

Varunkaka's Lemonade Pals

Not that I didn't like my Uncle Varun. I was just a bit cross with him.

*Vanmkaka** that's what I call him, is my father's youngest cousin. He trained as a veterinary surgeon and went abroad for higher studies.

On his return from America, *Varunkaka* accepted a post at the Veterinary Hospital in Jabalpore, where my parents, both Army doctors, were posted. *Vamnkaka* intended staying with us, until he got a house of his own.

I remember the day he arrived. I wasn't expecting a Leviclad, long-haired 'Uncle.' But that didn't trouble me as much as his attitude.

"I hope you're going to be a doctor, Vani," he said when he finally noticed me. "Because if you are, you ought to be a Vet, and with my help, I'm sure you'll turn out to be a good Vet".

Look, I am fond of animals. But the nearest I can get to doing anything for them professionally is to join the SPCA.

"*Varunkaka*," I said firmly, "I'm going to study literature."

"Paternal Uncle

First lie just gaped, then turning to my mother he said, "*Bhabhi** is your daughter crazy? She's going to ruin the family tradition." You see, for generations our family profession has been the practice of medicine. Our ancestors must have been *vaidyas*** and witch-doctors.

I'm good at keeping quiet, so I didn't tell him he was a creep, but I instantly declared a cold war. While he stayed with us, I had to suffer him.

He had his positive points, though.

He was an absolute wizard with my Alsatian, Sultan. And he had said briefly, "Your *roghan-josh**** is delicious," the second time I made it during his stay. Of course, it was. I am a good cook!

Soon afterwards, Uncle got his accommodation. When we visited him the first time, we were quite shocked. The house was miles away from the city. An unkempt garden and untidy rooms swarming with dogs, mostly pye. Cats lay in sunny patches all over the garden. The last straw however, was the snake I found coiled on a cane chair in the verandah.

"Before you squeal, Miss Prim and Proper, let me tell you he's my pet," Varun*kaka* said sarcastically. To get even with him, I went and patted the snake gently. That obviously did the trick, for

"Brother's wife.

⁰⁰ Physicians.

⁰⁰⁰A meat preparation.

he became communicative. "Several monkeys too come here. Actually they stay on the *ber** trees, right at the back of the garden. But they come here occasionally to visit me."

"Will you take me there and show me, Varun-*kaka*?" I said, forgetting my hostility.

"Sure, Vani I'll even show you the one I managed to fix up."

"Is it some kind of toy or what?" I taunted him.

"Look, kid," he said condescendingly, "I'll tell you all about it."

And sure enough he started.

"Early one morning, when I was having a cup of tea, Bahadur brought a guy, who, he said was a '*madari*'** Bahadur had caught him in the back garden trying to catch baby monkeys.

"Till then I didn't even know I had monkeys in my garden. So I asked the *madari* to show me where they were. He took me to this tree which was practically loaded with monkeys. Then he started pleading with me.

"*Sahe*! let me catch just one male monkey. Otherwise my show can't go on. I have a large family to support, *Saheb*. Please, *Saheb*."

"I told him to catch one elsewhere. But he kept on pleading. He said he had caught the female

"Wild Berry.

"Showman.

""Sir.

from this tree, and no one had objected at that time. So, I relented. "All right. Catch one. But if you hurt any, I shall wring your neck." When I came home for lunch that afternoon, I found Bahadur trying to coax a baby monkey to drink water. There was a blood-stained bandage on the poor thing's hind leg. The '*madan*' was nowhere to be seen.

"Bahadur told me briefly how the little one fell from the tree when the '*madan*' threw a net round it to trap it. By now I had discovered that the baby had not merely hurt itself, it had fractured its leg. It was half-dead with fright, so it was easy to put the plaster cast on. Otherwise, monkeys can be very difficult patients."

I was pretty engrossed in the tale. So I was rather annoyed when Varunkaka abruptly went inside. He returned wearing a pair of gum-boots and carrying another pair.

"They're a bit big for you, but you'd better put them on," he said. "The grass there is taller than you and there are mosquitoes and snakes in the undergrowth "

"But where are we going?" I asked, puzzled.

"To meet my pet Bobo and the rest of his family," he said briefly.

"But the story?" I protested. "How did you fix' the monkey? How did he climb the tree with a broken leg?"

"Look here. Will you let me tell the story or are you going to keep asking questions? I'll tell you the rest while we walk to the back of the compound."

So, off we went and Varunkaka continued, "Where was I? Oh, yes! The plaster on Bobo's leg. You know he was such a sweet little thing, but he was very weak. I had, of course, decided to cure him, but not at the hospital.

"Bobo was stubborn and refused to eat or drink. I managed to force some milk down his throat, but that was not enough. He really needed much more nourishment to recover.

"To tempt him to eat, I used to put him on the dining table while I had my food. But it didn't work. I could see he was recovering, because he was more active, but the progress was extremely slow. Then, one day, the funniest thing happened.

"I came back rather late for lunch. Bahadur had kept my food on the table and gone off somewhere. I brought Bobo and left him on the table. As I was thirsty, I opened the fridge and took out a bottle of lemonade. I pressed the marble in and put the bottle to my lips. With every sip I took, the blue marble would bob up and down. Bobo was staring at me. Whenever I picked up the bottle, his eyes would dart to the marble in the bottle. I held the bottle out to him. But he didn't take it. Instead, he turned his face away.

I started eating. But he kept turning round to see if I had picked up the bottle. So, to amuse him, I took out another bottle of lemonade and drank it without offering him any."

I was finding it quite difficult to follow Varun-*kaka* through the grass in those big gum-boots. But he couldn't care less.

"Actually," he continued, "Bobo by now had learned to hobble about, on his plaster cast. So, even if I left him on the table, he would manage to get down to the floor. After I finished eating, I hid behind the curtain to watch his movements. He dragged himself to the edge of the table, reached out and opened the fridge. Glancing round quickly, he picked up a lemonade bottle. Then he forced the marble in with a finger. How delighted he was to see the marble bobbing up and down. He took a sip and you should have seen his face! The fizz in the lemonade must have been too strong for him, for he grimaced. But he would not give up. He went on drinking the lemonade, just because he wanted to see the marble bob up and down! I let him enjoy himself.

"After that I stopped coaxing him to eat. I led him to the fridge and left the door open. To begin with, he took only the lemonade. But gradually he learnt to pick up an apple or some other fruit and nibble it. If I asked him for some, he'd hand me the seeds!



"He recovered in no time and became quite a nuisance around the house. Nothing in the fridge was safe from him. At times he kept opening and closing the door to see the light come on. He tweaked the dogs' ears and they went charging at him. But the little fellow would shin up a door and grin at them from there. He even tried his hand at shaving with my razor.

"That was more than enough for me. I started locking up the house and leaving him in the garden. One evening I didn't find him there. I knew then h., had gone back to his clan. I let him be. Now he comes back occasionally for a lemonade!"

Warunkaka finished his story. Was he bluffing? I didn't know.

We soon came to a cluster of *ber* trees and they were swarming with monkeys. Monkeys of all shapes and sizes. Monkeys eating '*ber*', monkeys chattering and monkeys fighting.

"Which one is Bobo?" I asked *Varunkaka*. Before he could answer, a little fellow with a black shoelace round his neck swung on to the lowest branch.

"Is that....?" I turned to *Varunkaka* and gaped. His face looked a sight!

Varunkaka is crazy. He was miming for Bobo's benefit the opening of a lemonade bottle! "Glug, glug, glug. . .". He pretended to drink the im-

aginary stuff. Bobo watched him closely. He leapt down from the tree, went to Varun *kaka* and swung on to his shoulder. And there he sat until we got home. Once inside, he made a beeline for the fridge and helped himself to a lemonade.

So did Varun *kaka* and I. As I gulped down the sweet fizzy beverage, I thought Varun *kaka* wasn't a bad sort really. He was quite a pal in fact.

