

Khagam : A story by Satyajit Ray

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We were dining by the light of a Petromax lamp and I had just bitten into a curried egg when chowkidar Lachman said, “Aren’t you going to pay Imli baba a visit?”

I had to tell him that since the name of Imli baba had been unknown to us, the question of paying him a visit had not risen. Lachman said that if we asked the driver of the forest department jeep that had been engaged for us, he would take us to his den. We learned that baba’s hut was in the forest surrounded by pleasant scenery, and that he was highly regarded as a saint. In fact, people from all over the country came to pay their respects to that noted saint and sought his blessings, etc., etc. But apart from that, the information that really attracted our attention was the curious fact that baba had a pet krait snake that lived in a hole near his hut and that came to him every evening to drink goat’s milk.

After listening to everything, Dhurjati babu remarked that the country was being liberally filled with imposters and that the number of bogus holy men in India had risen to a dangerous level. He added that the more the impact of scientific knowledge was spreading in the Western countries, the more our country was progressing toward the darkness of superstition and fallacy. “The whole situation is utterly hopeless; makes my blood boil just to think of it!” he said.

No sooner had Dhurjati babu made the above comment than he put his fork down, picked up the fly-flap from the table and with one deft slap killed a mosquito that had settled on it. The gentleman was aged between forty-five and fifty. He was a short, thin, pale man with sharp features and grey eyes. It was in Bharatpur where the two of us first met. I had come from Agra and was on my way to Jaipur to spend a two-week holiday with my brother who lived there. The dak bungalow and the tourist lodge in Bharatpur being full at the time, I had to settle in that out-of-the-way Forest Rest House. I wasn’t repentant in anyway though, because I felt that there was a kind of thrilling comfort in residing in a rest house surrounded by the forest.

Dhurjati babu had come the day before I had arrived. He hadn’t mentioned the reason for his visit; however, I presumed that he was merely taking a holiday trip. Since the time we met, we had been traveling in the same jeep. Yesterday we went to see the fortress and the palace at Deeg, which was around twenty-two miles to the east from here. We had already been to the Bharatpur Fort in the morning and in the evening we saw the Keoladeo bird sanctuary. It was an exceptional experience. The bird sanctuary consisted of a large pond of about seven miles in length dotted with little island like wetlands, and on these wetlands were assembled flocks of rare and unique birds that came from all over the world. I hadn’t seen more than half of the species of birds before. While I watched the birds with amazement, Dhurjati babu grumbled and made vain attempts to wave away the tiny insects that buzzed around our heads. The little insects known as Unkis have a tendency to come in swarms and settle on your person; nevertheless, they are so small that their intrusion can well be ignored. But Dhurjati babu seemed irritated by them. I wondered how he could be so impatient.

We finished our dinner around half past eight in the evening, and as I sat in a wicker chair in the front porch admiring the beauty of the forest on a moonlit light, I said to Dhurjati babu, “That sadhubaba the servant had been talking about—should we go and have a look at him?”

Flicking the cigarette he had been smoking toward a eucalyptus tree, Dhurjati babu said, “A krait snake can never become a pet; it’s impossible to tame them. I know a great deal

about snakes. As a child, I used to live in Jalpaiguri, you see, and I have killed a number of snakes myself. A krait is a beastly and poisonous snake that can never be tamed. I am, therefore, dubious as to how truthful the account of the sadhu and his pet snake is.”

“Let’s go and see Imli baba tomorrow” I said. “After we see the fortress at Bayan in the morning we have no other plans for tomorrow as such.”

“You seem to have a lot of faith in holy men,” said Dhurjati babu. I realized that there was a note of sarcasm in his remark, but I replied rather innocently.

“The question of faith doesn’t arise here since I never had an opportunity to be in close quarters with holy men; nevertheless, I agree that I do have certain curiosity about the spiritual stuff.”

“I had once been curious about holy men too, but after a certain experience all that had changed....”

The following was the experience he narrated — it turned out that Dhurjati babu suffered from high blood pressure. Ten years or so ago, persuaded by one of his uncles, he tried an empiric medicine prescribed by a sadhubaba the intake of which had caused Dhurjati babu to suffer from unbearable stomach pain for nearly a week, and which ultimately resulted in his blood pressure shooting up even more. Ever since that experience, Dhurjati babu had considered nearly ninety percent of holy men in India as imposters.

Being rather amused by his deep-seated dislike of sadhus, I decided to provoke Dhurjati babu. “I am sure people like you and I can never tame a krait snake,” I said, “but I heard that some Himalayan sadhus actually live with tigers in their lair.”

“That’s what you heard, but have you ever seen such a thing?”

I had to admit that I hadn’t indeed.

“I am sure you won’t ever see anything like that because all these are cock-and-bull stories. When it comes to hearing, you will hear a lot, but when real visual evidence is called for, nothing could be had. Take for instance the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It is said that they contain historical facts, when in truth they are nothing but a storehouse of nonsensical tales of fiction. Ravana, the demon, had ten heads; Hanuman, the monkey-god, set Lanka on fire using the flame from his burning tail; Bhima’s appetite; Ghatotkach; Hidimba; Pushpaka, the flying chariot; Kumbhakarna— can anything strike you as more absurd than these stories? And speaking of fraudulent holy men, they appear even in the Puranas. Yet, despite that, both uneducated and uneducated people have been studying those texts for a very long time.

After returning from our trip to the fortress at Bayan, we had lunch, rested a bit, and so it was not until a little past four in the afternoon when we reached Imli baba’s hut in the forest. Dhurjati babu didn’t object to the visit any longer. I thought that he too, like me, was curious about the saint. Imli baba’s hut was situated under the shade of a huge tamarind tree in a clearing in the middle of the forest. It was from the tamarind tree that baba derived his name. It was actually the local people who had given baba that name; baba’s real name was unknown.

Inside the hut made of dried date palm leaves, we found Imli baba along with one of his disciples sitting on a bearskin rug. We couldn’t ascertain baba’s age, but his disciple looked fairly young. There was still a little over an hour to go before sunset, but because of the dense canopy of tamarind leaves, the place looked fairly dark. Outside the hut incense resin burned; baba held a ganja-pipe and smoked from it. In the slight luminescence

issued from the resin incense, I observed a clothesline stretched across the wall of the hut from which hung a gamchaa, a loincloth, and several sloughed-off snake skins.

Baba smiled at us and Dhurjati babu whispered in my ear, "Instead of wasting any more time, I think you should ask him straight away when the snake would be fed."

"Would you like to meet Balkishen?"

Strangely enough, Imli baba had read our thoughts correctly. We already knew from our jeep's driver, Deendayal, that the name of baba's pet snake was Balkishen. We told Imli baba that we knew all about his Balkishen and that we were very curious to see how the snake was fed milk. We asked him if there was any possibility of our wish being fulfilled.

Imli baba sadly shook his head. He said that until a couple of days ago Balkishen would come out of his burrow every evening in answer to baba's call and drink his milk, but since the day before, the snake had not been feeling well. "Today is poornima, the night of the full moon, so he won't come night tonight as well; he would be here from tomorrow," said baba.

I was surprised to hear that even snakes could be taken ill from time to time. And yet, come to think of it, there was nothing really improbable about it. It was, after all, a pet snake! And weren't there clinics for dogs, horses and cows, etc.?

Baba's young disciple gave us another bit of information: a colony of black ants had entered Balkishen's hideout and had further enfeebled the already indisposed snake; however, it seemed that baba's curse had decimated those nasty black ants now. On hearing the last sentence, Dhurjati babu gave me a sidelong glance. I was looking at Imli baba at the time. He didn't look extraordinary in anyway. He wore a long saffron robe. He had matted coils of hair, but his dreadlocks weren't ostentatious in any way. He wore metal earrings, a few neckpieces, and an amulet. His whole appearance didn't suggest anything unique; in fact, you couldn't tell him apart from a host of other holy men. And yet, despite that, I don't know why in that dusk laden early evening, I couldn't look away from that mesmerizing figure sitting behind the flared shaped incense burner. On seeing us standing, baba's disciple produced a couple of plaited reed mats and spread them on the floor. Since we couldn't see baba's pet krait that evening after all, we decided to leave. We were apprehensive about driving through the forest at night with the wild animals around. We had seen herds of deer almost every day. We greeted baba farewell with a namaskar and with his eyes closed and his weed-pipe still in his mouth, he responded to our salutation with a bow. After leaving baba's hut, Dhurjati babu and I walked in the direction of our jeep that was parked several yards away from the road. Until a few moments ago, we had been hearing the twittering of birds returning to their nests at dusk, but now all was quiet.

No sooner had Dhurjati babu stepped out of the hut and walked a few steps than he suddenly stopped and said, "We could have at least asked Imli baba to show us the burrow where the krait lives."

"We needn't return to Imli baba for that," I said, "Deendayal, our driver, said he had seen the snake's burrow; we could ask him."

"That's right," said Dhurjati babu.

A little while later, accompanied by Deendayal we came back to the place. But this time, instead of going in the direction of the hut, we walked along a narrow walking path by an almond tree. After some time, we stopped near a thorn-bush. The broken pieces of stone scattered about the area suggested the presence of some kind of construction in that spot in the past. Deendayal said that the snake's burrow was just behind that thorn-bush. In the

fading light of the day, the spot was barely visible. Dhurjati babu extracted a small battery operated flashlight from his coat pocket and pointed it at the thorn-bush. In the incandescent light of the torch, we spotted the hole. It was a relief to know that the burrow did exist. But what about the snake, would it come out of its lair just to satisfy our curiosity? To tell you the truth, even though I was curious to see baba feeding the snake goat's milk, I wasn't at all keen on seeing that krait come out of its hole and confront us. Nevertheless, unlike me, Dhurjati babu was all enthusiasm. When the beam from the torchlight produced no satisfying result, he started throwing clods of dirt at the bush.

I thought things were going too far now. "What's the matter with you?" I said, "I thought you didn't believe that there was any snake in the first place, and now you seem determined to drag it out of its burrow."

The gentleman now picked up a large clod of earth and said, "I still don't believe that there is any snake. If this clod of dirt doesn't bring it out then I would know that there is not a grain of truth in the story of the babaji and his snake. It's always better to disperse vain superstitions from people's mind."

The clod of earth landed with a thud on the bush and destroyed a part of the thorn-bush in the process. Dhurjati babu stood with his flashlight pointed at the cavity of the snake's burrow. For a few brief moments, everything seemed quiet except for the buzzing noise that a lone cricket had just started to make from somewhere inside the forest. Now, another sound was added to the buzzing noise, a dry, tuneless whistle like sound. This was followed by a stirring of dry leaves, and in the next moment, we noticed in the incandescent beam of the flashlight, a part of something black and shiny. The thing was alive and moving, and it was slowly slithering its way out of the burrow.

The leaves in the thorn-bush now stirred, and subsequently, through its parting, emerged the head of a snake. The light of the torch illuminated its beady glinting eyes, its sleek fork-pointed tongue that flicked out of its mouth again and again. Deendayal had been asking us to return for some time, and now he said in a pleading tone, "Leave it alone, sir! You have seen it, now let's go back."

It was probably because of the flashlight that Balkishen kept looking at us with his tongue flicking from time to time. I have seen snakes many a time, but this was the first time I saw a krait at such close quarters. Also, I had never known any snake like Balkishen that didn't assault its intruders. The light of the torch then suddenly trembled and was whisked away from the snake. I was totally unprepared for what happened next. Dhurjati babu abruptly picked up a stone and hurled it in the direction of the snake. He then threw another couple of stones, one after another, at Balkishen. I was gripped with a sudden sense of apprehension. "Why on earth did you do that, Dhurjati babu?" I said.

The gentleman who stood by me panting said in a rather exhilarated tone, "This means one krait less!"

Deendayal stood with eyes popping out of his head staring dumbly at the thorn-bush. I took the flashlight from Dhurjati babu and flashed it on the snake's burrow. I noticed a portion of Balkishen's insensate form. The leaves of the thorn-bush were spattered with the snake's blood.

Meanwhile, we were surprised to find Imli baba and his disciple standing behind us; we had no idea when they had arrived. It was Dhurjati babu who first turned and noticed them. And then I turned as well and saw Imli baba armed with a staff standing next to a stout date tree a few yards away from us observing us with a cold hard stare. Until that moment, I never realized that baba was so tall. I cannot express in words the nature of that look he

gave us. I can only say that it was a horrible concoction of such emotions as amazement, anger, and hatred. I had never seen such a gaze in anybody else's eye.

Imli baba now slowly raised his right hand. It was pointed at Dhurjati babu. A second later, he opened his palm and pointed his index finger at him. I now noticed for the first time that baba's fingernails were at least two inches long. Who did baba remind me of? Yes, I remembered the reproduction of the painting by Raja Ravi Verma depicting the powerful sage Durvasa cursing Shakuntala I had seen as a child at my maternal uncle's house in Bidon Street. Imli baba with his one upraised arm and that deadly stare in his eyes looked exactly like the hermit Durvasa.

Imli baba, however, said nothing about a curse. What he said in Hindi in his grim baritone meant this—it didn't matter that one Balkishen was dead; another would eventually come to take its place. Balkishen couldn't die. He was immortal.

Rubbing his dusty hands on a handkerchief, Dhurjati babu looked at me and said, "Let's go." Baba's disciple went to the snake's burrow and extracted the krait's corpse—perhaps to cremate its remains. I voiced a low gasp to see the length of the snake's body. I had no idea that a krait snake could have such an astounding length. Imli baba gradually turned and walked in the direction of his hut. The three of us went to our jeep.

Seeing Dhurjati babu sitting grim faced on our way back to the rest house, I said, "It was a pet snake and it didn't attack you in any way then why did you kill it?"

I thought that he would denunciate snakes and imposter holy men and try to justify his misdeed, but instead he asked me something totally irrelevant. "Do you know anything about Khagam? Khagam?"

Khagam, the name sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't remember where I heard it. Dhurjati babu muttered the name Khagam under his breath a few times and then he went quiet. It was six-thirty in the evening when we reached the rest house. The image of Imli baba looking like Durvasa with his cold hard stare and upraised arm pointed at Dhurjati babu flashed across my mind time and again. I couldn't fathom why the gentleman behaved in such a injudicious manner. Nevertheless, I thought that we had seen the end of the incident. Also, Imli baba had himself said that Balkishen was deathless. I said to myself that there must be many more krait snakes in the forests of Bharatpur; baba's disciples would definitely find another snake for him in no time.

Lachman had made chicken curry, chapatis fried in ghee and urad daal for dinner that night. One gets terribly hungry after a whole day of sightseeing. I felt I effortlessly consumed double the amount of food I usually ate at home in Kolkata. Even Dhurjati babu, who was small and thin, had a hearty appetite. But today I thought he was out of sorts. When I asked him if he was unwell, he didn't reply. I said, "I hope you are not aggrieved because of Balkishen's death?"

Dhurjati babu opened his mouth, but what he said couldn't be taken as a proper reply to my query. Staring at the petromax, he said in a thin, soft tone, "The snake, it was whispering...whiss...ss..perring..."

I laughed and said, "Would you say whispering or hissing?"

Dhurjati babu turned his face toward me and said, "No, it was whispering...snakes speak when snakes wheeze, hiss...hiss..."

Dhurjati babu stopped and made a snake like hissing sound for a few times himself. And then, in a tone of reciting a rhyme he said, "Snakes speak when snakes wheeze, hiss...hiss..hiss...hiss, Balkishen is very poisonous, hiss...hiss..hiss...hiss! Is that goat's milk I see there?" The last part of the sentence wasn't part of the rhyme. It was directed at the plate of pudding placed before us on the table.

Lachman understood the word "milk" and said, "Yes, babu, it has milk, and eggs, too." In general, Dhurjati babu had struck me as a gentleman who was habitually absentminded and a little eccentric, too. Today, however, his behavior was more than a bit capricious. Perhaps he realized that and made a strong effort to compose himself. "I feel a bit indisposed...I guess it's because of being out in the sun for so long. I need to be careful from tomorrow," he said.

It being a chilly night, I decided not to sit outside after dinner. Instead, I went to my room and began to pack my suitcase. I would catch the evening train from Bharatpur on the following day. At midnight I would change trains at Sawai Madhopur and reach Jaipur the next day at five in the morning.

My well laid plan, however, was spoiled. Circumstances took such a turn that I had to send my brother a telegram informing him that I would be arriving a day later. I would now tell you why I had to do this. I would try to be as clear and as specific as possible when describing to you what happened that night and on the day after. I know a lot of people won't believe me. I think that what could have been a solid evidence to bolster my story was perhaps still lying on the ground several yards away from Imli baba's hut. Even now, the very thought of that thing sends shivers down my spine. No wonder I couldn't pick it up and bring it back with me. Anyway, let me hark back to that incident.

I was about to get the bed after having packed my suitcase, turned down the wick of my lantern, placed it behind the dressing table, and put on my night clothes, when I heard a knocking on the door on the eastern side of the room. Dhurjati babu's room was behind that door.

When I opened the door, the gentleman said in a whisper, "Do you have Flit, or some other mosquito repellent?"

"Where did mosquitoes come from? Isn't there mosquito-netting on doors and windows?" I asked.

"Yes, there is," he said.

"Well, then?"

"But I think something is biting me."

"Can you feel it?"

"See, I have developed marks on my body."

The doorway was dark and I couldn't see his faces clearly, "Well, do come inside. Let me have a look at the marks," I said.

Dhurjati babu stepped inside. I raised my lantern and saw the marks directly. His face seemed to be covered with dark diamond-shaped blotches. I had never seen anything like it before, and I didn't like looking at it either. "I think you have caught some strange disease. Of course, it could be an allergic reaction. We must find a doctor tomorrow morning. I think you should go to sleep now. Don't think about it any longer. I don't think its insect bite. Does it hurt?"

"No," Dhurjati babu said.

"Well, that's good. Now, go to bed."

After the gentleman had departed, I went to bed myself. I have the habit of reading for sometime before going to bed, but reading by the lantern light wasn't possible. To tell you the truth, I didn't need any reading that night. I was tired from the exertions of the day and knew I would fall asleep within ten minutes of my head touching the pillow.

Nevertheless, I couldn't sleep that night. I was about to doze off when the noise of a car broke my slumber. The voice of foreign tourists and a dog's bark next followed. The dog stopped barking after a scolding from its master. After this, everything went quiet. The foreign tourists probably went inside their rooms as well. Crickets buzzed outside. No, not just crickets, I thought I heard another sound as well. My neighbor seemed to be up and about. I heard his footsteps. And yet, I had noticed through the opening under the door, his lantern either being put out or removed to the bathroom. I wondered what the man was doing walking up and down the room in the dark.

This was the first time I had the idea that perhaps Dhurjati babu was more than a bit eccentric. I had known him for just a couple of days. Apart from what he had told himself, I knew nothing about him. And yet, it was strange that even a few hours back there wasn't any sign of real madness in the gentleman's demeanor. I understood from the remarks he made when we visited the forts at Bayan and Deeg that he had a good grasp on history. Not only that, his comments suggested a thorough knowledge of art as well. He spoke enthusiastically and at length about the impact of Hindu and Muslim artists on Rajasthani architecture. No, I concluded that the gentleman was unwell after all. I decided that I must find a doctor for him on the following morning.

The radium dial on my watch announced the time as ten forty-five p.m. There was another knock on the door on the east. This time I decided not to get up. I shouted from my bed, "What is it, Dhurjati babu?"

"S-s-s-s..."

"What did you say?"

"S-s-s-s..."

I gathered that the gentleman was having difficulty speaking. Oh, what a mess! "Please say clearly what it is."

"S-s-s—can you open the door please?"

I was compelled to get up this time. As soon as I opened the door, the gentleman posed such an impossible childlike query that it really annoyed me.

"Can you tell me how many S's are there in the word snake?" he asked.

I made no effort to hide my displeasure.

"You woke me up in the middle of the night just to ask this?" I said.

"How many S's?"

"Just one," I said.

"And -curse? How many S's in curse?"

"Only one," said.

"I see," said Dhurjati babu. "Thank you. Go to s-s-s-s sleep."

Seeing him like this, I felt pity for the gentleman. "Would you like to have a sleeping pill? I have it with me," I said.

"No, thank you," said Dhurjati babu. "I s-s-s-sleep very well in winter. S-s-s-s... except during s-s-s-sunset and in the evening ..."

I interrupted the gentleman and said, "Has something happened to your tongue? You are stammering. Let me have a look at it."

I followed the gentleman to his room. His flashlight was kept on top of the dressing table. I picked it up and raised it near Dhurjati babu's face. The gentleman opened his mouth and

stuck out his tongue. Doubtless, there was something wrong with it. I noticed a thin scarlet line running from the middle of it down to the rim of the tongue.

“There is no pain, you say?” I asked.

“No, no pain.”

I had no idea of the kind of disease that Dhurjati babu was suffering from. It was at this moment that I chanced to look upon his bed. It was not slept in. “I won’t leave until you go to bed,” I said sternly. “And please do not knock on my knock anymore tonight. I won’t be able to sleep in the train tomorrow, so I need to sleep soundly tonight.”

The gentleman made no effort to go to bed. I noticed that the lantern was kept in the bathroom. Outside, the night was aglow with the light of the full moon. Moonlight streamed into the room through the open window in the north and illuminated a section of the floor. In the tender glow of the moonlight, I saw Dhurjati babu. Dressed in his sleeping suit, he was standing a little way off intermittently making whistling noises through parted lips. I had draped my blanket before coming to his room, but Dhurjati babu seemed not to be affected by the chill at all. I realized that if Dhurjati babu was unwell then it would be difficult for me to leave him alone and go away. It was unacceptable to me that a Bengali should leave another Bengali in trouble miles away from home and go about his own way.

When Dhurjati babu didn’t stir in spite of my urging him to go to bed, I realized that I needed to be strict with him. If he persisted in behaving like a sulky child, I had to adopt the role of his conscientious guardian. I decided that I had no other option but to grab Dhurjati babu by his arm and forcibly put him to bed. But no sooner had I touched the gentleman than I sprang a few steps backward; his body as cold as ice. I never imagined that any living person could have a body as cold as that.

It was perhaps my reaction that made Dhurjati babu smile a little. He was now observing me with his cat-eyes and smiling. In a muffled voice I said, “What’s the matter with you?” Dhurjati babu kept looking at me. He had been staring at me for more than a minute now and during this time he hadn’t blinked even once. I noticed how he kept sticking his tongue out of his mouth time and again. And then, he whispered, “Baba is calling me—Balkishen! Balkishen! Baba is calling me...”

After this, Dhurjati babu’s knees buckled and he knelt down on the floor. He then stretched his body forward and lay on his chest. Subsequently, he used his elbows to drag himself into the darkness under the bed.

I realized that my body was drenched in sweat and that I was shivering violently in fear. I couldn’t stand in Dhurjati babu’s room any more. I no longer felt apprehensive about him; what I felt now was something that involved equal parts of horror and disbelief.

I came back to my room, shut and bolted the door after me. I then climbed on my bed and covered myself with my blanket. After a while, the shivering stopped and I saw things more clearly. I tried to rationalize all that had happened before me. This evening Dhurjati babu had killed Imli baba’s pet krait snake before my eyes. Afterward, Imli baba, with his arm upraised and index finger pointed at Dhurjati babu, had said— one Balkishen was gone; another Balkishen would eventually come to take its place. Was the second Balkishen a snake, or a human being?

Or, possibly, a human being who had become a snake?

What were those diamond-shaped blotches all over Dhurjati babu’s body?

What was that thin red line on his tongue?

Was it the precondition before it became forked?

Why was his body so cold?

Why did he crawl underneath his bed instead of sleeping on it?

At this moment, something flashed across my mind like lightning. Khagam. Dhurjati babu had been asking me about Khagam. I thought I heard the name somewhere, but couldn't recollect it at the time. Now I remembered. It was a story in the Mahabharata I read as a child. Khagam was a hermit whose curse turned his friend, Sahasrapada, into a snake. Khagam—snake—curse...all fitted. Sahastrapada had metamorphosed into a non-poisonous, harmless snake; I wondered what kind of slithering serpent Dhurjati babu would become.

Somebody had just knocked on my door. There it was again, not on the top but near the foot of the door. One, two, three... I lay still on my bed. I decided that I was not going to open the door. Not again.

The rapping sound stopped. I held my breath and listened. I heard a whistle. The sound gradually moved away from my door. Now I heard another sound in company with the lub-dub of my heart.

Was that a screech I heard? No, it was something between a screech and a low shriek. Was it rats, I wondered. I knew there were rats at the rest house; I had seen one the day I came here. I had told Lachman about it and the next day he had shown me a rat he had trapped in the kitchen. "Not only rats, sir, we have moles infesting the place, too." Lachman had said.

The low shriek had now ceased and it was quiet once more. I looked at my watch and realized that ten minutes had passed. The time was twelve-forty-five. I thought I couldn't sleep anymore that night. I looked at the trees outside; the moon was shining in the middle of the sky.

I heard the sound of a door being opened. I realized that Dhurjati babu, who lived next door, had just opened the door to the verandah. The windows of both Dhurjati babu's and my room faced the verandah.

I wondered what the gentleman was doing in the verandah at such a time in the night.

What was his intention? I lay still and looked straight at the open window.

The next instant, I heard a whistling sound. It gradually became louder. It now came from just outside my window. Thank heavens there was mosquito-netting on the window!

I noticed at that moment something crawling up from the bottom of the wall. It stopped after a while. In the dim luminescence of the lantern, I observed a head and a pair of beady, cat-eyes staring at me unblinkingly.

The eyes looked at me for more than a minute; the barking of a dog then caused it to stir and disappear in the darkness.

The dog had been barking relentlessly for some time now. The sleep-laced voice of its owner scolded it. The dog gave out a plaintive moan and stopped barking. All went quiet once again. I kept my senses alert for another ten minutes or so. The lines of a rhyme I had heard in the evening played in my mind again and again—

"Snakes speak when snakes wheeze

Hiss-hiss-hiss-hiss!

Balkishen is very poisonous

Hiss-hiss-hiss-hiss!"

Eventually, that rhyme too faded away. A deep soporific drowsiness overtook me; I realized I was falling asleep.

The sound of a commotion broke my sleep. I heard agitated foreign voices coming from downstairs. It was ten minutes to six in the morning. Realizing something was wrong, I got up from my bed, put on some warm clothes, and went down to accost my foreign neighbors. The group consisted of a couple of young Americans named Bruce and Michael. They told me that their pet dog had died during the night. The dog was sleeping in the same room as them, but they hadn't locked the door. They thought that the animal was bitten during the night by something poisonous like a snake or a scorpion. Michael thought it was a scorpion because snakes never come out in the winter.

I didn't waste any more time with the foreigners and their dead dog and came up hurriedly to Dhurjati babu's room. I found the door of the room open and its occupant absent. Every day at five in the morning Lachman prepared tea. When I asked him about Dhurjati babu, he said he hadn't seen him in the morning.

A host of apprehensions clouded my mind. I knew I had to somehow find Dhurjati babu. I gathered he couldn't go far on foot. And yet, despite searching for him in the surrounding forest, I couldn't find any trace of the gentleman.

Around ten-thirty in the morning the jeep arrived and I asked the driver to take me to the post office—I had to send a telegram to my brother in Jaipur. I decided I would not leave Bharatput without solving the mystery of Dhurjati babu's unexplained disappearance from the rest house.

When I came back from the post office after sending a telegram to my brother and postponing my train tickets for a day, I learned that there still was no sign of Dhurjati babu. The two American tourists after having buried their dog had left in the morning.

I spend the whole afternoon searching for Dhurjati babu in the area surrounding the rest house. I had asked the jeep driver to come in the evening. He arrived punctually and I asked him to take me to Imli baba's hut in the forest. Something told me that there I would find news about Dhurjati babu.

We reached Imli baba's hermitage about the same time as we did the day before. The hermit was sitting in the same manner behind an incense burner. I noticed that there were two more disciples with baba today. One of them was middle aged, the other was young.

On seeing me, baba greeted me with a brief shake of the head. The smoldering gaze of the previous evening was conspicuous by its absence from baba's eyes today. I went straight to the point without wasting any more time. I asked him if he could possibly give me any information about the gentleman who accompanied me to his hut the previous evening. A happy smile of contentment illuminated baba's face. "Of course, there is news about him," said he. "Your friend has fulfilled my wish; he has brought my Balkishen back to me."

At this moment, I noticed a bowl of milk placed on baba's right-hand side. But I had not come here to see a snake and a bowl of milk. I came here to find Dhurjati Prasad Basu. It was impossible that a human being could disappear into thin air overnight. At any rate, I would be fairly relieved if I discovered some sign of his existence.

I had already noticed before Imli baba's uncanny ability to read people's mind. Inhaling deeply at the ganja pipe he held in his hand and then handing it over to his middle-aged disciple, Imli baba said, "I am afraid you won't find your friend quite as he used to be before; but you can see the memento he had left. You will find it lying on the ground fifty steps to the south of Balkishen's burrow. Be careful, the place is filled with thorn bushes."

I set off according to baba's instruction and reached Balkishen's burrow. I wasn't at all curious to know if there was a snake in the burrow or not. I kept my eyes on the setting sun and proceeded toward my destination. I counted my steps as I waded my way through the grass, stone rubble, and thorn bush. Finally, after finishing fifty careful steps, I found myself near an Arjuna tree. I noticed something was lying on the ground near the foot of the tree. The thing that lay was similar to what I had seen a little while ago hanging from a clothesline across the wall in Imli baba's hut.

The item was a newly sloughed-off skin covered all over with diamond-shaped patterns. Was it a sloughed-off skin of a snake? No, it couldn't be. Snakes, I gathered, do not have such broad proportions. And they also do not have a couple of arms hanging from their sides, or a pair of legs stretching from underneath.

The thing I saw lying underneath the Arjuna tree was actually the sloughed-off skin of a man. It was the skin of a man who had ceased to be a man anymore. He was now lying curled up inside that snake's burrow. He was at present a venomous krait snake.

I heard him hissing now. The sun had just gone down in the west. There was Imli baba's voice— Balkishen...Balkishen...Balkishen!

*** Glossary of Non-English Words:

Baba, sadhubaba: Saint, holy man. A hermit.

Puranas: Hindu religious texts.

Ganja-pipe, ganja: Weed, marijuana.

Gamchaa: A handspun towel.