanmoy told the Prime Minister when he got a chance after three days of continuous ceremonies.

"Maharaj, Sage Dhiman had already left for the Himalaya. However, you will be free to move about only after the next ceremony is concluded," informed the Prime Minister.

"Yet another ceremony?"

"Your wedding with Princess Haimavati."

"But that's absurd and impossible!" Tanmoy shrieked out his protest.

"What's absurd and impossible, Your Majesty?" the four senior officers asked him, taken aback.

"If wed I must, it should be to Susmita, the daughter of Tantrik Chandagauranga. I'm committed," Tanmoy declared assertively.

The Prime Minister and the General laughed, albeit modestly.

"My lord, the commitment was made by an ordinary young man – not by Maharaja Tanmoy Dev. Much of your past had lost its relevance," said the two top executives of the kingdom, dividing the statement between themselves.

"Maharaj, what is really absurd is the idea of your marrying Susmita. I wonder if it is known to you that she is not the Tantrik's own daughter but merely adopted by him. She could very well be illegitimate." The priest's was a guardian's warning.

"Well, my lord, there could be no objection to Susmita being admitted into the inner quarters of the palace as a companion or maid of the princess and as your concubine." The Kotwal exuded the confidence of one who had solved a knotty problem.

"Gentlemen, once again let me tell you that all this is absurd and impossible!

My marrying the princess is out of the question!” Tanmoy had never before raised his voice to that pitch.

“To be honest, my lord, you married her the moment you let her garland you. And once she had garlanded you in public, can she marry anyone else? The tradition demands that if the king died without a male heir, whoever ascends the throne must wed his daughter, if he had any,” explained the Prime Minister.

“Look here, gentlemen,” Tanmoy blurted out impatiently. “If the elephant emptied the golden pitcher on my head, it was because of Susmita, I don’t know how to explain the mystery to you!”

The sentinels of the throne looked at one another. At last the priest cleared his throat. “Your Majesty, probably you cannot explain it and we assure you, you need not. For us the mystery had only one interpretation. It was Providential. Maybe for you, as we see the situation, it was a quirk!”

But Tanmoy remained unconvinced. Arguments continued till it was past midnight and they remained inconclusive.

Tanmoy tossed on his bed. Sleep evaded him.

A little before dawn he was shocked by a cry. It was a female voice. Whose was that? Who was being threatened with dire consequences by the guards outside the palace gate?

He came out of his bedroom. At once two of his personal attendants came running and bowed to him.

“Well, was there some commotion outside?”

“Nothing unusual, Maharaj!”

Tanmoy concluded that what he thought he heard was a delusion. It was unlikely that Susmita should try to gatecrash at that unearthly hour demanding a meeting with him.

He was required to sit in the court all the time the next day for the chieftains of the kingdom to kneel down and profess their allegiance to him and submit their gifts, one by one. Then it was the turn of the emissaries of the neighbouring kingdoms to greet him. Tanmoy exchanged pleasantries with them, smiled and nodded, but without the least enthusiasm. At every opportunity he reiterated his resolve against marrying the princess.

Exhausted, he was at last about to retire for the night when the chief maid of the princess approached him.

“My lord, Princess Haimavati would like to say a word to you.”

The maid retired and the princess emerged from the other side of the curtain.

Tanmoy had seen her only once before. She was superbly beautiful. Now she was in tears and its impact on Tanmoy was shattering.

“My lord!” uttered the princess as she gulped a sob. “Kindly do not reduce me to a laughing stock before the world. Just bear with the wedding ceremony. Then I

will disappear from your sight and your life, I promise. You'll be at liberty to bring home the bride of your choice."

She did not wait for a reply and was escorted away by her maids.

Tanmoy stood thunderstruck.

The next day the Kotwal informed him, trying to sound absolutely casual, that the Tantrik Chandagauranga and his daughter were not to be seen anywhere. Perhaps they had left for some unknown destination.

"The conduct of Tantriks is always mystifying," the Kotwal remarked in a style befitting one who knows.

Tanmoy did not know how to go about looking for them. The pressure on him for marrying the princess was mounting. Besides, her tearful face and supplication haunted him ceaselessly.

The wedding was performed.

Once again, tradition demanded that the couple visit Varanasi within a fortnight of the ceremony. King Tanmoy and Queen Haimavati undertook the travel, but the queen took ill on the very day of their arrival in that holy city. The physician of the King of Kashi attended upon her and did his best, but though an old hand, he looked more and more gloomy as days passed.

Queen Haimavati continued to be critically ill. The physician summoned an occultist. After an examination of the patient, the occultist looked equally gloomy.

Tanmoy was upset.

At night the queen expressed a desire to speak to her husband alone. The maids went out.

In a voice weak, pathetic but gentle, she said, "My lord, it was time for me to keep my promise. I'm leaving you."

"But, Haimavati, the situation had changed and so had my mind. Please pardon me and don't leave me," entreated Tanmoy.

"I too am not that keen on departing now, my lord, but..." Her voice grew feebler, culminating in a total silence. She closed her eyes.

Tanmoy kept sitting near her, ardently wishing her a restful sleep and speedy recovery.

No sound other than the murmur of Varuna, the sweet branch of the Ganga, was heard. A lamp flickered beside the bedstead of the pale queen.

"Maharaj!" Tanmoy, who had momentarily fallen into a state of daze, received a jolt. Never in his life had he been stunned like that. This was the voice dearest to him till the other day. Now, of course, there was a tinge of derision in it.

In the faint light and smoke he could discern the outline of a woman.

"Maharaj, your beloved wife, the princess, rather the queen, is no more!"

"No more? But what about you, Susmita?"

"I too am no more in my body, needless to say. But should you so wish, the

queen, I mean her body, would bounce back to life – with my spirit entering it. Look at her. She is so beautiful! Must you be deprived of this splendour so abruptly? But the process brooks no delay. This spirit present before you is unable to enter her body without your co-operation.”

“What is my function?” asked Tanmoy, feeling himself under a strange and formidable spell.

Susmita’s spirit told him what to do. That was a simple rite.

Tanmoy performed it and soon the queen opened her eyes.

“O Queen!” exclaimed Tanmoy.

“I hate that appellation!” rebuffed Haimavati as she sat up – or was it rather not Susmita? We can refer to her as the queen, for the sake of convenience.

The queen focussed her arresting look on Tanmoy. A brief shiver ran down his spine. But he was anxious to restore normalcy to the situation and took her hand in his.

“So, you got a new lease of life!” he whispered.

“Who got it – your wife Haimavati or your forgotten lover Susmita?” the lady sounded abrasive.

“How can you say that you were forgotten, Susmita!” Tanmoy protested.

“Listen, O King, the body you are touching so tenderly is not mine. Hence I, Susmita, have no cause to feel elated. Rather I feel tormented, for I cannot ignore the fact that you are caressing Haimavati! You see her, not me!”

“But, Susmita...”

“Can you address me like that with a clear conscience? Can you touch your Susmita? You cannot!”

“Why not? I desire to feel you...”

“But that will only result in your feeling, Haimavati! How can I, or why should I, bear with that?”

She wept and after a moment’s silence, said, “Better, never touch me.”

The attendants were delighted at the miraculous recovery of the queen. They were required to camp there for the period of her convalescence. But that was an extremely trying time for Tanmoy. He never forgot that what dwelt in Haimavati’s body was Susmita’s spirit. But this was hardly the modest and conscientious Susmita he loved!

It was time at last for them to return home. Two nobles came to escort them back. Tanmoy who had meanwhile got over the state of bewilderment in which the abrupt turn in his life had put him, had resolved to exercise his free will firmly.

“Let the queen return. I must meet my Guru in the Himalaya before resuming my kingly duties,” he told the nobles, who could not object. The queen looked happy.

“It is the queen who must rule in the king’s absence. Be pleased to return

as soon as possible so that she does not find her burden too heavy,” the nobles appealed to Tanmoy politely.

The queen fell short of bursting into a wild laugh while taking leave of Tanmoy.

The nobles left behind them two members of their entourage for serving Tanmoy. But he dismissed them the very next day and travelled northward all alone. He was as eager to meet his Guru as he was anxious to leap out of the whirlpool of bizarre occurrences suffocating him.

On reaching the hermitage his Guru’s friend at Haridwar, he learnt that Sage Dhiman had decided to spend the winter interned in a cave at Badarikashram, in a state of Samadhi for months at a stretch when the holy site would be practically deserted and covered in snow.

Winter had set in. It was not possible for Tanmoy to advance farther north as the roads were obliterated by snow and landslides. He patiently waited.

Coinciding with Sage Dhiman’s return to Haridwar after four months, Tanmoy chanced upon two pilgrims from his own land. Their reports shocked him. The queen had become a tyrant and a terror. She had executed the Prime Minister, accusing him of murdering Tantrik Chandagauranga and his daughter, Susmita. In her maiden days princess Haimavati commanded so much love and adoration by all who mattered in the kingdom that there was no question of anyone opposing her pronouncement.

But the priest had murmured, saying, “Whatever the Prime Minister did – if at all he did what is attributed to him – must have been for the good of his king or the kingdom.”

“Is that so?” Haimavati had demanded of him. The priest mysteriously disappeared that very night.

The Kotwal was found guilty of disobedience and was awarded the most painful death – being placed on the spike. The General absconded before his turn came.

The pilgrims further informed Tanmoy that the General was secretly organising a revolt and the queen had already put a number of nobles to death, suspecting them of collusion with him.

Sage Dhiman, when told of the developments, advised Tanmoy to forthwith return to his capital and set right the affairs. But before leaving, Tanmoy, who had disclosed to the sage all about his predicament, asked him, “Gurudev, how could Susmita, who was so gentle and wise, behave in this grotesque manner after adopting Haimavati’s body?”

“My boy, what possessed Queen Haimavati was by no means Susmita’s soul, but only her vital being, her life-force, an explosive reserve of her desires and passions. The Susmita you knew was so different because her vital being was

constrained by her soul. Once dead, her soul went away to its own sphere where it must await an appropriate rebirth. Detached from the soul, her vital being must have come under the influence of some hostile elements. It is one's vital being which generally, though not necessarily, wanders about for a while after one's death."

"Gurudev! Who is to blame for the death of Haimavati? I feel extremely guilty."

"She had resolved to die at an awfully humiliating moment in her life, thereby reducing her life-force to a cipher. At the same time either Susmita or one of her Tantrik well-wishers applying some occult destructives on her cannot be ruled out. To wish to die is a transgression or at least a spiritual blunder. The hostile elements in the atmosphere can cause one much damage while one nurtured that kind of negative will. It was too late when Haimavati, touched by your kindness, wished to live. But, my boy, you are not to blame for her death. Be at peace," said the sage.

"Who or what could have brought about the death of Susmita?" Tanmoy queried.

"Circumstances. Probably the Prime Minister had a role in it and if so, needless to say, under the impression that his action would put an end to the conflict in you."

Tanmoy hurried to his capital. But, shortly before that the rebels, led by the General, had attacked the palace and the queen had met with a violent death.

The General and his compatriots surrendered to Tanmoy most willingly and were pardoned. Peace returned to the kingdom.

King Tanmoy continues to rule, extremely lonesome though he is.

"Did you understand what I meant by one and half times dead? Susmita at first died in her own body; her vital being died once again in Haimavati's body," explained Samanta.

Abolkara sat as though under an enchantment.

"Now, my boy, we must resume walking," said Samant as he stood up.

"Alas, how strange are the unknown laws of fate, Sir! Tanmoy, Susmita or Haimavati – none of them had committed any particular sin, to begin with. Susmita, no doubt, had tried to manipulate Tanmoy's destiny for her own satisfaction, prompted by her own possessive and passionate love for him. But can her action be branded sinful?" "Who are you or I to brand someone's action as this or that anyway?"

"Right, Sir. But, is it not a pity that things should go the way they did?"

Samant laughed. "Abol What do you think was my motive behind narrating the story to you? You are in the habit of measuring everything along the simplistic logic of two plus two becoming four. If you see one suffering or another enjoying,

you conclude that the first had done something evil and the second something good. But there are causes beyond causes, causes beyond logic and causes beyond our perceptions. One who had never done a wrong might suffer. It is impossible to predict a safe passage for anyone, however innocent or holy, through this world teeming with desires, lusts, dreams and schemes; it is difficult to say why someone stumbles or collapses.”

“But is it not a fact that no suffering or death could befall one without one’s soul’s consent?” queried Abolkara.

“Abol, have you realised your soul? If not, what right have you to speculate on that issue? For the moment remain content with the hypothesis that it is simply impossible to find a rational explanation for every occurrence. Don’t jump to another conclusion.”

Abolkara nodded, but did not budge.

“Get up, will you?”

“No inclination, Sir!”

“Abol, the episode I narrated had taken place immediately before my earlier visit to this land. The king was then of more or less my age which means he is pretty old by now. Since, as I understand, he has no heir, some day the elephant will be out once again holding in its trunk the golden pitcher. But let’s wish the king a long life. No use your sitting right now, ready to stick out your blessed little head towards the royal pachyderm.”

“Sir, I must confess that the golden pitcher had tickled my head for a fleeting second only, but not a wee bit of that sensation survived your narration by the time it concluded.”

Abolkara stood up and lifted his load. Even then Samant laughed.

“What amuses you, Sir?”

“Well, Abol, even if you hear this story a full dozen times, your head, like many a head, would begin tickling the moment you see the elephant out with the golden pitcher, I bet,” commented Samant.



The Last Demoness

The first part of this story is from the Buddha Jatakas in which it ends with the escape of the father and the son from the forest home of the demoness and her inability to catch them and her dying in despair.

The road meandering along the foot of the mountain was lonely and since the season was spring, the flight of birds hooting towards the lush green woods looked lustier than normal, their golden wings in proud communion with a gloriously setting sun. The valley breathed zest with an assorted fragrance of varieties of flowers.

Abolkara, following Samant absent-mindedly, suddenly stumbled and stopped. “Master!” he called out, his eyes fixed on the ground.

“Well, Abol, whoever marches forward stumbles once in a while. Come on...”

“But, Master, does whoever march forward stumble upon the sort of stuff I stumbled upon?”

Samant identified the stuff – a chunk of ornate stone from some monument.

“Look up, Abol, look at the hilltop. What do you see?”

Abol looked up and stood agape. “What’s this, Master! There are rows of mansions, some quite palatial ones at that, amidst trees and bushes which were probably once well-groomed gardens – looking like a deserted paradise floating pointlessly on the clouds!”

“Right, you may even call it a haunted paradise. I hope you realise that

there was nothing intriguing in your foot striking a piece of broken carving from a crumbling mansion above.”

“Master, our destination for today, I understand, is not far. That is to say, we need not be in a terrible hurry. Be kind to tell me the story of the deserted paradise – maybe the story of its fall, if you so please.”

Samant was tired too. And the serene hour and the solitude were an invitation for relaxation. He sat on a slab and facing him sat Abolkara, cross-legged, on the cosy carpet of foamy grass.

“Do you remember the story in the Jatakas informing us how once a Brahmin travelling through the wilderness was obliged to marry a demoness, and in their cave far from any locality, was born to them as their son the Bodhisattva, the spirit of the Buddha in one of his earlier incarnations?” asked Samant. He then went on with his narration:

As the Bodhisattva grew up, he could not but feel puzzled over the difference between the lifestyle of his father and that of his mother. One day, while the demoness was away in the forest, the son demanded of his father an explanation for what he had been observing.

The father satisfied the boy’s curiosity. “My son,” he then said, “luckily you have inherited, both physically and mentally, my traits and not your mother’s and, let me tell you, our co-existence with a demoness on a permanent basis is neither comfortable nor desirable, even though she is my wife and your mother. It is time we slip away, for you have no future here.”

The son understood. They bided their time and when the opportune moment came, fled the forest. Soon they were on the bank of the river that they must cross in order to enter the civilized locality.

Upon her return to the cave the demoness found her husband and son missing. By and by the ominous probability dawned on her. Desperate, she ran in pursuit of the escapees and reached the river bank. But it had been a bit too late. The father and son were nearing the opposite bank of the river; the former plodding through the swift flow with the son perched on his shoulders.

The demoness had been too exhausted to proceed any farther. “Come back, my child! Come back, my husband!” she cried out once or twice and then collapsed on the parched sands. It is difficult to say whether her pathetic cry reached the ears of the Brahmin and the Bodhisattva or got dispersed and diluted in the erratic wind. Soon it began to rain. The heart-broken demoness breathed her last in a short while, says the Jatakas, concluding the story.

But there was more to it, Samant informed his follower and the latter pricked his ears.

The demoness died, but only after giving birth to a female child. If her son had been like her husband, her daughter was a miniature of herself, a proper

demoness, thanks to the intriguing laws of genetics. Demon-kids, unlike their human counterparts, were never feeble and helpless at their birth. They sprang to movement almost like a newborn calf. In the pouring rain, the infant crawled on to the embankment on the river and crossed into the hut of a Rishi, while a flash flood swept her mother's body away into the sea.

The Rishi, through his meditation, learnt about the girl's unusual parentage and nurtured her with great love, for by then the demons were not only an endangered species, but practically extinct.

This satellite atop the hill mostly served as a summer resort for the aristocrats and the wealthy of the day. However, among those who resided there permanently, was a young man called Vratarup. Though an orphan, he had inherited a mansion and enough wealth to let him live happily.

Vratarup was carefree, romantic and idealistic by nature. He spent a good deal of time roaming the forests, which skirted or covered the adjacent hills, in search of exotic trees, flowers, birds and for discovering hidden streams, brooks and valleys. It was during one such wandering that he chanced upon the Rishi and his foster-daughter. By then the Rishi had grown pretty old. "My son," he told Vratarup on their second or third meeting, "please take care of this last member of the demon species on the earth."

"The last?"

"That's right, my son. Spirits who were being born as demons have either returned to their source, the original Consciousness, or are re-born as human beings. The soul of this young demoness is a highly evolved one."

"O Seer, be it a human or a demon, no one is made only of a soul. There are other elements to constitute a being, such as the body, the vital life and the mind. What happened to those aspects of the vanished species?" asked Vratarup.

"My son, the physical being of a demon is much more subtle than that of a man. A demon can change its shape or form at will, a capacity denied to man. So far as the demon's vital life is concerned, it is dangerously powerful, but his mind is rather unevolved. Detached from their souls, their vitals and their minds got merged with those of men. Making use of the powerful mind with which man is endowed, the demoniac vitality could henceforth work havoc in society. It could motivate a merchant to mix snake's fat with *ghee* without any wavering, it could enthuse scientists to invent sophisticated means of torturing, maiming and killing their fellow-beings; in politicians it could plant the idea for bartering their conscience for naked power, and so on and so forth. Do you comprehend the situation? The evolutionary process withdrew its life-sustaining support to the species of demons because it found man capable of functioning as better-quality demons."

The Rishi passed away before long. Vratarup had by then become quite

attached to the young demoness. He wanted to usher her into the town but was not sure how the townsfolk would receive her. It would be good, he thought, if some conscientious, eligible bachelor married her so that the blood of the primeval race would not totally disappear and a faint flicker of humanity's mythical past could burn for some more time.

He began his search for a bridegroom for his charge. First he met a radical youth leader and asked him if he would extend his radicalism up to marrying a demoness. To his surprise, Vratarup saw the revolutionary's face growing as faint as a reflection on a patch of muddy water.

He then put the proposal across to a handsome and affluent young visitor from the nobility, a holidaymaker.

"Would you mind giving me some idea about the dowry?" asked the young man, albeit in a voice as tender as butter. Since Vratarup was vague about it, the young noble's attention went over to a dancing girl he had hired to entertain him.

Vratarup then approached a classy musician. But the classy one confided to him that he would like to have a gifted danseuse for a wife.

"I'm sure the bride I propose can dance well if taught," asserted Vratarup.

"A demoness as a dancer, eh?" The musician gave out such a belly laugh that Vratarup went away even before its echo had died down.

As a last resort, Vratarup went to the scion of an aristocratic feudal dynasty. The young landlord was excited at the prospect of winning an out of the ordinary consort, but soon waxed emotional and taking Vratarup to be a broker for supernatural stuff, earnestly requested him to procure, instead of a demoness, a nymph – to which he was surely entitled.

One day Vratarup suddenly announced to his acquaintances that he would himself marry the demoness, for she was unwilling to marry anyone else. Two would exchange garlands near the Rishi's tomb in the forest, and he would bring home his bride.

The townsfolk were stunned. Everybody looked practically lost the day before the couple's scheduled entry into the town as husband and wife. By the time the guardians of the community passed a resolution banning the wedding, Vratarup had already left for the forest.

What would be the attitude and conduct of the demoness towards the peace-loving, innocent residents of the resort? How would the children of the town react at her sight? Ladies of the elite, well versed in quotable quotes on love, dreams and allied topics, could not but brood over yet another delicate issue. How could they accommodate a demoness in their fraternity? They could not evaluate the damage her gross and crude presence would cause to the lyrical and the mystique that went with their gender.

Some practical and far-sighted householders even sharpened and kept their weapons handy for use in case the demoness ran amuck at the sight of so many edible human beings.

But lo and behold, at last, when the bride entered the town in the company of her bridegroom at sundown, the townsfolk, peeping through their windows, were struck dumb and numb. Was this a demoness? What, then, was a nymph?

Indeed, the bride could pass as a princess born to the god of love himself. Her dainty footsteps created the illusion of flowers popping up under them. Her shy smile seemed to spray a profusion of jasmine dust. The flicker of her eyes could make a hundred over-sensitive stars faint!

Two carts laden with gems and jewellery followed the couple. Although this was centuries before the birth of journals, the era was not without its tribe of oral reporters. One of them was busy making a fast sketch of the bride. Another stepped closer to the couple and asked Vratarup, "Were you not supposed to wed a demoness? But we see a damsel whose beauty would outweigh the combined beauty of all the princesses of our Jamvudwipa!"

Vratarup laughed. "Friends," he explained, "I'm sure you are not ignorant of the Puranas! Don't you remember that demons and demonesses possess the expertise to change their forms at will?"

The young man who had raised the issue of dowry coughed nervously. "You could not give me any idea about the dowry. But what you've received would shame any Yaksha!"

"Had I said that there would be no dowry? Well, the knowledge of the treasures collected by my mother-in-law's ancestors and dumped in a cave flashed in my wife's mind only now. She had never bothered about her material inheritance!"

Vratarup led his wife into his mansion and shut the door. It took about an hour for the leading citizens to recover their voices. But after two hours, every one of them was anxious to make the rest listen to him. In fact, they were highly agitated. The young men in particular felt sure that they had been betrayed though they could not say how. In a spontaneous show of unity, they surrounded Vratarup's house and raised some slogans which, strangely, conveyed no meaning but some fuzzy and nervous anguish. At the peak of the maddening hullabaloo, they banged on the doors of the couple's impressive home.

It was midnight when Vratarup emerged. At once the mob fell silent. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked.

Nobody seemed to know the answer. "Where's your consort?" some of them asked.

"She is allergic to shouts and slogans. That's why she changed herself to look like any normal woman of this town and went away to mingle with them," said Vratarup. He then made his way through the crowd and walked towards the forest.

The crowd made forays into his house and searched for the fabulous wealth. But they found nothing valuable except the left-over of some cakes and sweets the bride had prepared for both of them. Those who partook of these items fainted. It was for the first time in human history that some people fainted because the shock and delight their tongues got were too grand to be absorbed by the rest of their being. It was indeed unfortunate that these gentlemen lost all taste for all the other delicacies of the earth for the remaining time of their lives.

“The wealth we saw was an illusion,” observed a venerable senior citizen.

“Maybe they disappeared by magic – or rendered invisible,” said another. But the other elders suspected some nefarious motive in these statements.

They accused the venerable two of hiding their knowledge of the treasure in order to lay their hands on it later. The dispute resulted in the two groups coming to blows and becoming permanent enemies of each other. The common men of the town too were divided into two camps. The quarrel was carried to every stratum of the community.

But a far more deadly crisis brewed in every family. Where was the demoness hiding? Had she gobbled up a lady and then usurped her form? Which one? Ominous suspicion and fear poisoned the atmosphere in every household.

The colony lost its attraction. Outsiders avoided it. Anger, depression, fear and mistrust shortened the life-span of its residents. Slowly but surely the charming hilltop town became a memory.

“Pity!” exclaimed Abolkara.

“But Vratarup and his wife lived in the forest happily, like two hermits.”

“Great!” Abolkara raised his folded palms to his forehead, looking at the space between the forest atop the hills and the floating clouds growing dusky.

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एकः सूते सकलम्



The Final Night

The first part of the story is from the Panchatantra in which it ends with the bandit advising the young wife of the old man to be mindful of her husband's needs.

Having passed a night in the prosperous and sprawling village of Ahladpur, Samant and Abolkara resumed their journey in the morning. At the centre of the village was a small lake and on its bank stood an old shrine of Lord Shiva, stones from its broken parapet lying scattered all over the place.

Abolkara dropped down on a reasonably smooth stone as if he had just completed a marathon.

“My dear Abol, except for the moments spent in bathing, a few allied activities and eating sumptuous meals, you dedicated the past twenty-four hours to spells of snoring. How come this exhaustion?”

“Look yonder, my master.” Abolkara drew Samant’s attention to a frolicsome pair consisting of a dog and a cat.

“What’s so intriguing about that, Abol? Haven’t you ever seen a cat and a dog befriend each other?” asked Samant.

Abolkara chuckled. “Can you trick me into silence with such tests? Can I forget what we witnessed while approaching this village yesterday, on its outskirts? This very dog gave a violent chase to this very cat and the latter was fuming at it from the branch of a tree. You who generally become grave at any sight of hostility laughed looking at them. How could the same dog and cat,

enemies outside the village, become as chummy as fathers of a bride and her groom?”

“Abol, you have unwittingly spoken half the truth. The dog and the cat you see are really possessed by the ‘vital spirits’ of two dead gentlemen, fathers of a bride and her groom. Don’t confuse the ‘vital spirit’, the seat of one’s desires, passions and ordinary emotions with what we know as the soul.”

“Why then were they behaving like foes only yesterday?”

“The bride’s father, at the demand of the groom’s father, had sent a fat lot of dowry with his daughter. Any man who undervalues the dignity of his daughter and induces her husband’s family to accept her through a bribe, finds, after his death, his vital spirit vested in a dog. For each *paisa* of the dowry he had given, his half-incarnation dog must wag its tail ten times, indicating his having appeased a brutal and stupid tradition. Any father who looks upon his son as an exclusive commodity that can be put up for auction finds his vital spirit taking possession of a cat and continuing to satisfy its greed by stealing fish and cheese from numerous kitchens or pecking at leftovers in the dustbins. But the dog and the cat, so possessed, hate each other, for, in their human lives each had contributed to the other’s spiritual degradation.”

A happy Abolkara stood up with the luggage. But the very next moment he put his burden down again. “I understand why the dog tried to attack the cat outside the village yesterday. But what made them so chummy today – as we saw them here?”

“Abol, the subtle inner atmosphere of this village is made up of several nitty-gritty. One of them is simply sublime. When that dominates the atmosphere, which it does but rarely, even the animals feel splendid. During our brief stay, the sublime was on the surface several times. Didn’t you ever feel it?”

“Sir!” Abol blushed. “Wasn’t practically all my time swallowed up by an uninvited slumber? But, yes, I dreamt some sweet dreams. Well, Master, how can I lift the luggage unless you reveal the mystery of the sublime in the air of this village?”

“It owes its *raison d’être* to the presence of a great soul, a lady, who lived here centuries ago.”

“But I never heard of any such great soul!”

“Abol, only sages can hear in their slumber! But even if you were awake, you could not have heard of her, for all those who are great in their inner self are not necessarily widely known. Fame and true greatness do not always go together. Many of the great live unknown and depart in silence while knaves and the vain-glorious steal the limelight.”

“Sir, wouldn’t you tell me a little about the great lady?”

“Do you remember the *Panchatantra* story about the old man with a young wife?”

“I’ve forgotten, I’m afraid.”

Samant narrated the story:

Mahapatra of this village was a well-to-do family-man – rather a man in search of a family. That is to say, he married several times but for some strange curse on him, his wives were short-lived. He had just earned the merit of being an octogenarian when he married for the eighth time. Earlier, his argument for bringing wife after wife home was the need for an heir. The argument had no doubt weakened considerably by the time he risked an eighth marriage, but marital rites had become a kind of addiction for the veteran. Hence, he persuaded a father, indebted to him, to part with his daughter aged sixteen.

The young lady slept with her back towards the old hand and Mahapatra sighed and did nothing else. By and by, he realised that to expect the lady to alter her style would be as chimerical as expecting the return of his own youth. He reconciled himself to the situation.

Once at midnight, when the full moon presided over the nocturnal world, he woke up to find himself in the incredible situation of being in his young wife’s embrace. At first he suspected it to be a dream, but soon he was sure that it was not. His overwhelming surprise changed into overwhelming delight and thrill.

But his sense of realism returned before long. He was neither unaware of poets attributing several wonderful virtues to the full moon nor of the sea behaving in an impassioned manner on such nights; even then he grew sceptical of the possibility of the distant moon suddenly working up the romance dormant in his teenage wife’s heart into a tide strong enough to submerge him!

The old man cautiously raised his head and surveyed the situation. A shaft of moonlight, coming in through the window, fell on a corner of the room. The one to have descended there, tearing the thatch, was by no means the god of love with his flower-decked bow and arrows, but a ferocious bandit armed with a diamond-hued dagger. The old man understood why the poor girl had hugged him so tight.

“Welcome, bandit dear, my friend! Please help yourself. The delightful illusion your descent created in me, for a moment though, was far more valuable than all the movable property in this room put together. So, my welcome guest, please take whatever pleases you!” The old man repeated his generous offer in a voice choked with emotion.

Unpredictable indeed are the minds and moods of men. The bandit, instead of looking for valuables, fixed his gaze on the young lady. “My child!” he bellowed. “I comprehend the situation. You’ve never even cared for this old fool of a husband, what to speak of giving him a pinch of love. But that is not fair! If Providence thought it fit to put you, a garland of jasmine, around the neck of this ancient ape, well, you must resolve to stay put – that’s all! What can you or I do? The best

course open to you is to try and love this man, to accept him and care for him. Do you understand? I'll come back after a year and see whether you have changed or not. Good-bye!"

The bandit opened the door and quietly left, empty-handed.

"The great Vishnu Sharma," said Samant, "ends his story – rich with revelations of human predicament, of flickers of compassion at the least expected quarters, and so on and so forth – at this point. But what followed is a story at yet another plane."

"My Master! Why not finish it?" pleaded Abolkara.

The savant resumed:

The lady indeed began paying attention to her husband. She heated water for him for his morning ablutions, cooked delicious dishes and massaged his legs when he retired at night. The old man who had never expected the winter of his life to ever end, suddenly found himself amidst a season of riotous and lasting spring.

But remorse betook him soon. He met a hermit living in a valley between a forest and a range of hills, not far from the village. "O Sage," he submitted, "if I cannot become young again, at least grant me some youthful vigour."

"What inspired you to nurture such a bizarre desire, old boy? Why should you go against the prudent laws of nature?" demanded the hermit, always humble and kind.

"O great soul, how can old age and the fretful decadence that goes with it be called a prudent law?"

"You have a point there, but the issue is rather complex. My explanation will be meaningful only if you are conscious of your life's goal. It is not to remain entangled forever in the process of birth, suffering and death, but to transcend it and reach the Truth Consciousness: that ought to be our ultimate aim. While nature has arranged to throw man into a perplexing tangle, it has also made provisions for him to brood over the situation and find ways of being delivered from it. If certain senses become weak, it is an opportunity to discover alternative means of satisfaction. Our teeth fall; shouldn't we find in it a call for rising above the pleasures of the palate? The vision becomes dim; shouldn't the wise take it as a challenge to cultivate an inner vision?"

"I understand..." said the old man, "but I'm not wise." He wept and told the hermit the sequence of events that had led him to seek that embarrassing boon. He prayed to the hermit once again, saying, "I must not leave my wife's passions totally unrequited. Grant me youthful vigour at least for a year."

The hermit sat silent for a while.

"Listen, little man. I've no power to transform your age into youth. In fact, there is no such possibility in the realm of universal nature. The possibility may

one day emerge, may be after a few centuries, when man will be entitled to a gnostic consciousness," he said.

"Must I go back disappointed, Sir? Better I die at your feet."

"Well, I can only direct you to mustering some youthful vitality for a short period. There is a small waterfall in a hidden Himalayan valley. Should you bathe in it three times a day and then lick some germinal worms lurking in the swampy crevices of the rocks, you can develop the prowess you're hankering after. That the prowess, when related to this feeble and decadent body of yours, is bound to appear ridiculously disharmonious, is a different matter."

Agog with excitement, the old man took leave of his wife under some pretext and set out in search of the waterfall. Days changed into months and six months passed. The lady grew anxious. One day, as she met the hermit and reported her husband's mysterious absence, the hermit disclosed to her all about the old man's odd mission.

With tears in her eyes, she said, "O Sage, what's this my husband is doing? Once married to him, I prayed to the Divine Mother and won a decisive victory over sex. After the bandit's visit and advice, what I cultivated for him was a kind of maternal affection and that is what led me to serve him with dedication. I had no expectations from him. It breaks my heart to think of his wanderings and of his going through some nauseating rites at his venerable age in order to give me a satisfaction for which I had no lust!"

She paused and sighed and articulated her doubt. "I hope he is alive."

"He is, my daughter, and he shall continue to be alive till the sunrise on the 12th day of the lunar fortnight in the month of *Shravan*, the next year," the hermit assured her.

The lady returned home. As days passed, she grew more and more anxious about her husband. A year rolled by and at last the old man was back on the morning of the 11th day of the lunar fortnight in the month of *Shravan*. He looked as excited as a stork at the brink of a pool abounding in fish. But there was no harmony between his smile and his lusty look on the one hand and his over-wrinkled skin and worn-out physique on the other. A feverish smirk, indicating hope of reviving some long-lost prospect for enjoying life hung on his lips.

The lady understood that her husband had achieved success in his undertaking. It is not easy to describe her predicament. The old man, after his long absence and fruitful completion of his exploration, would naturally be eager to satisfy his desire at night, ignorant of the ominous fact that the end of the night would also bring his own end. Scriptures had informed the lady about the import of the quality of one's thoughts on the eve of one's death and its role in determining the circumstances of one's next birth. How could she allow herself to be the cause and agent of his degradation? It was not enough to keep him away from any

exercise of his passion; it was also her duty to inspire in him a sense of serenity and detachment.

After she had welcomed her husband and had cooked a delicious lunch for him and arranged for his rest, she entered her tiny household shrine and sat in meditation.

And that never ended. She passed away in her trance at sunset.

Her death drove out from the old man's consciousness all his passionate desires and yearnings. As prophesied by the hermit, he breathed his last at dawn. The villagers cremated them together.

"The hermit had revealed later that the lady was a highly evolved soul, almost a goddess," said Samant while concluding his narration. A bit of the power of her askesis was still there in the occult atmosphere of Ahladpur. How long it will be there depends on the collective consciousness of the villagers."

"Great!" commented Abolkara as he lifted the luggage.





A Turtle from the Blue

The first part of the story is from the Panchatantra in which it ends with the turtle falling to its death the moment it tried to speak.

Green was the valley and beautiful the lake. But Kambugriva was ambitious. Often he looked at the horizon and sighed. How much more beautiful must be the lakes and how much greener the valleys beyond those hills! He cursed his luck for being a turtle instead of a feathered creature.

At times he climbed to the bank and strolled for a while licking up a drop of dew from a blade of grass or chewing up a tiny flower. But far from satiating, that only enhanced his thirst for knowing the unknown.

Often, he would pass into a sort of trance and visualize phenomena that were strange: dancing trees, musical mountains, blue rivers falling perpendicularly from the clouds, men and monkeys assembled in magnificent halls debating the virtues of the tail.

Every year, during the monsoon, a couple of swans, Vikata and Sankata by name, visited the lake and camped there for a week before resuming their flight for a much bigger lake beyond the hills. Kambugriva looked forward to their visit. The swans knew of the turtle's extraordinary interests and did not grudge him an hour or two of storytelling everyday.

They had become intimate friends when the turtle suggested that they take him along in their flight to the bigger lake. Though not quite sure about the wisdom of the proposed adventure, the swans consented to give it a try for a mile.

They evolved a technique for Kambugriva's air-travel after several brainstorming sessions. The turtle clamped his jaws tightly on the middle point of a stick. Vikata and Sankata, holding its two ends in their beaks, took off.

Having flown a mile in this fashion they alighted on a small hillock.

"So, the trial flight had been a success, after all!" chuckled the turtle.

"Now we must fly non-stop over the hills and the town. You must not open your mouth as long as we are aloft!" Sankata and Vikata warned the turtle.

"Was it only to tell me this much that you alighted?" asked the impatient turtle.

"It would have been regrettable if we had tried to warn you while flying," replied the swans.

Kambugriva did not seem to hear. He goggled at the landscape with wonder and delight.

"I'll go down in history as the first astronaut among the turtles," he announced excitedly before taking hold of the stick once again.

The swans rose high, this time with greater ease and confidence. The wind was favourable and the sky was clear. But as it was the time for sunset, the sky was spattered with birds. The smaller ones like sparrows and partridges were frightened by the apparition while the respectable ones like the kites and the pigeons spoke gravely about it. An old cynic among the crows observed, "I had prophesied more than once that the future of our sky was bleak. This invasion of the sky by a turtle surely marks the beginning of the end!"

"And swans had always been renegades," commented a crane.

Some cowherd boys on the other side of the hills were the first humans to witness the phenomenon. They clapped their hands and ran keeping pace with the swans for some time. Kambugriva, with some manoeuvre, could roll his eyes sufficiently to catch a glimpse of the goings-on below. When the boys fell back, he felt like clapping his own hands, but, of course, he failed to achieve that feat.

Because of Kambugriva's weight the swans had come rather low. They were now passing over a river. A boat was carrying a marital party, with the bride and the bridegroom seated at the centre of the vessel, the bride's face covered by an ornate veil. But she peeped out as soon as she heard the others exclaim at the flying marvel and giving the first ever nudge to her husband, squeaked, "Can't you get that for me?" The husband stood up nervously wondering what to do, only to resume his seat abruptly and awkwardly as a lurch of the boat made him lose balance.

"You fool!" the turtle itched to utter, but managed to gulp down the surging inspiration.

The rays of the drooping sun drenched the swans' wings and the turtle's glistening back in gold.

“To rise high is life itself.” The turtle managed to gulp down this irresistible poetry this time too, but with greater difficulty.

At a distance could be seen the palace tower. People had rushed to inform the king of the strange occurrence in the sky and the king, along with his entire court, which included an emissary from another kingdom, was on the terrace.

“Amazing!” observed the king when he caught sight of the turtle and the swans emerging from a light cloud.

“Amazing, Your Majesty? But in our kingdom we sometimes see a full-grown hog swimming through the clouds!” bragged the emissary.

“But who carries them, Your Excellency? Do your hogs have wings then, or your royalty tails?” queried the king, his voice as tender as that of a maiden enquiring of his lover about his health.

“My lord!” stammered out the emissary with a mortified grin, “Our hogs have no wings nor are our royalty beailed, but we have some birds as big as buffaloes to whisk the hogs across the sky!”

“Indeed!” commented the king.

“You fool!” shrieked Kambugriva and the next moment he came down on the palace roof with a dull thud, scaring all but hitting none. The frustrated swans, dropping the stick, screeched and circled the palace for a few times and then retreated and perched on a nearby tree.

Those on the terrace surrounded the dead turtle.

“It’s an excellent turtle, of a rare delicious variety,” declared the court’s chief epicure, “suitable for the royal table but for the fact that kings look down upon turtle meat.”

“It’s only once in a millennium that a turtle comes crashing from the blue and when it does, its meat is a sure cure for a hundred ills,” observed the court physician-cum-astrologer. His eyes half closed and half focussed on the royal scribe, he added, “The next turtle will drop from the sky even as this one, nine hundred years and nine months and nine weeks – ah – yes, nine weeks, for I can clearly see that in the future ten weeks will make a month – and nine days and nine hours from now.”

“But why had you not made any prophesy about this one’s fall, O learned one?” asked the king.

“My only concern is your Majesty and since Your Majesty ate no turtle, I deemed the event, even though I knew its coming, irrelevant,” replied the astrologer.

The king’s eyes glittered for a moment as he regarded the turtle.

“Since it is a panacea for many ills, we shall have it roasted and the meat distributed among the neediest,” proclaimed the king. He directed the turtle to be carried to the kitchen.

“Although, like our great king, I never partake of turtle meat, I shall love a bit of this one,” said the king’s General in a casual tone. “It’s high time I got rid of my osteoarthritis.”

The General’s statement was instantly followed by similar ones from almost all the ministers and courtiers. Everyone complained of one ailment or the other and craved a bit of the turtle meat, all for the sake of better service to His Majesty.

“For better understanding and friendship between our two noble kingdoms, I won’t mind tasting a bit of it either,” announced the emissary.

In the meantime a portable throne had been brought on to the terrace. As the king sat down on it, the others squatted on the floor.

“The turtle will no doubt go to the most deserving. We will see to that. But I heard the creature uttering something as he fell. What was that?” demanded the king of the courtier endowed with the most elaborate pair of ears.

“My heart breaks to report it, my lord,” avowed the courtier tugging fretfully at his remarkable ears which he could cock at will. “It said, ‘You fool!’ Alas, that was its last pronouncement.

“But who did he address? Who could be the fool among us?” wondered the king.

There was an ominous silence and there were hurried mutual surveys among the courtiers.

“Unless,” declared the king, “the fool among us confesses himself, we will have to find him out through a process of elimination.”

The king waited for a few minutes during which the silence seemed to be growing heavier by the second.

“Now, the emissary, by virtue of his diplomatic status, is immune from being a fool,” resumed the king.

“It’s so, Your Majesty,” agreed the emissary.

“Our ministers must be either ministers or fools. They cannot be both.”

“Correct, Your Majesty,” bowed the ministers with smiles of relief. “We are only ministers.”

“Our General who disclosed bravely and openly of his osteoarthritis before the emissary of another kingdom must be wiser than he looks.”

The General gave a kind of uncertain smirk.

The king’s process of elimination soon embraced the entire court on the terrace.

And when the last sigh of relief had been heard, the king, it seemed, broke into tears. “That only means, I am the fool,” he cried out.

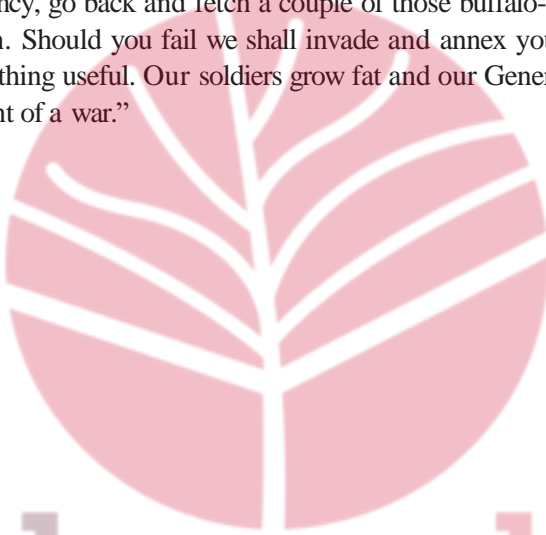
All the courtiers broke into tears and sobs.

“But a king cannot afford to remain a fool! He must cure himself of such a blemish even if that required his breaking a sacred tradition and condescending to

eat this creature, the whole of it if warranted, which in any case was no ordinary but a millennial turtle!”

Thus spoke the king waving to the chief cook who had just arrived with a huge tray of steaming turtle. The cook’s assistant snatched away the nearest minister’s turban and spread it on the king’s lap. The cook placed the dish upon it. The courtiers were still weeping when the king finished the repast.

“Enough,” the king’s voice cut through the sobs like a bulldozer, “Now to business.” Wiping his mouth he fixed his gaze on the emissary and said, “Listen, Your Excellency, go back and fetch a couple of those buffalo-sized birds. We give you a month. Should you fail we shall invade and annex your land. It was time we did something useful. Our soldiers grow fat and our General has osteoarthritis for sheer want of a war.”



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The Princess and the Story-Teller

Ingredients of this story are culled from unidentifiable sources of folklore.

“Once upon a time, not long ago, a certain king had as his only child a most beautiful princess...”

“Ah! We had not heard of one since ages. Please go on...” Bhatta sat up erect and alert like a dog ready to snap up a crumb.

“Name, address and phone number of the princess, please?” queried Sawoo who, during his long drawn-out trial as a foremost smuggler, had the opportunity to listen to some of the noted lawyers from close quarters and had conducted himself like one since his honourable acquittal.

“Look, Sawoo, the story-teller is here because you chaps, bored with the jokes from your own stale stock, were thirsting for some candid tales. Now, can he proceed with his yarn if you interrupt him at this rate? I hope I did not make a blunder by dragging him along here. Though a poor school teacher today, he was my classmate. And look at his modesty! He won’t drink, but how graciously he bears with you drunkards,” commented Roy.

“Poor school teacher! What were you yourself? A clerk at the port, as insignificant as a frogling in a lake. Had Bhatta and I not kicked you up to opulence, you would have died with nothing more than a wad of betel tucked in your mouth. Now you must grab an imported bottle and bully us, eh? I am entitled to know all about the princess, because, well, because I must know!” yapped Sawoo filling his glass for the umpteenth time.

“May I know why you must?” Roy demanded.

“Isn’t it enough when I say that I must? Wasn’t there a time when princes and princesses were hand in glove with me? How can you appreciate my love for them and theirs for me?” quipped Sawoo, without taking the glass off his lips.

“But we had no knowledge of your camaraderie with princes and princesses!” observed Roy.

“Knowledge and you! I might be talking of the fairytale princesses! But where did they all go? Not heard of them for decades. And who are you to stop me from being inquisitive?” cried Sawoo and he gave a further vent to his spoilt mood, adding, “What is there for you to be so proud of your one-eyed story-teller friend who even does not drink?”

“But he used to keep me spell-bound with his stories when I had the time to hear them, that is to say, before you venomous spiders entrapped me and I was drained of all my leisure, peace and dreams. And, by the way, let me ask you, Sawoo, was it out of pure piety that you pulled me away from my humble clerical stool? Could you have carried on your clandestine commerce overseas if I had not been unfaithful to my salt?” demanded Roy.

But Sawoo did not seem to hear. He murmured, “How much more beautiful the princess would have proved only if your friend had looked at her with a peg crawling down his gullet! But the chap had only one eye to look with!”

“When we first met, the princess too laughed at me on account of that,” reminisced the story-teller with a serene smile.

Sawoo clanged his tumbler against his teeth. “You mean, you knew the princess personally?”

The story-teller did not answer but went on: “The princess was as virtuous as she was beautiful. But she had a bee in her bonnet, a golden bee though.”

“They were always like that, quirky and stubborn, for instance, well, you must pardon me, for I just can’t recollect the instance...” mused Sawoo.

“Will you stomach your garbage?” Bhatta showed impatience. “Please don’t mind; go on,” he prompted the story-teller with a pat on his back.

The story-teller nodded and resumed:

‘The king naturally desired to marry off the princess. But the maiden-terrible put forth a naughty condition: she would marry only a person, prince or pauper she cared not, who succeeded in answering three questions she would put to him or in performing feats she would stipulate. Suitors came by the dozen, but who could pass the preposterous tests? For instance, of a certain prince as round as a boar, she demanded that he gorge himself on live cockroaches for a full fortnight if he wished to win her hand. Another who had lately lost his third wife and was still in mourning when smitten with the desire to sweep the princess into his harem, was required to laugh non-stop for a whole full-

moon night. He took up the challenge and commenced his performance before a bench of owl-faced women and goat-eyed men. He kept up his laughter for an hour at the end of which he resumed mourning the death of his third wife and left.

‘It was after the lady had humiliated a full dozen princes and princelings and an equal number of ambitious buffoons that I appeared before the king and said with a short bow, “My lord! I am willing!”

‘Who on earth is not, you fellow with the precious eye?’ growled the king, glaring at me. ‘Look here, man, I’m just sick. One after another they would retreat as though stung by a scorpion and out of consideration I must soothe them and pay some of the loafers their travelling allowance. This must stop. From now on every rejected suitor must pass a year or two in a solitary dungeon with nothing but a portrait of my daughter smiling upon him from a height beyond his reach. Willing?’

‘Willing,’ I said, ‘but what if I pass the test?’

‘Then you marry her – be you a man or a monster.’

‘That, my lord, is nothing new. But since you have announced a fresh stipulation for the beaten ones, you should also allow me to put forward a fresh condition from my side.’

‘What venom is brewing in the limbo that is your brain? You would love to seize my crown if you come off with flying colours, eh?’ asked the king with a longish sneer.

‘No, my lord. Just assure me that you will grant me any one wish if I pass the test. I promise I will leave your crown untouched.’

‘The king agreed. I was soon led into the ample private garden at the backyard of the palace. Intrigued by my audacity the king and, consequently, his entire court followed me.

‘The star-eyed, apple-cheeked princess was engaged in playing with peacocks. Looking at me askance, she calmly told her maids, “Will you take away the peacocks? They had never been exposed to a scarecrow.” I bore this insult with a grin...’

‘You did well,’ Bhatta commented baring his teeth and emptied his tumbler in a gulp.

‘Star-eyed, apple-cheeked!’ Sawoo murmured as gently as the fluttering of a butterfly, and sighed. His eyes roved around and then settled on the roof as if he saw the stars. The story-teller resumed:

‘The princess told me, feigning sweet innocence, “You desire to marry me, do you? How kind! But with your lone eye, you must be seeing only half of me, isn’t that so?”

The maids tittered, all the while trying to look grave.

‘Opposite is the case, Your Majesty. With my lone eye I can see twice of what you see with your blessed two eyes.’ I asserted.

‘How dare you make such a ludicrous, such an absurd claim?’ screamed the princess, flushing with fury...

‘You expected her to burst into a love song, did you?’ Sawoo too shrieked out, ‘How dared you pull her legs?’

The story-teller bestowed an apologetic smile on us and continued:

‘I said, “Your Majesty, I will convince all present here that I can indeed see twice of what you see, provided your question is counted as the first of the three tests I am required to go through.”

‘Alright,’ she agreed.

‘I went closer to her and fixing my lone eye on her, asked, ‘How many eyes do you see on me?’

‘One, I am sorry to say,’ answered the princess.

‘With your pair of eyes you see only one eye on me. But with my one eye I see two eyes on you. Don’t I see double of what you see?’ I demanded calmly.

‘The king, the courtiers and even the maids of the princess could not check their laughter and what a hearty hilarity was that!’

‘We too are laughing, look,’ said Bhatta, displaying a grimace, but he was fast losing control over his facial muscles.

Sawoo and Roy sat charmed, one gaping, the other blinking.

‘Furious at her defeat in the first round, the princess announced, “Now to my second question. If you say No to it, you accept defeat. If you say Yes, you must act accordingly.”

‘Go ahead,’ I stood at attention.

‘Do you see the hillock yonder?’ The princess spat out her words. ‘Can you carry it on your head for a mile?’

‘I can!’

‘The princess stood wringing her hands for a while...’

‘Believe me, we too feel lost!’ confessed Bhatta.

Sawoo put away his glass and fixed a stern gaze on the story-teller.

‘Then?’ asked Roy, his voice shaky with anxiety.

The story-teller resumed:

‘The princess asked me to follow her and strode towards the hill. Her maids, the king, the courtiers, and I followed her. No sooner had we reached the hill than the princess shouted, “Come on, let us see you carry the hill on your head.”

‘I am ready. Your Majesty, all you have to do is lift it up and place it on my most willing head.’

‘The good old king whistled. But he abruptly stopped when his eyes met those of his dear daughter.

‘Thus was the princess defeated in the second round too.’

‘Good heavens!’ groaned Bhatta, while Sawoo sighed like a punctured bicycle-tube.

‘The princess now came out with her last test,’ continued the story-teller. “Can you narrate a full dozen tales not one of which any of my maids had heard?”

“I can,” said I.

‘We hurried back to the garden. The princess sat flanked by her maids and I by the courtiers. The king sat in the middle. Excitement ran high.

‘I went on telling tales. At the end of each narration I would ask the maids, “Had you ever heard this?” The charmed maids would say, “No, never.”

‘When I had finished telling eleven tales, the desperate princess whispered to her maids, “Say Yes this time, you fools!”

‘I had anticipated this. Thus ran my last story: There was a young man who scaled the palace wall and met the princess, secretly, night after night. Each time he brought a lotus as a gift for her. But one day, try as he may, he found no lotus. Said the princess, probably in a lighter vein, “If you couldn’t find a lotus, why don’t you offer me the thing closest to it, I mean one of your eyes?”

‘The young man instantly flashed his knife and carving out one of his eyes held it out to the princess. Overwhelmed, the princess at once placed a garland around his neck indicating her acceptance of him as her husband. Now, know ye all, here is that honourable princess, and here am I, the one-eyed lover. Good Maids, did you know of this beforehand?

“Yes, of course we did!” exclaimed the maids in a chorus. “Thank you,” I said. “Now let the king and the courtiers know!”

‘The princess hung her head. The courtiers raised a gleeful hullabaloo above which could be heard only the royal voice, “I have got my worthy son-in-law at last!” And we were duly married!’

“Married! You did marry Her Majesty?” Bhatta cried out.

“You cheated the princess into marriage with you!” thundered Sawoo as he stood up, trembling.

“I did!” quietly said the story-teller.

“In that case you should have become the king!” pointed out Roy.

“Sure. But the king had promised to grant me a wish, didn’t he? Now I put that forth – I will take the princess to my hut. She will live there as a humble wife: spinning, cooking and washing dishes and clothes. I will have nothing to do with the royalty. The king was obliged to agree.”

“O rogue! O cruel cruel rogue!” shouted Bhatta.

“What right had you to so harass the beautiful princess? I will take out your remaining eye,” barked Sawoo and he staggered forward menacingly raising a spoon.

The story-teller stood up and, suddenly fluttering open the eye which he had kept shut until that moment, appealed, "Patience please! All this was as true as my not having an eye!"

Sawoo dropped the spoon and himself dropped into his sofa. "What a terrible chap you are!" he muttered, betraying alarm.

"You deserved to marry the princess. Please pardon us," said Bhatta and he pushed a pack of currency notes into the story-teller's pocket.

"Will you kindly present a bouquet and a few gifts on my behalf to the princess?" said Sawoo as he too pressed a bunch of notes on the story-teller and collapsed face down across the table.

Roy escorted the story-teller down to the portico and instructed his chauffeur to drop him at his home.

"Although for a moment I did forget that you really had both your eyes intact, I had not become unstable like them, or had I?" queried Roy anxiously.

"No, certainly not," the story-teller assured him indulgently.

Roy suddenly broke into sobs. "I know there was never a princess like that. Am I right?"

"Right."

"Well, whom am I missing then? For whom then am I weeping?"

Roy kept on mopping his eyes while the story-teller patted him on the back as though consoling a child.

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