

A Snake in the Grass

— R. K. Narayan

What the mind doesn't understand, it worships or fears.

— Alice Walker

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About the Author



R K Narayan (1906 – 2001): R. K. Narayan was an Indian writer, best known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He is one of three leading figures of early Indian literature in English (alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao), and is credited with bringing the genre to the rest of the world.

Narayan broke through with the help of his mentor and friend, Graham Greene, who was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's first four books, including the semi-autobiographical trilogy of *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. Narayan's works also include *The Financial Expert*, hailed as one of the most original works of 1951, and Sahitya Akademi award winner *The Guide*, which was adapted for film.

In a writing career that spanned over sixty years, Narayan received many awards and honours. These include the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and the Padma Vibhushan. He was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's Parliament. He died on 13 May 2001, in Chennai at the age of 94.

The Passage

Glossary

Difficult words:

inmate = resident
frantically = wild with pain, excitement

agitation = unrest
dreadful = full of terror, fearful

sinister = bad, evil
accusingly = with blame

tidy = clean

banalities = trivial instances

The Passage

On a sunny afternoon, when the **inmates** of the bungalow were at their **siesta** a cyclist rang his bell at the gate **frantically** and announced:

'A big cobra has got into your compound. It crossed my wheel.' He pointed to its track under the gate, and **resumed** his journey.

The family **consisting** of the mother and her four sons **assembled** at the gate in great **agitation**. The old servant Dasa was sleeping in the shed. They shook him out of his sleep and announced to him the arrival of the cobra. 'There is no cobra,' he replied and tried to dismiss the matter. They **swore** at him and forced him to take an interest in the cobra. 'The thing is somewhere here. If it is not found before the evening, we will dismiss you. Your neglect of the garden and the lawns is responsible for all these **dreadful** things coming in.' Some neighbours **dropped in**. They looked

apathy = absence of passion or emotion

desultorily = lack in consistency, without logical connection

foliage = leaves

aptly = likely

unobstructed = without any interruption

glare = harsh light, fiercely stare

triumphantly = with sense of winning

alms = donation

hypothetical = assumed, supposed

adequately = proper

One word substitute:

siesta = a midday or afternoon rest or nap

eloquent = with the power of fluent, forceful and appropriate speech

crow-bar = a steel bar usually flattened and slightly bent at one or both ends, used as a lever

shrub = a woody plant smaller than a tree

reptile = a group of animals which crawl or creep

hood = the fold of skin on the head of a cobra

Verbs and Idioms:

to resume = to take or occupy again

accusingly at Dasa: 'You have the laziest servant on earth,' they said. 'He ought to keep the surroundings tidy.'

'I have been asking for a grass-cutter for months,' Dasa said. In one voice they ordered him to manage with the available things and learn not to make demands. He persisted. They began to speculate how much it would cost to buy a grass-cutter. A neighbour declared that you could not think of buying any article made of iron till after the war. He chanted banalities of wartime prices. The second son of the house asserted that he could get anything he wanted at controlled prices. The neighbour became eloquent on black-market. A heated debate followed. The rest watched in apathy. At this point the college boy of the house butted in with: 'I read in an American paper that 30,000 people die of snake-bite every year.' Mother threw up her arms in horror and arraigned Dasa. The boy elaborated the statistics. 'I have worked it out, 83 a day. That means every twenty minutes someone is dying of cobra-bite. As we have been talking here, one person has lost his life somewhere.' Mother nearly screamed on hearing it. The compound looked sinister. The boys brought in bamboo-sticks and pressed one into the hands of the servant also. He kept desultorily poking it into the foliage with a cynical air. 'The fellow is beating about the bush,' someone cried aptly. They tucked up their dhoties, seized every available knife and crow-bar and began to hack the garden. Creepers, bushes, and lawns, were laid low. What could not be trimmed was cut to the root. The inner walls of the house brightened with the unobstructed glare streaming in. When there was nothing more to be done Dasa asked triumphantly, 'Where is the snake?'

An old beggar cried for alms at the gate. They told her not to pester when they were engaged in a snake-hunt. On hearing it the old woman became happy, 'You are fortunate. It is God Subramanya who has come to visit you. Don't kill the snake.' Mother was in hearty agreement: 'You are right. I forgot all about the promised Abhishekam. This is a reminder.' She gave a coin to the beggar, who promised to send down a snake-charmer as she went. Presently an old man appeared at the gate and announced himself as a snake-charmer. They gathered around him. He spoke to them of his life and activities and his power over snakes. They asked admiringly: 'How do you catch them?' 'Thus,' he said, pouncing upon a hypothetical snake on the ground. They pointed the direction in which the cobra had gone and asked him to go ahead. He looked helplessly about and said, 'If you show me the snake, I'll at once catch it. Otherwise what can I do? The moment you see it again, send for me. I live nearby.' He gave his name and address and departed.

to consist of = to be made up of
to assemble = to gather
to swear = to take an oath, to pledge
to drop in = to visit
to persist = to be insistent in statement, action etc.
to speculate = to reflect
to chant = to sing, to repeat rhythmically
to assert = to state with confidence
to butt in = to interrupt and interfere
to arraign = to accuse, to blame
to poke = to push
to tuck up = to pull up
to seize = to take possession of
to pester = to bother, to give trouble
to peep out of = to look out of small opening
to emerge = to come out of

At five in the evening, they threw away their sticks and implements and repaired to the veranda to rest. They had turned up every stone in the garden and cut down every grass-blade and **shrub**, so that the tiniest insect coming into the garden should have no cover. They were loudly discussing the various measures they would take to protect themselves against **reptiles** in the future, when Dasa appeared before them carrying a water-pot whose mouth was sealed with a slab of stone. He put the pot down and said: 'I have caught him in this. I saw him **peeping out of** it... I saw him before he could see me.' He explained at length the strategy he had employed to catch and seal up the snake in the pot. They stood at a safe distance and gazed on the pot. Dasa had the glow of a champion on his face. 'Don't call me an idler hereafter,' he said. Mother complimented him on his sharpness and wished she had placed some milk in the pot as a sort of religious duty. Dasa picked up the pot cautiously and walked off saying that he would leave the pot with its contents with the snake-charmer living nearby. He became the hero of the day. They watched him in great admiration and decided to reward him **adequately**.

It was five minutes since Dasa was gone when the youngest son cried: 'See there!' Out of a hole in the compound wall a cobra **emerged**. It glided along towards the gate, paused for a moment to look at the gathering in the veranda with its **hood** half-open. It crawled under the gate and disappeared along a drain. When they recovered from the shock they asked, 'Does it mean that there are two snakes here?' The college boy murmured: 'I wish I had taken the risk and knocked the water-pot from Dasa's hand; we might have known what it contained.'

EXERCISE – I

Read the passage and choose the correct answer for the following questions:

1. Who announced the entry of the cobra into the compound? _____
(a) Dasa (b) the neighbor (c) the lady servant (d) the cyclist
2. How many children does the lady have? _____
(a) two (b) three (c) four (d) five
3. What does Dasa demand from the family? _____
(a) a grass-cutter (b) a knife (c) a mower (d) an axe

4. Till when should one not think of buying any article made of iron? _____
(a) the show ended (b) the week ended (c) the war began (d) the war ended
5. As per the beggar's belief, which God had visited the house in the form of a cobra? _____
(a) Subbarao (b) Subramanya (c) Subbamaaya (d) Shubhmanyata
6. The beggar sent _____.
(a) a warrior (b) a sweeper (c) a snake-charmer (d) a dancer
7. Where had Dasa confined the cobra? _____
(a) the plate (b) the bowl (c) the water pot (d) the tin

EXERCISE - II

Answer the following questions:

1. Describe Dasa.

2. Why were the neighbours talking about the price of a grass-cutter?

3. What did the article in a US paper state about the deaths due to snake bite?

4. What did the beggar suggest to the mother?

5. How did the mother react to the beggar's suggestion?

6. How does Dasa become the hero of the day?

7. What is the irony at the end of the story?

✓ 8. Why did the family hold Dasa responsible for the entry of the snake?

9. How many people die of snake bite every year?

10. Why did the beggar suggest not to kill the snake?

11. Why was Dasa called 'the laziest servant on earth' by the neighbours?

EXERCISE – III

Write short paragraphs on:

1. Superstitions regarding the cobra mentioned in the story.

2. Dasa – a lazy but clever servant