

RUSKIN BOND



Uncles, Aunts
& Elephants





PUFFIN

Ruskin Bond

UNCLES, AUNTS & ELEPHANTS

Tales from your Favourite Storyteller

Illustrations by Archana Sreenivasan

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PUFFIN BOOKS

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PUFFIN BOOKS

UNCLES, AUNTS AND ELEPHANTS

Born in Kasauli (Himachal Pradesh) in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar (Gujarat), Dehradun, New Delhi and Simla.

His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, written when he was seventeen, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Since then he has written over five hundred short stories, essays and novellas (some included in the collections *Dust on the Mountains* and *Classic Ruskin Bond*) and more than forty books for children. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in India in 1993, the Padma Shri in 1999, and the Delhi government's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi's Bal Sahitya Puraskar for his total contribution to children's literature' in 2013 and honoured with the Padma Bhushan in 2014.

Ruskin Bond lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his extended family.

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By the Same Author
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Also in Puffin by Ruskin Bond

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The Room of Many Colours: Ruskin Bond's Treasury of Stories for Children
Panther's Moon and Other Stories
The Hidden Pool
The Parrot Who Wouldn't Talk and Other Stories
Mr Oliver's Diary
Escape from Java and Other Tales of Danger
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Rusty the Boy from the Hills
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Rusty and the Leopard
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The Kashmiri Storyteller
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The Adventures of Rusty: Collected Stories
The Cherry Tree
Getting Granny's Glasses
The Eyes of the Eagle
Thick as Thieves: Tales of Friendship

Foreword

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Since my first Puffin Treasury came out, five years ago, there has been a steady flow of tales to tell. The desk near my window is overflowing with notebooks and manuscripts. My cat ('Fat Cat') does her utmost to knock everything to the ground, but I am a patient soul and I do my best to restore order where confusion reigns. Downloaded from gappaa. Uncle Ken keeps popping up with new escapades; Mr Oliver endeavours to control a bunch of high-spirited students; talking parrots and playful elephants take the stage; I make friends with a mouse (Fat Cat would disapprove); recall the scenes of my childhood; and look out of my window at the mountains striding away into the distance and know that more friends and memories will come my way.

My thanks to Mimi Basu, a kind Puffin editor, who has done all the hard work in making this selection. I have written over fifty books for the Penguin and Puffin list, so she had a busy time choosing stories that would please our readers.

And to make Fat Cat happy, there is a cat poem too.

Ruskin Bond
At my window
Landour, 12 March 2014

FICTION



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A Little Friend

When I first arrived in London I knew no one. I was eighteen and on my own, looking for a room, looking for a job. I spent a week in a students' hostel, a noisy place full of foreign students talking in every tongue except English. Then I saw an ad for a room to let, for just a pound a week. I was on the dole, getting just three pounds a week, so I took the room without even looking at it.

It turned out to be a tiny attic at the top of the building. Nothing above me but a low ceiling and a slanting tiled roof. There was a bed, a small dressing table, and a gas fire in the corner of the room. You had to shove several pennies into a slot before you could light the fire. It was November, very cold, and I kept running out of pennies. The toilet was about two floors below me. Above the potty was a notice which said 'Do not throw your tea leaves in here.' As I did not have anything to cook on, I had no tea leaves to deposit in the loo. I supposed that the other tenants (whom I rarely saw) were given to flushing away their tea leaves.

My landlady was Jewish, and I did not see much of her either, except when the rent was due. She was a Polish refugee, and I think she'd had a hard time in Europe during the War. It was seldom that she emerged from her room.

There was no bath in the building. I had to use the public baths some way down Belsize Road. I took my meals, the cheapest I could get, at a snack bar near the underground station. Some evenings I would bring home a loaf of bread and a tin of sardines; *this* was luxury.

Was I lonely? You can bet I was . . . terribly lonely. I had no friends in that great city. Even the city looked lonely, all grey and fogbound. Every day I visited the employment exchange, and after two weeks I landed a job as a ledger clerk in a large grocery store. The pay was five pounds a week.

I was rich! For once I could have a proper lunch instead of the usual beans on toast. I bought ham and cheese and celebrated with sandwiches and a bottle of cheap sherry. Soon there were crumbs all over the floor of my room. My landlady wouldn't like that. I was about to get up to sweep them away when there was a

squeak and a little mouse ran across the floor with a bit of cheese that it had found. He darted across the room and disappeared behind the dressing table.

I decided not to clear away the crumbs; let the mouse have them. 'Waste not, want not,' as my grandmother used to say.

I did not see the mouse again, but after I'd put the light out and gone to bed, I could hear him scurrying about the room, collecting titbits. Now and then he emitted a little squeak, possibly of satisfaction.

'Well, at least I did not have to celebrate alone,' I said to myself, 'a mouse for company is better than no company at all.'

I was off to work early next morning, and in my absence the landlady had my room cleaned. I came back to find a note on the dressing table which said: 'Please do not scatter food on the floor.'

She was right, of course. My room-mate deserved better than a scattering of crumbs. So I provided him with an empty soap dish, which I placed near the dressing table, and I filled it with an assortment of biscuit crumbs. But for some reason he wouldn't go near the soap dish. I stayed up quite late, waiting for him to appear, and when he did, he explored all corners of the room and even approached my bed, but stayed well away from the soap dish. Perhaps he didn't like the colour, a bright pink. I've been told by a scientist that mice are colour-blind and wouldn't be able to distinguish a pink soap dish from a blue one. But I think the scientist got it wrong. Quite often, they do.

I couldn't tell if my mouse was a male or a female, but for some indefinable reason I felt that he was a bachelor, like me. Surely a female mouse would be living with her family. This one was very much a loner.

I threw the soap dish away, and the following evening, on my way home from work, I bought a pretty little saucer, and this I placed near his residence, with a piece of cheese in the middle. He came to it almost instantly, nibbled at the cheese, approved of it, and carried the rest of it back to his hole behind the dressing table.

A fussy mouse! No soap dish for him. He had to have a saucer with a Chinese willow-pattern design.

After some time we become protective of our own. Summer came to London early in May, and finding the room stuffier than usual, I opened the small window that looked out upon a sea of rooftops, all similar to ours and to each other. But I could not leave it open for long. Suddenly I heard an agitated squeak from below my bed, and the mouse scurried across the room to the safety of the dressing table. Looking up, I saw a large tabby cat framed in the open window, looking in with a

speculative air. I think he had seen, or sensed, that there was a free lunch in the offing if he was patient enough.

‘No free lunches for cats,’ I said. I closed the window and kept it shut.

On weekends I roamed the city, occasionally visiting suburban cinemas where the seats were cheap; but on weekdays I’d stay at home in the evenings, working on my novel, my romance of India, and occasionally reading aloud from my manuscript.

The mouse wasn’t a very good listener, he was never long in one place, but he was now trusting enough to take a piece of cheese or bread from my fingers, and if I spent too much time on my book, he would remind me of his presence by giving several little squeaks — scolding me for not paying attention to his needs.

Alas, the time came when I had to consider parting from the ‘Lone Ranger’, as I had come to call my fellow lodger. A slight increase in salary, and a cheque from BBC radio for a couple of stories, meant I could move to bigger and better lodgings in a more congenial area of London. My landlady was sorry to see me go, for, in spite of my untidy ways, I had been regular with the rent. And the little mouse — would he too be sorry to see me go? He would have to forage further afield for his meals. And the next tenant might prefer cats to mice!

This was my worry, not his. Unlike humans, mice don’t worry about the future — their own or the world’s.

The problem was partly resolved by the arrival of another tenant — not a human tenant, but another mouse, presumably a female, because she was a little smaller and a little prettier than my room-mate. Two or three days before I was to leave, I came home to find them chasing each other about the room with a great deal of squeaking and acrobatic play. Was this romance?

I felt a twinge of envy. My little friend had found a companion, and I was still without one. But when the time came for me to leave, I made sure they were well supplied with an assortment of crackers and rusks — enough to last well over a month, provided our landlady did not find them first.

I packed my battered, old suitcase and left that small attic behind. As we journey through life, old friends and new friends are often left behind, never to be met with again. There are times when we are on our own, lonely, in need of a friendly presence. Just someone to be there when we return to that empty, joyless room. And at such times, even a little mouse, can make a big difference.

Boy Scouts Forever!

I was a Boy Scout once, although I couldn't tell a slip knot from a granny knot, or a reef knot from a thief knot, except that a thief knot was supposed to be used to tie up a thief, should you happen to catch one. I have never caught a thief, and wouldn't know what to do with one since I can't tie a knot. Just let him go with a warning, I suppose. Tell him to become a Boy Scout.

'Be prepared!' That's the Boy Scout motto. And a good one, too. But I never seem to be well prepared for anything, be it an exam or a journey or the roof blowing off my room. I get halfway through a speech and then forget what I have to say next. Or I make a new suit to attend a friend's wedding, and then turn up in my pyjamas.

So how did I, the most impractical of boys, become a Boy Scout? I was at boarding school in Simla when it happened.

Well, it seems a rumour had gone around the junior school (I was still a junior then) that I was a good cook. I had never cooked anything in my life, but of course I had spent a lot of time in the tuck shop making

suggestions and advising Chippu, who ran the tuck shop,

and encouraging him to make more and better samosas, jalebis, tikkees and pakoras. For my unwanted advice he would favour me with an occasional free samosa, so naturally I looked upon him as a friend and benefactor. With this qualification I was given a cookery badge and put in charge of our troop's supply of rations.

There were about twenty of us in our troop, and during the summer break our Scoutmaster, Mr Oliver, took us on a camping expedition to Tara Devi, a temple-crowned mountain a few miles outside Simla. That first night we were put to work, peeling potatoes, skinning onions, shelling peas and pounding masalas. These various ingredients being ready, I was asked — as the troop's cookery expert — what should be done with them.

'Put everything in that big *degchi*,' I ordered. 'Pour half a tin of ghee over the lot. Add some nettle leaves and cook for half an hour.'

When this was done, everyone had a taste, but the general opinion was that the dish lacked something.

‘More salt,’ I suggested.

More salt was added. It still lacked something.

‘Add a cup of sugar,’ I ordered.

Sugar was added to the concoction. But still it lacked something.

‘We forgot to add tomatoes,’ said Bimal, one of the Scouts.

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘We have tomato sauce. Add a bottle of tomato sauce!’

‘How about some vinegar?’ asked another boy.

‘Just the thing,’ I agreed. ‘A cup of vinegar!’

‘Now it’s too sour,’ said one of the tasters.

‘What jam did we bring?’ I asked.

‘Gooseberry jam.’

‘Just the thing. Empty the bottle!’

The dish was a great success. Everyone enjoyed it, including Mr Oliver, who had no idea what went into it.

‘What’s this called?’ he asked.

‘It’s an all-Indian sweet-and-sour jam-potato curry,’ I ventured.

‘For short, just call it a Bond-bhujji,’ said Bimal.

I had earned my cookery badge!

*



Poor Mr Oliver! He wasn't really cut out to be a Scoutmaster, any more than I was meant to be a Scout. The following day he announced that he would give us a lesson in tracking. He would take a half-hour start and walk into the forest, leaving behind him a trail of broken twigs, chicken feathers, pine cones and chestnuts, and we were to follow the trail until we found him.

Unfortunately, we were not very good trackers. We did follow Mr Oliver's trail some way into the forest, but were distracted by a pool of clear water which looked very inviting. Abandoning our uniforms, we jumped into the pool and had a great time romping around or just lying on the grassy banks and enjoying the sunshine. A couple of hours later, feeling hungry, we returned to our campsite and set about preparing the evening meal. Bond-bhujji again, but with further variations.

It was growing dark, and we were beginning to worry about Mr Oliver's whereabouts when he limped into camp, assisted by a couple of local villagers. Having waited for us at the far end of the forest for a couple of hours, he had decided to return by following his own trail, but in the gathering gloom he was soon lost. Some locals returning from the temple took charge of him and escorted him back to camp. He was very angry and made us return all our good-conduct and other badges, which he stuffed into his haversack. I had to give up my cookery badge, too.

An hour later, when we were all preparing to get into our sleeping bags for the night, Mr Oliver called out: 'Where's dinner?'

'We've had ours,' said Bimal. 'Everything is finished, sir.'

'Where's Bond? He's supposed to be the cook. Bond, get up and make me an omelette.'

'Can't, sir.'

'Why not?'

'You have my badge. Not allowed to cook without it. Scout rule, sir.'

'Never heard of such a rule. But you can have your badges back, all of you. We return to school tomorrow.'

Mr Oliver returned to his tent in a huff. But I relented and made him an elaborate omelette, garnishing it with dandelion leaves and an extra chilli.

'Never had such an omelette before,' confessed Mr Oliver, blowing out his cheeks. 'A little too hot, but otherwise quite interesting.'

'Would you like another, sir?'

'Tomorrow, Bond, tomorrow. We'll breakfast early tomorrow.'

But we had to break up our camp very early the next day. In the early hours, a bear had strayed into our camp, entered the tent where our stores were kept, and created havoc with all our provisions, even rolling our biggest *degchi* down the hillside.

In the confusion and uproar that followed, the bear entered Mr Oliver's tent (he was already outside, fortunately) and came out entangled in Mr Oliver's dressing gown. It then made off in the direction of the forest.

A bear in a dressing gown? It was a comical sight. And though we were a troop of brave little Scouts, we thought it better to let the bear keep the gown.

Bitter Gooseberries

As a young man, Grandfather had spent a few years in Burma, and this was one of the stories he liked to tell us . . .

This is the story of the snake and the gooseberries and much else besides, so be still, don't interrupt, and don't ask questions. Are you listening? Well, then. There was once a snake and he lived in a gooseberry bush, and every night he turned into a handsome prince. Now there is nothing extraordinary about this; it happens all the time, especially in Burma where everyone is handsome anyway . . . But a story can't succeed unless there's a woman in it, so there was also a woman who lived in a little bamboo house with orchids hanging in the veranda, and she had three daughters called Ma Gyi, Ma Lat and Ma Nge. And Ma Nge was the youngest and the nicest and the most beautiful, because a story can't succeed unless she is all these things.

Well, one day the mother of Ma Nge had to go out to fetch gooseberries from the forest. They were bitter gooseberries: Burmese ladies call them *zi-byu-thi*, and prefer them to sweet gooseberries. The woman took her basket along, and just as she was starting to pick gooseberries, the snake who lived in the gooseberry bush hissed at her, as much as to say: 'Be off.' This was the snake who was a prince by night, but now of course it was broad daylight, and anyway Burmese women aren't afraid of snakes. Moreover, the snake recalled that this was the mother of three daughters, and he had a fondness for daughters, so he changed his mind about sending the woman away, and waited for her to speak first, because she was a woman, and women are remarkable for their business capacity.

The woman said, 'Please give me a gooseberry.' Women are always wanting something; it's a part of their business philosophy.

But the snake said no. He had remembered that he was a prince and that princes aren't supposed to say yes to anything; not at first, anyway. It was a matter of principle.

Then the woman said, 'If you like my eldest daughter, Ma Gyi, give me a gooseberry.' The snake didn't care for Ma Gyi, because he knew she had a terrible temper (or perhaps it was a distemper), but he gave the woman a gooseberry as a

matter of policy. ‘One gooseberry is about all that Ma Gyi is worth,’ he said to himself.

But women all over the world, from Burma to Bermuda and beyond, are never satisfied with only *one* of anything, and so she said, ‘If you like my second daughter, Ma Lat, give me another gooseberry.’

The prince knew that Ma Lat had a squint, but he didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, so he gave the woman another gooseberry; and thus encouraged, she continued, ‘And if you like my youngest daughter, Ma Nge, give me another gooseberry.’

At that, the snake trembled so violently from tip to tail that every gooseberry fell off the bush; for the snake prince knew that Ma Nge was the youngest and nicest and most beautiful of them all. And the woman gathered up all the gooseberries, put them in her basket, and took them home because they were bitter (*zi-byu-thi*), and because she was a woman of remarkable business capacity.

On the way she met a signpost and gave it a gooseberry, saying, ‘If a snake comes enquiring which way I have gone, don’t tell him, but point in the opposite direction.’ She said this because she knew the signpost would do just the opposite.

Then she went on and said the same thing to two more signposts (everything has to be done three times in the best stories), and the posts all did the same thing, which was to show the snake the proper road, because that is what signposts are supposed to do.

The snake had little difficulty in following the woman to her house. He hid in a large jar, and when she came to get something, he slid out and coiled round her arm in the manner of a prospective son-in-law.

‘If you love my daughter Ma Gyi, let go,’ cried the woman, pretending to be frightened. (She knew quite well that the snake was a prince.)

But the snake hung on, because he didn’t love Ma Gyi, who had a bad temper and probably distemper, too.

‘If you love Ma Lat, let go!’

But the snake hung on. Although he personally had nothing against squinty-eyed women, he did not relish the prospect of being stared at by one all his life.

And then (because everything must be done three times) the woman cried, ‘If you love my daughter Ma Nge, let go!’

The snake fell swooning to the ground. And as night had come on quite suddenly, in the snake’s place the mother found the supplicant prince, smitten with love for her youngest daughter. And she wasted no time in getting him married to Ma Nge.

That ought to be the end of the story. But in Burma stories don't end, they just go on and on forever, so that sometimes it is difficult to print them. But the prince had to do something to break the spell, because after some time Ma Nge found it rather irritating being married to a prince who was her husband by night and a snake by day. She said she preferred a man about the place even during the day. It was she who managed to break the spell because, like her mother, she too had this remarkable business capacity. All she did was to find her husband a job, and the shock was so great that it broke the spell. It was the first time in his life that the prince had been expected to do any work, and he was so shaken that he completely forgot how to turn himself back into a snake.

But the prince stuck to his job, and worked so hard that sometimes his wife felt quite lonely; she didn't know that his employers had provided him with a beautiful secretary, and that this was encouraging him to work overtime. And so, when he came home late and went straight to bed after dinner, she began to scold him and complain of his indifference. One morning he became so disgusted with her constant nagging that he found he could remember the magic spell and immediately turned himself into an enormous snake.

He started by trying to swallow his wife's feet. Ma Nge called out to her mother, but her mother said that was quite all right.

'He has swallowed my knees,' wailed poor Ma Nge.

'Never mind, dear,' replied her mother, who was cooking in the next room. 'You never can tell what an amorous husband will do.'

'He has swallowed my neck.'

The mother thought this was going too far; and when no further calls came from her daughter, she burst into the room and remonstrated with the snake, who had entirely swallowed Ma Nge.

'Give her up at once,' cried the indignant mother.

'Not unless you agree to my terms,' said the snake. 'First, I'm to be a snake whenever I feel like it. Second, I'm to be a real prince and go to work only when I feel like it. How can your daughter love me if I come home tired from the office like any other man? You wanted a prince for a son-in-law. You got one. Now you must let me live like a prince.'

The mother agreed to his terms, and he un-swallowed his wife, and from that day onwards the two women did all the work while the prince sat in the veranda under the hanging orchids and drank a wonderful beer made from bitter gooseberries.

*

‘Can you make gooseberry beer?’ I asked Grandfather when he had finished his story.

‘Certainly,’ said Grandfather. ‘The day your grandmother allows it, I’ll make gooseberry beer and plum wine and apple cider and a gin tonic, too!’

But Grandmother did not allow it. Strong drink had been banned ever since Uncle Ken had taken too much and fallen into a ditch.

Uncle Ken's Feathered Foes

Uncle Ken looked smug and pleased with life. He had just taken a large bite out of a currant bun (well-buttered inside, with strawberry jam as a stuffing) and was about to take a second bite when, out of a clear blue sky, a hawk swooped down, snatched the bun out of Uncle Ken's hands and flew away with its trophy.

It was a bad time for Uncle Ken. He was being persecuted — not by his sisters or the world at large, but by the birds in our compound.

It all began when he fired his airgun at a noisy bunch of crows, and one of them fell dead on the veranda steps.

The crows never forgave him.

He had only to emerge from the house for a few minutes, and they would fling themselves at him, a noisy gang of ten to fifteen crows, swooping down with flapping wings and extended beaks, knocking off his hat and clawing at his flailing arms. If Uncle Ken wanted to leave the compound, he would have to sneak out of the back veranda, make a dash for his bicycle, and pedal furiously down the driveway until he was out of the gate and on the main road. Even then, he would be pursued by two or three outraged crows until he was well outside their territory.

This persecution continued for two or three weeks, until, in desperation, Uncle Ken adopted a disguise. He put on a false beard, a deer-stalker cap (in the manner of Sherlock Holmes), a long, black cloak (in the manner of Count Dracula) and a pair of Grandfather's old riding boots. And so attired, he marched up and down the driveway, frightening away two elderly ladies who had come to see Grandmother. The crows were suitably baffled and kept at a distance. But Grandmother's pet mongrel, Crazy, began barking furiously, caught hold of Uncle Ken's cloak and wouldn't let go until I came to his rescue.

*

The mango season was approaching, and we were all looking forward to feasting on our mangoes that summer.

There were three or four mango trees in our compound, and Uncle Ken was particularly anxious to protect them from monkeys, parrots, flying foxes and other fruit-eating creatures. He had his own favourite mango tree, and every afternoon he would place a cot beneath it, and whenever he spotted winged or furred intruders in the tree, he would put a small bugle to his lips and produce a shrill bugle call — loud enough to startle everyone in the house as well as the denizens of the trees.

However, after a few shattering bugle calls Uncle Ken would doze off, only to wake up an hour later bespattered with the droppings of parrots, pigeons, squirrels and other inhabitants of the mango tree. After two or three days of blessings from the birds, Uncle Ken came out with a large garden umbrella which protected him from aerial bombardment.

While he was fast asleep one afternoon (after spoiling Grandfather's siesta with his horn blowing), Grandmother caught me by the hand and said, 'Be a good boy; go out and fetch that bugle.'

I did as I was told, slipping the bugle out of Uncle Ken's hands as he snored, and handing it over to Grandmother. I'm not sure what she did with it, but a few weeks later, as a wedding band came down the road, drums beating and trumpets blaring, I thought I recognized Uncle Ken's old bugle. A dark, good-looking youth blew vigorously upon it, quite out of tune with everyone else. It looked and sounded like Uncle Ken's bugle.

*

Summer came and went, and so did the mangoes. And then the monsoon arrived, and the pond behind the house overflowed, and there were frogs hopping about all over the veranda.

One morning Grandfather called me over to the back garden and led me down to the pond where he pointed to a couple of new arrivals — a pair of colourful storks who were wading about on their long legs and using their huge bills to snap up fish, frogs, or anything else they fancied. They paid no attention to us, and we were quite content to watch them going about their business.

Uncle Ken, of course, had to go and make a nuisance of himself. Armed with his Kodak 'Baby Brownie' camera (all the rage at the time), he waded into the pond (wearing Grandfather's boots) and proceeded to take pictures of the visiting birds.

Now, certain storks and cranes — especially those who move about in pairs — grow very attached to each other, and generally resent any overtures of friendship

from clumsy humans.

Mr Stork, seeing Uncle Ken approaching through the lily-covered waters, assumed that my uncle's intentions were of an amorous nature. Uncle Ken in hat and cloak might well have been mistaken for a huge bird of prey — or a member of the ostrich family.

Mr Stork wasn't going to stand for any rivals, and leaving Mrs Stork to do the fishing, advanced upon Uncle Ken with surprising speed, lunged at him, and knocked the camera from his hands.

Leaving his camera to the tadpoles, Uncle Ken fled from the lily pond, hotly pursued by an irate stork, who even got in a couple of kung fu kicks before Uncle Ken reached the safety of the veranda.

Mourning the loss of his dignity and his camera, Uncle Ken sulked for a couple of days, and then announced that he was going to far-off Pondicherry to stay with an aunt who had settled there.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief, and Grandfather and I saw Uncle Ken off at the station, just to make sure he didn't change his mind and return home in time for dinner.

Later, we heard that Uncle Ken's holiday in Pondicherry went smoothly for a couple of days, there being no trees around his aunt's seafront flat. On the beach he consumed innumerable ice creams and platters full of French fries, without being bothered by crows, parrots, monkeys or small boys.

And then, one morning, he decided to treat himself to breakfast at an open-air café near the beach, and ordered bacon and eggs, sausages, three toasts, cheese and marmalade.

He had barely taken a bite out of his buttered toast when, out of a blind blue sky, a seagull swooped down and carried off a sausage.

Uncle Ken was still in shock when another seagull shot past him, taking with it a rasher of bacon.

Seconds later a third gull descended and removed the remaining sausage, splattering toast and fried egg all over Uncle Ken's trousers.

He was left with half a toast and a small pot of marmalade.

When he got back to the flat and told his aunt what had happened, she felt sorry for him and gave him a glass of milk and a peanut butter sandwich.

Uncle Ken hated milk. And he detested peanut butter. But when hungry he would eat almost anything.

‘Can’t trust those seagulls,’ said his aunt. ‘They are all non-veg. Stick to spinach and lettuce, and they’ll leave you alone.’

‘Ugh,’ said Uncle Ken in disgust. ‘I’d rather be a seagull.’



Escape from Java

It all happened within the space of a few days. The cassia tree had barely come into flower when the first bombs fell on Batavia (now called Jakarta) and the bright pink blossoms lay scattered over the wreckage in the streets.

News had reached us that Singapore had fallen to the Japanese. My father said, 'I expect it won't be long before they take Java. With the British defeated, how can the Dutch be expected to win!' He did not mean to be critical of the Dutch; he knew they did not have the backing of the Empire that Britain had. Singapore had been called the Gibraltar of the East. After its surrender there could only be retreat, a vast exodus of Europeans from South-East Asia.

It was the Second World War. What the Javanese thought about the war is now hard for me to say, because I was only nine at the time and knew very little of worldly matters. Most people knew they would be exchanging their Dutch rulers for Japanese rulers; but there were also many who spoke in terms of freedom for Java when the war was over.

Our neighbour, Mr Hartono, was one of those who looked ahead to a time when Java, Sumatra and the other islands would make up one independent nation. He was a college professor and spoke Dutch, Chinese, Javanese and a little English. His son, Sono, was about my age. He was the only boy I knew who could talk to me in English, and as a result we spent a lot of time together. Our favourite pastime was flying kites in the park.

The bombing soon put an end to kite flying. Air raid alerts sounded at all hours of the day and night, and although in the beginning most of the bombs fell near the docks, a couple of miles from where we lived, we had to stay indoors. If the planes sounded very near, we dived under beds or tables. I don't remember if there were any trenches. Probably there hadn't been time for trench digging, and now there was time only for digging graves. Events had moved all too swiftly, and everyone (except, of course, the Javanese) was anxious to get away from Java.

'When are you going?' asked Sono, as we sat on the veranda steps in a pause between air raids.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘It all depends on my father.’

‘My father says the Japs will be here in a week. And if you’re still here then, they’ll put you to work building a railway.’

‘I wouldn’t mind building a railway,’ I protested.

‘But they won’t give you enough to eat. Just rice with worms in it. And if you don’t work properly, they’ll shoot you.’

‘They do that to soldiers,’ I said. ‘We’re civilians.’

‘They do it to civilians, too,’ said Sono.

What were my father and I doing in Batavia, when our home had been first in India and then in Singapore? He worked for a firm dealing in rubber, and six months earlier he had been sent to Batavia to open a new office in partnership with a Dutch business house. Although I was so young, I accompanied my father almost everywhere. My mother left when I was very small, and my father had always looked after me. After the war was over he was going to take me to England.

‘Are we going to win the war?’ I asked.

‘It doesn’t look it from here,’ he said.

No, it didn’t look as though we were winning. Standing at the docks with my father, I watched the ships arrive from Singapore crowded with refugees — men, women and children, all living on the decks in the hot tropical sun; they looked pale and worn out and worried. They were on their way to Colombo or Bombay. No one came ashore at Batavia. It wasn’t British territory; it was Dutch, and everyone knew it wouldn’t be Dutch for long.

‘Aren’t we going too?’ I asked. ‘Sono’s father says the Japs will be here any day.’

‘We’ve still got a few days,’ said my father. He was a short, stocky man who seldom got excited. If he was worried, he didn’t show it. ‘I’ve got to wind up a few business matters, and then we’ll be off.’

‘How will we go? There’s no room for us on those ships.’

‘There certainly isn’t. But we’ll find a way, lad, don’t worry.’

I didn’t worry. I had complete confidence in my father’s ability to find a way out of difficulties. He used to say, ‘Every problem has a solution hidden away somewhere, and if only you look hard enough you will find it.’

There were British soldiers in the streets but they did not make it feel much safer. They were just waiting for troop ships to come and take them away. No one, it seemed, was interested in defending Java, only in getting out as fast as possible.

Although the Dutch were unpopular with the Javanese people, there was no ill feeling against individual Europeans. I could walk safely through the streets.

Occasionally small boys in the crowded Chinese quarter would point at me and shout, ‘Orang Balandi!’ (Dutchman!) but they did so in good humour, and I didn’t know the language well enough to stop and explain that the English weren’t Dutch. For them, all white people were the same, and understandably so.

My father’s office was in the commercial area, along the canal banks. Our two-storeyed house, about a mile away, was an old building with a roof of red tiles and a broad balcony which had stone dragons at either end. There were flowers in the garden almost all the year round. If there was anything in Batavia more regular than the bombing, it was the rain, which came pattering down on the roof and on the banana fronds almost every afternoon. In the hot and steamy atmosphere of Java, the rain was always welcome.

There were no anti-aircraft guns in Batavia — at least we never heard any — and the Jap bombers came over at will, dropping their bombs by daylight. Sometimes bombs fell in the town. One day the building next to my father’s office received a direct hit and tumbled into the river. A number of office workers were killed.

The schools closed, and Sono and I had nothing to do all day except sit in the house, playing darts or carrom, wrestling on the carpets, or playing the gramophone. We had records by Gracie Fields, Harry Lauder, George Formby and Arthur Askey, all popular British artists of the early 1940s. One song by Arthur Askey made fun of Adolph Hitler, with the words, *Adolph, we’re gonna hang up your washing on the Siegfried Line, if the Siegfried Line’s still there!* It made us feel quite cheerful to know that back in Britain people were confident of winning the war!

One day Sono said, ‘The bombs are falling on Batavia, not in the countryside. Why don’t we get cycles and ride out of town?’

I fell in with the idea at once. After the morning all-clear had sounded, we mounted our cycles and rode out of town. Mine was a hired cycle, but Sono’s was his own. He’d had it since the age of five, and it was constantly in need of repair. ‘The soul has gone out of it,’ he used to say.

Our fathers were at work; Sono’s mother had gone out to do her shopping (during air raids she took shelter under the most convenient shop counter) and wouldn’t be back for at least an hour. We expected to be back before lunch.

We were soon out of town, on a road that passed through rice fields, pineapple orchards and cinchona plantations. On our right lay dark green hills; on our left, groves of coconut palms and, beyond them, the sea. Men and women were working in the rice fields, knee-deep in mud, their broad-brimmed hats protecting them from

the fierce sun. Here and there a buffalo wallowed in a pool of brown water, while a naked boy lay stretched out on the animal's broad back.

We took a bumpy track through the palms. They grew right down to the edge of the sea. Leaving our cycles on the shingle, we ran down a smooth, sandy beach and into the shallow water.

'Don't go too far in,' warned Sono. 'There may be sharks about.'

Wading in amongst the rocks, we searched for interesting shells, then sat down on a large rock and looked out to sea, where a sailing ship moved placidly on the crisp, blue waters. It was difficult to imagine that half the world was at war, and that Batavia, two or three miles away, was right in the middle of it.

On our way home we decided to take a shortcut through the rice fields, but soon found that our tyres got bogged down in the soft mud. This delayed our return; and to make things worse, we got the roads mixed up and reached an area of the town that seemed unfamiliar. We had barely entered the outskirts when the siren sounded, followed soon after by the drone of approaching aircraft.

'Should we get off our cycles and take shelter somewhere?' I called out.

'No, let's race home!' shouted Sono. 'The bombs won't fall here.'

But he was wrong. The planes flew in very low. Looking up for a moment, I saw the sun blotted out by the sinister shape of a Jap fighter-bomber. We pedalled furiously; but we had barely covered fifty yards when there was a terrific explosion on our right, behind some houses. The shock sent us spinning across the road. We were flung from our cycles. And the cycles, still propelled by the blast, crashed into a wall.

I felt a stinging sensation in my hands and legs, as though scores of little insects had bitten me. Tiny droplets of blood appeared here and there on my flesh. Sono was on all fours, crawling beside me, and I saw that he too had the same small scratches on his hands and forehead, made by tiny shards of flying glass.

We were quickly on our feet, and then we began running in the general direction of our homes. The twisted cycles lay forgotten on the road.

'Get off the street, you two!' shouted someone from a window; but we weren't going to stop running until we got home. And we ran faster than we'd ever run in our lives.

My father and Sono's parents were themselves running about the street, calling for us, when we came rushing around the corner and tumbled into their arms.

'Where have you been?'

'What happened to you?'

‘How did you get those cuts?’

All superfluous questions but before we could recover our breath and start explaining, we were bundled into our respective homes. My father washed my cuts and scratches, dabbed at my face and legs with iodine — ignoring my yelps — and then stuck plaster all over my face.

Sono and I had had a fright, and we did not venture far from the house again.

That night my father said, ‘I think we’ll be able to leave in a day or two.’

‘Has another ship come in?’

‘No.’

‘Then how are we going? By plane?’

‘Wait and see, lad. It isn’t settled yet. But we won’t be able to take much with us — just enough to fill a couple of travelling bags.’

‘What about the stamp collection?’ I asked.

My father’s stamp collection was quite valuable and filled several volumes.

‘I’m afraid we’ll have to leave most of it behind,’ he said. ‘Perhaps Mr Hartono will keep it for me, and when the war is over — if it’s over — we’ll come back for it.’

‘But we can take one or two albums with us, can’t we?’

‘I’ll take one. There’ll be room for one. Then if we’re short of money in Bombay, we can sell the stamps.’

‘Bombay? That’s in India. I thought we were going back to England.’

‘First we must go to India.’

The following morning I found Sono in the garden, patched up like me, and with one foot in a bandage. But he was as cheerful as ever and gave me his usual wide grin.

‘We’re leaving tomorrow,’ I said.

The grin left his face.

‘I will be sad when you go,’ Sonu said. ‘But I will be glad too, because then you will be able to escape from the Japs.’

‘After the war, I’ll come back.’

‘Yes, you must come back. And then, when we are big, we will go round the world together. I want to see England and America and Africa and India and Japan. I want to go everywhere.’

‘We can’t go everywhere.’

‘Yes, we can. No one can stop us!’

We had to be up very early the next morning. Our bags had been packed late at night. We were taking a few clothes, some of my father's business papers, a pair of binoculars, one stamp album and several bars of chocolate. I was pleased about the stamp album and the chocolates, but I had to give up several of my treasures — favourite books, the gramophone and records, an old Samurai sword, a train set and a dartboard. The only consolation was that Sono, and not a stranger, would have them.

In the first faint light of dawn a truck drew up in front of the house. It was driven by a Dutch businessman, Mr Hookens, who worked with my father. Sono was already at the gate, waiting to say goodbye.

'I have a present for you,' he said.

He took me by the hand and pressed a smooth, hard object into my palm. I grasped it and then held it up against the light. It was a beautiful little seahorse, carved out of pale blue jade.

'It will bring you luck,' said Sono.

'Thank you,' I said. 'I will keep it forever.'

And I slipped the little seahorse into my pocket.

'In you get, lad,' said my father, and I got up on the front seat between him and Mr Hookens.

As the truck started up, I turned to wave to Sono. He was sitting on his garden wall, grinning at me. He called out: 'We will go everywhere, and no one can stop us!'

He was still waving when the truck took us round the bend at the end of the road.

We drove through the still, quiet streets of Batavia, occasionally passing burnt-out trucks and shattered buildings. Then we left the sleeping city far behind and were climbing into the forested hills. It had rained during the night, and when the sun came up over the green hills, it twinkled and glittered on the broad, wet leaves. The light in the forest changed from dark green to greenish gold, broken here and there by the flaming red or orange of a trumpet-shaped blossom. It was impossible to know the names of all those fantastic plants! The road had been cut through a dense tropical forest, and on either side the trees jostled each other, hungry for the sun; but they were chained together by the liana creepers and vines that fed upon the struggling trees.

Occasionally a *jelarang*, a large Javan squirrel, frightened by the passing of the truck, leapt through the trees before disappearing into the depths of the forest. We saw many birds: peacocks, junglefowl, and once, standing majestically at the side of

the road, a crowned pigeon, its great size and splendid crest making it a striking object even at a distance. Mr Hookens slowed down so that we could look at the bird. It bowed its head so that its crest swept the ground; then it emitted a low, hollow boom rather than the call of a turkey.

When we came to a small clearing, we stopped for breakfast. Butterflies, black, green and gold, flitted across the clearing. The silence of the forest was broken only by the drone of airplanes. Japanese Zeros heading for Batavia on another raid. I thought about Sono, and wondered what he would be doing at home: probably trying out the gramophone!

We ate boiled eggs and drank tea from a thermos, then got back into the truck and resumed our journey.

I must have dozed off soon after, because the next thing I remember is that we were going quite fast down a steep, winding road, and in the distance I could see a calm blue lagoon.

‘We’ve reached the sea again,’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ said my father. ‘But we’re now nearly a hundred miles from Batavia, in another part of the island. You’re looking out over the Sunda Straits.’

Then he pointed towards a shimmering white object resting on the waters of the lagoon.

‘There’s our plane,’ he said.

‘A seaplane!’ I exclaimed. ‘I never guessed. Where will it take us?’

‘To Bombay, I hope. There aren’t many other places left to go to!’

It was a very old seaplane, and no one, not even the captain — the pilot was called the captain — could promise that it would take off. Mr Hookens wasn’t coming with us; he said the plane would be back for him the next day. Besides my father and me, there were four other passengers, and all but one were Dutch. The odd man out was a Londoner, a motor mechanic who’d been left behind in Java when his unit was evacuated. (He told us later that he’d fallen asleep at a bar in the Chinese quarter, waking up some hours after his regiment had moved off!) He looked rather scruffy. He’d lost the top button of his shirt, but instead of leaving his collar open as we did, he’d kept it together with a large safety pin, which thrust itself out from behind a bright pink tie.

‘It’s a relief to find you here, guvnor,’ he said, shaking my father by the hand. ‘Knew you for a Yorkshireman the minute I set eyes on you. It’s the songfried that does it, if you know what I mean.’ (He meant sangfroid, French for a ‘cool look’.) ‘And here I was, with all these flippin’ forriners, and me not knowing a word of

what they've been yattering about. Do you think this old tub will get us back to Blighty?'

'It does look a bit shaky,' said my father. 'One of the first flying boats, from the looks of it. If it gets us to Bombay, that's far enough.'

'Anywhere out of Java's good enough for me,' said our new companion. 'The name's Muggeridge.'

'Pleased to know you, Mr Muggeridge,' said my father. 'I'm Bond. This is my son.'

Mr Muggeridge rumped my hair and favoured me with a large wink.

The captain of the seaplane was beckoning to us to join him in a small skiff which was about to take us across a short stretch of water to the seaplane.

'Here we go,' said Mr Muggeridge. 'Say your prayers and keep your fingers crossed.'

The seaplane was a long time getting airborne. It had to make several runs before it finally took off. Then, lurching drunkenly, it rose into the clear blue sky.

'For a moment I thought we were going to end up in the briny,' said Mr Muggeridge, untying his seat belt. 'And talkin' of fish, I'd give a week's wages for a plate of fish an' chips and a pint of beer.'

'I'll buy you a beer in Bombay,' said my father.

'Have an egg,' I offered, remembering we still had some boiled eggs in one of the travelling bags.

'Thanks, mate,' said Mr Muggeridge, accepting an egg with alacrity. 'A real egg, too! I've been livin' on egg powder these last six months. That's what they give you in the army. And it ain't hens' eggs they make it from, let me tell you. It's either gulls' or turtles' eggs!'

'No,' said my father with a straight face. 'Snakes' eggs.'

Mr Muggeridge turned a delicate shade of green; but he soon recovered his poise, and for about an hour kept talking about almost everything under the sun, including Churchill, Hitler, Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, and Betty Grable. (The last-named was famous for her beautiful legs.) He would have gone on talking all the way to Bombay had he been given a chance, but suddenly a shudder passed through the old plane, and it began lurching again.

'I think an engine is giving trouble,' said my father.

When I looked through the small glassed-in window, it seemed as though the sea was rushing up to meet us.

The co-pilot entered the passenger cabin and said something in Dutch. The passengers looked dismayed, and immediately began fastening their seat belts.

‘Well, what did the blighter say?’ asked Mr Muggeridge.

‘I think he’s going to have to ditch the plane,’ said my father, who knew enough Dutch to get the gist of anything that was said.

‘Down in the drink!’ exclaimed Mr Muggeridge.

‘Gawd ‘elp us! And how far are we from Bombay, guv?’

‘A few hundred miles,’ said my father.

‘Can you swim, mate?’ asked Mr Muggeridge looking at me.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But not all the way to Bombay. How far can you swim?’

‘The length of a bathtub,’ he answered.

‘Don’t worry,’ said my father. ‘Just make sure your life jacket’s properly tied.’

We looked to our life jackets; my father checked mine twice, making sure that it was properly fastened.

The pilot had now cut both engines, and was bringing the plane down in a circling movement. But he couldn’t control the speed, and it was tilting heavily to one side. Instead of landing smoothly on its belly, it came down on a wing tip, and this caused the plane to swivel violently around in the choppy sea. There was a terrific jolt when the plane hit the water, and if it hadn’t been for the seat belts we’d have been flung from our seats. Even so, Mr Muggeridge struck his head against the seat in front, and he was now holding a bleeding nose and using some shocking language.

As soon as the plane came to a standstill, my father undid my seat belt. There was no time to lose. Water was already filling the cabin, and all the passengers — except one, who was dead in his seat with a broken neck — were scrambling for the exit hatch. The co-pilot pulled a lever and the door fell away to reveal high waves slapping against the sides of the stricken plane.

Holding me by the hand, my father was leading me towards the exit.

‘Quick, lad,’ he said. ‘We won’t stay afloat for long.’

‘Give us a hand!’ shouted Mr Muggeridge, still struggling with his life jacket.

‘First this bloody bleedin’ nose, and now something’s gone and stuck.’

My father helped him fix the life jacket, then pushed him out of the door ahead of us.

As we swam away from the seaplane (Mr Muggeridge splashing fiercely alongside us), we were aware of the other passengers in the water. One of them shouted to us in Dutch to follow him.

We swam after him towards the dinghy, which had been released the moment we hit the water. That yellow dinghy, bobbing about on the waves, was as welcome as land.

All who had left the plane managed to climb into the dinghy. We were seven altogether — a tight fit. We had hardly settled down in the well of the dinghy when Mr Muggeridge, still holding his nose, exclaimed, 'There she goes!' And as we looked on helplessly, the seaplane sank swiftly and silently beneath the waves.

The dinghy had shipped a lot of water, and soon everyone was busy bailing it out with mugs (there were a couple in the dinghy), hats, and bare hands. There was a light swell, and every now and then water would roll in again and half fill the dinghy. But within half an hour we had most of the water out, and then it was possible to take turns, two men doing the bailing while the others rested. No one expected me to do this work, but I gave a hand anyway, using my father's sola topee for the purpose.

'Where are we?' asked one of the passengers.

'A long way from anywhere,' said another.

'There must be a few islands in the Indian Ocean.'

'But we may be at sea for days before we come to one of them.'

'Days or even weeks,' said the captain. 'Let us look at our supplies.'

The dinghy appeared to be fairly well provided with emergency rations: biscuits, raisins, chocolates (we'd lost our own) and enough water to last a week. There was also a first-aid box, which was put to immediate use, as Mr Muggeridge's nose needed attention. A few others had cuts and bruises. One of the passengers had received a hard knock on the head and appeared to be suffering from a loss of memory. He had no idea how we happened to be drifting about in the middle of the Indian Ocean; he was convinced that we were on a pleasure cruise a few miles off Batavia.

The unfamiliar motion of the dinghy, as it rose and fell in the troughs between the waves, resulted in almost everyone getting seasick. As no one could eat anything, a day's rations were saved.

The sun was very hot, and my father covered my head with a large spotted handkerchief. He'd always had a fancy for bandana handkerchiefs with yellow spots, and seldom carried fewer than two on his person; so he had one for himself too. The sola topee, well soaked in sea water, was being used by Mr Muggeridge.

It was only when I had recovered to some extent from my seasickness that I remembered the valuable stamp album, and sat up, exclaiming, 'The stamps! Did

you bring the stamp album, Dad?’

He shook his head ruefully. ‘It must be at the bottom of the sea by now,’ he said. ‘But don’t worry, I kept a few rare stamps in my wallet.’ And looking pleased with himself, he tapped the pocket of his bush shirt.

The dinghy drifted all day, with no one having the least idea where it might be taking us.

‘Probably going round in circles,’ said Mr Muggeridge pessimistically.

There was no compass and no sail, and paddling wouldn’t have got us far even if we’d had paddles; we could only resign ourselves to the whims of the current and hope it would take us towards land or at least to within hailing distance of some passing ship.

The sun went down like an overripe tomato dissolving slowly in the sea. The darkness pressed down on us. It was a moonless night, and all we could see was the white foam on the crests of the waves. I lay with my head on my father’s shoulder, and looked up at the stars which glittered in the remote heavens.

‘Perhaps your friend Sono will look up at the sky tonight and see those same stars,’ said my father. ‘The world isn’t so big after all.’

‘All the same, there’s a lot of sea around us,’ said Mr Muggeridge from out of the darkness.

Remembering Sono, I put my hand in my pocket and was reassured to feel the smooth outline of the jade seahorse.

‘I’ve still got Sono’s seahorse,’ I said, showing it to my father.

‘Keep it carefully,’ he said. ‘It may bring us luck.’

‘Are seahorses lucky?’

‘Who knows? But he gave it to you with love, and love is like a prayer. So keep it carefully.’

I didn’t sleep much that night. I don’t think anyone slept. No one spoke much either, except, of course, Mr Muggeridge, who kept muttering something about cold beer and salami.

I didn’t feel so sick the next day. By ten o’clock I was quite hungry; but breakfast consisted of two biscuits, a piece of chocolate and a little drinking water. It was another hot day, and we were soon very thirsty, but everyone agreed that we should ration ourselves strictly.

Two or three still felt ill, but the others, including Mr Muggeridge, had recovered their appetites and normal spirits, and there was some discussion about the prospects of being picked up.

‘Are there any distress rockets in the dinghy?’ asked my father. ‘If we see a ship or a plane, we can fire a rocket and hope to be spotted. Otherwise there’s not much chance of our being seen from a distance.’

A thorough search was made in the dinghy, but there were no rockets.

‘Someone must have used them last Guy Fawkes Day,’ commented Mr Muggeridge.

‘They don’t celebrate Guy Fawkes Day in Holland,’ said my father. ‘Guy Fawkes was an Englishman.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Muggeridge, not in the least put out. ‘I’ve always said, most great men are Englishmen. And what did this chap Guy Fawkes do?’

‘Tried to blow up Parliament,’ said my father.

That afternoon we saw our first sharks. They were enormous creatures, and as they glided backward and forward under the boat it seemed they might hit and capsize us. They went away for some time, but returned in the evening.

At night, as I lay half asleep beside my father, I felt a few drops of water strike my face. At first I thought it was the sea spray; but when the sprinkling continued, I realized that it was raining lightly.

‘Rain!’ I shouted, sitting up. ‘It’s raining!’

Everyone woke up and did his best to collect water in mugs, hats or other containers. Mr Muggeridge lay back with his mouth open, drinking the rain as it fell.

‘This is more like it,’ he said.

‘You can have all the sun an’ sand in the world. Give me a rainy day in England!’

But by early morning the clouds had passed, and the day turned out to be even hotter than the previous one. Soon we were all red and raw from sunburn. By midday even Mr Muggeridge was silent. No one had the energy to talk.

Then my father whispered, ‘Can you hear a plane, lad?’

I listened carefully, and above the hiss of the waves I heard what sounded like the distant drone of a plane; it must have been very far away, because we could not see it. Perhaps it was flying into the sun, and the glare was too much for our sore eyes; or perhaps we’d just imagined the sound.

Then the Dutchman who’d lost his memory thought he saw land, and kept pointing towards the horizon and saying, ‘That’s Batavia, I told you we were close to shore!’ No one else saw anything. So my father and I weren’t the only ones imagining things.

My father said, 'It only goes to show that a man can see what he wants to see, even if there's nothing to be seen!'

The sharks were still with us. Mr Muggeridge began to resent them. He took off one of his shoes and hurled it at the nearest shark; but the big fish ignored the shoe and swam on after us.

'Now, if your leg had been in that shoe, Mr Muggeridge, the shark might have accepted it,' observed my father.

'Don't throw your shoes away,' said the captain. 'We might land on a deserted coastline and have to walk hundreds of miles!'

A light breeze sprang up that evening, and the dinghy moved more swiftly on the choppy water.

'At last we're moving forward,' announced the captain.

'In circles,' said Mr Muggeridge.

But the breeze was refreshing; it cooled our burning limbs, and helped us to get some sleep. In the middle of the night I woke up feeling very hungry.

'Are you all right?' asked my father, who had been awake all the time.

'Just hungry,' I said.

'And what would you like to eat?'

'Oranges!'

He laughed. 'No oranges on board. But I kept a piece of my chocolate for you. And there's a little water, if you're thirsty.' I kept the chocolate in my mouth for a long time, trying to make it last. Then I sipped a little water.

'Aren't you hungry?' I asked.

'Ravenous! I could eat a whole turkey. When we get to Bombay or Madras or Colombo, or wherever it is we get to, we'll go to the best restaurant in town and eat like — like —'

'Like shipwrecked sailors!' I said.

'Exactly.'

'Do you think we'll ever get to land, Dad?'

'I'm sure we will. You're not afraid, are you?'

'No. Not as long as you're with me.'

Next morning, to everyone's delight, we saw seagulls. This was a sure sign that land couldn't be far away; but a dinghy could take days to drift a distance of thirty or forty miles. The birds wheeled noisily above the dinghy. Their cries were the first familiar sounds we had heard for three days and three nights, apart from the wind and the sea and our own weary voices.

The sharks had disappeared, and that too was an encouraging sign. They didn't like the oil slicks that were appearing in the water.

But presently the gulls left us, and we feared we were drifting away from land.

'Circles,' repeated Mr Muggeridge. 'Circles.'

We had sufficient food and water for one more week at sea; but no one even wanted to think about spending another week at sea.

The sun was a ball of fire. Our water ration wasn't sufficient to quench our thirst. By noon, we were without much hope or energy.

My father had his pipe in his mouth. He didn't have any tobacco, but he liked holding the pipe between his teeth. He said it prevented his mouth from getting too dry.

The sharks had come back.

Mr Muggeridge removed his other shoe and threw it at them.

'Nothing like a lovely wet English summer,' he mumbled.

I fell asleep in the well of the dinghy, my father's large handkerchief spread over my face. The yellow spots on the cloth seemed to grow into enormous revolving suns.

When I woke up, I found a huge shadow hanging over us. At first I thought it was a cloud. But it was a shifting shadow. My father took the handkerchief from my face and said, 'You can wake up now, lad. We'll be home and dry soon.'

A fishing boat was beside us, and the shadow came from its wide, flapping sail. A number of bronzed, smiling, chattering fishermen — Burmese, as we discovered later — were gazing down at us from the deck of their boat.

A few days later my father and I were in Bombay. My father sold his rare stamps for over a thousand rupees, and we were able to live in a comfortable hotel. Mr Muggeridge was flown back to England. Later we got a postcard from him saying the English rain was awful!

'And what about us?' I asked. 'Aren't we going back to England?'

'Not yet,' said my father. 'You'll be going to a boarding school in Simla, until the war's over.'

'But why should I leave you?' I asked.

'Because I've joined the RAF,' he said. Then he added, 'Don't worry, I'm being posted to Delhi. I'll be able to come up to see you sometimes.'

A week later I was on a small train which went chugging up the steep mountain track to Simla. Several Indian, Anglo-Indian and English children tumbled around in the compartment. I felt quite out of place among them, as though I had grown out of

their pranks. But I wasn't unhappy. I knew my father would be coming to see me soon. He'd promised me some books, a pair of roller skates and a cricket bat, just as soon as he got his first month's pay.

Meanwhile, I had the jade seahorse which Sono had given me.

And I have it with me today.

The Black Cat

Before the cat came, of course, there had to be a broomstick.

In the bazaar of one of our hill stations is an old junk shop — dirty, dingy and dark — in which I often potter about looking for old books or Victorian bric-a-brac. Sometimes one comes across useful household items, but I do not usually notice these. I was, however, attracted to an old but well-preserved broom standing in a corner of the shop. A long-handled broom was just what I needed. I had no servant to sweep out the rooms of my cottage, and I did not enjoy bending over double when using the common short-handled *jharoo*.

The old broom was priced at ten rupees. I haggled with the shopkeeper and got it for five. It was a strong broom, full of character, and I used it to good effect almost every morning. And there this story might have ended — or would never have begun — if I had not found the large black cat sitting on the garden wall.

The black cat had bright yellow eyes, and it gave me a long, penetrating look, as though it were summing up my possibilities as an exploitable human. Though it miaowed once or twice, I paid no attention. I did not care much for cats. But when I went indoors, I found that the cat had followed and begun scratching at the pantry door.

It must be hungry, I thought, and gave it some milk.

The cat lapped up the milk, purring deeply all the while, then sprang up on a cupboard and made itself comfortable.

Well, for several days there was no getting rid of that cat. It seemed completely at home, and merely tolerated my presence in the house. It was more interested in my broom than me, and would dance and skittle around the broom whenever I was sweeping the rooms. And when the broom was resting against the wall, the cat would sidle up to it, rubbing itself against the handle and purring loudly.

A cat and a broomstick — the combination was suggestive, full of possibilities . . . The cottage was old, almost a hundred years old, and I wondered about the kind of tenants it might have had during these long years. I had been in the cottage only for

a year. And though it stood alone in the midst of a forest of Himalayan oaks, I had never encountered any ghosts or spirits.

Miss Bellows came to see me in the middle of July. I heard the tapping of a walking stick on the rocky path outside the cottage, a tapping which stopped near the gate.

‘Mr Bond!’ called an imperious voice. ‘Are you at home?’

I had been doing some gardening, and looked up to find an elderly straight-backed Englishwoman peering at me over the gate.

‘Good evening,’ I said, dropping my hoe.

‘I believe you have my cat,’ said Miss Bellows.

Though I had not met the lady before, I knew her by name and reputation. She was the oldest resident in the hill station.

‘I do have a cat,’ I said, ‘though it’s probably more correct to say that the cat has me. If it’s your cat, you’re welcome to it. Why don’t you come in while I look for her?’

Miss Bellows stepped in. She wore a rather old-fashioned black dress, and her ancient but strong walnut stick had two or three curves in it and a knob instead of a handle.



She made herself comfortable in an armchair while I went in search of the cat. But the cat was on one of her mysterious absences, and though I called for her in my most persuasive manner, she did not respond. I knew she was probably quite near. But cats are like that — perverse, obstinate creatures.

When finally I returned to the sitting room, there was the cat, curled up on Miss Bellows' lap.

'Well, you've got her, I see. Would you like some tea before you go?'

'No, thank you,' said Miss Bellows. 'I don't drink tea.'

'Something stronger, perhaps. A little brandy?' She looked up at me rather sharply. Disconcerted, I hastened to add, 'Not that I drink much, you know. I keep a little in the house for emergencies. It helps ward off colds and things. It's particularly good for — er — well, for colds,' I finished lamely.

'I see your kettle's boiling,' she said. 'Can I have some hot water?'

'Hot water? Certainly.' I was a little puzzled, but I did not want to antagonize Miss Bellows at our first meeting.

'Thank you. And a glass.'

She took the glass and I went to get the kettle. From the pocket of her voluminous dress, she extracted two small packets, similar to those containing chemists' powders. Opening both packets, she poured first a purple powder and then a crimson powder into the glass. Nothing happened.

'Now the water, please,' she said.

'It's boiling hot!'

'Never mind.'

I poured boiling water into her glass, and there was a terrific fizzing and bubbling as the frothy stuff rose to the rim. It gave off a horrible stench. The potion was so hot that I thought it would crack the glass; but before this could happen, Miss Bellows put it to her lips and drained the contents.

'I think I'll be going now,' she said, putting the glass down and smacking her lips. The cat, tail in the air, voiced its agreement. Said Miss Bellows said, 'I'm much obliged to you, young man.'

'Don't mention it,' I said humbly. 'Always at your service.'

She gave me her thin, bony hand, and held mine in an icy grip.

I saw Miss Bellows and the black cat to the gate, and returned pensively to my sitting room. Living alone was beginning to tell on my nerves and imagination. I made a half-hearted attempt to laugh at my fancies, but the laugh stuck in my throat. I couldn't help noticing that the broom was missing from its corner.

I dashed out of the cottage and looked up and down the path. There was no one to be seen. In the gathering darkness I could hear Miss Bellows' laughter, followed by a snatch of song:

*With the darkness round me growing,
And the moon behind my hat,
You will soon have trouble knowing
Which is witch and witch's cat.*

Something whirred overhead like a Diwali rocket.

I looked up and saw them silhouetted against the rising moon. Miss Bellows and her cat were riding away on my broomstick.

Grandfather's Many Faces

Grandfather had many gifts, but perhaps the most unusual — and at times startling — was his ability to disguise himself and take on the persona of another person, often a street vendor or carpenter or washerman: someone he had seen around for some time, and whose habits and characteristics he had studied.

His normal attire was that of the average Anglo-Indian or Englishman — bush shirt, khaki shorts, occasionally a sola topee or sun helmet — but if you rummaged through his cupboards you would find a strange assortment of garments: dhotis, lungis, pyjamas, embroidered shirts, colourful turbans . . . He could be a maharaja one day, a beggar the next. Yes, he even had a brass begging bowl, but he used it only once, just to see if he could pass himself off as a bent-double beggar hobbling through the bazaar. He wasn't recognized but he had to admit that begging was a most difficult art.

'You have to be on the street all day and in all weather,' he told me that evening. 'You have to be polite to everyone — no beggar succeeds by being rude! You have to be alert at all times. It's a hard work, believe me. I wouldn't advise anyone to take up begging as a profession.'

Grandfather really liked to get the 'feel' of someone else's occupation or lifestyle. And he enjoyed playing tricks on his friends and relatives.

Grandmother loved bargaining with shopkeepers and vendors of all kinds. She would boast that she could get the better of most men when it came to haggling over the price of onions or cloth or baskets or buttons . . . Until one day the sabziwala, a wandering vegetable-seller who carried a basket of fruit and vegetables on his head, spent an hour on the veranda arguing with Granny over the price of various items before finally selling her what she wanted.

Later that day, Grandfather confronted Grandmother and insisted on knowing why she had paid extra for tomatoes and green chillies. 'Far more than you'd have paid in the bazaar,' he said.

'How do you know what I paid him?' asked Granny.

‘Because here’s the ten-rupee note you gave me,’ said Grandfather, handing back her money. ‘I changed into something suitable and borrowed the sabziwala’s basket for an hour!’

Grandfather never used makeup. He had a healthy tan, and with the help of a false moustache or beard, and a change of hairstyle, could become anyone he wanted to be.

For my amusement, he became a tongawala; that is, the driver of a pony-drawn buggy, a common form of conveyance in the days of my boyhood.

Grandfather borrowed a tonga from one of his cronies, and took me for a brisk and eventful ride around the town. On our way we picked up the odd customer and earned a few rupees which were dutifully handed over to the tonga-owner at the end of the day. We picked up Dr Bisht, our local physician, who failed to recognize him. But of course I was the giveaway. ‘And what are you doing here?’ asked the good doctor. ‘Shouldn’t you be in school?’

‘I’m just helping Grandfather,’ I replied. ‘It’s part of my science project.’ Dr Bisht then took a second look at Grandfather and burst out laughing; he also insisted on a free ride.

On one occasion Grandfather drove Grandmother to the bank without her recognizing him. And that too in a tonga with a white pony. Granny was superstitious about white ponies and avoided them as far as possible. But Grandfather, in his tonga-driver’s disguise, persuaded her that his white pony was the best-behaved little pony in the world; and so it was, under his artful guidance. As a result, Granny lost her fear of white ponies.

One winter the Gemini Circus came to our small north Indian town, and set up its tents on the old parade ground. Grandfather, who liked circuses and circus people, soon made friends with all the show folk — the owner, the ringmaster, the lion tamer, the pony-riders, clowns, trapeze-artistes and acrobats. He told me that as a boy he’d always wanted to join a circus, preferably as an animal trainer or ringmaster, but his parents had persuaded him to become an engine driver instead.

‘Driving an engine must be fun,’ I said.

‘Yes, but lions are safer,’ said Grandfather.

And he used his friendship with the circus folk to get free passes for me, my cousin Melanie and my little friend Gautam who lived next door.

‘Aren’t you coming with us?’ I asked Grandfather.

‘I’ll be there,’ he answered. ‘I’ll be with my friends. See if you can spot me!’

We were convinced that Grandfather was going to adopt one of his disguises and take part in the evening's entertainment. So for Melanie, Gautam and me the evening turned out to be a guessing game.

We were enthralled by the show's highlights — the tigers going through their drill, the beautiful young men and women on the flying trapeze, the daring motorcyclist bursting through a hoop of fire, the jugglers and clowns — but we kept trying to see if we could recognize Grandfather among the performers. We couldn't make too much of a noise because in the row behind us sat some of the town's senior citizens — the mayor, a turbaned maharaja, a formally dressed Englishman with a military bearing, a couple of nuns, and Gautam's class teacher — but we kept up our chatter for most of the show.

'Is your Grandfather the lion tamer?' asked Gautam.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'He hasn't had any practice with lions. He's better with tigers!' But there was someone else in charge of the tigers.

'He could be one of the jugglers,' suggested Melanie.

'He's taller than the jugglers,' I said.

Gautam made an inspired guess: 'Maybe he's the bearded lady!'

We looked hard and long at the bearded lady when she came to our side of the ring. She waved to us in a friendly manner, and Gautam called out, 'Excuse me, are you Ruskin's grandfather?'

'No, dear,' she replied with a deep laugh. 'I'm his girlfriend!' And she skipped away to another part of the ring.

A clown came up to us and made funny faces.

'Are you Grandfather?' asked Melanie.

But the clown just grinned, somersaulted backwards, and went about his funny business.

'I give up,' said Melanie. 'Unless he's the dancing bear.'

'It's a real bear,' said Gautam. 'Just look at those claws!'

The bear looked real enough. So did the lion, though a trifle mangy. And the tigers looked tigerish.

We went home convinced that Grandfather hadn't been there at all.

'So did you enjoy the circus?' he asked, when he sat down to dinner late that evening.

'Yes, but you weren't there,' I complained. 'And we took a close look at everyone — including the bearded lady!'

‘Oh, I was there all right,’ said Grandfather. ‘I was sitting just behind you. But you were too absorbed in the circus and the performers to notice the audience. I was that smart-looking Englishman in the suit and tie, sitting between the maharaja and the nuns. I thought I’d just be myself for a change!’

He Said It with Arsenic

Is there such a person as a born murderer — in the sense that there are born writers and musicians, born winners and losers?

One can't be sure. The urge to do away with troublesome people is common to most of us, but only a few succumb to it. If ever there was a born murderer, he must surely have been William Jones. The thing came so naturally to him. No extreme violence, no messy shootings or hackings or throttling — just the right amount of poison, administered with skill and discretion.

A gentle, civilized sort of person was Mr Jones. He collected butterflies and arranged them systematically in glass cases. His ether bottle was quick and painless. He never stuck pins into the beautiful creatures.

Have you ever heard of the Agra Double Murder?

It happened, of course, a great many years ago, when Agra was a far-flung outpost of the British Empire. In those days, William Jones was a male nurse in one of the city's hospitals. The patients — specially terminal cases — spoke highly of the care and consideration he showed them. While most nurses, both male and female, preferred to attend to the more hopeful cases, Nurse William was always prepared to stand duty over a dying patient.

He felt a certain empathy for the dying; he liked to see them on their way. It was just his good nature, of course.

On a visit to nearby Meerut, he met and fell in love with Mrs Browning, the wife of the local stationmaster. Impassioned love letters were soon putting a strain on the Agra-Meerut postal service. The envelopes grew heavier — not so much because the letters were growing longer but because they contained little packets of a powdery, white substance, accompanied by detailed instructions as to its correct administration.

Mr Browning, an unassuming and trustful man — one of the world's born losers — was not the sort to read his wife's correspondence. Even when he was seized by frequent attacks of colic, he put them down to an impure water supply. He recovered from one bout of vomiting and diarrhoea only to be racked by another.

He was hospitalized on a diagnosis of gastroenteritis, and, thus freed from his wife's ministrations, soon got better. But on returning home and drinking a glass of nimbu pani brought to him by the solicitous Mrs Browning, he had a relapse from which he did not recover.

Those were the days when deaths from cholera and related diseases were only too common in India, and death certificates were easier to obtain than dog licences.

After a short interval of mourning (it was the hot weather and you couldn't wear black for long), Mrs Browning moved to Agra, where she rented a house next door to William Jones.

I forgot to mention that Mr Jones was also married. His wife was an insignificant creature, no match for a genius like William. Before the hot weather was over, the dreaded cholera had taken her too. The way was clear for the lovers to unite in holy matrimony.

But Dame Gossip lived in Agra too, and it was not long before tongues were wagging and anonymous letters were being received by the superintendent of police. Inquiries were instituted. Like most infatuated lovers, Mrs Browning had hung on to her beloved's letters and billet-doux, and these soon came to light. The silly woman had kept them in a box beneath her bed.

Exhumations were ordered in both Agra and Meerut.

Arsenic keeps well, even in the hottest of weather, and there was no dearth of it in the remains of both victims.

Mr Jones and Mrs Browning were arrested and charged with murder.

'Is Uncle Bill really a murderer?' I asked from the drawing-room sofa in my grandmother's house in Dehra. (It's time that I told you that William Jones was my uncle, my mother's half-brother.)

I was eight or nine at the time. Uncle Bill had spent the previous summer with us in Dehra and had stuffed me with bazaar sweets and pastries, all of which I had consumed without suffering any ill effects.

'Who told you that about Uncle Bill?' asked Grandmother.

'I heard it in school. All the boys were asking me the same question, "Is your uncle a murderer?" They say he poisoned both his wives.'

'He had only one wife,' snapped Aunt Mabel.

'Did he poison her?'

'No, of course not. How can you say such a thing!'

'Then why is Uncle Bill in jail?'

'Who says he's in jail?'

‘The boys at school. They heard it from their parents. Uncle Bill is to go on trial in the Agra fort.’

There was a pregnant silence in the drawing room, then Aunt Mabel burst out, ‘It was all that awful woman’s fault.’

‘Do you mean Mrs Browning?’ asked Grandmother.

‘Yes, of course. She must have put him up to it. Bill couldn’t have thought of anything so — so diabolical!’

‘But he sent her the powders, dear. And don’t forget — Mrs Browning has since . . .’

Grandmother stopped in mid-sentence, and both she and Aunt Mabel glanced surreptitiously at me.

‘Committed suicide,’ I filled in. ‘There were still some powders with her.’

Aunt Mabel’s eyes rolled heavenwards. ‘This boy is impossible. I don’t know what he will be like when he grows up.’

‘At least I won’t be like Uncle Bill,’ I said. ‘Fancy poisoning people! If I kill anyone, it will be in a fair fight. I suppose they’ll hang Uncle?’

‘Oh, I hope not!’

Grandmother was silent. Uncle Bill was her stepson but she did have a soft spot for him. Aunt Mabel, his sister, thought he was wonderful. I had always considered him to be a bit soft but had to admit that he was generous. I tried to imagine him dangling at the end of a hangman’s rope, but somehow he didn’t fit the picture.

As things turned out, he didn’t hang. During the Raj, white people in India seldom got the death sentence, although the hangman was pretty busy disposing of dacoits and political terrorists. Uncle Bill was given a life sentence and settled down to a sedentary job in the prison library at Naini, near Allahabad. His gifts as a male nurse went unappreciated; they did not trust him in the hospital.

He was released after seven or eight years, shortly after the country became an independent republic. He came out of jail to find that the British were leaving, either for England or the remaining colonies. Grandmother was dead. Aunt Mabel and her husband had settled in South Africa. Uncle Bill realized that there was little future for him in India and followed his sister out to Johannesburg. I was in my last year at boarding school. After my father’s death, my mother had married an Indian, and now my future lay in India.

I did not see Uncle Bill after his release from prison, and no one dreamt that he would ever turn up again in India.

In fact, fifteen years were to pass before he came back, and by then I was in my early thirties, the author of a book that had become something of a bestseller. The previous fifteen years had been a struggle — the sort of struggle that every young freelance writer experiences — but at last the hard work was paying off and the royalties were beginning to come in.

I was living in a small cottage on the outskirts of the hill station of Fosterganj, working on another book, when I received an unexpected visitor.

He was a thin, stooped, grey-haired man in his late fifties, with a straggling moustache and discoloured teeth. He looked feeble and harmless but for his eyes which were pale cold blue. There was something slightly familiar about him.

‘Don’t you remember me?’ he asked. ‘Not that I really expect you to, after all these years ...’

‘Wait a minute. Did you teach me at school?’

‘No — but you’re getting warm.’ He put his suitcase down and I glimpsed his name on the airlines label. I looked up in astonishment. ‘You’re not — you couldn’t be ...’

‘Your Uncle Bill,’ he said with a grin and extended his hand. ‘None other!’ And he sauntered into the house.

I must admit that I had mixed feelings about his arrival. While I had never felt any dislike for him, I hadn’t exactly approved of what he had done. Poisoning, I felt, was a particularly reprehensible way of getting rid of inconvenient people; not that I could think of any commendable ways of getting rid of them! Still, it had happened a long time ago; he’d been punished, and presumably he was a reformed character.

‘And what have you been doing all these years?’ he asked me, easing himself into the only comfortable chair in the room.

‘Oh just writing,’ I said.

‘Yes, I heard about your last book. It’s quite a success, isn’t it?’

‘It’s doing quite well. Have you read it?’

‘I don’t do much reading.’

‘And what have you been doing all these years, Uncle Bill?’

‘Oh, knocking about here and there. Worked for a soft drink company for some time. And then with a drug firm. My knowledge of chemicals was useful.’

‘Weren’t you with Aunt Mabel in South Africa?’

‘I saw quite a lot of her, until she died a couple of years ago. Didn’t you know?’

‘No. I’ve been out of touch with relatives.’ I hoped he’d take that as a hint. ‘And what about her husband?’

‘Died too, not long after. Not many of us left, my boy. That’s why, when I saw something about you in the papers, I thought why not go and see my only nephew again?’

‘You’re welcome to stay a few days,’ I said quickly. ‘Then I have to go to Bombay.’ (This was a lie, but I did not relish the prospect of looking after Uncle Bill for the rest of his days.)

‘Oh, I won’t be staying long,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a bit of money put by in Johannesburg. It’s just that so far as I know you’re my only living relative, and I thought it would be nice to see you again.’

Feeling relieved, I set about trying to make Uncle Bill as comfortable as possible. I gave him my bedroom and turned the window seat into a bed for myself. I was a hopeless cook but, using all my ingenuity, I scrambled some eggs for supper. He waved aside my apologies; he’d always been a frugal eater, he said. Eight years in jail had given him a cast-iron stomach.

He did not get in my way but left me to my writing and my lonely walks. He seemed content to sit in the spring sunshine and smoke his pipe.

It was during our third evening together that he said, ‘Oh, I almost forgot. There’s a bottle of sherry in my suitcase. I brought it specially for you.’

‘That was very thoughtful of you, Uncle Bill. How did you know I was fond of sherry?’

‘Just my intuition. You do like it, don’t you?’

‘There’s nothing like a good sherry.’

He went to his bedroom and came back with an unopened bottle of South African sherry.

‘Now you just relax near the fire,’ he said agreeably. ‘I’ll open the bottle and fetch glasses.’

He went to the kitchen while I remained near the electric fire, flipping through some journals. It seemed to me that Uncle Bill was taking rather a long time. Intuition must be a family trait, because it came to me quite suddenly — the thought that Uncle Bill might be intending to poison me.

After all, I thought, here he is after nearly fifteen years, apparently for purely sentimental reasons. But I had just published a bestseller. And I was his nearest relative. If I were to die, Uncle Bill could lay claim to my estate and probably live comfortably on my royalties for the next five or six years!

What had really happened to Aunt Mabel and her husband, I wondered. And where did Uncle Bill get the money for an air ticket to India?

Before I could ask myself any more questions, he reappeared with the glasses on a tray. He set the tray on a small table that stood between us. The glasses had been filled. The sherry sparkled.

I stared at the glass nearest me, trying to make out if the liquid in it was cloudier than that in the other glass. But there appeared to be no difference.

I decided I would not take any chances. It was a round tray, made of smooth Kashmiri walnut wood. I turned it round with my index finger, so that the glasses changed places.

‘Why did you do that?’ asked Uncle Bill.

‘It’s a custom in these parts. You turn the tray with the sun, a complete revolution. It brings good luck.’

Uncle Bill looked thoughtful for a few moments, then said, ‘Well, let’s have some more luck,’ and turned the tray around again.

‘Now you’ve spoilt it,’ I said. ‘You’re not supposed to keep revolving it! That’s bad luck. I’ll have to turn it about again to cancel out the bad luck.’

The tray swung round once more, and Uncle Bill had the glass that was meant for me.

‘Cheers!’ I said, and drank from my glass.

It was good sherry. Uncle Bill hesitated. Then he shrugged, said ‘Cheers’, and drained his glass quickly.

But he did not offer to fill the glasses again.

Early next morning he was taken violently ill. I heard him retching in his room, and I got up and went to see if there was anything I could do. He was groaning, his head hanging over the side of the bed. I brought him a basin and a jug of water.

‘Would you like me to fetch a doctor?’ I asked.

He shook his head. ‘No, I’ll be all right. It must be something I ate.’

‘It’s probably the water. It’s not too good at this time of the year. Many people come down with gastric trouble during their first few days in Fosterganj.’

‘Ah, that must be it,’ he said, and doubled up as a fresh spasm of pain and nausea swept over him.

He was better by the evening — whatever had gone into the glass must have been by way of the preliminary dose, and a day later he was well enough to pack his suitcase and announce his departure. The climate of Fosterganj did not agree with him, he told me.

Just before he left, I said, ‘Tell me, Uncle, why did you drink it?’

‘Drink what? The water?’

‘No, the glass of sherry into which you’d slipped one of your famous powders.’

He gaped at me, then gave a nervous, whinnying laugh. ‘You will have your little joke, won’t you?’

‘No, I mean it,’ I said. ‘Why did you drink the stuff? It was meant for me, of course.’

He looked down at his shoes, then gave a little shrug and turned away.

‘In the circumstances,’ he said, ‘it seemed the only decent thing to do.’

I’ll say this for Uncle Bill: he was always the perfect gentleman.

Here Comes Mr Oliver

Apart from being our Scoutmaster, Mr Oliver was also our maths teacher, a subject in which I had some difficulty in obtaining pass marks. Sometimes I scraped through; usually I got something like twenty or thirty out of a hundred.

‘Failed again, Bond,’ Mr Oliver would say. ‘What will you do when you grow up?’

‘Become a Scoutmaster, sir.’

‘Scoutmasters don’t get paid. It’s an honorary job. But you could become a cook. That would suit you.’ He hadn’t forgotten our Scout camp, when I had been the camp’s cook.

If Mr Oliver was in a good mood, he’d give me grace marks, passing me by a mark or two. He wasn’t a hard man, but he seldom smiled. He was very dark, thin, stooped (from a distance he looked like a question mark) and balding. He was about forty, still a bachelor, and it was said that he had been unlucky in love — that the girl he was going to marry had jilted him at the last moment, had run away with a sailor while he was waiting at the church, ready for the wedding ceremony. No wonder he always had such a sorrowful look.

Mr Oliver did have one inseparable companion — a Dachshund, a snappy little ‘sausage’ of a dog, who looked upon the human race and especially small boys with a certain disdain and frequent hostility. We called the dog Hitler. He was impervious to overtures of friendship, and if you tried to pat or stroke him, he would do his best to bite your fingers — or your shin or ankle. However, he was devoted to Mr Oliver and followed him everywhere, except into the classroom; this our Headmaster would not allow.

You remember that old nursery rhyme:

*Mary had a Little Lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow,
And everywhere that Mary went
The Lamb was sure to go.*

Well, we made up our own version of the rhyme, and I must confess to having had a hand in its composition. It went like this:

*Olly had a little dog,
'Twas never out of sight,
And everyone that Olly met
The dog was sure to bite!*

It followed him about the school grounds. It followed him when he took a walk through the pines, to the Brockhurst tennis courts. It followed him into town and home again. Mr Oliver had no other friend, no other companion. The dog slept at the foot of Mr Oliver's bed. It did not sit at the breakfast table, but it had buttered toast for breakfast and soup and crackers for dinner. Mr Oliver had to take his lunch in the dining hall with the staff and boys, but he had an arrangement with one of the bearers whereby a plate of dal, rice and chapattis made its way to Mr Oliver's quarters and his well-fed pet.

And then tragedy struck.

Mr Oliver and Hitler were returning to school after their evening walk through the pines. It was dusk, and the light was fading fast. Out of the shadows of the trees emerged a lean and hungry panther. It pounced on the hapless dog, flung it across the road, seized it between its powerful jaws, and made off with its victim into the darkness of the forest.

Mr Oliver, untouched, was frozen into immobility for at least a minute. Then he began calling for help. Some bystanders who had witnessed the incident began shouting, too. Mr Oliver ran into the forest, but there was no sign of dog or panther.

Mr Oliver appeared to be a broken man. He went about his duties with a poker face, but we could all tell that he was grieving for his lost companion. In the classroom he was listless, indifferent to whether or not we followed his calculations on the blackboard. In times of personal loss, the Highest Common Factor made no sense.

Mr Oliver was not to be seen on his evening walk. He stayed in his room, playing cards with himself. He played with his food, pushing most of it aside; there were no chapattis to send home.

'Olly needs another pet,' said Bimal, wise in the ways of adults.

'Or a wife,' suggested Tata, who thought on those lines.

'He's too old. Over forty.'

'A pet is best,' I decided. 'What about a parrot?'

‘You can’t take a parrot for a walk,’ said Bimal. Olly wants someone to walk beside him.’

‘A cat, maybe . . .’

‘Hitler hated cats. A cat would be an insult to Hitler’s memory.’

‘He needs another Dachshund. But there aren’t any around here.’

‘Any dog will do. We’ll ask Chippu to get us a pup.’

Chippu ran the tuck shop. He lived in the Chotta Simla bazaar, and occasionally we would ask him to bring us tops or marbles or comics or little things that we couldn’t get in school. Five of us Boy Scouts contributed a rupee each, and we gave Chippu five rupees and asked him to get us a pup. ‘A good breed,’ we told him. ‘Not a mongrel.’

The next evening Chippu turned up with a pup that seemed to be a combination of at least five different breeds — all good ones, no doubt. One ear lay flat, the other stood upright. It was spotted like a Dalmatian, but it had the legs of a Spaniel and the tail of a Pomeranian. It was quite fluffy and playful, and the tail wagged a lot, which was more than Hitler’s ever did.

‘It’s quite pretty,’ said Tata. ‘Must be a female.’

‘He may not want a female,’ put in Bimal.

‘Let’s give it a try,’ I said.

During our play hour, before the bell rang for supper, we left the pup on the steps outside Mr Oliver’s front door. Then we knocked, and sped into the hibiscus bushes that lined the pathway.

Mr Oliver opened the door. He looked down at the pup with an expressionless face. The pup began to paw at Mr Oliver’s shoes, loosening one of his laces in the process.

‘Away with you!’ muttered Mr Oliver. ‘Buzz off!’ And he pushed the pup away, gently but firmly.

After a break of ten minutes we tried again, but the result was much the same. We now had a playful pup on our hands, and Chippu had gone home for the night. We would have to conceal it in the dormitory.

At first we hid the pup in Bimal’s locker, but it began yapping and struggling to get out. Tata took it into the shower room, but it wouldn’t stay there either. It began running around the dormitory, playing with socks, shoes, slippers, and anything else it could get hold of.

‘Watch out!’ hissed one of the boys. ‘Here’s Ma Fisher!’

Mrs Fisher, the Headmaster's wife, was on her nightly rounds, checking to make sure we were all in bed and not up to some mischief.

I grabbed the pup and hid it under my blankets. It was quiet there, happy to nibble at my toes. When Ma Fisher had gone, I let the pup loose again, and for the rest of the night it had the freedom of the dormitory.

At the crack of dawn, before first light, Bimal and I sped out of the dormitory in our pyjamas, taking the pup with us. We banged hard on Mr Oliver's door, and kept knocking until we heard footsteps approaching. As soon as the door opened just a bit (for Mr Oliver, being a cautious man, did not open it all at once) we pushed the pup inside and ran for our lives.

Mr Oliver came to class as usual, but there was no pup with him. Three or four days passed, and still no sign of the pup! Had he passed it on to someone else, or simply let it wander off on its own?

'Here comes Olly!' called Bimal, from our vantage point near the school bell.

Mr Oliver was setting out for his evening walk. He was carrying a stout walnut-wood walking stick — to keep panthers at bay, no doubt. He looked neither left nor right, and if he noticed us watching him, he gave no sign of it. But then, scurrying behind him, came the pup! The creature of various good breeds was accompanying Mr Oliver on his walk. It had been well brushed and was wearing a bright red collar. Like Mr Oliver it took no notice of us, but scampered along beside its new master.

Mr Oliver and the pup were soon inseparable companions, and my friends and I were quite pleased with ourselves. Mr Oliver gave absolutely no indication that he knew where the pup had come from, but when the end-of-term exams were over, and Bimal and I were sure we had failed our maths paper, we were surprised to find that we had passed after all — with grace marks!

'Good old Olly!' said Bimal. 'So he knew all the time.'

Tata, of course, did not need grace marks; he was a whiz at maths. But Bimal and I decided we would thank Mr Oliver for his kindness.

'Nothing to thank me for,' said Mr Oliver brusquely. 'I've seen enough of you two in junior school. It's high time you went up to the senior school — and God help you there!'

Mr Oliver's Diary

Mr Oliver, our maths teacher and Scoutmaster, kept a diary. Here is an extract.

25 April

We have a sleepwalker in the junior dormitory.

Last night Basu, who is prefect in the junior dorm, comes knocking on my door at around 11 p.m. with the startling information that the Chopra boy has walked out of the dormitory and is presently wandering about on the playing field.

Putting on my dressing gown and slippers, I follow the pyjama-clad Basu on to the field where, true enough, young Chopra is walking around in some kind of trance.

'Chopra!' I call out. 'What do you think you're up to? Get back to your dormitory at once!'

No response. He keeps walking away from us. We follow at a discreet distance. Don't want to startle him. Sleepwalkers should be woken gently, or so we are told.

Chopra picks up speed. I have a hard time keeping up with him.

'Shall I catch him, sir?' asked Basu.

'No, let's see where he goes?'

Chopra left the field and walked out of the school gate!

'He is going to town, sir!' exclaimed Basu.

'He can't sleepwalk all the way to town.'

I was right. He walked about 100 metres up the road, then turned, and walked straight back straight past us!

'His eyes are open, but he doesn't see us,' observed Basu.

'Definitely sleepwalking.'

Chopra next made a round of H.M.'s vegetable garden, disturbing a couple of porcupines who were rooting around for potatoes; then returned to the main building (with Basu and I in hot pursuit), passed through the dining room and took the stairs to his dormitory. We were in time to see him climb into his bed and nestle

down under the blankets. After leading us a merry chase, he was sleeping peacefully, unaware of what had happened.

Basu returned to his bed, and I returned to my room, disturbing Tota in the process, who greeted me with a squawk and a 'bottom's up'.

Made this diary entry in the morning. Looking over it, I see that I have got my tenses all mixed up. Must have been the excitement.

4 May

Someone has disfigured our Founder's portrait, and H.M. is furious.

The portrait hangs at one end of our assembly hall — a portrait in oils of Rev Constant Endover, who started our schools a century ago. His other achievement was translating the gospels into Pashtu. Later, he was murdered by one of his retainers. His grave (near Peshawar) bears the inscription: 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant.'

But let me not digress.

The Rev Endover was a clean-shaven man, but the desecrator had given him a large handlebar moustache, a bright red clown's nose, a yellow paper hat and a pair of earrings!

We were all ordered in the Assembly Hall, where H.M. harangued us for half an hour, describing the unknown perpetrator as a fiendish and sinister creature who would grow up to be a terrorist. To make matters worse, a closer scrutiny of the portrait's inscription revealed that the lettering of the Founder's name had been altered, so that it read 'Rev Constant Bendover'!

When this was discovered, some of us couldn't help laughing; this was infectious, and ripples of laughter spread through the hall.

'Silence!' bellowed H.M. 'I want to know who committed this outrage!'

There was an absolute silence, and no one attempted to break it by confessing to the crime.

'Unless the culprit comes forward there will be no exits this weekend.'

A murmur of protest, but no one spoke out.

'And the tuck shop will be closed for a week!' added H.M. Groans all around. This is the unkindest cut of all.

Suddenly a squeaky voice from the front row (Class 1) piped up, 'It was me, sir!'

Popat, the smallest boy in the school, had confessed to the greatest of crimes!

Although taken aback, H.M. was always fussy about grammar.

‘It was *I*, Popat!’ corrected H.M., his passion for correct usage strong even in a crisis.

‘No, sir, it wasn’t!’ cried Popat, under the impression that H.M. was taking the blame. ‘It was *me*!’

‘It was *I*!’

‘It was *me*!’

At this exchange, everyone in the hall broke down in fits of laughter, and eventually H.M. couldn’t help smiling as well.

Popat promised to clean up the portrait in his spare time, and Miss Ramola promised to help him. Weekend exits restored, tuck shop closure postponed, and Popat a hero for a day.

20 June

Conducted the school marathon. Everyone ran, but hardly anyone crossed the finishing line.

I accompanied the boys to the starting point, near the Governor’s mansion, and flagged them off, then followed at a slow jog.

The first to drop out was Chopra, our sleepwalker. I found him on the parapet, holding his sides.

‘Exhausted, sir,’ he said. ‘The distance is too much for me.’

‘You cover enough distance in your sleep,’ I remarked. ‘You’ve led us a merry chase on several occasions.’

‘Maybe that’s why I’m so tired, sir. All that sleepwalking. But I don’t remember any of it.’

‘Well, if you finish the marathon perhaps you’ll be too tired to sleepwalk, so get a move on!’

Chopra groaned, got up, and trundled down the road. The next dropout was Gautam.

‘I’ve got a stich in my side, sir. Not used to so much running.’

‘Well, here’s your chance to get used to it. Exits next Saturday for the first three to cross the finishing line. You’re a good sprinter, always first to reach the tuck shop, so try your luck at a longer distance.’ And I prodded him into action.

Rounded a corner and found Tata, Mirchi and Basu standing around a small fire on which corn cobs were being roasted.

‘Have a bhutta, sir,’ said Tata, always hospitable.

‘They’re good with a little salt,’ added Mirchi.

‘But best with butter,’ said Basu,’ except we don’t have any butter.’

‘I’ll butter the three of you if you don’t get a move on,’ I said. And they collected their roasted corn and sped down the road. But I’ve no idea where they went next, because they did not finish the race.

Caught up with Rudra who was strolling along, talking to someone on his cell phone.

‘You know cell phones are not allowed in school,’ I said, taking it from him.

‘But we’re outside the school, sir. And I was only listening to music.’

‘You can collect the phone at the end of the term. Now make music with your feet. Let’s see you tap dance down the school.’

Rudra grinned and started dancing on the road.

‘That’s not a tap dance,’ I said.

‘No sir, it’s Kathakali. Didn’t you know I’m from the South?’

‘Well, Kathakali down to the school, then. Maybe you’ll get a prize from Mrs Tonk.’

Mrs Tonk, principal of the girls’ school, was waiting to give away the first prize — a hamper of chocolates, biscuits, buns, and laddoos. And who should come in first but ‘Fatty’ Prakash, huffing and puffing, but pounding down the road with grim determination. He must have had prior information as to the nature of the first prize. If you have an object in life, you will attain it with a little extra effort.

Uncle Ken's Rumble in the Jungle

Uncle Ken drove Grandfather's old Fiat along the forest road at an incredible 30 mph, scattering pheasants, partridges and junglefowl as he clattered along. He had come in search of the disappearing red junglefowl, and I could see why the bird had disappeared. Too many noisy human beings had invaded its habitat.

By the time we reached the forest rest house, one of the car doors had fallen off its hinges, and a large lantana bush had got entwined in the bumper.

'Never mind,' said Uncle Ken. 'It's all part of the adventure!'

The rest house had been reserved for Uncle Ken, thanks to Grandfather's good relations with the forest department. But I was the only other person in the car. No one else would trust himself or herself to Uncle Ken's driving. He treated a car as though it were a low-flying aircraft having some difficulty in getting off the runway.

As we arrived at the rest house, a number of hens made a dash for safety.

'Look, junglefowl!' exclaimed Uncle Ken.

'Domestic fowl,' I said. 'They must belong to the forest guards.'

I was right, of course. One of the hens was destined to be served up as chicken curry later that day. The jungle birds avoided the neighbourhood of the rest house, just in case they were mistaken for poultry and went into the cooking pot.

Uncle Ken was all for starting his search right away, and after a brief interval during which we were served with tea and pakoras (prepared by a forest guard, who it turned out was also a good cook) we set off on foot into the jungle in search of the elusive red junglefowl.

'No tigers around here, are there?' asked Uncle Ken, just to be on the safe side.

'No tigers on this range,' said the guard. 'Just elephants.'

Uncle Ken wasn't afraid of elephants. He'd been for numerous elephant rides at the Lucknow zoo. He'd also seen Sabu in *Elephant Boy*.

A small wooden bridge took us across a little river, and then we were in thick jungle, following the forest guard who led us along a path that was frequently blocked by broken tree branches and pieces of bamboo.

‘Why all these broken branches?’ asked Uncle Ken.

‘The elephants, sir,’ replied our guard. ‘They passed through last night. They like certain leaves, as well as young bamboo shoots.’

We saw a number of spotted deer and several pheasants, but no red junglefowl. That evening we sat out on the veranda of the rest house. All was silent, except for the distant trumpeting of elephants. Then, from the stream, came the chanting of hundreds of frogs.

There were tenors and baritones, sopranos and contraltos, and occasionally a bass deep enough to have pleased the great Chaliapin. They sang duets and quartets from *La Boheme* and other Italian operas, drowning out all other jungle sounds except for the occasional cry of a jackal doing his best to join in.

‘We might as well sing,’ said Uncle Ken, and began singing the ‘Indian Love Call’ in his best Nelson Eddy manner.

The frogs fell silent, obviously awestruck; but instead of receiving an answering love call, Uncle Ken was answered by even more strident jackal calls — not one, but several — with the result that all self-respecting denizens of the forest fled from the vicinity, and we saw no wildlife that night apart from a frightened rabbit that sped across the clearing and vanished into the darkness.

Early next morning we renewed our efforts to track down the red junglefowl, but it remained elusive. Returning to the rest house dusty and weary, Uncle Ken exclaimed: ‘There it is — a red junglefowl!’

But it turned out to be the caretaker’s cock-bird, a handsome fellow all red and gold, but not the jungle variety.

Disappointed, Uncle Ken decided to return to civilization. Another night in the rest house did not appeal to him. He had run out of songs to sing.

In any case, the weather had changed overnight and a light drizzle was falling as we started out. This had turned to a steady downpour by the time we reached the bridge across the Suswa river. And standing in the middle of the bridge was an elephant.

He was a lone tusker and didn’t look too friendly.

Uncle Ken blew his horn, and that was a mistake.

It was a strident, penetrating horn, highly effective on city roads but out of place in the forest. The elephant took it as a challenge, and returned the blast of the horn with a shrill trumpeting of its own. It took a few steps forward. Uncle Ken put the car into reverse.

‘Is there another way out of here?’ he asked.

‘There’s a side road,’ I said recalling an earlier trip with Grandfather. ‘It will take us to the Kansrao railway station.’

‘What ho!’ cried Uncle Ken. ‘To the station we go!’

And he turned the car and drove back until we came to the turning.



The narrow road was now a rushing torrent of rain water and all Uncle Ken's driving skills were put to the test. He had on one occasion driven through a brick wall, so he knew all about obstacles; but they were normally stationary ones.

'More elephants,' I said, as two large pachyderms loomed out of the rain-drenched forest.

'Elephants to the right of us, elephants to the left of us!' chanted Uncle Ken, misquoting Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*. 'Into the valley of death rode the six hundred!'

'There are now three of them,' I observed.

'Not my lucky number,' said Uncle Ken and pressed hard on the accelerator. We lurched forward, almost running over a terrified barking deer.

'Is four your lucky number, Uncle Ken?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Well, there are now four of them behind us. And they are catching up quite fast!'

'I see the station ahead,' cried Uncle Ken, as we drove into a clearing where a tiny railway station stood like a beacon of safety in the wilderness.

The car came to a grinding halt. We abandoned it and ran for the building.

The stationmaster, seeing our predicament, beckoned to us to enter the station building, which was little more than a two-room shed and platform. He took us inside his tiny control room and shut the steel gate behind us.

'The elephants won't bother you here,' he said. 'But say goodbye to your car.'

We looked out of the window and were horrified to see Grandfather's Fiat overturned by one of the elephants, while another proceeded to trample it underfoot. The other elephants joined in the mayhem and soon the car was a flattened piece of junk.

'I'm Stationmaster Abdul Rauf,' the friendly stationmaster introduced himself. 'I know a good scrap dealer in Doiwala. I'll give you his address.'

'But how do we get out of here?' asked Uncle Ken.

'Well, it's only an hour's walk to Doiwala,' said our benefactor. 'But I wouldn't advise walking, not with those elephants around. Stay and have a cup of tea. The Dehra Express will pass through shortly. It stops for a few minutes. And it's only half an hour to Dehra from here.'

He punched out a couple of rail tickets. 'Here you are, my friends. Just two rupees each. The cheapest rail journey in India. And those tickets carry an insurance value of two lakh rupees each, should an accident befall you between here and Dehradun.'

Uncle Ken's eyes lit up. 'You mean, if one of us falls out of the train?' he asked.

‘Out of the moving train,’ clarified the stationmaster. ‘There will be an enquiry, of course. Some people try to fake an accident.’

But Uncle Ken decided against falling out of the train and making a fortune. He’d had enough excitement for the day. We got home safely enough, taking a pony-cart from the Dehra station to our house.

‘Where’s my car?’ asked Grandfather, as we staggered up the veranda steps.

‘It had a small accident,’ said Uncle Ken. ‘We left it outside the Kansrao railway station. I’ll collect it later.’

‘I’m starving,’ I said. ‘Haven’t eaten since morning.’

‘Well, come and have your dinner,’ said Granny. ‘I’ve made something special for you. One of your Grandfather’s hunting friends sent us a junglefowl. I’ve made a nice roast. Try it with apple sauce.’

Uncle Ken did not ask if the junglefowl was red, grey or technicoloured. He was first to the dining table.

Granny had anticipated this, and served me with a chicken leg, giving the other leg to Grandfather.

‘I rather fancy the breast myself,’ she said, and this left Uncle Ken with a long and scrawny neck — which was rather like his own neck, and definitely more than he deserved.



Monkey Trouble

Grandfather bought Tutu from a street entertainer for the sum of ten rupees. The man had three monkeys. Tutu was the smallest but the most mischievous. She was tied up most of the time. The little monkey looked so miserable with a collar and chain that Grandfather decided she would be much happier in our home. He had a weakness for keeping unusual pets. It was a habit that I, at the age of eight or nine, used to encourage.

Grandmother at first objected to having a monkey in the house. 'You have enough pets as it is,' she said, referring to Grandfather's goat, several white mice and a small tortoise.

'But I don't have any,' I said.

'You're wicked enough for two monkeys. One boy in the house is all I can take.'

'Ah, but Tutu isn't a boy,' said Grandfather triumphantly. 'This is a little girl monkey!'

Grandmother gave in. She had always wanted a little girl in the house. She believed girls were less troublesome than boys. Tutu was to prove her wrong.

Tutu was a pretty little monkey. Her bright eyes sparkled with mischief beneath deep-set eyebrows. And her teeth, which were a pearly white, were often revealed in a grin that frightened the wits out of Aunt Ruby, whose nerves had already suffered from the presence of Grandfather's pet python in the house at Lucknow. But this was Dehra, my grandparents' house, and aunts and uncles had to put up with our pets.

Tutu's hands had a dried-up look, as though they had been pickled in the sun for many years. One of the first things I taught her was to shake hands, and this she insisted on doing with all who visited the house. Peppery Major Malik would have to stoop and shake hands with Tutu before he could enter the drawing room, otherwise Tutu would climb on his shoulder and stay there, roughing up his hair and playing with his moustache.

Uncle Ken couldn't stand any of our pets and took a particular dislike to Tutu, who was always making faces at him. But as Uncle Ken was never in a job for long,

and depended on Grandfather's good-natured generosity, he had to shake hands with Tutu like everyone else.

Tutu's fingers were quick and wicked. And her tail, while adding to her good looks (Grandfather believed a tail would add to anyone's good looks), also served as a third hand. She could use it to hang from a branch, and it was capable of scooping up any delicacy that might be out of reach of her hands.

Aunt Ruby had not been informed of Tutu's arrival. Loud shrieks from her bedroom brought us running to see what was wrong. It was only Tutu trying on Aunt Ruby's petticoats! They were much too large, of course, and when Aunt Ruby entered the room all she saw was a faceless, white blob jumping up and down on the bed.

We disentangled Tutu and soothed Aunt Ruby. I gave Tutu a bunch of sweet peas to make her happy. Granny didn't like anyone plucking her sweet peas, so I took some from Major Malik's garden while he was having his afternoon siesta.

Then Uncle Ken complained that his hairbrush was missing. We found Tutu sunning herself on the back verandah, using the hairbrush to scratch her armpits. I took it from her and handed it back to Uncle Ken with an apology; but he flung the brush away with an oath.

'Such a fuss about nothing,' I said. 'Tutu doesn't have fleas!'

'No, and she bathes more often than Ken,' said Grandfather, who had borrowed Aunt Ruby's shampoo for giving Tutu a bath.

All the same, Grandmother objected to Tutu being given the run of the house. Tutu had to spend her nights in the outhouse, in the company of the goat. They got on quite well, and it was not long before Tutu was seen sitting comfortably on the back of the goat, while the goat roamed the back garden in search of its favourite grass.

The day Grandfather had to visit Meerut to collect his railway pension, he decided to take Tutu and me along — to keep us both out of mischief, he said. To prevent Tutu from wandering about on the train, causing inconvenience to passengers, she was provided with a large, black travelling bag. This, with some straw at the bottom, became her compartment. Grandfather and I paid for our seats, and we took Tutu along as hand baggage.

There was enough space for Tutu to look out of the bag occasionally, and to be fed with bananas and biscuits, but she could not get her hands through the opening and the canvas was too strong for her to bite her way through.

Tutu's efforts to get out only had the effect of making the bag roll about on the floor or occasionally jump into the air — an exhibition that attracted a curious crowd of onlookers both at Dehra and Meerut railway stations.

Anyway, Tutu remained in the bag as far as Meerut, but while Grandfather was producing our tickets at the turnstile, she suddenly poked her head out of the bag and gave the ticket collector a wide grin.

The poor man was taken aback. But, with great presence of mind and much to Grandfather's annoyance, he said, 'Sir, you have a dog with you. You'll have to buy a ticket for it.'

'It's not a dog!' said Grandfather indignantly. 'This is a baby monkey of the species macacus-mischievous, closely related to the human species homus-horribilis! And there is no charge for babies!'

'It's as big as a cat,' said the ticket collector.

'Next you'll be asking to see her mother,' snapped Grandfather.'

In vain did he take Tutu out of the bag. In vain did he try to prove that a young monkey did not qualify as a dog or a cat or even as a quadruped. Tutu was classified as a dog by the ticket collector, and five rupees were handed over as her fare.

Then Grandfather, just to get his own back, took from his pocket the small tortoise that he sometimes carried about, and asked, 'And what must I pay for this, since you charge for all creatures great and small?'

The ticket collector looked closely at the tortoise, prodded it with his forefinger, gave Grandfather a triumphant look, and announced, 'No charge, sir. It is not a dog!'

Winters in north India can be very cold. A great treat for Tutu on winter evenings was the large bowl of hot water given to her by Grandmother for a bath. Tutu would cunningly test the temperature with her hand, then gradually step into the bath, first one foot, then the other (as she had seen me doing) until she was in the water up to her neck.

Once comfortable, she would take the soap in her hands or feet and rub herself all over. When the water became cold she would get out and run as quickly as she could to the kitchen fire in order to dry herself. If anyone laughed at her during this performance, Tutu's feelings would be hurt and she would refuse to go on with the bath.

One day Tutu almost succeeded in boiling herself alive. Grandmother had left a large kettle on the fire for tea. And Tutu, all by herself and with nothing better to do,

decided to remove the lid. Finding the water just warm enough for a bath, she got in, with her head sticking out from the open kettle.

This was fine for a while, until the water began to get heated. Tutu raised herself a little out of the kettle. But finding it cold outside, she sat down again. She continued hopping up and down for some time until Grandmother returned and hauled her, half-boiled, out of the kettle.

‘What’s for tea today?’ asked Uncle Ken gleefully. ‘Boiled eggs and a half-boiled monkey?’

But Tutu was none the worse for the adventure and continued to bathe more regularly than Uncle Ken.

Aunt Ruby was a frequent taker of baths. This met with Tutu’s approval — so much so, that one day, when Aunt Ruby had finished shampooing her hair she looked up through a lather of bubbles and soapsuds to see Tutu sitting opposite her in the bath, following her example.

One day Aunt Ruby took us all by surprise. She announced that she had become engaged. We had always thought Aunt Ruby would never marry — she had often said so herself — but it appeared that the right man had now come along in the person of Rocky Fernandes, a schoolteacher from Goa.

Rocky was a tall, firm-jawed, good-natured man, a couple of years younger than Aunt Ruby. He had a fine baritone voice and sang in the manner of the great Nelson Eddy. As Grandmother liked baritone singers, Rocky was soon in her good books.

‘But what on earth does he see in her?’ Uncle Ken wanted to know.

‘More than any girl has seen in you!’ snapped Grandmother. ‘Ruby’s a fine girl. And they’re both teachers. Maybe they can start a school of their own.’

Rocky visited the house quite often and brought me chocolates and cashewnuts, of which he seemed to have an unlimited supply. He also taught me several marching songs. Naturally I approved of Rocky. Aunt Ruby won my grudging admiration for having made such a wise choice.

One day I overheard them talking of going to the bazaar to buy an engagement ring. I decided I would go along too. But as Aunt Ruby had made it clear that she did not want me around I decided that I had better follow at a discreet distance. Tutu, becoming aware that a mission of some importance was under way, decided to follow me. But as I had not invited her along, she too decided to keep out of sight.

Once in the crowded bazaar, I was able to get quite close to Aunt Ruby and Rocky without being spotted. I waited until they had settled down in a large jewellery shop before sauntering past and spotting them as though by accident. Aunt Ruby wasn’t

too pleased at seeing me, but Rocky waved and called out, 'Come and join us! Help your aunt choose a beautiful ring!'

The whole thing seemed to be a waste of good money, but I did not say so — Aunt Ruby was giving me one of her more unloving looks.

'Look, these are pretty!' I said, pointing to some cheap, bright agates set in white metal. But Aunt Ruby wasn't looking. She was immersed in a case of diamonds.

'Why not a ruby for Aunt Ruby?' I suggested, trying to please her.

'That's her lucky stone,' said Rocky. 'Diamonds are the thing for engagement.' And he started singing a song about a diamond being a girl's best friend.

While the jeweller and Aunt Ruby were sifting through the diamond rings, and Rocky was trying out another tune, Tutu had slipped into the shop without being noticed by anyone but me. A little squeal of delight was the first sign she gave of her presence. Everyone looked up to see her trying on a pretty necklace.

'And what are those stones?' I asked.

'They look like pearls,' said Rocky.

'They are pearls,' shouted the shopkeeper, making a grab for them.

'It's that dreadful monkey!' cried Aunt Ruby. 'I knew that boy would bring him here!'

The necklace was already adorning Tutu's neck. I thought she looked rather nice in them, but she gave us no time to admire the effect. Springing out of our reach Tutu dodged around Rocky, slipped between my legs, and made for the crowded road. I ran after her, shouting to her to stop, but she wasn't listening.

There were no branches to assist Tutu in her progress, but she used the heads and shoulders of people as springboards and so made rapid headway through the bazaar.

The jeweller left his shop and ran after us. So did Rocky. So did several bystanders who had seen the incident. And others, who had no idea what it was all about, joined in the chase. As Grandfather used to say, 'In a crowd, everyone plays follow-the-leader even when they don't know who's leading.'

Tutu tried to make her escape speedier by leaping on to the back of a passing scooterist. The scooter swerved into a fruit stall and came to a standstill under a heap of bananas, while the scooterist found himself in the arms of an indignant fruitseller. Tutu peeled a banana and ate part of it before deciding to move on.

From an awning she made an emergency landing on a washerman's donkey. The donkey promptly panicked and rushed down the road, while bundles of washing fell by the wayside. The washerman joined in the chase. Children on their way to school

decided that there was something better to do than attend classes. With shouts of glee, they soon overtook their panting elders.

Tutu finally left the bazaar and took a road leading in the direction of our house. But knowing that she would be caught and locked up once she got home, she decided to end the chase by ridding herself of the necklace. Deftly removing it from her neck, she flung it into the small canal that ran down that road.

The jeweller, with a cry of anguish, plunged into the canal. So did Rocky. So did I. So did several other people, both adults and children. It had become a treasure hunt!

Some twenty minutes later, Rocky shouted, 'I've found it!' Covered in mud, water lilies, ferns and tadpoles, we emerged from the canal, and Rocky presented the necklace to the relieved shopkeeper.

Everyone trudged back to the bazaar to find Aunt Ruby waiting in the shop, still trying to make up her mind about a suitable engagement ring.

Finally the ring was bought, the engagement was announced, and a date was set for the wedding.

'I don't want that monkey anywhere near us on our wedding day,' declared Aunt Ruby.

'We'll lock her up in the outhouse,' promised Grandfather. 'And we'll let her out only after you've left for your honeymoon.'

A few days before the wedding I found Tutu in the kitchen helping Grandmother prepare the wedding cake. Tutu often helped with the cooking and, when Grandmother wasn't looking, added herbs, spices, and other interesting items to the pots — so that occasionally we found a chilli in the custard or an onion in the jelly or a strawberry floating on the chicken soup.

Sometimes these additions improved a dish, sometimes they did not. Uncle Ken lost a tooth when he bit firmly into a sandwich which contained walnut shells.

I'm not sure exactly what went into that wedding cake when Grandmother wasn't looking — she insisted that Tutu was always very well behaved in the kitchen — but I did spot Tutu stirring in some red chilli sauce, bitter gourd seeds and a generous helping of eggshells!

It's true that some of the guests were not seen for several days after the wedding but no one said anything against the cake. Most people thought it had an interesting flavour.

The great day dawned, and the wedding guests made their way to the little church that stood on the outskirts of Dehra — a town with a church, two mosques and several temples.

I had offered to dress Tutu up as a bridesmaid and bring her along, but no one except Grandfather thought it was a good idea. So I was an obedient boy and locked Tutu in the outhouse. I did, however, leave the skylight open a little. Grandmother had always said that fresh air was good for growing children, and I thought Tutu should have her share of it.

The wedding ceremony went without a hitch. Aunt Ruby looked a picture, and Rocky looked like a film star.

Grandfather played the organ, and did so with such gusto that the small choir could hardly be heard. Grandmother cried a little. I sat quietly in a corner, with the little tortoise on my lap.

When the service was over, we trooped out into the sunshine and made our way back to the house for the reception.

The feast had been laid out on tables in the garden. As the gardener had been left in charge, everything was in order. Tutu was on her best behaviour. She had, it appeared, used the skylight to avail of more fresh air outside, and now sat beside the three-tier wedding cake, guarding it against crows, squirrels and the goat. She greeted the guests with squeals of delight.

It was too much for Aunt Ruby. She flew at Tutu in a rage. And Tutu, sensing that she was not welcome, leapt away, taking with her the top tier of the wedding cake.

Led by Major Malik, we followed her into the orchard, only to find that she had climbed to the top of the jackfruit tree. From there she proceeded to pelt us with bits of wedding cake. She had also managed to get hold of a bag of confetti, and when she ran out of cake she showered us with confetti.

‘That’s more like it!’ said the good-humoured Rocky. ‘Now let’s return to the party, folks!’

Uncle Ken remained with Major Malik, determined to chase Tutu away. He kept throwing stones into the tree, until he received a large piece of cake bang on his nose. Muttering threats, he returned to the party, leaving the Major to do battle.

When the festivities were finally over, Uncle Ken took the unnecessary old car out of the garage and drove up to the veranda steps. He was going to drive Aunt Ruby and Rocky to the nearby hill resort of Mussoorie, where they were going for their honeymoon.

Watched by family and friends, Aunt Ruby and Rocky climbed into the back seat. Aunt Ruby waved regally to everyone. She leant out of the window and offered me her cheek and I had to kiss her farewell. Everyone wished them luck.

As Rocky burst into song Uncle Ken opened the throttle and stepped on the accelerator. The car shot forward in a cloud of dust.

Rocky and Aunt Ruby continued to wave to us. And so did Tutu from her perch on the rear bumper! She was clutching a bag in her hands and showering confetti on all who stood in the driveway.

‘They don’t know Tutu’s with them!’ I exclaimed. ‘She’ll go all the way to Mussoorie! Will Aunt Ruby let her stay with them?’

‘Tutu might ruin the honeymoon,’ said Grandfather. ‘But don’t worry — our Ken will bring her back!’



Owls in the Family

One winter morning, my grandfather and I found a baby spotted owlet by the veranda steps of our home in Dehradun. When Grandfather picked it up the owlet hissed and clacked its bill but then, after a meal of raw meat and water, settled down under my bed.

Spotted owlets are small birds. A fully grown one is no larger than a thrush and they have none of the sinister appearance of large owls. I had once found a pair of them in our mango tree and by tapping on the tree trunk had persuaded one to show an enquiring face at the entrance to its hole. The owlet is not normally afraid of man nor is it strictly a night bird. But it prefers to stay at home during the day as it is sometimes attacked by other birds who consider all owls their enemies.

The little owlet was quite happy under my bed. The following day we found a second baby owlet in almost the same spot on the veranda and only then did we realize that where the rainwater pipe emerged through the roof, there was a rough sort of nest from which the birds had fallen. We took the second young owl to join the first and fed them both.

When I went to bed, they were on the window ledge just inside the mosquito netting and later in the night, their mother found them there. From outside, she crooned and gurgled for a long time and in the morning, I found she had left a mouse with its tail tucked through the netting. Obviously, she put no great trust in me as a foster parent.

The young birds thrived and ten days later, Grandfather and I took them into the garden to release them. I had placed one on a branch of the mango tree and was stooping to pick up the other when I received a heavy blow on the back of the head. A second or two later, the mother owl swooped down on Grandfather but he was quite agile and ducked out of the way.

Quickly, I placed the second owl under the mango tree. Then from a safe distance we watched the mother fly down and lead her offspring into the long grass at the edge of the garden. We thought she would take her family away from our rather

strange household but next morning I found the two owlets perched on the hatstand in the veranda.

I ran to tell Grandfather and when we came back we found the mother sitting on the birdbath a few metres away. She was evidently feeling sorry for her behaviour the previous day because she greeted us with a soft ‘whoo-whoo’.

‘Now there’s an unselfish mother for you,’ said Grandfather. ‘It’s obvious she wants us to keep an eye on them. They’re probably getting too big for her to manage.’

So the owlets became regular members of our household and were among the few pets that Grandmother took a liking to. She objected to all snakes, most monkeys and some crows — we’d had all these pets from time to time — but she took quite a fancy to the owlets and frequently fed them spaghetti!

They loved to sit and splash in a shallow dish provided by Grandmother. They enjoyed it even more if cold water was poured over them from a jug while they were in the bath. They would get thoroughly wet, jump out and perch on a towel rack, shake themselves and return for a second splash and sometimes a third. During the day they dozed on a hatstand. After dark, they had the freedom of the house and their nightly occupation was catching beetles, the kitchen quarters being a happy hunting ground. With their razor-sharp eyes and powerful beaks, they were excellent pest-destroyers.

Looking back on those childhood days, I carry in my mind a picture of Grandmother in her rocking chair with a contented owlet sprawled across her aproned lap. Once, on entering a room while she was taking an afternoon nap, I saw one of the owlets had crawled up her pillow till its head was snuggled under her ear.

Both Grandmother and the owlet were snoring.

Grandfather Fights an Ostrich

Before Grandfather joined the Indian Railways, he worked for some time on the East African Railways, and it was during that period that he had his famous encounter with the ostrich. My childhood was frequently enlivened by this oft-told tale of my grandfather's, and I give it here in his own words — or as well as I can remember them:

While engaged in the laying of a new railway line, I had a miraculous escape from an awful death. I lived in a small township, but my work lay some twelve miles away, and although I had a tent on the works, I often had to go into town on horseback.

On one occasion, an accident happening to my horse, I got a lift into town, hoping that someone might do me a similar favour on my way back. But this was not to be, and I made up my mind next morning to do the journey on foot, shortening the distance by taking a cut through the hills which would save me about six miles.

To take this shortcut it was necessary to cross an ostrich 'camp' or farm. To venture across these 'camps' in the breeding season, especially on foot, can be dangerous, for during this time the male birds are extremely ferocious.

But being familiar with the ways of ostriches, I knew that my dog would scare away any ostrich which tried to attack me. Strange though it may seem, even the biggest ostrich (and some of them grow to a height of nine feet) will bolt faster than a racehorse at the sight of even a small dog. And so, in company with my dog (a mongrel who had adopted me the previous month), I felt reasonably safe.

On arrival at the 'camp' I got through the wire fencing and, keeping a good lookout, dodged across the spaces between the thorn bushes, now and then getting a sight of the birds which were feeding some distance away.

I had gone about half a mile from the fencing when up started a hare, and in an instant my dog gave chase. I tried to call him back although I knew it was useless, since chasing hares was a passion with him.

Whether it was the dog's bark or my own shouting, I don't know, but just what I was most anxious to avoid immediately happened: the ostriches were startled and began darting to and fro. Suddenly I saw a big male bird emerge from a thicket about a hundred yards away. He stood still and stared at me for a few moments; then, expanding his wings and with his tail erect, he came bounding towards me.

Believing discretion to be the better part of valour (at least in that particular situation), I turned and ran towards the fence. But it was an unequal race. What were my steps of two or three feet against the creature's great strides of sixteen to twenty feet? There was only one hope: to wait for the ostrich behind some bush and try to dodge him till he tired. A dodging game was obviously my only chance.

Altering course a little, I rushed for the nearest clump of bushes where, gasping for breath, I waited for my pursuer. The great bird was almost immediately upon me, and a strange encounter commenced. This way and that I dodged, taking great care that I did not get directly in front of his deadly kick. The ostrich kicks forward, and with such terrific force that his great chisel-like nails, if they struck, would rip one open from head to foot.

Breathless, and really quite helpless, I prayed wildly for help as I circled the bush, which was about twelve feet in diameter and some six feet in height. My strength was rapidly failing, and I realized it would be impossible to keep up the struggle much longer; I was ready to drop from sheer exhaustion. As if aware of my condition, the infuriated bird suddenly doubled on his course and charged straight at me. With a desperate effort I managed to step to one side. How it happened I don't know, but I found myself holding on to one of the creature's wings, close to its body.

It was now the bird's turn to be frightened, and he began to turn, or rather waltz, moving round and round so quickly that my feet were soon swinging out almost horizontally. All the time the ostrich kept opening and shutting his beak with loud snaps.

Imagine my situation as I clung desperately to the wing of the enraged bird, which was whirling me round and round as if I had been a cork! My arms soon began to ache with the strain, and the swift and continuous circling was making me dizzy. But I knew that if I relaxed my hold, a terrible fate awaited me: I should be promptly trampled to death by the spiteful bird.

Round and round we went in a great circle. It seemed as if my enemy would never tire. But I knew I could not hold on much longer.

Suddenly the bird went into reverse! This unexpected movement not only had the effect of making me lose my hold but sent me sprawling to the ground. I landed in a heap at the foot of the thorn bush. In an instant, almost before I had time to realize what had happened, the ostrich was upon me. I thought the end had come. Instinctively I put up my hands to protect my face. But, to my amazement, the great bird did not strike.

I moved my hands from my face, and there stood the ostrich with one foot raised, ready to rip me open! I couldn't move. Was the bird going to play with me like a cat with a mouse, and prolong the agony?

As I watched fascinated, I saw him turn his head sharply to the left. A second later he jumped back, turned, and made off as fast as he could go. Dazed, I wondered what had happened.

I soon found out, for, to my great joy, I heard the bark of my truant dog, and the next moment he was jumping around me, licking my face and hands.

Needless to say, I returned his caresses most affectionately! And I took good care to see that he did not leave my side until we were well clear of the ostrich 'camp'.



Return of the White Pigeon

About fifty years ago, on the outskirts of Dehradun, there lived a happily married couple, an English colonel and his beautiful Persian wife. They were both enthusiastic gardeners, and their beautiful bungalow was covered with bougainvillea and *Gul-i-Phanoos*, while in the garden the fragrance of the rose challenged the sweet scent of the jasmine.

They had lived together many years when the wife suddenly became very ill. Nothing could be done for her. As she lay dying, she told her servants that she would return to her beloved garden in the form of a white pigeon so that she could be near her husband and the place she loved so dearly.

The couple had no children, and as the years passed after his wife's death the colonel found life very lonely. When he met an attractive English widow a few years younger than himself, he married her and brought her home to his beautiful house. But as he was carrying his new bride through the porch and up the veranda steps, a white pigeon came fluttering into the garden and perched on a rose bush. There it remained for a long time, cooing and murmuring in a sad, subdued manner.

Every day it entered the garden and alighted on the rose bush where it would call sadly and persistently. The servants became upset and even frightened. They remembered their previous mistress's dying promise, and they were convinced that her spirit dwelt in the white pigeon.

When the colonel's new wife heard the story, she was naturally upset. Her husband did not give any credence to the tale, but when he saw how troubled his new wife looked, he decided to do something about it. And so one day, when the pigeon appeared, he took his rifle and slipped out of the house, quietly making his way down the verandah steps. When he saw the pigeon on the rose bush, he raised his gun, took aim, and fired.

There was a high-pitched woman's scream. And then the pigeon flew away unsteadily, its white breast dark with blood. Where it fell, no one knew.

That same night the colonel died in his sleep. The doctor put it down to heart failure, which was true enough; but the servants said that their master had always

kept good health, and they were sure his death had something to do with the killing of the white pigeon.

The colonel's widow left Dehradun, and the beautiful bungalow fell into ruin. The garden became a jungle, and jackals passed through the abandoned rooms. The colonel had been buried in the grounds of his estate, and the gravestone can still be found, although the inscription has long since disappeared.

Few people pass that way. But those who do, say that they have often seen a white pigeon resting on the grave, a white pigeon with a crimson stain on its breast.



The Parrot Who Wouldn't Talk

‘You’re no beauty! Can’t talk, can’t sing, can’t dance!’

With these words Aunt Ruby would taunt the unfortunate parakeet, who glared morosely at everyone from his ornamental cage at one end of the long veranda of Grandmother’s bungalow in north India.

In those distant days, almost everyone — Indian or European — kept a pet parrot or parakeet, or ‘lovebird’ as some of the smaller ones were called. Sometimes these birds became great talkers, or rather mimics, and would learn to recite entire mantras or admonitions to the children of the house, such as ‘*Padho, beta, padho!*’ or, for the benefit of boys like me, ‘Don’t be greedy, don’t be greedy!’

These expressions were, of course, picked up by the parrot over a period of time, after many repetitions by some member of the household who had taken on the task of teaching the bird to talk.

But our parrot refused to talk.

He’d been bought by Aunt Ruby from a bird-catcher who’d visited all the houses on our road, selling caged birds ranging from colourful budgerigars to chirpy little munnias and even common sparrows that had been dabbed with paint and passed off as some exotic species. Neither Granny nor Grandfather were keen on keeping caged birds as pets, but Aunt Ruby threatened to throw a tantrum if she did not get her way — and Aunt Ruby’s tantrums were dreadful to behold!

Anyway, she insisted on keeping the parrot and teaching it to talk. But the bird took an instant dislike to my aunt and resisted all her blandishments.

‘Kiss, kiss!’ Aunt Ruby would coo, putting her face close to the bars of the cage. But the parrot would back away, its beady little eyes getting even smaller with anger at the prospect of being kissed by Aunt Ruby. And on one occasion it lunged forward without warning and knocked my aunt’s spectacles off her nose.

After that Aunt Ruby gave up her endearments and became quite hostile towards the poor bird, making faces at it and calling out ‘can’t talk, can’t sing, can’t dance’ and other nasty comments.

It fell upon me, then ten years old, to feed the parrot, and it seemed quite happy to receive green chillies and ripe tomatoes from my hands, these delicacies being supplemented by slices of mango, for it was then the mango season. This also gave me an opportunity to consume a couple of mangoes while feeding the parrot!

One afternoon, while everyone was indoors enjoying a siesta, I gave the parrot its lunch and then deliberately left the cage door open. Seconds later, the bird was winging its way to the freedom of the mango orchard.

At the same time Grandfather came to the veranda and remarked, 'I see your aunt's parrot has escaped!'

'The door was quite loose,' I said with a shrug. 'Well, I don't suppose we'll see it again.'

Aunt Ruby was upset at first, and threatened to buy another bird. We put her off by promising to buy her a bowl of goldfish.

'But goldfish don't talk!' she protested.

'Well, neither did your bird,' said Grandfather. 'So we'll get you a gramophone. You can listen to Clara Cluck all day. They say she sings like a nightingale.'



I thought we'd never see the parrot again, but it probably missed its green chillies, because a few days later I found the bird sitting on the veranda railing, looking expectantly at me with its head cocked to one side. Unselfishly I gave the parrot half of my mango.

While the bird was enjoying the mango, Aunt Ruby emerged from her room and, with a cry of surprise, called out, 'Look, it's my parrot come back! He must have missed me!'

With a loud squawk, the parrot flew out of her reach and, perching on the nearest rose bush, glared at her and shrieked in my aunt's familiar tones: 'You're no beauty! Can't talk, can't sing, can't dance!'

Aunt Ruby went ruby-red and dashed indoors.

But that wasn't the end of the affair. The parrot became a frequent visitor to the garden and veranda, and whenever it saw Aunt Ruby it would call out, 'You're no beauty, you're no beauty! Can't talk, can't sing, can't dance!'

The parrot had learnt to talk after all!

The Canal

We loved to bathe there, on hot summer afternoons — Sushil and Raju and Pitamber and I — and there were others as well, but we were the regulars, the ones who met at other times too, eating at chaat shops or riding on bicycles into the tea gardens.

The canal has disappeared — or rather, it has gone underground, having been covered over with concrete to widen the road to which it ran parallel for most of its way. Here and there it went through a couple of large properties, and it was at the extremity of one of these — just inside the boundaries of Miss Gamla's house — that the canal went into a loop, where it was joined by another small canal, and this was the best place for bathing or just romping around. The smaller boys wore nothing, but we had just reached the years of puberty and kept our *kacchas* on. So Miss Gamla really had nothing to complain about.

I'm not sure if this was her real name. I think we called her Miss Gamla because of the large number of gamlas or flowerpots that surrounded her house. They filled the veranda, decorated the windows, and lined the approach road. She had a mali who was always watering the pots. And there was no shortage of water, the canal being nearby.

But Miss Gamla did not like small boys. Or big boys, for that matter. She placed us high on her list of Pests, along with monkeys (who raided her kitchen), sparrows (who shattered her sweet peas) and goats (who ate her geraniums). We did none of these things, being strictly fun-loving creatures; but we did make a lot of noise, spoiling her afternoon siesta. And I think she was offended by the sight of our near-naked bodies cavorting about on the boundaries of her estate. A spinster in her sixties, the proximity of naked flesh, no matter how immature, perhaps disturbed and upset her.

She had a companion — a noisy peke, who followed her around everywhere and set up an ear-splitting barking at anyone who came near. It was the barking, rather than our play, that woke her in the afternoons. And then she would emerge from her back veranda, waving a stick at us, and shouting at us to be off.

We would collect our clothes, and lurk behind a screen of lantana bushes, returning to the canal as soon as lady and dog were back in the house.

The canal came down from the foothills, from a hill called Nalapani where a famous battle had taken place a hundred and fifty years back, between the British and the Gurkhas. But for some quirky reason, possibly because we were not very good at history, we called it the Panipat canal, after a more famous battle once fought north of Delhi.

We had our own mock battles, wrestling on the grassy banks of the canal before plunging into the water — it was no more than waist-high — flailing around with shouts of joy, with no one to hinder our animal spirits . . .

Except Miss Gamla.

Down the path she hobbled — she had a pronounced limp — waving her walnut-wood walking stick at us, while her bulging-eyed peke came yapping at her heels.

‘Be off, you chhokra-boys!’ she’d shout. ‘Off to your filthy homes, or I’ll put the police on to you!’

And on one occasion she did report us to the local thana, and a couple of policemen came along, told us to get dressed and warned us off the property. But the Head Constable was Pitamber’s brother-in-law’s brother-in-law, so the ban did not last for more than a couple of days. We were soon back at our favourite stretch of canal.

When Miss Gamla saw that we were back, as merry and disrespectful as ever, she was furious. She nearly had a fit when Raju — probably the most wicked of the four of us — did a jig in front of her, completely in the nude.

When Miss Gamla advanced upon him, stick raised, Raju jumped into the canal.

‘Why don’t you join us?’ shouted Sushil, taunting the enraged woman.

‘Jump in and cool off,’ I called, not to be outdone in villainy.

The little peke ran up and down the banks of the canal, yapping furiously, dying to sink its teeth into our bottoms. Miss Gamla came right down to the edge of the canal, waving her stick, trying to connect with any part of Raju’s anatomy that could be reached. The ferrule of the stick caught him on the shoulder and he yelped in pain. Miss Gamla gave a shrill cry of delight. She had scored a hit!

She made another lunge at Raju, and this time I caught the end of the stick and pulled. Instead of letting go of the stick, Miss Gamla hung on to it. I should have let go then, but on an impulse I gave it a short, sharp pull, and to my horror, both walking stick and Miss Gamla tumbled into the canal.

Miss Gamla went under for a few seconds. Then she came to the surface, spluttering, and screamed. There was a frenzy of barking from the peke. Why had he been left out of the game? Wisely, he forbore from joining us.

We went to the aid of Miss Gamla, with every intention of pulling her out of the canal, but she backed away, screaming, ‘Get away from me, get away!’ Fortunately, the walking stick had been carried away by the current.

Miss Gamla was now in danger of being carried away too. Floundering about, she had backed away to a point where a secondary canal joined the first, and here the current was swift. All the boys, big and small, avoided that spot. It formed a little whirlpool before rushing on.

‘Memsahib, be careful!’ called out Pitamber.

‘Watch out!’ I shouted, ‘you won’t be able to stand against the current.’

Raju and Sushil lunged forward to help, but with a look of hatred Miss Gamla turned away and tried to walk downstream. A surge in the current swept her off her legs. Her gown billowed up, turning her into a sailboat, and she moved slowly downstream, arms flailing as she tried to regain her balance.

We scrambled out of the canal and ran along the bank, hoping to overtake her, but we were hindered by the peke who kept snapping at our heels, and by the fact that we were without our clothes and approaching the busy Dilaram Bazaar.

Just before the Bazaar, the canal went underground, emerging about two hundred metres further on, at the junction of the Old Survey Road and the East Canal Road. To our horror, we saw Miss Gamla float into the narrow tunnel that carried the canal along its underground journey. If she didn’t get stuck somewhere in the channel, she would emerge — hopefully, still alive — at the other end of the passage.

We raced back for our clothes, dressed, then ran through the bazaar, and did not stop running until we reached the exit point on the Canal Road. This must have taken ten to fifteen minutes.

We took up our positions on the culvert where the canal emerged, and waited.

We waited and waited.

No sign of Miss Gamla.

‘She must be stuck somewhere,’ said Pitamber.

‘She’ll drown,’ said Sushil.

‘Not our fault,’ argued Raju. ‘If we tell anyone, we’ll get into trouble. They’ll think we pushed her in.’

‘We’ll wait a little longer,’ I suggested.

So we hung about the canal banks, pretending to catch tadpoles, and hoping that Miss Gamla would emerge, preferably alive.

Her walking stick floated past. We did not touch it. It would be evidence against us, warned Pitamber. The dog had gone home after seeing his mistress disappear down the tunnel.

‘Like Alice,’ I thought. Only that was a dream.’

When it grew dark, we went our different ways, resolving not to mention the episode to anyone. We might be accused of murder! By now, we *felt* like murderers.

A week passed, and nothing happened. No bloated body was found floating in the lower reaches of the canal. No memsahib was reported missing.

They say the guilty always return to the scene of the crime. More out of curiosity than guilt, we came together one afternoon, just before the rains broke, and crept through the shrubbery behind Miss Gamla’s house.

All was silent, all was still. No one was playing in the canal. The mango trees were unattended. No one touched Miss Gamla’s mangoes. Trespassers were more afraid of her than of her lathi-wielding mali.

We crept out of the bushes and advanced towards the cool, welcoming water flowing past us.

And then came a shout from the house.

‘Scoundrels! Goondas! Chhokra-boys! I’ll catch you this time!’

And there stood Miss Gamla, tall and menacing, alive and well, flourishing a brand-new walking stick and advancing down her steps.

‘It’s her ghost!’ gasped Raju.

‘No, she’s real,’ said Sushil. ‘Must have got out of the canal somehow.’

‘Well, at least we aren’t murderers,’ said Pitamber.

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘But she’ll murder us if we stand here any longer.’

Miss Gamla had been joined by her mali, the yelping peke, and a couple of other retainers.

‘Let’s go,’ said Raju.

We fled the scene. And we never went there again. Miss Gamla had won the Battle of Panipat.



White Mice

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Granny should never have entrusted my Uncle Ken with the job of taking me to the station and putting me on the train for Delhi. He got me to the station all right, but then proceeded to put me on the wrong train!

I was nine or ten at the time, and I'd been spending part of my winter holidays with my grandparents in Dehra. Now it was time to go back to my parents in Delhi, before joining school again.

'Just make sure that Ruskin gets into the right compartment,' said Gran to her only son, Kenneth. 'And make sure he has a berth to himself and a thermos of drinking water.'

Uncle Ken carried out the instructions. He even bought me a bar of chocolate, consuming most of it himself while telling me how to pass my exams without too much study. (I'll tell you the secret some day.) The train pulled out of the station and we waved fond goodbyes to each other.

An hour and two small stations later, I discovered to my horror that I was not on the train to Delhi but on the night express to Lucknow, over 300 miles in the opposite direction. Someone in the compartment suggested that I get down at the next station; another said it would not be wise for a small boy to get off the train at a strange place in the middle of the night. 'Wait till we get to Lucknow,' advised another passenger, 'then send a telegram to your parents.'

Early next morning the train steamed into Lucknow. One of the passengers kindly took me to the stationmaster's office. 'Mr P.K. Ghosh, Stationmaster,' said the sign over his door. When my predicament had been explained to him, Mr Ghosh looked down at me through his bifocals and said, 'Yes, yes, we must send a telegram to your parents.'

'I don't have their address as yet,' I said. 'They were to meet me in Delhi. You'd better send a telegram to my grandfather in Dehra.'

'Done, done,' said Mr Ghosh, who was in the habit of repeating certain words. 'And meanwhile, I'll take you home and introduce you to my family.'

Mr Ghosh's house was just behind the station. He had his cook bring me a cup of sweet, milky tea and two large rasgullas.

‘You like rasgullas, I hope, I hope?’

‘Oh yes, sir,’ I said. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘Now let me show you my family.’

And he took me by the hand and led me to a boarded-up veranda at the back of the house. Here I was amazed to find a miniature railway, complete with a station, railway bungalows, signal boxes, and next to it a miniature fairground complete with swings, roundabout and a ferris wheel. Cavorting on the roundabout and ferris wheel were some fifteen to twenty white mice! Another dozen or so ran in and out of tunnels, and climbed up on a toy train. Mr Ghosh pressed a button and the little train, crowded with white mice, left the station and went rattling off to the far corner of the veranda.

‘My hobby for many years,’ said Mr Ghosh. ‘What do you think of it — think of it?’

‘I like the train, sir.’

‘But not the mice?’

‘There are an awful lot of them, sir. They must consume a great many rasgullas!’

‘No, no, I don’t give them rasgullas,’ snapped Mr Ghosh, a little annoyed. ‘Just railway biscuits, broken up. These old station biscuits are just the thing for them. Some of our biscuits haven’t been touched for years. Too hard for our teeth. Rasgullas are for you and me! Now I’ll leave you here while I return to the office and send a telegram to your grandfather. These new-fangled telephones never work properly!’

*

Grandfather arrived that evening, and in the meantime I helped feed the white mice with railways biscuits, then watched Mr Ghosh operate the toy train. Some of the mice took the train, some played on the swings and roundabouts, while some climbed in and out of Mr Ghosh’s pockets and ran up and down his uniform. By the time Grandfather arrived, I had consumed about a dozen rasgullas and fallen asleep in a huge railway armchair in Mr Ghosh’s living room. I woke up to find the stationmaster busy showing Grandfather his little railway colony of white mice. Grandfather, being a retired railwayman, was more interested in the toy train, but he

said polite things about the mice, commending their pink eyes and pretty little feet. Mr Ghosh beamed with pleasure and sent out for more rasgullas.

When Grandfather and I had settled into the compartment of a normal train late that night, Mr Ghosh came to the window to say goodbye.

As the train began moving, he thrust a cardboard box into my hands and said, ‘A present for you and your grandfather!’

‘More rasgullas,’ I thought. But when the train was underway and I had lifted the lid of the box, I found two white mice asleep on a bed of cotton wool.

*

Back in Dehra, I kept the white mice in their box; I had plans for them. Uncle Ken had spent most of the day skulking in the guava orchard, too embarrassed to face me. Granny had given him a good lecture on how to be a responsible adult. But I was thirsty for revenge!

After dinner I slipped into my uncle’s room and released the mice under his bedsheet.

An hour later we had all to leap out of our beds when Uncle Ken dashed out of his room, screaming that something soft and furry was running about inside his pyjamas.

‘Well, off with the pyjamas!’ said Grandfather, giving me a wink; he had a good idea of what had happened.

After Uncle Ken had done a tap dance, one white mouse finally emerged from the pyjamas; but the other had run up the sleeve of his pyjama-coat and suddenly popped out beneath my uncle’s chin. Uncle Ken grew hysterical. Convinced that his room was full of mice — pink, white and brown — he locked himself into the storeroom and slept on an old sofa.

Next day Grandfather took me to the station and put me on the train to Delhi. It was the right train this time.

‘I’ll look after the white mice,’ he said.

Grandfather grew quite fond of the mice, and even wrote to Mr Ghosh, asking if he could spare another pair. But Mr Ghosh, he learnt later, had been transferred to another part of the country, and had taken his family with him.

Wilson's Bridge

The old, wooden bridge has gone, and today an iron suspension bridge straddles the Bhagirathi as it rushes down the gorge below Gangotri. But villagers will tell you that you can still hear the hoofs of Wilson's horse as he gallops across the bridge he had built a hundred and fifty years ago. At the time people were sceptical of its safety, and so, to prove its sturdiness, he rode across it again and again. Parts of the old bridge can still be seen on the far bank of the river. And the legend of Wilson and his pretty hill bride, Gulabi, is still well known in this region.

I had joined some friends in the old forest rest house near the river. There were the Rays, recently married, and the Dattas, married many years. The younger Rays quarrelled frequently; the older Dattas looked on with more amusement than concern. I was a part of their group and yet something of an outsider. As a single man, I was a person of no importance. And as a marriage counsellor, I wouldn't have been of any use to them.

I spent most of my time wandering along the riverbanks or exploring the thick deodar and oak forests that covered the slopes. It was these trees that had made a fortune for Wilson and his patron, the Raja of Tehri. They had exploited the great forests to the full, floating huge logs downstream to the timber yards in the plains.

Returning to the rest house late one evening, I was halfway across the bridge when I saw a figure at the other end, emerging from the mist. Presently I made out a woman, wearing the plain dhoti of the hills, her hair falling loose over her shoulders. She appeared not to see me, and reclined against the railing of the bridge, looking down at the rushing waters far below. And then, to my amazement and horror, she climbed over the railing and threw herself into the river.

I ran forward, calling out, but I reached the railing only to see her fall into the foaming waters below, where she was carried swiftly downstream.

The watchman's cabin stood a little way off. The door was open. The watchman, Ram Singh, was lying on his bed, smoking a hookah.

'Someone just jumped off the bridge,' I said breathlessly. 'She's been swept down the river!'

The watchman was unperturbed. ‘Gulabi again,’ he said, almost to himself; and then to me, ‘Did you see her clearly?’

‘Yes, a woman with long, loose hair — but I didn’t see her face very clearly.’

‘It must have been Gulabi. Only a ghost, my dear sir. Nothing to be alarmed about. Every now and then someone sees her throw herself into the river. Sit down,’ he said, gesturing towards a battered old armchair, ‘be comfortable and I’ll tell you all about it.’

I was far from comfortable, but I listened to Ram Singh tell me the tale of Gulabi’s suicide. After making me a glass of hot, sweet tea, he launched into a long, rambling account of how Wilson, a British adventurer seeking his fortune, had been hunting musk deer when he encountered Gulabi on the path from her village. The girl’s grey-green eyes and peach-blossom complexion enchanted him, and he went out of his way to get to know her people. Was Wilson in love with her, or did he simply find her beautiful and desirable? We shall never really know. In the course of his travels and adventures he had known many women, but Gulabi was different, childlike and ingenuous, and he decided he would marry her. The humble family to which she belonged had no objection.

Hunting had its limitations, and Wilson found it more profitable to trap the region’s great forest wealth. In a few years he had made a fortune. He built a large, timbered house at Harsil, another in Dehradun, and a third at Mussoorie. Gulabi had all she could have wanted, including two robust little sons. When Wilson was away on work, she looked after their children and their large apple orchard at Harsil.

And then came the evil day when Wilson met the Englishwoman, Ruth, in the Mussoorie mall, and decided that she should have a share of his affections and his wealth. A fine house was provided for her too. The time he spent at Harsil with Gulabi and his children dwindled. ‘Business affairs’ — he was now one of the owners of a bank — kept him in the fashionable hill resort. He was a popular host and took his friends and associates on shikar parties in the Doon.

Gulabi brought up her children in village style. She came to know stories of Wilson’s dalliance with the Mussoorie woman. On one of his rare visits, she confronted him and voiced her resentment, demanding that he leave the other woman. He brushed her aside and told her not to listen to idle gossip. When he turned away from her, she picked up the flintlock pistol that lay on the gun table, and fired one shot at him. The bullet missed him and shattered her looking glass. Gulabi ran out of the house, through the orchard and into the forest, then down the steep path to the bridge built by Wilson only two or three years before. When he had

recovered his composure, he mounted his horse and came looking for her. It was too late. She had already thrown herself off the bridge into the swirling waters far below. Her body was found a mile or two downstream, caught between some rocks.

This was the tale that Ram Singh told me, with various flourishes and interpolations of his own. I thought it would make a good story to tell my friends that evening, before the fireside in the rest house. They found the story fascinating, but when I told them I had seen Gulabi's ghost, they thought I was doing a little embroidering of my own. Mrs Dutta thought it was a tragic tale. Young Mrs Ray thought Gulabi had been very silly. 'She was a simple girl,' opined Mr Dutta. 'She responded in the only way she knew . . .' 'Money can't buy happiness,' put in Mr Ray. 'No,' said Mrs Dutta, 'but it can buy you a great many comforts.' Mrs Ray wanted to talk of other things, so I changed the subject. It can get a little confusing for a bachelor who must spend the evening with two married couples. There are undercurrents which he is aware of but not equipped to deal with.

I would walk across the bridge quite often after that. It was busy with traffic during the day, but after dusk there were only a few vehicles on the road and seldom any pedestrians. A mist rose from the gorge below and obscured the far end of the bridge. I preferred walking there in the evening, half-expecting, half-hoping to see Gulabi's ghost again. It was her face that I really wanted to see. Would she still be as beautiful as she was fabled to be?

It was on the evening before our departure that something happened that would haunt me for a long time afterwards.

There was a feeling of restiveness as our days there drew to a close. The Rays had apparently made up their differences, although they weren't talking very much. Mr Dutta was anxious to get back to his office in Delhi and Mrs Dutta's rheumatism was playing up. I was restless too, wanting to return to my writing desk in Mussoorie.

That evening I decided to take one last stroll across the bridge to enjoy the cool breeze of a summer's night in the mountains. The moon hadn't come up, and it was really quite dark, although there were lamps at either end of the bridge providing sufficient light for those who wished to cross over.

I was standing in the middle of the bridge, in the darkest part, listening to the river thundering down the gorge, when I saw a sari-draped figure emerging from the lamplight and making towards the railings.

Instinctively I called out, 'Gulabi!' She half-turned towards me, but I could not see her clearly. The wind had blown her hair across her face and all I saw was wildly

staring eyes. She raised herself over the railing and threw herself off the bridge. I heard the splash as her body struck the water far below.

Once again I found myself running towards the part of the railing where she had jumped. And then someone was running towards the same spot, from the direction of the rest house. It was young Mr Ray.

‘My wife!’ he cried out. ‘Did you see my wife?’

He rushed to the railing and stared down at the swirling waters of the river.

‘Look! There she is!’ He pointed at a helpless figure bobbing about in the water.

We ran down the steep bank to the river but the current had swept her on.

Scrambling over rocks and bushes, we made frantic efforts to catch up with the drowning woman. But the river in that defile is a roaring torrent, and it was over an hour before we were able to retrieve poor Mrs Ray’s body, caught in driftwood about a mile downstream.

She was cremated not far from where we found her and we returned to our various homes in gloom and grief, chastened but none the wiser for the experience.

If you happen to be in that area and decide to cross the bridge late in the evening, you might see Gulabi’s ghost or hear the hoof beats of Wilson’s horse as he canters across the old wooden bridge looking for her. Or you might see the ghost of Mrs Ray and hear her husband’s anguished cry. Or there might be others. Who knows?

The Eyes of the Eagle

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It was a high, piercing sound, almost like the yelping of a dog.

Jai stopped picking the wild strawberries that grew in the grass around him, and looked up at the sky. He had a dog — a shaggy guard dog called Motu — but Motu did not yelp, he growled and barked. The strange sound came from the sky, and Jai had heard it before. Now, realizing what it was, he jumped to his feet, calling out to his dog, calling his sheep to start for home. Motu came bounding towards him, ready for a game.

‘No, not now, Motu!’ said Jai. ‘We must get the lambs home quickly.’ And again Jai looked up at the sky.

He saw it now, a black speck against the sun, growing larger as it circled the mountain, coming lower every moment: a golden eagle, king of the skies over the higher Himalayas, ready to swoop and seize its prey.

Had it seen a pheasant or a pine marten? Or was it after one of the lambs? Jai had never lost a lamb to an eagle, but recently some of the other shepherds had been talking about a golden eagle that had been preying on their flocks.

The sheep had wandered some way down the side of the mountain, and Jai ran after them to make sure that none of the lambs had gone off on its own.

Motu ran about, barking furiously. He wasn’t very good at keeping the sheep together — in fact, he was often bumping into them and sending them tumbling down the slope, but his size and bear-like appearance kept the leopards and wolves at a distance.

Jai was counting the lambs; they were bleating loudly and staying close to their mothers. One — two — three — four . . .

There should have been a fifth. Jai couldn’t see it on the slope below him. He looked up towards a rocky ledge near the steep path to the Tungnath temple. The golden eagle was circling the rocks.

Suddenly the great bird stopped circling. It dropped a few feet, and then, wings held back and powerful feet thrust out below like the wheels of a plane about to land,

it came swooping down, heading straight for a spot behind the rocks.

The eagle disappeared from sight for a moment, then rose again with a small creature grasped firmly in its terrible talons.

‘It has taken a lamb!’ shouted Jai. He started scrambling up the slope. Motu ran ahead of him, barking furiously at the big bird as it glided away over the tops of the stunted junipers to its eyrie on the cliffs above Tung.

There was nothing that Jai and Motu could do except stare helplessly and angrily at the disappearing eagle. The lamb had died the instant it had been struck. The rest of the flock seemed unaware of what had happened. They still grazed on the thick, sweet grass of the mountain slopes.

‘We had better drive them home, Motu,’ said Jai, and at a nod from the boy, the big dog bounded down the slope, to take part in his favourite game of driving the sheep homewards. Soon he had them running all over the place, and Jai had to dash about trying to keep them together. Finally they straggled homewards.

‘A fine lamb gone,’ said Jai to himself. ‘I wonder what Grandfather will say.’

*

Grandfather said, ‘Never mind. It had to happen some day. That eagle has been watching the sheep for sometime.’

Grandmother, more practical, put in, ‘We could have sold the lamb for three hundred rupees. You’ll have to be more careful in future, Jai. Don’t fall asleep on the hillside, and don’t read storybooks when you are supposed to be watching the sheep!’

‘I wasn’t reading this morning,’ answered Jai truthfully, forgetting to mention that he had been gathering strawberries.

‘It’s good for him to read,’ put in Grandfather, who had never had the luck to go to school. In his days, there weren’t any schools in the mountains. Now there was one in every village.

‘Time enough to read at night,’ retorted Grandmother, who did not think much of the little one-room school down at Maku, their home village.

‘Well, these are the October holidays,’ said Grandfather, ‘otherwise he would not be here to help us with the sheep. It will snow by the end of the month, and then we will move with the flock. You will have more time for reading then, Jai.’

At Maku, which was down in the warmer valley, Jai’s parents tilled a few narrow terraces on which they grew barley, millet and potatoes. The old people brought

their sheep up to the Tung meadows to graze during the summer months. They stayed in a small stone hut just off the path which pilgrims took to the ancient temple. At 12,000 feet above sea level, it was the highest Hindu temple on the inner Himalayan ranges.

The following day Jai and Motu were very careful. They did not let the sheep out of their sight even for a minute. Nor did they catch a glimpse of the golden eagle.

‘What if it attacks again?’ wondered Jai. ‘How will I stop it?’

The great eagle, with its powerful beak and talons, was more than a match for boy or dog. The eagle’s hind claw, four inches round the curve, was its most dangerous weapon. When it spread its wings, the distance from tip to tip was more than eight feet.

The eagle did not appear that day because it had fed well and was now resting in its eyrie. Old bones, which had belonged to pheasants, snowcocks, pine martens and even foxes, were scattered about the rocks which formed the eagle’s home. The eagle had a mate, but it was not the breeding season and she was away on a scouting expedition of her own.

The golden eagle stood on its rocky ledge, staring majestically across the valley. Its hard, unblinking eyes missed nothing. Those strange orange-yellow eyes could spot a field rat or a mouse hare more than a hundred yards below.

There were other eagles on the mountain, but usually they kept to their own territory. Only the bolder ones went for lambs, because the flocks were always protected by men and dogs.

*

The eagle took off from its eyrie and glided gracefully, powerfully over the valley, circling the Tung mountain.

Below lay the old temple, built from slabs of grey granite. A line of pilgrims snaked up the steep, narrow path. On the meadows below the peak, the sheep grazed peacefully, unaware of the presence of the eagle. The great bird’s shadow slid over the sunlit slopes.

The eagle saw the boy and the dog, but it did not fear them. It had his eye on a lamb that was frisking about on the grass, a few feet away from the other sheep.

Jai did not see the eagle until it swept round an outcrop of rocks about a hundred feet away. The bird moved silently, without any movement of its wings, for it had already built up the momentum for its dive. Now it came straight at the lamb.

Motu saw the bird in time. With a low growl he dashed forward and reached the side of the lamb at almost the same instant that the eagle swept in.

There was a terrific collision. Feathers flew. The eagle screamed with rage. The lamb tumbled down the slope, and Motu howled in pain as the huge beak struck him high on the leg.

The big bird, a little stunned by the clash, flew off rather unsteadily, with a mighty beating of its wings.

Motu had saved the lamb. It was frightened, but unhurt. Bleating loudly, it joined the other sheep, who took up the bleating. It sounded as though they had all started complaining at once about the awful state of affairs.

Jai ran up to Motu, who lay whimpering on the ground. There was a deep gash in the dog's thigh, and blood was seeping onto the grass.

Jai looked around. There was no sign of the eagle. Quickly he removed his shirt and vest; then he wrapped his vest round the dog's wound, tying it in position with his belt.

Motu could not get up, and he was much too heavy for Jai to carry. Jai did not want to leave his dog alone, in case the eagle returned to the attack.

He stood up, cupped his hands to his mouth, and began calling for his grandfather.

'Dada, Dada!' Jai shouted, and presently Grandfather heard him and came stumbling down the slope. He was followed by another shepherd, and together they lifted Motu and carried him home.

*



Motu had a bad wound, but Grandmother cleaned it and applied a paste made of herbs. Then she laid strips of carrot over the wound — an old mountain remedy — and bandaged the leg. But it would be some time before Motu could run about again. By then it would probably be snowing and time to leave these high-altitude pastures and return to the valley.

Meanwhile, the sheep had to be taken out to graze, and Grandfather decided to accompany Jai for the remaining period.

They did not see the golden eagle for two or three days, and, when they did, it was flying over the next range. Perhaps it had found some other source of food, or even another flock of sheep.

‘Are you afraid of the eagle?’ asked Grandfather.

‘I wasn’t before,’ replied Jai. ‘Not until it hurt Motu. I did not know it could be so dangerous. But Motu wounded it too. He banged straight into it!’

‘Perhaps it won’t bother us again,’ said Grandfather thoughtfully. ‘A bird’s wing is easily injured — even an eagle’s.’

Jai wasn’t so sure. He had seen it strike twice, and he knew that it was not afraid of anyone. Only when it learnt to fear his presence would it keep away from the flock.

The next day Grandfather did not feel well. He was feverish and kept to his bed. Motu was hobbling about on three legs; the wounded leg was still very sore.

‘Don’t go too far with the sheep,’ advised Grandmother. ‘Let them graze near the house.’

‘But there’s hardly any grass here,’ argued Jai.

‘I don’t want you wandering off while that eagle is still around,’ said Grandmother.

‘Give him my stick,’ said Grandfather from his bed.

It was an old stick, made of wild cherrywood, which Grandfather often carried around. The wood was strong and well seasoned; the stick was stout and long. It reached up to Jai’s shoulders.

‘Don’t lose it,’ said Grandfather. ‘It was given to me many years ago by a wandering scholar who came to the Tungnath temple. I was going to give it to you when you got bigger, but perhaps this is the right time for you to have it. If the eagle comes near you, swing the stick around your head. That should frighten it off!’

Clouds had gathered over the mountains, and a heavy mist hid the Tungnath temple. With the approach of winter, the flow of pilgrims had been reduced to a trickle. The shepherds had started leaving the lush meadows and returning to their villages at lower altitudes. Very soon the bears and the leopards and the golden eagles would have the range all to themselves.

Jai used the cherrywood stick to prod the sheep along the path until they reached the steep meadows. The stick would have to be a substitute for Motu. And they seemed to respond to it more readily than they did to Motu's mad charges.

Because of the sudden cold and the prospect of snow, Grandmother had made Jai wear a rough, woollen jacket and a pair of high boots bought from a Tibetan trader. Jai wasn't used to the boots — he wore sandals at other times — and had some difficulty in climbing quickly up and down the hillside. It was tiring work trying to keep the flock together. The cawing of some crows warned Jai that the eagle might be around, but the mist prevented him from seeing very far.

After some time the mist lifted and Jai was able to see the temple and the snow peaks towering behind it. He saw the golden eagle, too. It was circling high overhead. Jai kept close to the flock, one eye on the eagle, one eye on the restless sheep.

Then the great bird stooped and flew lower. It circled the temple and then pretended to go away. Jai felt sure it would be back. And a few minutes later it reappeared from the other side of the mountain. It was much lower now, wings spread out and back, taloned feet to the fore, piercing eyes fixed on its target, a small lamb that had suddenly gone frisking down the grassy slope, away from Jai and the flock.

Now the eagle flew lower still, only a few feet off the ground, paying no attention to the boy. It passed Jai with a great rush of air. As it did so the boy struck out with his stick and gave the bird a glancing blow.

The eagle missed its prey, and the lamb skipped away.

To Jai's amazement, the bird did not fly off. Instead it landed on the hillside and glared at the boy, as a king would glare at a humble subject who had dared to pelt him with a pebble.

The golden eagle stood almost as tall as Jai. Its wings were still outspread. Its fierce eyes seemed to be looking through and through the boy.

Jai's first instinct was to turn and run. But the cherrywood stick was still in his hands, and he felt sure there was power in the stick. He saw that the eagle was about

to launch itself again at the lamb. Instead of running away, Jai ran forward, the stick raised above his head.

The eagle rose a few feet off the ground and struck out with its huge claws.

Luckily for Jai, his heavy jacket took the force of the blow. A talon ripped through the sleeve, and the sleeve fell away. At the same time the stick caught the eagle across its open wing. The bird gave a shrill cry of pain and fury. Then it turned and flapped heavily away, flying unsteadily because of its injured wing.

Jai still clutched the stick, because he expected the bird to return; he did not even glance at his torn jacket. But the golden eagle had alighted on a distant rock and seemed in no hurry to return to the attack.

*

Jai began driving the sheep home. The clouds had become heavy and black, and presently the first snowflakes began to fall.

Jai saw a hare go lolloping down the hill. When it was about fifty yards away, there was a rush of air from the eagle's beating wings, and Jai saw the bird approaching the hare in a sidelong dive.

So it hasn't been badly hurt, thought Jai, feeling a little relieved, for he could not really help admiring the great bird. And now it has found something else to chase.

The hare saw the eagle and dodged about, making for a clump of junipers. Jai did not know if it was caught or not, because the snow and sleet had increased and both bird and hare were lost in the gathering snowstorm.

The sheep were bleating behind him. One of the lambs looked tired, and Jai stopped to pick it up. As he did so, he heard a thin, whining sound. It grew louder by the second. Before he could look up, a huge wing caught him across the shoulders and sent him sprawling. The lamb tumbled down the slope with him, into a thorny bilberry bush.

The bush had saved them. Jai saw an eagle coming in again, flying low. It was another eagle! One had been vanquished, and now here was another, just as big and fearless, probably the mate of the first eagle.

Jai had lost his stick and there was no way in which he could fight the second eagle. So he crept further into the bush, holding the lamb beneath him. At the same time he began shouting at the top of his voice — both to scare the bird away and to summon help. The eagle could not get at them now; but the rest of the flock was exposed on the hillside. Surely the eagle would make for them.

Even as the bird circled and came back in another dive, Jai heard fierce barking. The eagle immediately swung away and rose skywards.

The barking came from Motu. Hearing Jai's shouts and sensing that something was wrong, he had come limping out of the house, ready to do battle. Behind him came another shepherd and — most wonderful of all — Grandmother herself, banging two frying pans together.

The barking, the banging and the shouting frightened the eagles away. The sheep scattered, too, and it was sometime before they could all be rounded up. By then it was snowing heavily.

'Tomorrow we must all go down to Maku,' said the shepherd.

'Yes, it's definitely time we went,' agreed Grandmother. 'You can read your storybooks again, Jai.'

'I'll have my own story to tell,' said Jai.

When they reached the hut and Jai saw Grandfather, he said, 'Oh, I've forgotten your stick!'

But Motu had picked it up. Carrying it between his teeth, he brought it home and sat down with it in the open doorway. He had decided the cherrywood was good for his teeth and would've chewed it all up if Grandmother hadn't taken it from him.

'Never mind,' said Grandfather, sitting up on his cot. 'It isn't the stick that matters. It's the person who holds it.'



NON-FICTION



A Knock at the Door

For Sherlock Holmes, it usually meant an impatient client waiting below in the street. For Nero Wolfe, it was the doorbell that rang, disturbing the great man in his orchid rooms. For Poe or Walter de la Mare, that knocking on a moonlit door could signify a ghostly visitor — no one outside — or, even more mysterious, no one in the house . . .

Well, clients I have none, and ghostly visitants don't have to knock; but as I spend most of the day at home, writing, I have learnt to live with the occasional knock at the front door. I find doorbells even more startling than ghosts, and ornate brass knockers have a tendency to disappear when the price of brassware goes up; so my callers have to use their knuckles or fists on the solid mahogany door. It's a small price to pay for disturbing me.

I hear the knocking quite distinctly, as the small front room adjoins my even smaller study-cum-bedroom. But sometimes I keep up a pretence of not hearing anything straight away. Mahogany is good for the knuckles! Eventually, I place a pencil between my teeth and holding a sheet of blank foolscap in one hand, move slowly and thoughtfully toward the front door, so that, when I open it, my caller can see that I have been disturbed in the throes of composition. Not that I have ever succeeded in making anyone feel guilty about it; they stay as long as they like. And after they have gone, I can get back to listening to my tapes of old Hollywood operettas.

Impervious to both literature and music, my first caller is usually a boy from the village, wanting to sell me his cucumbers or 'France-beans'. For some reason he won't call them French beans. He is not impressed by the accoutrements of my trade. He thrusts a cucumber into my arms and empties the beans on a coffee-table book which has been sent to me for review. (There is no coffee table, but the book makes a good one.) He is confident that I cannot resist his 'France-beans', even though this sub-Himalayan variety is extremely hard and stringy. Actually, I am a sucker for cucumbers, but I take the beans so I can get the cucumber cheap. In this fashion, authors survive.

The deal done, and the door closed, I decide it's time to do some work. I start this little essay. If it's nice and gets published, I will be able to take care of the electricity bill. There's a knock at the door. Some knocks I recognize, but this is a new one. Perhaps it's someone asking for a donation. Cucumber in hand, I stride to the door and open it abruptly only to be confronted by a polite, smart-looking chauffeur who presents me with a large bouquet of flowering gladioli!

'With the compliments of Mr B.P. Singh,' he announces, before departing smartly with a click of the heels. I start looking for a receptacle for the flowers, as Grandmother's flower vase was really designed for violets and forget-me-nots.

B.P. Singh is a kind man who had the original idea of turning his property outside Mussoorie into a gladioli farm. A bare hillside is now a mass of gladioli from May to September. He sells them to flower shops in Delhi, but his heart bleeds at harvesting time.

Gladioli arranged in an ice bucket, I return to my desk and am just wondering what I should be writing next, when there is a loud banging on the door. No friendly knock this time. Urgent, peremptory, summoning! Could it be the police? And what have I gone and done? Every good citizen has at least one guilty secret, just waiting to be discovered! I move warily to the door and open it an inch or two. It is a policeman!

Hastily, I drop the cucumber and politely ask him if I can be of help. Try to look casual, I tell myself. He has a small packet in his hands. No, it's not a warrant. It turns out to be a slim volume of verse, sent over by a visiting DIG of Police, who has authored it. I thank his emissary profusely, and, after he has gone, I place the volume reverently on my bookshelf, beside the works of other poetry-loving policemen. These men of steel, who inspire so much awe and trepidation in the rest of us, they too are humans and some of them are poets!

Now it's afternoon, and the knock I hear is a familiar one, and welcome, for it heralds the postman. What would writers do without postmen? They have more power than literary agents. I don't have an agent (I'll be honest and say an agent won't have me), but I do have a postman, and he turns up every day except when there's a landslide.

Yes, it's Prakash the postman who makes my day, showering me with letters, books, acceptances, rejections, and even the occasional cheque. These postmen are fine fellows, they do their utmost to bring the good news from Ghent to Aix.

And what has Prakash brought me today? A reminder: I haven't paid my subscription to the Author's Guild. I'd better send it off, or I shall be a derecognized

author. A letter from a reader: would I like to go through her 800-page dissertation on the Gita? Some day, my love . . . A cheque, a cheque! From Sunflower Books, for nineteen rupees only, representing the sale of six copies of one of my books during the previous year. Never mind. Six wise persons put their money down for my book. No fresh acceptances, but no rejections either. A postcard from Goa, where one of my publishers is taking a holiday. So the post is something of an anticlimax. But I mustn't complain. Not every knock on the door brings gladioli fresh from the fields. Tomorrow's another day, and the postman comes six days a week.

Bird Life in the City

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Having divided the last ten years of my life between Delhi and Mussoorie, I have come to the heretical conclusion that there is more bird life in the cities than there is in the hills and forests around our hill stations.

For birds to survive, they must learn to live with and off humans; and those birds, like crows, sparrows and mynas, who do this to perfection, continue to thrive as our cities grow; whereas the purely wild birds, those who depend upon the forests for life, are rapidly disappearing, simply because the forests are disappearing.

Recently, I saw more birds in one week in a New Delhi colony than I had seen during a month in the hills. Here, one must be patient and alert if one is to spot just a few of the birds so beautifully described in Salim Ali's *Indian Hill Birds*. The babblers and thrushes are still around, but the flycatchers and warblers are seldom seen or heard.

*

In Delhi, if you have just a bit of garden and perhaps a guava tree, you will be visited by innumerable bulbuls, tailorbirds, mynas, hoopoes, parrots and tree pies. Or, if you own an old house, you will have to share it with pigeons and sparrows, perhaps swallows or swifts. And if you have neither garden nor rooftop, you will still be visited by the crows.

Where the man goes, the crow follows. He has learnt to perfection the art of living off humans. He will, I am sure, be the first bird on the moon, scavenging among the paper bags and cartons left behind by untidy astronauts.

Crows favour the densest areas of human population, and there must be at least one for every human. Many crows seem to have been humans in their previous lives; they possess all the cunning and sense of self-preservation of man. At the same time, there are many humans who have obviously been crows; we haven't lost our thieving instincts.

Watch a crow sidling along the garden wall with a shabby, genteel air, cocking a speculative eye at the kitchen door and any attendant humans. He reminds one of a newspaper reporter, hovering in the background until his chance comes — and then pouncing! I have even known a crow to make off with an egg from the breakfast table. No other bird, except perhaps the sparrow, has been so successful in exploiting human beings.

The myna, although he too is quite at home in the city, is more of a gentleman. He prefers fruit on the tree to scraps from the kitchen, and visits the garden as much out of a sense of sociability as in expectation of handouts. He is quite handsome, too, with his bright orange bill and the mask around his eyes. He is equally at home on a railway platform as on the ear of a grazing buffalo, and, being omnivorous, has no trouble in coexisting with man.

The sparrow, on the other hand, is not a gentleman. Uninvited, he enters your home, followed by his friends, relatives and political hangers-on, and proceeds to quarrel, make love and leave his droppings on the sofa-cushions, with a complete disregard for the presence of humans. The party will then proceed into the garden and destroy all the flower-buds. No birds have succeeded so well in making fools of humans.

Although the bluejay, or roller, is quite capable of making his living in the forest, he seems to show a preference for the haunts of men, and would rather perch on a telegraph wire than in a tree. Probably he finds the wire a better launching pad for his sudden rocket-flights and aerial acrobatics.

In repose he is rather shabby; but in flight, when his outspread wings reveal his brilliant blues, he takes one's breath away. As his food consists of beetles and other insect pests, he can be considered man's friend and ally.

Parrots make little or no distinction between town and country life. They are the freelancers of the bird world — sturdy, independent and noisy. With flashes of blue and green, they swoop across the road, settle for a while in a mango tree, and then, with shrill, delighted cries, move on to some other field or orchard.

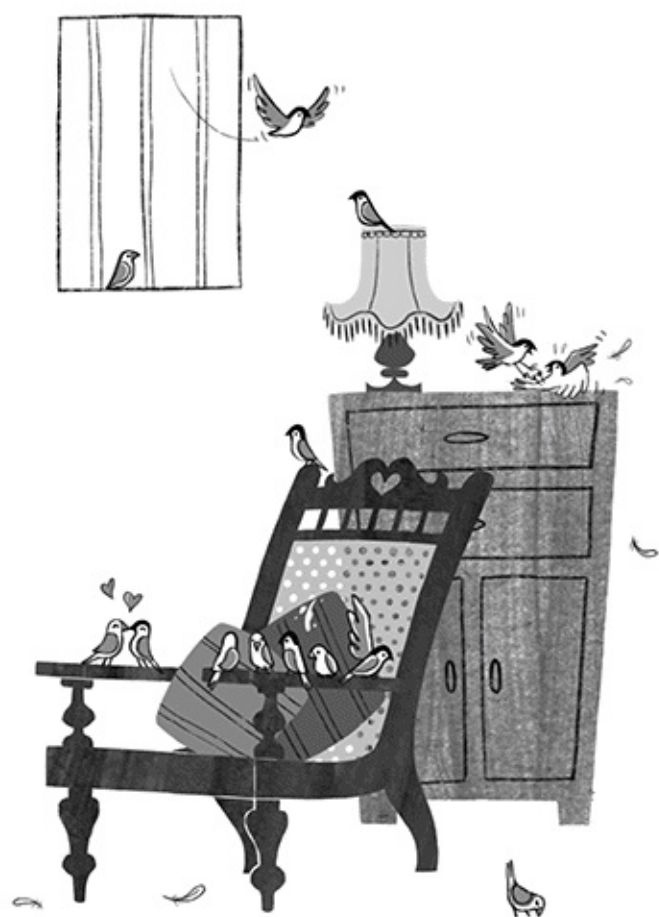
They will sample all the fruit they can, without finishing any. They are destructive birds but, because of their bright plumage, graceful flight and charming ways, they are popular favourites and can get away with anything. No one who has enjoyed watching a flock of parrots in swift and carefree flight could want to cage one of these virile birds. Yet so many people do cage them.

After the peacock, perhaps the most popular bird in rural India is the sarus crane — a familiar sight around the jheels and riverbanks of northern India and Gujarat.

The sarus pairs for life and is seldom seen without his mate. When one bird dies, the other often pines away and seemingly dies of grief. It is this near-human quality of devotion that has earned the birds their popularity with the villagers of the plains.

As a result, they are well protected.

*



In the long run, it is the 'common man', and not the scientist or conservationist, who can best give protection to the birds and animals living around him. Religious sentiment has helped preserve the peacock and a few other birds. It is a pity that so many other equally beautiful birds do not enjoy the same protection.

But the wily crow, the cheeky sparrow, and the sensible myna will always be with us. Quite possibly they will survive the human species.

And it is the same with other animals. While the cringing jackal has learnt the art of survival, his master, the magnificent tiger, is on his way to extinction.



Bhabiji's House

(My neighbours in Rajouri Garden back in the 1960s were the Kamal family. This entry from my journal, which I wrote on one of my later visits, describes a typical day in that household.)

At first light there is a tremendous burst of birdsong from the guava tree in the little garden. Over a hundred sparrows wake up all at once and give tongue to whatever it is that sparrows have to say to each other at five o'clock on a foggy winter's morning in Delhi.

In the small house, people sleep on, that is, everyone except Bhabiji — Granny — the head of the lively Punjabi middle-class family with whom I nearly always stay when I am in Delhi.

She coughs, stirs, groans, grumbles and gets out of bed. The fire has to be lit, and food prepared for two of her sons to take to work. There is a daughter-in-law, Shobha, to help her; but the girl is not very good at getting up in the morning. Actually, it is this way: Bhabiji wants to show up her daughter-in-law; so, no matter how hard Shobha tries to be up first, Bhabiji forestalls her. The old lady does not sleep well, anyway; her eyes are open long before the first sparrow chirps, and as soon as she sees her daughter-in-law stirring, she scrambles out of bed and hurries to the kitchen. This gives her the opportunity to say: 'What good is a daughter-in-law when I have to get up to prepare her husband's food?'

The truth is that Bhabiji does not like anyone else preparing her sons' food.

She looks no older than when I first saw her ten years ago. She still has complete control over a large family and, with tremendous confidence and enthusiasm, presides over the lives of three sons, a daughter, two daughters-in-law and fourteen grandchildren. This is a joint family (there are not many left in a big city like Delhi), in which the sons and their families all live together as one unit under their mother's benevolent (and sometimes slightly malevolent) autocracy. Even when her husband was alive, Bhabiji dominated the household.

The eldest son, Shiv, has a separate kitchen, but his wife and children participate in all the family celebrations and quarrels. It is a small miracle how everyone

(including myself when I visit) manages to fit into the house; and a stranger might be forgiven for wondering where everyone sleeps, for no beds are visible during the day. That is because the beds — light wooden frames with rough string across — are brought in only at night, and are taken out first thing in the morning and kept in the garden shed.

As Bhabiji lights the kitchen fire, the household begins to stir, and Shobha joins her mother-in-law in the kitchen. As a guest I am privileged and may get up last. But my bed soon becomes an island battered by waves of scurrying, shouting children, eager to bathe, dress, eat and find their school books. Before I can get up, someone brings me a tumbler of hot sweet tea. It is a brass tumbler and burns my fingers; I have yet to learn how to hold one properly. Punjabis like their tea with lots of milk and sugar — so much so that I often wonder why they bother to add any tea.

Ten years ago, ‘bed tea’ was unheard of in Bhabiji’s house. Then, the first time I came to stay, Kamal, the youngest son, told Bhabiji: ‘My friend is angrez. He must have tea in bed.’ Kamal forgot to mention that I usually took my morning cup at seven; they gave it to me at five. I gulped it down and went to sleep again. Then, slowly, others in the household began indulging in morning cups of tea. Now everyone, including the older children, has ‘bed tea’. They bless my English forebears for instituting the custom; I bless the Punjabis for perpetuating it.

Breakfast is by rota, in the kitchen. It is a tiny room and accommodates only four adults at a time. The children have eaten first; but the smallest children, Shobha’s toddlers, keep coming in and climbing over us. Says Bhabiji of the youngest and most mischievous: ‘He lives only because God keeps a special eye on him.’

Kamal, his elder brother Arun and I sit cross-legged and barefooted on the floor while Bhabiji serves us hot parathas stuffed with potatoes and onions, along with omelettes, an excellent dish. Arun then goes to work on his scooter, while Kamal catches a bus for the city, where he attends an art college. After they have gone, Bhabiji and Shobha have their breakfast.

By nine o’clock everyone who is still in the house is busy doing something. Shobha is washing clothes. Bhabiji has settled down on a cot with a huge pile of spinach, which she methodically cleans and chops up. Madhu, her fourteen-year-old granddaughter, who attends school only in the afternoons, is washing down the sitting-room floor. Madhu’s mother is a teacher in a primary school in Delhi, and earns a pittance of Rs 150 a month. Her husband went to England ten years ago, and never returned; he does not send any money home.

Madhu is made attractive by the gravity of her countenance. She is always thoughtful, reflective, seldom speaks, smiles rarely (but looks very pretty when she does). I wonder what she thinks about as she scrubs floors, prepares meals with Bhabiji, washes dishes and even finds a few hard-pressed moments for her school work. She is the Cinderella of the house. Not that she has to put up with anything like a cruel stepmother. Madhu is Bhabiji's favourite. She has made herself so useful that she is above all reproach. Apart from that, there is a certain measure of aloofness about her — she does not get involved in domestic squabbles — and this is foreign to a household in which everyone has something to say for himself or herself. Her two young brothers are constantly being reprimanded; but no one says anything to Madhu. Only yesterday morning, when clothes were being washed and Madhu was scrubbing the floor, the following dialogue took place.

Madhu's mother (picking up a schoolbook left in the courtyard): 'Where's that boy Popat? See how careless he is with his books! Popat! He's run off. Just wait till he gets back. I'll give him a good beating.'

Vinod's mother: 'It's not Popat's book. It's Vinod's. Where's Vinod?'

Vinod (grumpily): 'It's Madhu's book.'

Silence for a minute or two. Madhu continues scrubbing the floor; she does not bother to look up. Vinod picks up the book and takes it indoors. The women return to their chores.

Manju, daughter of Shiv and sister of Vinod, is averse to housework and, as a result, is always being scolded — by her parents, grandmother, uncles and aunts.

Now, she is engaged in the unwelcome chore of sweeping the front yard. She does this with a sulky look, ignoring my cheerful remarks. I have been sitting under the guava tree, but Manju soon sweeps me away from this spot. She creates a drifting cloud of dust, and seems satisfied only when the dust settles on the clothes that have just been hung up to dry. Manju is a sensuous creature and, like most sensuous people, is lazy by nature. She does not like sweeping because the boy next door can see her at it, and she wants to appear before him in a more glamorous light. Her first action every morning is to turn to the cinema advertisements in the newspaper. Bombay's movie moguls cater to girls like Manju who long to be tragic heroines. Life is so very dull for middle-class teenagers in Delhi that it is only natural that they should lean so heavily on escapist entertainment. Every residential area has a cinema.

But there is not a single bookshop in this particular suburb, although it has a population of over twenty thousand literate people. Few children read books; but

they are adept at swotting up examination 'guides'; and students of, say, Hardy or Dickens read the guides and not the novels.

Bhabiji is now grinding onions and chillies in a mortar. Her eyes are watering but she is in a good mood. Shobha sits quietly in the kitchen. A little while ago she was complaining to me of a backache. I am the only one who lends a sympathetic ear to complaints of aches and pains. But since last night, my sympathies have been under severe strain. When I got into bed at about ten o'clock, I found the sheets wet. Apparently Shobha had put her baby to sleep in my bed during the afternoon.

While the housework is still in progress, cousin Kishore arrives. He is an itinerant musician who makes a living by arranging performances at marriages. He visits Bhabiji's house frequently and at odd hours, often a little tipsy, always brimming over with goodwill and grandiose plans for the future. It was once his ambition to be a film producer, and some years back he lost a lot of Bhabiji's money in producing a film that was never completed. He still talks of finishing it.

'Brother,' he says, taking me into his confidence for the hundredth time, 'do you know anyone who has a movie camera?'

'No,' I say, knowing only too well how these admissions can lead me into a morass of complicated manoeuvres. But Kishore is not easily put off, especially when he has been fortified with country liquor.

'But you knew someone with a movie camera?' He asks.

'That was long ago.'

'How long ago?' (I have got him going now.)

'About five years back.'

'Only five years? Find him, find him!'

'It's no use. He doesn't have the movie camera any more. He sold it.'

'Sold it!' Kishore looks at me as though I have done him an injury. 'But why didn't you buy it? All we need is a movie camera, and our fortune is made. I will produce the film, I will direct it, I will write the music. Two in one, Charlie Chaplin and Raj Kapoor. Why didn't you buy the camera?'

'Because I didn't have the money.'

'But we could have borrowed the money.'

'If you are in a position to borrow money, you can go out and buy another movie camera.'

'We could have borrowed the camera. Do you know anyone else who has one?'

'Not a soul.' I am firm this time; I will not be led into another maze.

‘Very sad, very sad,’ mutters Kishore. And with a dejected, hang-dog expression designed to make me feel that I am responsible for all his failures, he moves off.

Bhabiji had expressed some annoyance at Kishore’s arrival, but he softens her up by leaving behind an invitation to a marriage party this evening. No one in the house knows the bride’s or bridegroom’s family, but that does not matter; knowing one of the musicians is just as good. Almost everyone will go.

While Bhabiji, Shobha and Madhu are preparing lunch, Bhabiji engages in one of her favourite subjects of conversation, Kamal’s marriage, which she hopes she will be able to arrange in the near future. She freely acknowledges that she made grave blunders in selecting wives for her other sons — this is meant to be heard by Shobha — and promises not to repeat her mistakes. According to Bhabiji, Kamal’s bride should be both educated and domesticated; and of course she must be fair.

‘What if he likes a dark girl?’ I ask teasingly.

Bhabiji looks horrified. ‘He cannot marry a dark girl,’ she declares.

‘But dark girls are beautiful,’ I tell her.

‘Impossible!’

‘Do you want him to marry a European girl?’

‘No foreigners! I know them, they’ll take my son away. He shall have a good Punjabi girl, with a complexion the colour of wheat.’

*

Noon. The shadows shift and cross the road. I sit beneath the guava tree and watch the women at work. They will not let me do anything, but they like talking to me and they love to hear my broken Punjabi. Sparrows flit about at their feet, snapping up the grain that runs away from their busy fingers. A crow looks speculatively at the empty kitchen, sidles towards the open door; but Bhabiji has only to glance up and the experienced crow flies away. He knows he will not be able to make off with anything from this house.

One by one the children return home, demanding food. Now it is Madhu’s turn to go to school. Her younger brother Popat, an intelligent but undersized boy of thirteen, appears in the doorway and asks for lunch.

‘Be off!’ says Bhabiji. ‘It isn’t ready yet.’

Actually the food is ready and only the chapatis remain to be made. Shobha will attend to them. Bhabiji lies down on her cot in the sun, complaining of a pain in her back and ringing noises in her ears.

‘I’ll press your back,’ says Popat. He has been out of Bhabiji’s favour lately, and is looking for an opportunity to be rehabilitated.

Barefooted he stands on Bhabiji’s back and treads her weary flesh and bones with a gentle walking-in-one-spot movement. Bhabiji grunts with relief. Every day she has new pains in new places. Her age, and the daily business of feeding the family and running everyone’s affairs, are beginning to tell on her. But she would sooner die than give up her position of dominance in the house. Her working sons still hand over their pay to her, and she dispenses the money as she sees fit.

The pummelling she gets from Popat puts her in a better mood, and she holds forth on another favourite subject, the respective merits of various dowries. Shiv’s wife (according to Bhabiji) brought nothing with her but a string cot; Kishore’s wife brought only a sharp and clever tongue; Shobha brought a wonderful steel cupboard, fully expecting that it would do all the housework for her.

This last observation upsets Shobha, and a little later I find her under the guava tree, weeping profusely. I give her the comforting words she obviously expects; but it is her husband Arun who will have to bear the brunt of her outraged feelings when he comes home this evening. He is rather nervous of his wife. Last night he wanted to eat out, at a restaurant, but did not want to be accused of wasting money; so he stuffed fifteen rupees into my pocket and asked me to invite both him and Shobha to dinner, which I did. We had a good dinner. Such unexpected hospitality on my part has further improved my standing with Shobha. Now, in spite of other chores, she sees that I get cups of tea and coffee at odd hours of the day.

Bhabiji knows Arun is soft with his wife, and taunts him about it. She was saying this morning that whenever there is any work to be done Shobha retires to bed with a headache (partly true). Bhabiji says even Manju does more housework (not true). Bhabiji has certain talents as an actress, and does a good take-off of Shobha sulking and grumbling at having too much to do.

While Bhabiji talks, Popat sneaks off and goes for a ride on the bicycle. It is a very old bicycle and is constantly undergoing repairs. ‘The soul has gone out of it,’ says Vinod philosophically and makes his way on to the roof, where he keeps a store of pornographic literature. Up there, he cannot be seen and cannot be remembered, and so avoids being sent out on errands.

One of the boys is bathing at the hand pump. Manju, who should have gone to school with Madhu, is stretched out on a cot, complaining of fever. But she will be up in time to attend the marriage party ...

Towards evening, as the birds return to roost in the guava tree, their chatter is challenged by the tumult of people in the house getting ready for the marriage party.

Manju presses her tight pyjamas but neglects to dam them. She wears a loose-fitting, diaphanous shirt. She keeps flitting in and out of the front room so that I can admire the way she glitters. Shobha has used too much powder and lipstick in an effort to look like the femme fatale which she indubitably is not. Shiv's more conservative wife floats around in loose, old-fashioned pyjamas. Bhabiji is sober and austere in a white sari. Madhu looks neat. The men wear their suits.

Popat is holding up a mirror for his Uncle Kishore, who is combing his long hair. (Kishore kept his hair long, like a court musician at the time of Akbar, before the hippies had been heard of.) He is nodding benevolently, having fortified himself from a bottle labelled 'Som Ras' ('Nectar of the Gods'), obtained cheaply from an illicit seller.

Kishore: 'Don't shake the mirror, boy!'

Popat: 'Uncle, it's your head that's shaking.'

Shobha is happy. She loves going out, especially to marriages, and she always takes her two small boys with her, although they invariably spoil the carpets.

Only Kamal, Popat and I remain behind. I have had more than my share of marriage parties.

The house is strangely quiet. It does not seem so small now, with only three people left in it. The kitchen has been locked (Bhabiji will not leave it open while Popat is still in the house), so we visit the dhaba, the wayside restaurant near the main road, and this time I pay the bill with my own money. We have kababs and chicken curry.

Yesterday Kamal and I took our lunch on the grass of the Buddha Jayanti Gardens. There was no college for Kamal, as the majority of Delhi's students had hijacked a number of corporation buses and headed for the Pakistan High Commission, with every intention of levelling it to the ground if possible, as a protest against the hijacking of an Indian plane from Srinagar to Lahore. The students were met by the Delhi police in full strength, and a pitched battle took place, in which stones from the students and tear gas shells from the police were the favoured missiles. There were two shells fired every minute, according to a newspaper report. And this went on all day. A number of students and policemen were injured, but by some miracle no one was killed. The police held their ground, and the Pakistan High Commission remained inviolate. But the Australian High

Commission, situated to the rear of the student brigade, received most of the tear gas shells, and had to close down for the day.

Kamal and I attended the siege for about an hour, before retiring to the Gardens with our ham sandwiches. A couple of friendly squirrels came up to investigate, and were soon taking bread from our hands. We could hear the chanting of the students in the distance. I lay back on the grass and opened my copy of *Barchester Towers*. Whenever life in Delhi, or in Bhabiji's house (or anywhere, for that matter), becomes too tumultuous, I turn to Trollope. Nothing could be further removed from the turmoil of our times than an English cathedral town in the nineteenth century. But I think Jane Austen would have appreciated life in Bhabiji's house.

By ten o'clock, everyone is back from the marriage. (They had gone for the feast, and not for the ceremonies, which continue into the early hours of the morning.) Shobha is full of praise for the bridegroom's good looks and fair complexion. She describes him as being 'gora-chitta' — very white! She does not have a high opinion of the bride.

Shiv, in a happy and reflective mood, extols the qualities of his own wife, referring to her as The Barrel. He tells us how, shortly after their marriage, she had threatened to throw a brick at the next-door girl. This little incident remains fresh in Shiv's mind, after eighteen years of marriage.

He says: 'When the neighbours came and complained, I told them, "It is quite possible that my wife will throw a brick at your daughter. She is in the habit of throwing bricks." The neighbours held their peace.'

I think Shiv is rather proud of his wife's militancy when it comes to taking on neighbours; recently she vanquished the woman next door (a formidable Sikh lady) after a verbal battle that lasted three hours. But in arguments or quarrels with Bhabiji, Shiv's wife always loses, because Shiv takes his mother's side.

Arun, on the other hand, is afraid of both wife and mother, and simply makes himself scarce when a quarrel brews. Or he tells his mother she is right, and then, to placate Shobha, takes her to the pictures.

Kishore turns up just as everyone is about to go to bed. Bhabiji is annoyed at first, because he has been drinking too much; but when he produces a bunch of cinema tickets, she is mollified and asks him to stay the night. Not even Bhabiji likes missing a new picture.

Kishore is urging me to write his life story.

'Your life would make a most interesting story,' I tell him. 'But it will be interesting only if I put in everything — your successes *and* your failures.'

‘No, no, only successes,’ exhorts Kishore. ‘I want you to describe me as a popular music director.’

‘But you have yet to become popular.’

‘I will be popular if you write about me.’

Fortunately we are interrupted by the cots being brought in. Then Bhabiji and Shiv go into a huddle, discussing plans for building an extra room. After all, Kamal may be married soon.

One by one, the children get under their quilts. Popat starts massaging Bhabiji’s back. She gives him her favourite blessing: ‘God protect you and give you lots of children.’ If God listens to all of Bhabiji’s prayers and blessings, there will never be a fall in the population.

The lights are off and Bhabiji settles down for the night. She is almost asleep when a small voice pipes up: ‘Bhabiji, tell us a story.’

At first Bhabiji pretends not to hear; then, when the request is repeated, she says: ‘You’ll keep Aunty Shobha awake, and then she’ll have an excuse for getting up late in the morning.’ But the children know Bhabiji’s one great weakness, and they renew their demand.

‘Your grandmother is tired,’ says Arun. ‘Let her sleep.’

But Bhabiji’s eyes are open. Her mind is going back over the crowded years, and she remembers something very interesting that happened when her younger brother’s wife’s sister married the eldest son of her third cousin . . .

Before long, the children are asleep, and I am wondering if I will ever sleep, for Bhabiji’s voice drones on, into the darker reaches of the night.



Fragrance to the Air

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I would be the last person to belittle a flower for its lack of fragrance, because there are many spectacular blooms such as the dahlia and the gladioli which have hardly any scent and yet make up for it with their colour and appearance. But it does happen that my own favourite flowers are those with a distinctive fragrance and these are the flowers I would have around me.

The rose, of course, is the world's favourite, a joy to all — even to babies, who enjoy taking them apart, petal by petal. But there are other, less spectacular, less celebrated blooms which have a lovely, sometimes elusive fragrance all their own.

I have a special fondness for antirrhinums — or snapdragons, as they are more commonly known. If I sniff hard at them, I don't catch any scent at all. They seem to hold it back from me. But if I walk past a bed of snapdragons, or even a single plant, the gentlest of fragrance is wafted towards me. If I stop and try to take it all in, it has gone again! I find this quite tantalizing, but it has given me a special regard for this modest flower.

Another humble, even old-fashioned flower, is the wallflower which obviously takes its name from the fact that it thrives on walls. I have seen wallflowers adorn a garden wall in an extravagant and delightful manner, making it a mountain of perfume. They are best grown so as to form dense masses which become literally solid with fiery flowers — blood-red, purple, yellow, orange or bronze, all sending a heady fragrance into the surrounding air.

Carnations, with their strong scent of cloves, are great showoffs. In India, the jasmine and the magnolia are both rather heady and overpowering. The honeysuckle too insists on making its presence known. A honeysuckle creeper flourished outside the window of my room in Mussoorie, and all through the summer its sweet, rather cloying fragrance drifted in through the open window. It was delightful at times, but at other times I had to close the window just so that I could give my attention to other, less intrusive smells — like the soft, sweet scent of

petunias (another of my favourites) growing near the doorstep, and great bunches of sweet peas stacked in a bowl on my desk.

It is much the same with chrysanthemums and geraniums. The lemon geranium, for instance, is valued more for its fragrant leaves than for its rather indeterminate blue flowers. And I cannot truthfully say what ordinary mint looks like in flower. The refreshing fragrance of the leaves, when crushed, makes up for any absence of floral display. On the other hand, the multicoloured loveliness of dahlias is unaccompanied by any scent. Its greenery, when cut or broken, does have a faintly acrid smell, but that's about all.

Not all plants are good to smell. Some leaves, when crushed, will keep strong men at bay! During the monsoon in the plains, neem pods fall and are crushed underfoot, giving out a distinctive odour. Most people dislike the smell, but I find it quite refreshing.

Of course, one man's fragrance might well turn out to be another creature's bad smell. Geraniums, my grandmother insisted, kept snakes away because they couldn't stand the smell of the leaves. She surrounded her bungalow with pots of geraniums. As we never found a snake in the house, she may well have been right. But the evidence is purely circumstantial.

I suppose snakes like some smells, close to the ground, or by now they'd have taken to living in more elevated places. But, turning to a book on reptiles, I learnt from it that in the snake the sense of smell is rather dull. Perhaps it has an aversion to anything that it can smell — such as those aromatic geranium leaves!

Close to Mother Earth, there are many delightful smells, provided you avoid roadsides and freshly-manured fields. When I lie on summer grass in some Himalayan meadow, I am conscious of the many good smells around me — the grass itself, redolent of the morning's dew, bruised clover, wild violets, tiny buttercups and golden stars and strawberry flowers and many others I shall never know the names of.

And the earth itself. It smells different in different places. But its loveliest fragrance is known only when it receives a shower of rain. And then the scent of the wet earth rises as though it would give something beautiful back to the clouds. A blend of all the fragrant things that grow upon it.



Garden of a Thousand Trees

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No one in his right mind would want to chop down a mango tree. Every mango tree, even if it grows wild, is generous with its juicy fruit, known sometimes as ‘the nectar of the gods’, and sometimes as the ‘king of fruits’. You can eat ripe mangoes fresh from the tree; you can eat them in pickles or chutneys or jams; you can eat them flattened out and dried, as in aam papad; you can drink the juice with milk as in ‘mango-fool’; you can even pound the kernel into flour and use it as a substitute for wheat. And there are over a hundred different varieties of the mango, each with its own distinctive flavour.

But in praising the fruit, let us not forget the tree, for it is one of the stateliest trees in India, its tall, spreading branches a familiar sight throughout the country, from the lower slopes of the Himalayas to Cape Comorin.

In Gujarat, on the night of the seventh of the month of Savan (July-August), a young mango tree is planted near the house and worshipped by the womenfolk to protect their children from disease. Sometimes a post of mango wood is set up when Ganesh is worshipped.

If you live anywhere in the plains of northern India, you will often have seen a grove of giant mango trees, sometimes appearing like an oasis in the midst of the vast, flat countryside. Beneath the trees you may find a well and a small temple. It is here that the tired, dusty farmer sits down to rest and eat his midday chapati, following it with a draught of cold water from the well. If you join him and ask him who planted the mango grove, he will not be able to tell you; it was there when he was a boy, and probably when his father was a boy too. Some mango groves are very, very old.

Have you heard of the Garden of a Thousand Trees? Probably not. But you must have heard of the town of Hazaribagh in Bihar. Well, a huge mango grove containing over a thousand trees — some of which are still there — was known as hazari, and around these trees a village grew, spreading in time into the modern town of Hazaribagh, ‘Garden of a Thousand Trees’. Anyway, that’s the story you

will hear from the oldest inhabitants of the town. And even today, the town is almost hidden in a garden of trees: mango and neem, sal and tamarind.

All are welcome in a mango grove. But during the mango season, when the trees are in fruit, you enter the grove at your own peril! At this time of the year it is watched over by a fierce chowkidar, whose business is to drive away any mischievous children who creep into the grove in the hope of catching him asleep and making off with a few juicy mangoes. The chowkidar is a busy man. Even before the mangoes ripen, he has to battle not only with the village urchins, but also with raiding parties of emerald-green parrots, who swarm all over the trees, biting deep into the green fruit. Sometimes he sits under a tree in the middle of the grove, pulling a rope which makes a large kerosene-tin rattle in the branches. He can try shouting too, but his voice can't compete with the screams of the parrots. They wheel in circles round the grove and, spreading their tails, settle on the topmost branches.

Even when there are no mangoes, you will find parrots in the grove, because during their breeding season, their favourite nesting places are the holes in the gnarled trunks of old mango trees.

Other birds, including the blue jay and the little green coppersmith, favour the mango grove for the same reason. And sometimes you may spot a small owl peering at you from its hole halfway up the trunk of an old tree.

Good Day to You, Uncle

On the left bank of the Ganga, where it emerges from the Himalayan foothills, there is a long stretch of heavy forest. There are villages on the fringe of the forest, inhabited by bamboo cutters and farmers, but there are few signs of commerce or pilgrimage. Hunters, however, have found the area an ideal hunting ground during the last seventy years, and as a result, the animals are not as numerous as they used to be. The trees, too, have been disappearing slowly; and, as the forest recedes, the animals lose their food and shelter and move further on into the foothills. Slowly, they are being denied the right to live.

Only the elephants can cross the river. And two years ago, when a large area of the forest was cleared to make way for a refugee resettlement camp, a herd of elephants — finding their favourite food, the green shoots of the bamboo, in short supply — waded across the river. They crashed through the suburbs of Hardwar, knocked down a factory wall, pulled down several tin roofs, held up a train and left a trail of devastation in their wake until they found a new home in a new forest which was still untouched. Here, they settled down to a new life — but an unsettled, wary life. They did not know when men would appear again with tractors, bulldozers and dynamite.

There was a time when the forest on the banks of the Ganga had provided food and shelter for some thirty or forty tigers; but men in search of trophies had shot them all, and now there remained only one old tiger in the jungle. Many hunters had tried to get him, but he was a wise and crafty old tiger, who knew the ways of men, and he had so far survived all attempts on his life.

Although the tiger had passed the prime of his life, he had lost none of his majesty. His muscles rippled beneath the golden yellow of his coat, and he walked through the long grass with the confidence of one who knew that he was still a king, even though his subjects were fewer. His great head pushed through the foliage, and it was only his tail, swinging high, that showed occasionally above the sea of grass.

Often he headed for water, the only water in the forest (if you don't count the river, which was several miles away), the water of a large jheel, which was almost a

lake during the rainy season, but just a muddy marsh at this time of the year, in the late spring.

Here, at different times of the day and night, all the animals came to drink — the long-horned sambar, the delicate chital, the swamp deer, the hyenas and jackals, the wild boar, the panthers — and the lone tiger. Since the elephants had gone, the water was usually clear except when buffaloes from the nearby village came to wallow in it. These buffaloes, though not wild, were not afraid of the panther or even of the tiger. They knew the panther was afraid of their massive horns and that the tiger preferred the flesh of the deer.

One day, there were several sambars at the water's edge, but they did not stay long. The scent of the tiger came with the breeze, and there was no mistaking its strong feline odour. The deer held their heads high for a few moments, their nostrils twitching, and then scattered into the forest, disappearing behind a screen of leaf and bamboo.

When the tiger arrived, there was no other animal near the water. But the birds were still there. The egrets continued to wade in the shallows, and a kingfisher darted low over the water, dived suddenly, a flash of blue and gold, and made off with a slim silver fish, which glistened in the sun like a polished gem. A long, brown snake glided in and out among the water lilies and disappeared beneath a fallen tree which lay rotting in the shallows.

The tiger waited in the shelter of a rock, his ears pricked up for the least unfamiliar sound, for he knew that it was at that place that men sometimes sat up for him with guns for they coveted his beauty — his stripes and the gold of his body, his fine teeth, his whiskers, and his noble head. They would have liked to hang his skin on a wall, with his head stuffed and mounted, and pieces of glass replacing his fierce eyes; then they would have boasted of their triumph over the king of the jungle.

The tiger had been hunted before, so he did not usually show himself in the open during the day. But of late he had heard no guns, and if there were hunters around, you would have heard their guns (for a man with a gun cannot resist letting it off, even if it is only at a rabbit — or at another man). And, besides, the tiger was thirsty.

He was also feeling quite hot. It was March and the shimmering dust haze of summer had come early. Tigers — unlike other cats — are fond of water, and on a hot day will wallow in it for hours.

He walked into the water, in amongst the water lilies, and drank slowly. He was seldom in a hurry when he ate or drank. Other animals might bolt down their food,

but they were only other animals. A tiger is a tiger; he has his dignity to preserve even though he isn't aware of it!

He raised his head and listened, one paw suspended in the air. A strange sound had come to him with the breeze, and he was wary of strange sounds. So he moved swiftly into the shelter of the tall grass that bordered the jheel, and climbed a hillock until he reached his favourite rock. This rock was big enough both to hide him and to give him shade. Anyone looking up from the jheel might think it strange that the rock had a round bump on the top. The bump was the tiger's head. He kept it very still.

The sound he heard was only the sound of a flute, rendered thin and reedy in the forest. It belonged to Ramu, a slim, brown boy who rode a buffalo. Ramu played vigorously on the flute. Shyam, a slightly smaller boy, riding another buffalo, brought up the rear of the herd.

There were about eight buffaloes in the herd, and they belonged to the families of the two friends Ramu and Shyam. Their people were *Gujjars*, a nomadic community who earned a livelihood by keeping buffaloes and selling milk and butter. The boys were about twelve years old, but they could not have told you exactly because in their village nobody thought birthdays were important. They were almost the same age as the tiger, but he was old and experienced while they were still cubs.

The tiger had often seen them at the tank, and he was not worried by their presence. He knew the village people would do him no harm as long as he left their buffaloes alone. Once when he was younger and full of bravado, he had killed a buffalo — not because he was hungry, but because he was young and wanted to try out his strength — and after that the villagers had hunted him for days, with spears, bows and an old muzzle loader. Now he left the buffaloes alone, even though the deer in the forest were not as numerous as before.

The boys knew that a tiger lived in the jungle, for they had often heard him roar, but they did not suspect that he was so near just then.

The tiger gazed down from his rock, and the sight of eight fat black buffaloes made him give a low, throaty moan. But the boys were there, and, besides, a buffalo was not easy to kill.

He decided to move on and find a cool shady place in the heart of the jungle, where he could rest during the warm afternoon and be free of the flies and mosquitoes that swarmed around the jheel. At night he would hunt.

With a lazy, half-humorous roar — 'a-oonh!' — he got up off his haunches and sauntered off into the jungle.

Even the gentlest of the tiger's roars can be heard half a mile away, and the boys who were barely fifty yards away looked up immediately.

'There he goes!' said Ramu, taking the flute from his lips and pointing it towards the hillocks. He was not afraid, for he knew that this tiger was not interested in humans. 'Did you see him?'

'I saw his tail, just before he disappeared. He's a big tiger!'

'Do not call him tiger. Call him Uncle, or Maharaj.'

'Oh, why?'

'Don't you know that it's unlucky to call a tiger a tiger? My father always told me so. But if you meet a tiger and call him Uncle, he will leave you alone.'

'I'll try and remember that,' said Shyam.

The buffaloes were now well inside the water, and some of them were lying down in the mud. Buffaloes love soft, wet mud and will wallow in it for hours. The slushier the mud, the better. Ramu, to avoid being dragged down into the mud with his buffalo, slipped off its back and plunged into the water. He waded to a small islet covered with reeds and water lilies. Shyam was close behind him.

They lay down on their hard, flat stomachs, on a patch of grass, and allowed the warm sun to beat down on their bare brown bodies.

Ramu was the more knowledgeable boy, because he had been to Hardwar and Dehradun several times with his father. Shyam had never been out of the village.

Shyam said, 'The jheel is not so deep this year.'

'We have had no rain since January,' said Ramu. 'If we do not get rain soon the jheel may dry up altogether.'

'And then what will we do?'

'We? I don't know. There is a well in the village. But even that may dry up. My father told me that it failed once, just about the time I was born, and everyone had to walk ten miles to the river for water.'

'And what about the animals?'

'Some will stay here and die. Others will go to the river. But there are too many people near the river now — and temples, houses and factories — and the animals stay away. And the trees have been cut, so that between the jungle and the river there is no place to hide. Animals are afraid of the open — they are afraid of men with guns.'

'Even at night?'

'At night men come in jeeps, with searchlights. They kill the deer for meat and sell the skins of tigers and panthers.'

‘I didn’t know a tiger’s skin was worth anything.’

‘It’s worth more than our skins,’ said Ramu knowingly. ‘It will fetch six hundred rupees. Who would pay that much for one of us?’

‘Our fathers would.’

‘True, if they had the money.’

‘If my father sold his fields, he would get more than six hundred rupees.’

‘True, but if he sold his fields, none of you would have anything to eat. A man needs the land as much as a tiger needs the jungle.’

‘Yes,’ said Shyam. ‘And that reminds me — my mother asked me to take some roots home.’

‘I will help you.’

They walked deeper into the jheel until the water was up to their waists, and began pulling up water lilies by the roots. The flower is beautiful but the villagers value the root more. When it is cooked, it makes a delicious and strengthening dish. The plant multiplies rapidly and is always in good supply. In the year when famine hit the village, it was only the root of the water lily that saved many from starvation.

When Shyam and Ramu had finished gathering roots, they emerged from the water and passed the time in wrestling with each other, slipping about in the soft mud which soon covered them from head to toe.

To get rid of the mud, they dived into the water again and swam across to their buffaloes. Then, jumping on their backs and digging their heels into thick hides, the boys raced them across the jheel, shouting and hollering so much that all the birds flew away in fright, and the monkeys set up a shrill chattering of their own in the *dhak* trees.

It was evening, and the twilight fading fast, when the buffalo herd finally wended its way homeward, to be greeted outside the village by the barking of dogs, the gurgle of hookah pipes and the homely smell of cow-dung smoke.

The tiger made a kill that night — a chital. He made his approach against the wind so that the unsuspecting spotted deer did not see him until it was too late. A blow on the deer’s haunches from the tiger’s paw brought it down, and then the great beast fastened his fangs on the deer’s throat. It was all over in a few minutes. The tiger was too quick and strong, and the deer did not struggle much.

It was a violent end for so gentle a creature. But you must not imagine that in the jungle the deer live in permanent fear of death. It is only man, with his imagination and his fear of the hereafter, who is afraid of dying. In the jungle it is different. Sudden death appears at intervals. Wild creatures do not have to think about it, and

so the sudden killing of one of their number by some predator of the forest is only a fleeting incident, soon forgotten by the survivors.

The tiger feasted well, growling with pleasure as he ate his way up the body, leaving the entrails. When he had his night's fill he left the carcase for the vultures and jackals. The cunning old tiger never returned to the same carcase, even if there was still plenty left to eat. In the past, when he had gone back to a kill he had often found a man sitting in a tree waiting for him with a rifle.

His belly filled, the tiger sauntered over to the edge of the forest and looked out across the sandy wasteland and the deep, singing river, at the twinkling lights of Rishikesh on the opposite bank, and raised his head and roared his defiance at mankind.

The tiger was a lonesome bachelor. It was five or six years since he had a mate. She had been shot by the trophy hunters, and her two cubs had been trapped by men who do trade in wild animals. One went to a circus, where he had to learn tricks to amuse people and respond to the flick of a whip; the other, more fortunate, went first to a zoo in Delhi and was later transferred to a zoo in America.

Sometimes, when the old tiger was very lonely, he gave a great roar, which could be heard throughout the forest. The villagers thought he was roaring in anger, but the jungle knew that he was really roaring out of loneliness.

When the sound of his roar had died away, he paused, standing still, waiting for an answering roar, but it never came. It was taken up instead by the shrill scream of a barbet high up in a sal tree.

It was dawn now, dew-fresh and cool, and jungle dwellers were on the move . . .

The black, beady, little eyes of a jungle rat were fixed on a small brown hen who was pecking around in the undergrowth near her nest. He had a large family to feed, this rat, and he knew that in the hen's nest was a clutch of delicious fawn-coloured eggs. He waited patiently for nearly an hour before he had the satisfaction of seeing the hen leave her nest and go off in search of food.

As soon as she had gone, the rat lost no time in making his raid. Slipping quietly out of his hole, he slithered along among the leaves; but, clever as he was, he did not realize that his own movements were being watched.

A pair of grey mongooses scouted about in the dry grass. They too were hungry, and eggs usually figured in large measure on their menu. Now, lying still on an outcrop of rock, they watched the rat sneaking along, occasionally sniffing at the air and finally vanishing behind a boulder. When he reappeared, he was struggling to roll an egg uphill towards his hole.

The rat was in difficulty, pushing the egg sometimes with his paws, sometimes with his nose. The ground was rough, and the egg wouldn't move straight. Deciding that he must have help, he scuttled off to call his spouse. Even now the mongooses did not descend on that tantalizing egg. They waited until the rat returned with his wife, and then watched as the male rat took the egg firmly between his forepaws and rolled over on to his back. The female rat then grabbed her mate's tail and began to drag him along.

Totally absorbed in their struggle with the egg, the rat did not hear the approach of the mongooses. When these two large furry visitors suddenly bobbed up from behind a stone, the rats squealed with fright, abandoned the egg and fled for their lives.

The mongooses wasted no time in breaking open the egg and making a meal of it. But just as, a few minutes ago, the rat had not noticed their approach, so now they too did not notice the village boy, carrying a small bright axe and a net bag in his hands, creeping along.

Ramu too was searching for eggs, and when he saw the mongooses busy with one, he stood still to watch them, his eyes roving in search of the nest. He was hoping the mongooses would lead him to the nest; but, when they had finished their meal and made off into the undergrowth, Ramu had to do his own searching. He failed to find the nest, and moved further into the forest. The rat's hopes were just reviving when, to his disgust, the mother hen returned.

Ramu now made his way to a mahua tree.

The flowers of the mahua can be eaten by animals as well as by men. Bears are particularly fond of them and will eat large quantities of flowers which gradually start fermenting in their stomachs with the result that the animals get quite drunk. Ramu had often seen a couple of bears stumbling home to their cave, bumping into each other or into the trunks of trees. They are short-sighted to begin with, and when drunk can hardly see at all. But their sense of smell and hearing are so good that in the end they find their way home.

Ramu decided he would gather some mahua flowers, and climbed up the tree, which is leafless when it blossoms. He began breaking the white flowers and throwing them to the ground. He had been on the tree for about five minutes when he heard the whining grumble of a bear, and presently a young sloth bear ambled into the clearing beneath the tree.

He was a small bear, little more than a cub, and Ramu was not frightened; but, because he thought the mother might be in the vicinity, he decided to take no chance,

and sat very still, waiting to see what the bear would do. He hoped it wouldn't choose the mahua tree for a meal.

At first the young bear put his nose to the ground and sniffed his way along until he came to a large anthill. Here he began huffing and puffing, blowing rapidly in and out of his nostrils, causing the dust from the anthill to fly in all directions. But he was disappointed because the anthill had been deserted long ago. And so, grumbling, he made his way across to a tall wild plum tree and, shinning rapidly up the smooth trunk, was soon perched on its topmost branches. It was only then that he saw Ramu.

The bear at once scrambled several feet higher up the tree and laid himself out flat on a branch. It wasn't a very thick branch and left a large part of the bear's body showing on either side. The bear tucked his head away behind another branch, and so long as he could not see Ramu, seemed quite satisfied that he was well hidden, though he couldn't help grumbling with anxiety, for a bear, like most animals, is afraid of man.

Bears, however, are also very curious, and curiosity has often led them into trouble. Slowly, inch by inch, the young bear's black snout appeared over the edge of the branch; but immediately as the eyes came into view and met Ramu's, he drew back with a jerk and the head was once more hidden. The bear did this two or three times, and Ramu, highly amused, waited until it wasn't looking, then moved some way down the tree. When the bear looked up again and saw that the boy was missing, he was so pleased with himself that he stretched right across to the next branch, to get a plum. Ramu chose this moment to burst into loud laughter. The startled bear tumbled out of the tree, dropped through the branches for a distance of some fifteen feet, and landed with a thud in a heap of dry leaves.

And then several things happened at almost the same time.

The mother bear came charging into the clearing. Spotting Ramu in the tree, she reared up on her hind legs, grunting fiercely. It was Ramu's turn to be startled. There are few animals more dangerous than a rampaging mother bear, and the boy knew that one blow from her clawed forepaws could rip his skull open.

But before the bear could approach the tree, there was a tremendous roar, and the old tiger bounded into the clearing. He had been asleep in the bushes not far away — he liked a good sleep after a heavy meal — and the noise in the clearing had woken him.

He was in a bad mood, and his loud 'a-oonh!' made his displeasure quite clear. The bear turned and ran from the clearing, the youngster squealing with fright.

The tiger then came into the centre of the clearing, looked up at the trembling boy, and roared again.

Ramu nearly fell out of the tree.

‘Good day to you, Uncle,’ he stammered, showing his teeth in a nervous grin.

Perhaps this was too much for the tiger. With a low growl, he turned his back on the mahua tree and padded off into the jungle, his tail twitching in disgust.

That night, when Ramu told his parents and his grandfather about the tiger and how it had saved him from a female bear, it started a round of tiger stories — about how some of them could be gentlemen, others rogues. Sooner or later the conversation came round to man-eaters, and Grandfather told two stories which he swore were true, although his listeners only half-believed him.

The first story concerned the belief that a man-eating tiger is guided towards his next victim by the spirit of a human being previously killed and eaten by the tiger. Grandfather said that he actually knew three hunters, who sat up in a machan over a human kill, and that, when the tiger came, the corpse sat up and pointed with his right hand at the men in the tree. The tiger then went away. But the hunters knew he would return, and one man was brave enough to get down from the tree and tie the right arm of the corpse to its side. Later, when the tiger returned, the corpse sat up, and this time pointed out the men with his left hand. The enraged tiger sprang into the tree and killed his enemies in the machan.

‘And then there was a bania,’ said Grandfather, beginning another story, ‘who lived in a village in the jungle. He wanted to visit a neighbouring village to collect some money that was owed to him, but as the road lay through heavy forest in which lived a terrible man-eating tiger, he did not know what to do. Finally, he went to a sadhu who gave him two powders. By eating the first powder, he could turn into a huge tiger, capable of dealing with any other tiger in the jungle, and by eating the second he could become a bania again.

‘Armed with his two powders, and accompanied by his pretty, young wife, the bania set out on his journey. They had not gone far into the forest when they came upon the man-eater sitting in the middle of the road. Before swallowing the first powder, the bania told his wife to stay where she was, so that when he returned after killing the tiger, she could at once give him the second powder and enable him to resume his old shape.

‘Well, the bania’s plan worked, but only up to a point. He swallowed the first powder and immediately became a magnificent tiger. With a great roar, he bounded

towards the man-eater, and after a brief, furious fight, killed his opponent. Then, with his jaws still dripping blood, he returned to his wife.

‘The poor girl was terrified and spilt the second powder on the ground. The bania was so angry that he pounced on his wife and killed and ate her. And afterwards this terrible tiger was so enraged at not being able to become a human again that he killed and ate hundreds of people all over the country.’

‘The only people he spared,’ added Grandfather, with a twinkle in his eyes, ‘were those who owed him money. A bania never gives up a loan as lost, and the tiger still hoped that one day he might become a human again and be able to collect his dues.’

Next morning, when Ramu came back from the well, which was used to irrigate his father’s fields, he found a crowd of curious children surrounding a jeep and three strangers. Each of the strangers had a gun, and they were accompanied by two bearers and a vast amount of provisions.

They had heard that there was a tiger in the area, and they wanted to shoot it.

One of the hunters, who looked even more strange than the others, had come all the way from America to shoot a tiger, and he vowed that he would not leave the country without a tiger’s skin in his baggage. One of his companions had said that he could buy a tiger’s skin in Delhi, but the hunter said he preferred to get his own trophies.

These men had money to spend, and, as most of the villagers needed money badly, they were only too willing to go into the forest to construct a machan for the hunters. The platform, big enough to take the three men, was put up in the branches of a tall *tun*, or mahogany tree.

It was the only night the hunters used the machan. At the end of March, though the days are warm, the nights are still cold. The hunters had neglected to bring blankets, and by midnight their teeth were chattering. Ramu, having tied up a buffalo calf for them at the foot of the tree, made as if to go home but instead circled the area, hanging up bits and pieces of old clothing on small trees and bushes. He thought he owed that much to the tiger. He knew the wily old king of the jungle would keep well away from the bait if he saw the bits of clothing — for where there were men’s clothes, there would be men.

The vigil lasted well into the night but the tiger did not come near the *tun* tree; perhaps he wasn’t hungry, perhaps he got Ramu’s message. In any case, the men in the tree soon gave themselves away.

The cold was really too much for them. A flask of rum was produced, and passed around, and it was not long before there was more purpose to finishing the rum than

to finishing off a tiger. Silent at first, the men soon began talking in whispers; and to jungle creatures a human whisper is as telling as a trumpet call.

Soon the men were quite merry, talking in loud voices. And when the first morning light crept over the forest, and Ramu and his friends came back to fetch the great hunters, they found them fast asleep in the machan.

The hunters looked surly and embarrassed as they trudged back to the village.

‘No game left in these parts,’ announced the American.

‘Wrong time of the year for tiger,’ said the second man.

‘Don’t know what the country’s coming to,’ said the third.

And complaining about the weather, the poor quality of cartridges, the quantity of rum they had drunk and the perversity of tigers, they drove away in disgust.

It was not until the onset of summer that an event occurred which altered the hunting habits of the old tiger and brought him into conflict with the villagers.

There had been no rain for almost two months, and the tall jungle grass had become a sea of billowy dry yellow. Some refugee settlers, living in an area where the forest had been cleared, had been careless while cooking and had started a jungle fire. Slowly it spread into the interior, from where the acrid smell and the fumes smoked the tiger out towards the edge of the jungle. As night came on, the flames grew more vivid, and the smell stronger. The tiger turned and made for the jheel, where he knew he would be safe, provided he swam across to the little island in the centre.

Next morning he was on the island, which was untouched by the fire. But his surroundings had changed. The slopes of the hills were black with burnt grass, and most of the tall bamboo had disappeared. The deer and the wild pig, finding that their natural cover had gone, fled further east.

When the fire had died down and the smoke had cleared, the tiger prowled through the forest again but found no game. Once he came across the body of a burnt rabbit, but he could not eat it. He drank at the jheel and settled down in a shady spot to sleep the day away. Perhaps, by evening, some of the animals would return; if not, he too would have to look for new hunting grounds — or new game.

The tiger spent five more days looking for a suitable game to kill. By that time he was so hungry that he even resorted to rooting among the dead leaves and burnt out stumps of trees, searching for worms and beetles. This was a sad comedown for the king of the jungle. But even now he hesitated to leave the area, for he had a deep suspicion and fear of the forests further east — forests that were fast being swallowed up by human habitation. He could have gone north, into high mountains,

but they did not provide him with the long grass he needed. A panther could manage quite well up there, but not a tiger who loved the natural privacy of the heavy jungle. In the hills, he would have to hide all the time.

At break of day, the tiger came to the jheel. The water was now shallow and muddy, and a green scum had spread over the top. But it was still drinkable and the tiger quenched his thirst.

He lay down across his favourite rock, hoping for a deer but none came. He was about to get up and go away when he heard an animal approach.

The tiger at once leaped off his perch and flattened himself on the ground, his tawny striped skin merging with the dry grass. A heavy animal was moving through the bushes, and the tiger waited patiently.

A buffalo emerged and came to the water.

The buffalo was alone.

He was a big male, and his long, curved horns lay right back across his shoulders. He moved leisurely towards the water, completely unaware of the tiger's presence.

The tiger hesitated before making his charge. It was a long time — many years — since he had killed a buffalo, and he knew the villagers would not like it. But the pangs of hunger overcame his scruples. There was no morning breeze; everything was still, and the smell of the tiger did not reach the buffalo. A monkey chattered on a nearby tree, but his warning went unheeded.

Crawling stealthily on his stomach, the tiger skirted the edge of the jheel and approached the buffalo from the rear. The water birds, who were used to the presence of both animals, did not raise an alarm.

Getting closer, the tiger glanced around to see if there were men, or other buffaloes, in the vicinity. Then, satisfied that he was alone, he crept forward. The buffalo was drinking, standing in shallow water at the edge of the tank, when the tiger charged from the side and bit deep into the animal's thigh.

The buffalo turned to fight, but the tendons of his right hind leg had been snapped, and he could only stagger forward a few paces. But he was a buffalo — the bravest of the domestic cattle. He was not afraid. He snorted, and lowered his horns at the tiger, but the great cat was too fast, and circling the buffalo, bit into the other hind leg.

The buffalo crashed to the ground, both hind legs crippled, and then the tiger dashed in, using both tooth and claw, biting deep into the buffalo's throat until blood gushed out from the jugular vein.

The buffalo gave one long, last bellow before dying.

The tiger, having rested, now began to gorge himself, but, even though he had been starving for days, he could not finish the huge carcass. At least one good meal still remained, when, satisfied and feeling his strength returning, he quenched his thirst at the jheel. Then he dragged the remains of the buffalo into the bushes to hide it from the vultures, and went off to find a place to sleep.

He would return to the kill when he was hungry again.

The villagers were upset when they discovered that a buffalo was missing; and next day, when Ramu and Shyam came running home to say that they found the carcass near the jheel, half eaten by a tiger, the men were disturbed and angry. They felt that the tiger had tricked and deceived them. And they knew that once he got a taste for domestic cattle he would make a habit of slaughtering them.

Kundan Singh, Shyam's father and the owner of the dead buffalo, said he would go after the tiger himself.

'It is all very well to talk about what you will do to the tiger,' said his wife, 'but you should never have let the buffalo go off on its own.'

'He had been out on his own before,' said Kundan. 'This is the first time the tiger has attacked one of our beasts. A devil must have entered the Maharaj.'

'He must have been very hungry,' said Shyam.

'Well, we are hungry too,' said Kundan Singh.

'Our best buffalo — the only male in our herd.'

'The tiger will kill again,' warned Ramu's father.

'If we let him,' said Kundan.

'Should we send for the shikaris?'

'No. They were not clever. The tiger will escape them easily. Besides, there is no time. The tiger will return for another meal tonight. We must finish him off ourselves!'

'But how?'

Kundan Singh smiled secretively, played with the ends of his moustache for a few moments, and then, with great pride, produced from under his cot a double-barrelled gun of ancient vintage.

'My father bought it from an Englishman,' he said.

'How long ago was that?'

'At the time I was born.'

'And have you ever used it?' asked Ramu's father, who was not sure that the gun would work.

‘Well, some years back, I let it off at some bandits. You remember the time when those dacoits raided our village? They chose the wrong village, and were severely beaten for their pains. As they left, I fired my gun off at them. They didn’t stop running until they crossed the Ganga!’

‘Yes, but did you hit anyone?’

‘I would have, if someone’s goat hadn’t got in the way at the last moment. But we had roast mutton that night! Don’t worry, brother, I know how the thing fires.’

Accompanied by Ramu’s father and some others, Kundan set out for the jheel, where, without shifting the buffalo’s carcass — for they knew that the tiger would not come near them if he suspected a trap — they made another machan in the branches of a tall tree some thirty feet from the kill.

Later that evening, Kundan Singh and Ramu’s father settled down for the night on their crude platform on the tree.

Several hours passed, and nothing but a jackal was seen by the watchers. And then, just as the moon came up over the distant hills, Kundan and his companion were startled by a low ‘A-ooonh’, followed by a suppressed, rumbling growl.

Kundan grasped his old gun, whilst his friend drew closer to him for comfort. There was complete silence for a minute or two — time that was an agony of suspense for the watchers — and then the sound of stealthy footfalls on dead leaves under the trees.

A moment later the tiger walked out into the moonlight and stood over his kill.

At first Kundan could do nothing. He was completely overawed by the size of this magnificent tiger. Ramu’s father had to nudge him, and then Kundan quickly put the gun to his shoulder, aimed at the tiger’s head, and pressed the trigger.

The gun went off with a flash and two loud bangs as Kundan fired both barrels. Then there was a tremendous roar. One of the bullets had grazed the tiger’s head.

The enraged animal rushed at the tree and tried to leap on to the branches. Fortunately, the machan had been built at a safe height, and the tiger was unable to reach it. It roared again and then bounded off into the forest.

‘What a tiger!’ exclaimed Kundan, half in fear and half in admiration. ‘I feel as though my liver has turned to water.’

‘You missed him completely,’ said Ramu’s father. ‘Your gun makes big noise; an arrow would have done more damage.’

‘I did not miss him,’ said Kundan, feeling offended. ‘You heard him roar, didn’t you? Would he have been so angry had he not been hit? If I have wounded him badly, he will die.’

‘And if you have wounded him slightly, he may turn into a man-eater, and then where will we be?’

‘I don’t think he will come back,’ said Kundan. ‘He will leave these forests.’

They waited until the sun was up before coming down from the tree. They found a few drops of blood on the dry grass but no trail led into the forest, and Ramu’s father was convinced that the wound was only a slight one.

The bullet, missing the fatal spot behind the ear, had only grazed the back of the skull and cut a deep groove at its base. It took a few days to heal, and during this time the tiger lay low and did not go near the jheel except when it was very dark and he was very thirsty.

The villagers thought the tiger had gone away, and Ramu and Shyam — accompanied by some other youths, and always carrying axes and lathis — began bringing buffaloes to the tank again during the day; but they were careful not to let any of them stray far from the herd, and they returned home while it was still daylight.

It was some days since the jungle had been ravaged by the fire, and in the tropics the damage is repaired quickly. In spite of it being the dry season, new life soon began to creep into the forest.

While the buffaloes wallowed in the muddy water, and the boys wrestled on the grassy islet, a big tawny eagle soared high above them, looking for a meal — a sure sign that some of the animals were beginning to return to the forest. It was not long before his keen eyes detected a movement in the glade below.

What the eagle with his powerful eyesight saw was a baby hare, a small fluffy thing, its long pink-tinted ears laid flat along its sides. Had it not been creeping along between two large stones, it would have escaped notice. The eagle waited to see if the mother was about, and as he waited he realized that he was not the only one who coveted this juicy morsel. From the bushes there had appeared a sinuous yellow creature, pressed low to the ground and moving rapidly towards the hare. It was a yellow jungle cat, hardly noticeable in the scorched grass. With great stealth the jungle cat began to stalk the baby hare.

He pounced. The hare’s squeal was cut short by the cat’s cruel claws; but it had been heard by the mother hare, who now bounded into the glade and without the slightest hesitation went for the surprised cat.

There was nothing haphazard about the mother hare’s attack. She flashed around behind the cat and jumped clean over it. As she landed, she kicked back, sending a stinging jet of dust shooting into the cat’s face. She did this again and again.

The bewildered cat, crouching and snarling, picked up the kill and tried to run away with it. But the hare would not permit this. She continued her leaping and buffeting, till eventually the cat, out of sheer frustration, dropped the kill and attacked the mother.

The cat sprung at the hare a score of times, lashing out with his claws; but the mother hare was both clever and agile enough to keep just out of reach of those terrible claws, and drew the cat further and further away from her baby — for she did not as yet know that it was dead.

The tawny eagle saw his chance. Swift and true, he swooped. For a brief moment, as his wings overspread the puny, little hare and his talons sank deep into it, he caught a glimpse of the cat racing towards him and the mother hare fleeing into the bushes. And then with a shrill ‘kee-e e-ee’ of triumph, he rose and whirled away with his dinner.

The boys had heard his shrill cry and looked up just in time to see the eagle flying over the jheel with the little hare held firmly in its talons.

‘Poor hare,’ said Shyam. ‘Its life was short.’

‘That’s the law of the jungle,’ said Ramu. ‘The eagle has a family too, and must feed it.’

‘I wonder if we are any better than animals,’ said Shyam.

‘Perhaps we are a little better, in some ways,’ said Ramu. ‘Grandfather always says, “To be able to laugh and to be merciful are the only things that make man better than the beast.”’

The next day, while the boys were taking the herd home, one of the buffaloes lagged behind. Ramu did not realize that the animal was missing until he heard an agonized bellow behind him. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the big, striped tiger dragging the buffalo into a clump of young bamboo trees. At the same time the herd became aware of the danger and the buffaloes snorted with fear as they hurried along the forest path. To urge them forward, and to warn his friends, Ramu cupped his hands to his mouth and gave vent to a yodelling call.

The buffaloes bellowed, the boys shouted, and the birds flew shrieking from the trees. It was almost a stampede by the time the herd emerged from the forest. The villagers heard the thunder of hoofs, and saw the herd coming home amidst clouds of dust and confusion, and knew that something was wrong.

‘The tiger!’ shouted Ramu. ‘He is here! He has killed one of the buffaloes.’

‘He is afraid of us no longer,’ said Shyam.

‘Did you see where he went?’ asked Kundan Singh, hurrying up to them.

‘I remember the place,’ said Ramu. ‘He dragged the buffalo in amongst the bamboo.’

‘Then there is no time to lose,’ said his father. ‘Kundan, you take your gun and two men, and wait near the suspension bridge, where the Garur stream joins the Ganga. The jungle is narrow there. We will beat the jungle from our side, and drive the tiger towards you. He will not escape us, unless he swims the river!’

‘Good!’ said Kundan, running into his house for his gun, with Shyam close at his heels. ‘Was it one of our buffaloes again?’ he asked.

‘It was Ramu’s buffalo this time,’ said Shyam. ‘A good milk buffalo.’

‘Then Ramu’s father will beat the jungle thoroughly. You boys had better come with me. It will not be safe for you to accompany the beaters.’

Kundan Singh, carrying his gun and accompanied by Ramu, Shyam and two men, headed for the river junction, while Ramu’s father collected about twenty men from the village and, guided by one of the boys who had been with Ramu, made for the spot where the tiger had killed the buffalo.

The tiger was still eating when he heard the men coming. He had not expected to be disturbed so soon. With an angry ‘whoof!’ he bounded into a bamboo thicket and watched the men through a screen of leaves and tall grass.

The men did not seem to take much notice of the dead buffalo, but gathered round their leader and held a consultation. Most of them carried hand drums slung from their shoulders. They also carried sticks, spears and axes.

After a hurried conversation, they entered the denser part of the jungle, beating their drums with the palms of their hands. Some of the men banged empty kerosene tins. These made even more noise than the drums.

The tiger did not like the noise and retreated deeper into the jungle. But he was surprised to find that the men, instead of going away, came after him into the jungle, banging away on their drums and tins and shouting at the top of their voices. They had separated now, and advanced single or in pairs, but nowhere were they more than fifteen yards apart. The tiger could easily have broken through this slowly advancing semicircle of men — one swift blow from his paw would have felled the strongest of them — but his main aim was to get away from the noise. He hated and feared noises made by men.

He was not a man-eater and he would not attack a man unless he was very angry or frightened or very desperate; and he was none of these as yet. He had eaten well, and he would have liked to rest in peace — but there would be no rest for any animal until the men ceased their tremendous clatter and din.

For an hour Ramu's father and others beat the jungle, calling, drumming and trampling the undergrowth. The tiger had no rest. Whenever he was able to put some distance between himself and the men, he would sink down in some shady spot to rest, but, within five or ten minutes, the trampling and drumming would sound nearer, and the tiger, with an angry snarl, would get up and pad north, pad silently north along the narrowing strip of the jungle, towards the junction of the Garur stream and the Ganga. Ten years back, he would have had the jungle on his right in which to hide, but the trees had been felled long ago, to make way for humans and houses, and now he could only move to the left, towards the river.

It was after a long time that the tiger finally appeared in the open. He longed for the darkness and security of the night, for the sun was his enemy. Kundan and the boys had a clear view of him as he stalked slowly along, now in the open with the sun glinting on his glossy side, now in the shade or passing through the shorter reeds. He was still out of range of Kundan's gun, but there was no fear of his getting out of the beat, as the 'stops' were all picked men from the village. He disappeared among some bushes but soon reappeared to retrace his steps, the beaters having done their work well. He was now only one hundred and fifty yards from the rocks where Kundan Singh waited, and he looked very big.

The beat had closed in, and the exit along the bank downstream was completely blocked, so the tiger turned into a belt of reeds, and Kundan Singh expected that the head would soon peer out of the cover a few yards away. The beaters were now making a great noise, shouting and beating their drums, but nothing moved, and Ramu, watching from a distance, wondered, 'Has he slipped through the beaters?' And he half hoped so.

Tins clashed, drums beat, and some of the men poked into the reeds with their spears or long bamboos. Perhaps one of these thrusts found a mark, because at last the tiger was roused, and with an angry, desperate snarl he charged out of the reeds, splashing his way through an inlet of mud and water.

Kundan Singh fired, and his bullet struck the tiger on the thigh.

The mighty animal stumbled; but he was up in a minute, and rushing through a gap in the narrowing line of beaters, he made straight for the only way across the river — the suspension bridge that passed over the Ganga here, providing a route into the high hills beyond.

'We'll get him now,' said Kundan, priming his gun again. 'He's right in the open!'

The suspension bridge swayed and trembled as the wounded tiger lurched across it. Kundan fired, and this time the bullet grazed the tiger's shoulder. The animal bounded forward, lost his footing on the unfamiliar, slippery planks of the swaying bridge, and went over the side, falling headlong into the strong, swirling waters of the river.

He rose to the surface once, but the current took him under and away, and only a thin streak of blood remained on the river's surface.

Kundan and others hurried downstream to see if the dead tiger had been washed up on the river's banks; but though they searched the riverside several miles, they could not find the king of the forest.

He had not provided anyone with a trophy. His skin would not be spread on a couch, nor would his head be hung up on a wall. No claw of his would be hung as a charm around the neck of a child. No villager would use his fat as a cure for rheumatism.

At first the villagers were glad because they felt their buffaloes were safe. Then the men began to feel that something had gone out of their lives, out of the life of the forest; they began to feel that the forest was no longer a forest. It had been shrinking year by year, but, as long as the tiger had been there and the villagers had heard it roar at night, they had known that they were still secure from the intruders and newcomers who came to fell the trees and eat up the land and let the flood waters into the village. But, now that the tiger had gone, it was as though a protector had gone, leaving the forest open and vulnerable, easily destroyable. And, once the forest was destroyed, they too would be in danger.

There was another thing that had gone with the tiger, another thing that had been lost, a thing that was being lost everywhere — something called 'nobility'.

Ramu remembered something that his grandfather had once said, 'The tiger is the very soul of India, and when the last tiger has gone, so will the soul of the country.'

The boys lay flat on their stomachs on the little mud island and watched the monsoon clouds gathering overhead.

'The king of our forest is dead,' said Shyam. 'There are no more tigers.'

'There must be tigers,' said Ramu. 'How can there be an India without tigers?'

The river had carried the tiger many miles away from its home, from the forest it had always known, and brought it ashore on a strip of warm yellow sand, where it lay in the sun, quite still, but breathing.

Vultures gathered and waited at a distance, some of them perching on the branches of nearby trees.

But the tiger was more drowned than hurt, and as the river water oozed out of his mouth, and the warm sun made new life throb through his body, he stirred and stretched, and his glazed eyes came into focus. Raising his head, he saw trees and tall grass.

Slowly he heaved himself off the ground and moved at a crouch to where the grass waved in the afternoon breeze. Would he be harried again, and shot at? There was no smell of Man. The tiger moved forward with greater confidence.

There was, however, another smell in the air — a smell that reached back to the time when he was young and fresh and full of vigour — a smell that he had almost forgotten but could never quite forget — the smell of a tigress!

He raised his head high, and new life surged through his tired limbs. He gave a full-throated roar and moved purposefully through the tall grass. And the roar came back to him, calling him, calling him forward — a roar that meant there would be more tigers in this land!

The Good Earth

As with many who love gardens, I have never really had enough space in which to create a proper garden of my own. A few square feet of rocky hillside has been the largest patch at my disposal. All that I managed to grow on it were daisies — and they'd probably have grown there anyway. Still, they made for a charmingly dappled hillside throughout the summer, especially on full moon nights when the flowers were at their most radiant.

For the past few years, here in Mussoorie, I have had to live in two small rooms on the second floor of a tumbledown building which has no garden space at all. All the same, it has a number of ever-widening cracks in which wild sorrels, dandelions, thornapples and nettles all take root and thrive. You could, I suppose, call it a wild wall-garden. Not that I am deprived of flowers. I am better off than most city dwellers because I have only to walk a short way out of the hill station to see (or discover) a variety of flowers in their wild state; and wild flowers are rewarding, because the best ones are often the most difficult to find.

But I have always had this dream of possessing a garden of my own. Not a very formal garden — certainly not the 'stately home' type, with its pools and fountains and neat hedges as described in such detail by Bacon in his essay 'Of Gardens'. Bacon had a methodical mind, and he wanted a methodical garden. I like a garden to be a little untidy, unplanned, full of surprises — rather like my own muddled mind, which gives even me a few surprises at times.

My grandmother's garden in Dehra, in north India, for example: Grandmother liked flowers, and she didn't waste space on lawns and hedges. There was plenty of space at the back of the house for shrubs and fruit trees, but the front garden was a maze of flower beds of all shapes and sizes, and everything that could grow in Dehra (a fertile valley) was grown in them — masses of sweet peas, petunias, antirrhinum, poppies, phlox and larkspur; scarlet poinsettia leaves draped the garden walls, while purple and red bougainvillea climbed the porch; geraniums of many hues mounted the veranda steps; and, indoors, vases full of cut flowers gave the rooms a heady fragrance. I suppose it was this garden of my childhood that

implanted in my mind the permanent vision of a perfect garden so that, whenever I am worried or down in the dumps, I close my eyes and conjure up a picture of this lovely place, where I am wandering through forests of cosmos and banks of rambling roses. It soothes the agitated mind.

I remember an aunt who sometimes came to stay with my grandmother, and who had an obsession about watering the flowers. She would be at it morning and evening, an old and rather lopsided watering can in her frail hands. To everyone's amazement, she would water the garden in all weathers, even during the rains.

'But it's just been raining, aunt,' I would argue. Why are you watering the garden?'

'The rain comes from above,' she would reply. 'This is from me. They expect me at this time, you know.'

Grandmother died when I was still a boy, and the garden soon passed into other hands. I've never done well enough to be able to acquire something like it. And there's no point in getting sentimental about the past.

Yes, I'd love to have a garden of my own — spacious and gracious, and full of everything that's fragrant and flowering. But if I don't succeed, never mind — I've still got the dream.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that a garden is the answer to all problems, but it's amazing how a little digging and friendly dialogue with the good earth can help reactivate us when we grow sluggish.

Before I moved into my present home which has no space for a garden, I had, as I've said, a tiny patch on a hillside, where I grew some daisies. Whenever I was stuck in the middle of a story or an essay, I would go into my tiny hillside garden and get down to the serious business of transplanting or weeding or pruning or just plucking off dead blooms, and in no time at all I was struck with a notion of how to proceed with the stalled story, reluctant essay, or unresolved poem.

Not all gardeners are writers, but you don't have to be a writer to benefit from the goodness of your garden. Baldev, who heads a large business corporation in Delhi, tells me that he wouldn't dream of going to his office unless he'd spent at least half an hour in his garden that morning. If you can start the day by looking at the dew on your antirrhinums, he tells me, you can face the stormiest of board meetings.

Or take Cyril, an old friend.

When I met him, he was living in a small apartment on the first floor of a building that looked over a steep, stony precipice. The house itself appeared to be

built on stilts, although these turned out to be concrete pillars. Altogether an ugly edifice. ‘Poor Cyril,’ I thought. ‘There’s no way *he* can have a garden.’

I couldn’t have been more wrong. Cyril’s rooms were surrounded by a long veranda that allowed in so much sunlight and air, resulting in such a profusion of leaf and flower, that at first I thought I was back in one of the greenhouses at Kew Gardens, where I used to wander during a lonely sojourn in London.

Cyril found a chair for me among the tendrils of a climbing ivy, while a coffee table materialized from behind a plant. By the time I had recovered enough from taking in my arboreal surroundings, I discovered that there were at least two other guests — one concealed behind a tree-sized philodendron, the other apparently embedded in a pot of begonias.

Cyril, of course, was an exception. We cannot all have sunny verandas; nor would I show the same tolerance as he does towards the occasional caterpillar on my counterpane. But he was a happy man until his landlord, who lived below, complained that water was cascading down through the ceiling.

‘Fix the ceiling,’ said Cyril, and went back to watering his plants. It was the end of a beautiful tenant-landlord relationship.

So let us move on to the washerwoman who lives down the road, a little distance from my own abode. She and her family live at the subsistence level. They have one square meal at midday, and they keep the leftovers for the evening. But the steps to their humble quarters are brightened by geraniums potted in large tin cans, all ablaze with several shades of flower.

Hard as I try, I cannot grow geraniums to match hers. Does she scold her plants the way she scolds her children? Maybe I’m not firm enough with my geraniums. Or has it something to do with the washing? Anyway, her abode certainly looks more attractive than some of the official residences here in Mussoorie.

Some gardeners like to specialize in particular flowers, but specialization has its dangers. My friend, Professor Saili, an ardent admirer of the nature poetry of William Wordsworth, decided he would have his own field of nodding daffodils, and planted daffodil bulbs all over his front yard. The following spring, after much waiting, he was rewarded by the appearance of a solitary daffodil that looked like a railway passenger who had gotten off at the wrong station. This year he is specializing in ‘easy-to-grow’ French marigolds. They grow easily enough in France, I’m sure; but the professor is discovering that they are stubborn growers on our stony Himalayan soil.

Not everyone in this hill station has a lovely garden. Some palatial homes and spacious hotels are approached through forests of weeds, clumps of nettle, and dead or dying rose bushes. The owners are often plagued by personal problems that prevent them from noticing the state of their gardens. Loveless lives, unloved gardens.

On the other hand, there was Annie Powell, who, at the age of ninety, was up early every morning to water her lovely garden. Watering can in hand, she would move methodically from one flower bed to the next, devotedly giving each plant a sprinkling. She said she loved to see leaves and flowers sparkling with fresh water, it gave her a new lease of life every day.

And there were my maternal grandparents, whose home in Dehra in the valley was surrounded by a beautiful, well-kept garden. How I wish I had been old enough to prevent that lovely home from passing into other hands. But no one can take away our memories.

Grandfather looked after the orchard, Grandmother looked after the flower garden. Like all people who have lived together for many years, they had the occasional disagreement.



Grandfather would proceed to sulk on a bench beneath the jackfruit tree while, at the other end of the garden, Grandmother would start clipping a hedge with more than her usual vigour. Silently, imperceptibly, they would make their way toward the centre of the garden, where the flower beds gave way to a vegetable patch. This was neutral ground. My cousins and I looked on like UN observers. And there among the cauliflowers, conversation would begin again, and the quarrel would be forgotten. There's nothing like home-grown vegetables for bringing two people together.

Red roses for young lovers. French beans for long-standing relationships!

The Garden of Memories

Sitting in the sun on a winter's afternoon, feeling my age just a little (I'm sixty-seven now), I began reminiscing about my boyhood in the Dehra of long ago, and I found myself missing the old times — friends of my youth, my grandmother, our neighbours, interesting characters in our small town, and, of course, my eccentric relative — the dashing young Uncle Ken!

Yes, Dehra was a small town then — uncluttered, uncrowded, with quiet lanes and pretty gardens and shady orchards.

The only time in my life that I was fortunate enough to live in a house with a real garden — as opposed to a backyard or balcony or windswept veranda — was during those three years when I spent my winter holidays (December to March) in Granny's bungalow on the Old Survey Road.

The best months were February and March, when the garden was heavy with the scent of sweet peas, the flower beds a many-coloured quilt of phlox, antirrhinum, larkspur, petunia and Californian poppy. I loved the bright yellows of the Californian poppies, the soft pinks of our own Indian poppies, the subtle perfume of petunias and snapdragons, and above all, the delicious, overpowering scent of the massed sweet peas which grew taller than me. Flowers made a sensualist of me. They taught me the delight of smell and colour and touch — yes, touch too, for to press a rose to one's lips is very like a gentle, hesitant, exploratory kiss . . .

Granny decided on what flowers should be sown, and where. Dhuki, the gardener, did the digging and weeding, sowing and transplanting. He was a skinny, taciturn old man, who had begun to resemble the weeds he flung away. He did not mind answering my questions, but never did he allow our brief conversations to interfere with his work. Most of the time he was to be found on his haunches, hoeing and weeding with a little spade called a 'khurpi'. He would throw out the smaller marigolds because he said Granny did not care for them. I felt sorry for these colourful little discards, collected them, and transplanted them to a little garden patch of my own at the back of the house, near the garden wall.

Another so-called weed that I liked was a little purple flower that grew in clusters all over Dehra, on any bit of wasteland, in ditches, on canal banks. It flowered from late winter into early summer, and it will be growing in the valley and beyond long after gardens have become obsolete, as indeed they must, considering the rapid spread of urban clutter. It brightens up fields and roads where you least expect a little colour. I have since learnt that it is called *Ageratum*, and that it is actually prized as a garden flower in Europe, where it is described as 'Blue Mink' in the seed catalogues. Here it isn't blue but purple and it grows all the way from Rajpur (just above Dehra) to the outskirts of Meerut; then it disappears.

Other garden outcasts include the lantana bush, an attractive wayside shrub, the thorn apple, various thistles, daisies and dandelions. But both Granny and Dhuki had declared a war on weeds, and many of these commoners had to exist outside the confines of the garden. Like slum children, they survived rather well in ditches and on the roadside, while their more pampered fellow citizens were prone to leaf diseases and parasitic infections of various kinds.

The veranda was a place where Granny herself could potter about, attending to various ferns, potted palms and colourful geraniums. She averred that geraniums kept snakes away, although she never said why. As far as I know, snakes don't have a great sense of smell.

One day I saw a snake curled up at the bottom of the veranda steps. When it saw me, or became aware of my footsteps, it uncoiled itself and slithered away. I told Granny about it, and observed that it did not seem to be bothered by the geraniums.

'Ah,' said Granny. 'But for those geraniums, the snake would have entered the house!' There was no arguing with Granny.

Or with Uncle Ken, when he was at his most pontifical.

One day, while walking near the canal bank, we came upon a green grass snake holding a frog in its mouth. The frog was half in, half out, and with the help of my hockey stick, I made the snake disgorge the unfortunate creature. It hopped away, none the worse for its adventure.

I felt quite pleased with myself. 'Is this what it feels like to be God?' I mused aloud.

'No,' said Uncle Ken. 'God would have let the snake finish its lunch.'

Uncle Ken was one of those people who went through life without having to do much, although a great deal seemed to happen around him. He acted as a sort of catalyst for events that involved the family, friends, neighbours, the town itself. He believed in the fruits of hard work: other people's hard work.

Ken was good-looking as a boy, and his sisters doted on him. He took full advantage of their devotion, and, as the girls grew up and married, Ken took it for granted that they and their husbands would continue to look after his welfare. You could say he was the originator of the welfare state; his own.

I'll say this for Uncle Ken, he had a large fund of curiosity in his nature, and he loved to explore the town we lived in, and any other town or city where he might happen to find himself. With one sister settled in Lucknow, another in Ranchi, a third in Bhopal, a fourth in Pondicherry and a fifth in Barrackpore, Uncle Ken managed to see a cross section of India by dividing his time between all his sisters and their long-suffering husbands.

Uncle Ken liked to walk. Occasionally he borrowed my bicycle, but he had a tendency to veer off the main road and into ditches and other obstacles after a collision with a bullock cart, in which he tore his trousers and damaged the handlebar of my bicycle, Uncle Ken concluded that walking was the best way of getting around Dehra.

Uncle Ken dressed quite smartly for a man of no particular occupation. He had a blue-striped blazer and a red-striped blazer; he usually wore white or off-white trousers, immaculately pressed (by Granny). He was the delight of shoeshine boys, for he was always having his shoes polished. Summers he wore a straw hat, telling everyone he had worn it for the Varsity Boat Race, while rowing for Oxford (he hadn't been to England, let alone Oxford); winters, he wore one of Grandfather's old felt hats. He seldom went bareheaded. At thirty he was almost completely bald, prompting Aunt Mabel to remark: 'Well, Ken, you must be grateful for small mercies. At least you'll never have bats getting entangled in your hair.'

Thanks to all his walking Uncle Ken had a good digestion, which kept pace with a hearty appetite. Our walks would be punctuated by short stops at chaat shops, sweet shops, fruit stalls, confectioners, small bakeries and other eateries.

'Have you brought any pocket money along?' he would ask, for he was usually broke.

'Granny gave me five rupees.'

'We'll try some rasgullas, then.'

And the rasgullas would be followed by gulab jamuns until my five rupees was finished. Uncle Ken received a small allowance from Granny, but he ferreted it away to spend on clothes, preferring to spend my pocket money on perishables such as ice creams, kulfis and Indian sweets.

On one occasion, when neither of us had any money, Uncle Ken decided to venture into a sugarcane field on the outskirts of the town. He had broken off a stick of cane, and was busy chewing on it, when the owner of the field spotted us and let out a volley of imprecations. We fled from the field with the irate farmer giving chase. I could run faster than Uncle Ken, and did so. The farmer would have caught up with Uncle Ken if the latter's hat hadn't blown off, causing a diversion. The farmer picked up the hat, examined it, seemed to fancy it, and put it on. Several small boys clapped and cheered. The farmer marched off, wearing the hat, and Uncle Ken wisely decided against making any attempt to retrieve it.

'I'll get another one,' he said philosophically.

He wore a pith helmet, or sola topee, for the next few days, as he thought it would protect him from sticks and stones. For a while he harboured a paranoia that all the sugarcane farmers in the valley were looking for him, to avenge his foray into their fields. But after some time he discarded the topee because, according to him, it interfered with his good looks.

*

Granny grew the best sweet peas in Dehra. But she never entered them at the Annual Flower Show, held every year in the second week of March. She did not grow flowers to win prizes, she said; she grew them to please the spirit of Grandfather, who still hovered about the house and grounds he'd built thirty years earlier.

Miss Kellner, Granny's crippled but valued tenant, said the flowers were grown to attract beautiful butterflies, and she was right. In early summer, swarms of butterflies flitted about the garden.

Uncle Ken had no compunction about winning prizes, even though he did nothing to deserve them. Without telling anyone, he submitted a large display of Granny's sweet peas for the flower show, and when the prizes were announced, lo and behold! Kenneth Clerke had been awarded first prize for his magnificent display of sweet peas.

Granny refused to speak to him for several days.

Uncle Ken had been hoping for a cash prize, but they gave him a flower vase. He told me it was a Ming vase. But it looked more like Meerut to me. He offered it to Granny, hoping to propitiate her; but, still displeased with him, she gave it to Mr Khastgir, the artist next door, who kept his paintbrushes in it.

Although I was sometimes a stubborn and unruly boy (my hero was Richmal Crompton's 'William'), I got on well with old ladies, especially those who, like Miss Kellner, were fond of offering me chocolates, marzipans, soft nankattai biscuits (made at Yusuf's bakery in the Dilaram Bazaar), and pieces of crystallized ginger. Miss Kellner couldn't walk — had never walked — and so she could only admire the garden from a distance, but it was from her that I learnt the names of many flowers, trees, birds and even butterflies.

Uncle Ken wasn't any good at names, but he wanted to catch a rare butterfly. He said he could make a fortune if he caught a leaf butterfly called the Purple Emperor. He equipped himself with a butterfly net, a bottle of ether and a cabinet for mounting his trophies; he then prowled all over the grounds, making frequent forays at anything that flew. He caught several common species — Red Admirals, a Tortoiseshell, a Painted Lady, even the occasional dragonfly — but the high-flying Purple Emperor and other exotics eluded him, as did the fortune he was always aspiring to make.

Eventually he caught an angry wasp, which stung him through the netting. Chased by its fellow wasps, he took refuge in the lily pond and emerged sometime later draped in lilies and water weeds.

After this, Uncle Ken retired from the butterfly business, insisting that tiger hunting was safer.

In Search of the Perfect Window

Those who advertise rooms or flats to let often describe them as ‘room with bath’ or ‘room with tea and coffee-making facilities’. A more attractive proposition would be ‘room with window’, for without a view a room is hardly a living place — merely a place of transit.

As an itinerant young writer, I lived in many single-room apartments, or ‘bedsitters’ as they were called, and I have to admit that the quality of my life was certainly enhanced if any window looked out on something a little more inspiring than a factory wall or someone’s backyard.

We cherish a romantic image of a starving, young poet living in a garret and writing odes to skylarks, but, believe me, garrets don’t help. For six months in London I lived in a small attic room that had no view at all, except for the roofs of other houses — an endless vista of gray tiles and blackened chimneys, without so much as a proverbial cat to relieve the monotony. I did not write a single ode, for no self-respecting nightingale or lark ever found its way up there.

My next room, somewhere near Clapham Junction, had a ‘view of the railway’, but you couldn’t actually see the railway lines because of the rows of washing that were hung out to dry behind the building.

It was a working-class area, and there were no laundries around the corner. But if you couldn’t see the railway, you could certainly hear it. Every time a train thundered past, the building shuddered, and ornaments, crockery and dishes rattled and rocked as though an earthquake were in progress. It was impossible to hang a picture on the wall; the nail (and with it the picture) fell out after a couple of days. But it reminded me a bit of my Uncle Fred’s railway quarters just near Delhi’s main railway station, and I managed to write a couple of train stories while living in this particular room.

Train windows, naturally, have no equal when it comes to views, especially in India, where there’s an ever-changing panorama of mountain, forest, desert, village, town, and city — along with the colourful crowds at every railway station.

But good, personal windows — windows to live with — these were to prove elusive for several years. Even after returning to India, I had some difficulty finding the ideal window.

Moving briefly to a small town in northern India, I was directed to the Park View lodging house. There did happen to be a park in the vicinity, but no view of it could be had from my room or, indeed, from any room in the house. But I found, to my surprise, that the bathroom window actually looked out on the park. It provided a fine view! However, there is a limit to the length of time one can spend in the bath, gazing out at palm fronds waving in the distance. So I moved on again.

After a couple of claustrophobic years in New Delhi, I escaped to the hills, fully expecting that I would immediately find rooms or a cottage with windows facing the eternal snows. But it was not to be!

To see the snows I had to walk four miles from my lodgings to the highest point in the hill station. My window looked out on a high stone rampart, built to prevent the steep hillside from collapsing. True, a number of wild things grew in the wall — bunches of red sorrel, dandelions, tough weeds of various kinds, and, at the base, a large clump of nettles. Now I am sure there are people who can grow ecstatic over nettles, but I am not one of them. I find that nettles sting me at the first opportunity. So I gave my nettles a wide berth.

And then, at last, persistence was rewarded. I found my present abode, a windswept, rather shaky, old house on the edge of a spur. My bedroom window opened on to blue skies, mountains striding away into the far distance, winding rivers in the valley below, and, just to bring me down to earth, the local television tower. Like the Red Shadow in *The Desert Song*, I could stand at my window and sing ‘Blue heaven, and You and I’, even if the only listener was a startled policeman.

The window was so positioned that I could lie on my bed and look at the sky, or sit at my desk and look at the hills, or stand at the window and look at the road below.

Which is the best of these views?

Some would say the hills, but the hills never change. Some would say the road, because the road is full of change and movement — tinkers, tailors, tourists, salesmen, cars, trucks and motorcycles, mules, ponies, and even, on one occasion, an elephant. The elephant had no business being up here, but I suppose if Hannibal could take them over the Alps, an attempt could also be made on the Himalayan passes. (It returned to the plains the next day.)

The road is never dull but, given a choice, I'd opt for the sky. The sky is never the same. Even when it's cloudless, the sky colours are different. The morning sky, the daytime sky, the evening sky, the moonlit sky, the starry sky, these are all different skies. And there are almost always birds in the sky — eagles flying high, mountain swifts doing acrobatics, cheeky myna birds meeting under the eaves of the roof, sparrows flitting in and out of the room at will. Sometimes a butterfly floats in on the breeze. And on summer nights, great moths enter at the open window, dazzled by my reading light. I have to catch them and put them out again, lest they injure themselves.



When the monsoon rains arrive, the window has to be closed, otherwise cloud and mist fill the room, and that isn't good for my books. But the sky is even more fascinating at this time of the year.

From my desk I can, at this very moment, see the clouds advancing across the valley, rolling over the hills, ascending the next range. Raindrops patter against the window panes, closed until the rain stops.

And when the shower passes and the clouds open up, the heavens are a deeper, darker blue. Truly magic, casements these . . . For every time I see the sky I am aware of belonging to the universe rather than to just one corner of the earth.



The Evil Eye

In northern India, it is called nazar — a glance of malice or envy — and it is held accountable for a wide variety of ailments and disasters.

Recently the milkman's cow went dry. His excuse: his neighbour, who also kept a cow, had been jealous and cast an evil eye which was enough to end the competition! And then there is the man who tells me that his ailing child is growing thinner day by day because a childless person has cast the evil eye upon him.

I do not scoff at these beliefs. Ill will and evil intent cannot be shrugged off lightly. Hate has an aura which quickly permeates the surroundings.

When members of my own household underwent a series of disasters, I was puzzled at the way in which they followed rapidly one after another. Only later did I learn that someone had actually been wishing ill upon us. We were the victims of nazar — a baleful glance from the evil eye of someone who passed us on the road every day.

In India, as in most countries, the popular explanation for the fairly widespread belief in the evil eye is that it is based on envy or covetousness. It is logical enough to suppose that a man with only one eye is likely to envy a man who has two; the weak and puny envy the good health and good looks of others; the childless woman covets the children of more fortunate women.

One is not surprised to learn that in the ancient Hindu 'Laws of Manu', a one-eyed man is classed with those who are to be treated with caution, possibly because his glance is more concentrated than that of a man with sight in both eyes.

The old prejudice against the one-eyed resulted in Maha Singh, one of the Jaisalmer princes, being disqualified from succeeding to the throne. And when Jaswant Rao Holkar, another powerful Indian prince lost one of his eyes, he remarked: 'I was thought bad enough before — now I shall be looked upon as a guru among rogues!'

The prejudice extends even today to persons with a squint or cast in the eye. Years ago, I knew of an office clerk who suffered from a squint — and the accounts of his

fellow clerks always went wrong. They made so many mistakes in their work that they compelled him to cover the offending eye with a cloth during office hours.

The belief that certain persons possess the power of discharging a glance so malefic that it strikes like a dart at the person against whom it is directed, is prevalent in many parts of the world. Many believe that those born on a Saturday, under the unhappy influence of Saturn, have the power to cast an evil eye.

This worldwide belief comes down from remote antiquity. The English word ‘fascination’ is from the Latin *fascinatio*, which is transliterated from the classical Greek word meaning ‘the mysterious bewitching power of the evil eye’. The ancient Egyptians knew and feared the evil eye, carried mascots and muttered protective charms as do the Bedouins and Moors even today.

Montague Summers, the great English student of the occult (whose book *The Vampire* is a classic work), once described how, on a visit to Italy, he was walking with an Italian friend down the Via Roma, the main street of Naples, when he noticed people suddenly begin to scatter in every direction. His friend took him firmly by the arm and guided him into the nearest shop.

‘What on earth is up?’ asked Summers.

‘*Zitto, zitto,*’ whispered his friend, putting a finger to his lips.

A tall, well-dressed man, quite a respectable-looking figure, was walking along the empty pavement past the shop window. Summers heard the word *Jettatore* and saw the protective gesture, the pointing horns, made with the hands of those who got out of the way of the mysterious man in the street.

In Italy a *Jettatore* is a man (or woman) with the evil eye, one whose mere presence, whose very shadow, is ill-omened and unlucky enough, but whose baleful glance brings sorrow, sickness and death. Such a person may often be quite unaware of the effect he has on others.

In parts of rural England, sickly or deformed children are still spoken of as wisht — that is, ‘ill-wished’ or ‘overlooked’, injured by someone who has cast his or her malevolent gaze upon the sufferer.

An old woman in Somerset once quoted to me from the Bible (proverbs, XXIII. 6): ‘Eat not the bread of him that hath an evil eye . . . The morsel which thou hast eaten shalt thou vomit up.’

And she added: ‘There’s more than one of my neighbours I wouldn’t sit down to eat a meal with!’

In Europe you ward off the evil eye by ‘making horns’ — tucking in the thumb and extending the first and little fingers. In India, one method of avoiding the evil

eye is to make on the person likely to be effected a mark which acts as a disguise or distraction. Many people apply kajal to their children's eyes, a device which also serves the practical purpose of protecting them from sun glare! Or a spot is marked in the middle of the forehead, like a third eye — rather like the false 'eyes' on the wings of butterflies, which are meant to distract predatory birds.

Even domestic animals, like cattle and horses are protected by having brightly-coloured beads round their necks or by marking part of the harness with a single or double triangle. A horse is similarly safeguarded by leaving in the courtyard an earthen pot smeared with streaks of black and white.

Strings and knots, tattooing, precious stones, iron rings made of silver and gold, incense, various grasses or herbs, saliva, blood . . . all have magical or protective properties.

Garlic has been used as a protective in both the East and West. Count Dracula's hypnotic eye was powerless in the presence of a liberal amount of garlic! And in parts of central India, before a young man's marriage, an exorcist crushes pieces of garlic near his eyes or squeezes the juice into his nostrils to expel any evil spirit that might be lurking within.

In some parts of northern India, children who have been the victims of the evil eye are said to be cured by waving garlic and pepper pods round their heads on a Tuesday; these are then thrown into the fire.

Lest all this be dismissed as mere superstition, it would be well to recall that the power of positive and negative thinking has time and again been proved by scientists. In one study, identical barley seeds were planted in pots containing the same soil. All were similarly watered and exposed to sunlight for the same amount of time. But one set received positive thoughts directed at it; the other set received negative thoughts; and the third was left alone.

After fourteen days it was found that the 'blessed' seeds grew slightly better than the ones which received no thoughts at all. The most remarkable thing, however, was that the seeds which were 'cursed' grew only half the size of the others and 62 per cent did not even germinate.

Before scoffing at the power of the evil eye, ponder upon the feats of hypnotism. A powerful mind, using the intensifying apparatus of the eye, is able to influence a mind open to suggestion.

Surely the best way to deal with a baleful glance or negative thought is to reverse the roles, and draw upon one's own latent powers of suggestion, challenge the evil eye, stare it down, set it at naught. Meet it with a steadfast eye!

And should you find a staring match too much of a strain, here's a trick my magic-making grandmother taught me: Don't stare the other person in the eye. Fix your gaze on a point between the eyes, on the bridge of the nose, and keep it there. Your opponent will look away.

April in Landour

Swifts are busy nesting in the roof and performing acrobatics outside my window. They do everything on the wing, it seems, including feeding and making love.

The wind in the pines and deodars hums and moans, but in the chestnut it rustles and chatters and makes cheerful conversation. The horse chestnut in full leaf is a magnificent sight.

*

Amongst the current fraternity of writers, I must be that very rare person, an author who actually writes by hand.

Soon after the invention of the typewriter, most editors and publishers understandably refused to look at any manuscript that was handwritten. A few years earlier, when Dickens and Balzac had submitted their hefty manuscripts in longhand, no one had objected. Had their handwriting been awful, their manuscripts would still have been read. Fortunately for all concerned, these and other famous writers took pains over their handwriting.

Both Dickens and Thackeray had clear, flourishing handwriting. Somerset Maugham had an upright, legible hand, Tagore, a fine flourish. Churchill's neat handwriting never wavered, even when he was under stress. I like the bold, clear, straightforward hand of Abraham Lincoln; it mirrors the man.

Not everyone had a beautiful hand. King Henry VIII had an untidy scrawl, but then, he was not a man of much refinement. Guy Fawkes, who tried to blow up the British Parliament, had a very shaky hand. With such a quiver, no wonder he failed in his attempt. Hitler's signature is ugly, as you might expect. And Napoleon's doesn't seem to know when to stop; how like the man!

When I think of the great eighteenth and nineteenth century writers, scratching away with their quill pens, filling hundreds of pages every month, I am amazed that their handwriting did not deteriorate into the sort of hieroglyphics that makes up the average doctor's prescription today. They knew how to write legibly, if only for the sake of the typesetters.

And it wasn't only authors who wrote with an elegant hand. Most of our parents and grandparents had distinctive styles of their own. I still have my father's last letter, written to me when I was at boarding school over sixty years ago. He used large, beautifully formed letters, and his thoughts seemed to have the same flow and clarity as his handwriting.

In his letter he advises nine-year-old Ruskin about his handwriting:

I wanted to write before about your writing, Ruskin . . . Sometimes I get letters from you in very small writing, as if you wanted to squeeze everything into one sheet of paper. It is not good for you or for your eyes, to get into the habit of writing so small. . . Try and form a larger style of handwriting. Use more paper if necessary!

I did my best to follow his advice, and I'm glad to report that after a lifetime of penmanship, my handwriting is still readable.

Word processors and computers are the in thing now, and I do not object to these electronic aids any more than I objected to the mechanical aid of my old Olympia typewriter, which is still going strong after forty years; the latter is at least impervious to power failures. Although I still do most of my writing in longhand, I follow the conventions by typing a second draft. But I would not enjoy my writing if I had to do it straight on to a machine. It isn't just the pleasure of writing by hand, although that's part of it. Sometimes I like taking my notebooks or writing pads to odd places. This particular entry is being composed on the steep hillside above the cottage in which I live. Part of the reason for sitting here is that there is a new postman on the route, and I don't want him to miss me. For a freelance writer, the postman is almost as important as his publisher. He brings me editorial acceptances or rejections, the occasional cheques and sometimes a nice letter from a reader. I could, of course, sit here doing nothing, but as I have pencil and paper with me, and feel like using them, I shall write until the postman comes and maybe after he has gone, too.

Typewriters and computers were not designed with steep mountain slopes in mind. On one occasion last autumn I did carry my typewriter into the garden, and I am still trying to extricate a couple of acorns from under the keys, while the roller seems permanently stained from some fine yellow pollen dust from the deodar trees. But armed with pencils and paper, I can lie on the grass and write for hours. Provided there are a couple of cheese-and-tomato sandwiches within easy reach.

The smallest insect in the world is a sort of fairy fly and its body is only a fifth of a millimetre long. One can only just see it with the naked eye. Almost like a speck of dust, yet it has perfect little wings and little combs on its legs for preening itself.

That is perfection.

*

The nice thing about reaching a reasonable age (sixty plus) is that, along the way, one has collected a few pleasant memories. Life isn't always pleasant, but I find it's possible to shut out the darker recollections and dwell instead on life's happier moments. Psychiatrists may not agree with this method. They like their patients to unburden themselves and reveal their childhood traumas. But it's when we cannot escape our childhood traumas that we end up on the psychiatrist's couch.

Anyway, here's an example of being able to relive an old memory without regret:

Last week, after a gap of forty years, I climbed to the little temple of Sirkhanda Devi, a steep climb from the motor road at 8000 feet to the summit at 10,000 feet. Forty years ago I'd walked the thirty-odd miles from Mussoorie to Kaddukhal; there was no motor road then, just a bridle path. Now buses and taxis bring tourists and pilgrims to Kaddukhal, but they still have to climb to the temple. Climbing is good for both body and soul.

The old bridle path has disappeared, but remnants of it can be seen in places. While climbing up from the new road, I came across a little cluster of huts and recognized the one in which I'd spent a night, before tramping on to Chamba. I was just a boy then . . . Of course the old man who'd offered me hospitality was long gone, and his son had moved elsewhere, but there were children in the courtyard, and goats and chickens, and a tall deodar which had been no taller than me on that first visit. So here were memories flooding back in the nicest of ways.

To be perfectly honest, that night in the hut had not been so lovely, for the sheepskin rug on which I'd slept had been infested with vicious fleas and *khatmals*, and I'd stayed awake scratching into the early hours. But see how easy it is to put aside the less pleasant memory. Forget the bugs and think of the moon coming up over the mountains, and life becomes a little more tolerable.

Well, on this second occasion I entered the tiny temple on the hilltop and thanked the Devi for her blessings and told her that life had been good to me since I'd last been there.

I feel drawn to little temples on lonely hilltops. With the mist swirling round them, and the wind humming in the stunted pines, they absorb some of the magic and mystery of their surroundings and transmit it to the questing pilgrim.

Another memory revived when I accompanied the family to the sulphur springs outside Dehra, and discovered that this former wilderness had been turned into a little dhaba township, with the garbage left by tourists and picnickers littering the banks of the stream and being caught up on the rocks.

Here, fifty years ago, I bicycled with my friends, bathed, and rested in the shade of the ravine. Few people found their way there. Today, it has been ‘developed’ into a tourist spot, although there is no longer any sign of the hot spring that made it known in the first place. In shock, the spring appears to have gone underground.

All this is progress, of course, and I must confess to being sadly behind the times.

The other day a young Internet surfer asked me why I preferred using a pencil instead of a computer. The principal reason, I told him, was that I liked chewing on the end of my pencil. A nasty habit, but it helps me concentrate. And I find it extremely difficult to chew on a computer.

*

‘We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune’ — Epicurus

*

Glorious day. Walked up and around the hill, and got some of the cobwebs out of my head.

Some epigrams (my own, for future use):

A well-balanced person: someone with a chip on both shoulders.

Experience: The knowledge that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it the second time.

Sympathy: What one woman offers another in exchange for details.

Worry: The interest paid on trouble before it becomes due.

I read these out to my critic and confidant, four-year-old Gautam (Siddharth’s younger brother), and he shook his head sadly and responded with ‘*Kabi Khushi, Kabi Gam!*’ Like Mr Dick in *David Copperfield*, he usually comes up with an appropriate response.

*

Death moves about at random, without discriminating between the innocent and the evil, the poor and the rich. The only difference is that the poor usually handle it better.

I heard today that the peanut vendor had died. The old man would always be in the dark, windy corner in Landour Bazaar, hunched up over the charcoal fire on which he roasted his peanuts. He'd been there for as long as I could remember, and he could be seen at almost any hour of the day or night. Summer or winter, he stayed close to his fire.

He was probably quite tall, but I never saw him standing up. One judged his height from his long, loose limbs. He was very thin, and the high cheekbones added to the tautness of his tightly stretched skin.

His peanuts were always fresh, crisp and hot. They were popular with the small boys who had a few coins to spend on their way to and from school, and with the patrons of the cinemas, many of whom made straight for the windy corner during intervals or when the show was over. On cold winter evenings, or misty monsoon days, there was always a demand for the old man's peanuts.

No one knew his name. No one had ever thought of asking him for it. One just took him for granted. He was as fixed a landmark as the clock tower or the old cherry tree that grows crookedly from the hillside. The tree was always being lopped; the clock often stopped. The peanut vendor seemed less perishable than the tree, more dependable than the clock. He had no family, but in a way all the world was his family, because he was in continuous contact with people. And yet he was a remote sort of being, always polite, even to children, but never familiar. There is a distinction to be made between aloneness and loneliness. The peanut vendor was seldom alone, but he must have been lonely.

Summer nights he rolled himself up in a thin blanket and slept on the ground, beside the dying embers of his fire. During the winter, he waited until the last show was over, before retiring to the coolies' shed where there was some protection from the biting wind.

Did he enjoy being alive? I wonder now. He was not a joyful person; but then, neither was he miserable. I should think he was a genuine stoic, one of those who do not attach overmuch importance to themselves, who are emotionally uninvolved, content with their limitations, their dark corners. I wanted to get to know the old man better, to sound him out on the immense questions involved in roasting peanuts

all his life, but it's too late now. Today his dark corner was deserted; the old man had vanished; the coolies had carried him down to the cremation ground.

'He died in his sleep,' said the tea shop owner. 'He was very old.'

Very old. Sufficient reason to die.

But that corner is very empty, very dark, and I know that whenever I pass it I will be haunted by visions of the old peanut vendor, troubled by the questions I failed to ask.

*

Spoke to the Christian writers' group at Deodars, on the subject of writing for a living.

Question: Which, in your opinion, is the best book on Christianity?

'I'd always thought it was the New Testament,' was all I could say.

Reading Was My Religion

In January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated.

I had gone to the pictures at one of Dehra's new cinemas — The Hollywood on Chakrata Road — and the film was called *Blossoms in the Dust*; but it had been showing for about ten minutes when the projector stopped running. The lights came on and the manager appeared at one of the doors to announce that news had just been received that Gandhiji, father of the nation, had been shot dead. The cinema would be closed for a week. We were given our money back.

I walked disconsolately home across the maidan, shocked by the event and also a little dismayed that I wouldn't be able to see another picture for at least a week. (And I never did see *Blossoms* in its entirety.) As I was only thirteen at the time, I don't think I could be accused of a lack of sensitivity. As I walked across the vast maidan — it was now late evening — I passed little groups of people talking about what had happened and how it might affect the course of politics in the country. The assassin belonged to the majority community, and there was undisguised relief that the tragedy would not result in more communal riots. Gandhiji had already become history. Now he was to achieve sainthood.

Oddly enough my sister Ellen took it to heart more than anyone else in the family. She would spend hours drawing pictures of Gandhi. As her eyesight was poor, some of these portraits took weird shapes, but sometimes you could recognize the great man's glasses, chappals and walking stick.

We had moved again. My stepfather was supporting my mother once more, so she had given up the job at Green's, which was about to close down. They had rented a small, rather damp bungalow on the Eastern Canal Road, and I had a dark little room which leaked at several places when it rained. On wet winter nights it had a rather spooky atmosphere: the drip of water, the scurrying of rats in the space between the ceiling and corrugated tin roof, and the nightly visitation of a small bat which got in through a gap in the wall and swooped around the room, snapping up moths. I would stay up into the early hours reading *Oliver Twist* (pinched from Granny's house), *Wuthering Heights* (all in one sitting, during a particularly stormy

night) and *Shakespeare's Complete Works* — a lofty volume of the band's plays and poems, which, till then, was the only book in the house that I hadn't read. The print was very small but I set myself the task of reading right through, and achieved this feat during the winter holidays. Of the plays I enjoyed *The Tempest* more than any other. Of the longer poems *The Rape of Lucrece* was the most intriguing but I found it difficult to reconcile its authorship with that of the plays. They were so robust, the poems formalized, watery by comparison.

I realize now that my mother was a brave woman. She stuck it out with Mr Hari who, as a businessman, was a complete disaster. He'd lost on his photographic saloon, which had now been sold by his first wife; he had lost on his motor workshop and he had lost his car sales agencies. He was up against large income tax arrears and he was irregular with all his payments. But he was popular with his workmen and mechanics, as he was quite happy to sit and drink with them, or take them along on his shikar expeditions. In this way everyone had a good time, even though his customers grew more irate by the day. Repair jobs were seldom finished on time. If a customer left a decent looking car with him for servicing, my stepfather would use it for two or three months, on the pretext of 'testing' it, before handing it back to the owner.

But his heart was in the right place. During the communal riots of '47, he, a Hindu, was instrumental in saving a number of Muslim lives, driving friends or employees to safer locations, or even upto the Pakistan border.

He never had a harsh word for me. Sometimes I wish he had!

*

The RAF had undertaken to pay for my schooling, so I was able to continue at BCS.

Back in Simla I found a sympathetic soul in Mr Jones, an ex-Army Welshman who taught us divinity. He did not have the qualifications to teach us anything else, but I think I learnt more from him than from most of our more qualified staff. He had even got me to read the Bible (King James version) for the classical simplicity of its style.

Mr Jones got on well with small boys, one reason being that he never punished them. Alone among the philistines he was the only teacher to stand out against corporal punishment. He waged a lone campaign against the custom of caning boys for their misdemeanours, and in this respect was far ahead of his time. The other

masters thought him a little eccentric, and he lost his seniority because of his refusal to administer physical punishment.

But there was nothing eccentric about Mr Jones, unless it was the pet pigeon that followed him everywhere and sometimes perched on his bald head. He managed to keep the pigeon (and his cigar) out of the classroom, but his crowded, untidy bachelor quarters reeked of cigar smoke.

He had a passion for the works of Dickens, and when he discovered that I had read *Nickleby* and *Sketches by Boz*, he allowed me to look at his set of the *Complete Works*, with the illustrations by Phiz. I launched into *David Copperfield*, which I thoroughly enjoyed, identifying myself with young David, his triumphs and tribulations. After reading *Copperfield* I decided it was a fine thing to be a writer. The seed had already been sown, and although in my imagination I still saw myself as an Arsenal goalkeeper or a Gene Kelly-type tap dancer, I think I knew in my heart that I was best suited to the written word. I was topping the class in essay writing, although I had an aversion to studying the texts that were prescribed for English literature classes.

Mr Jones, with his socialist, Dickensian viewpoint, had an aversion for P.G. Wodehouse, whose comic novels I greatly enjoyed. He told me that these novels glamorized the most decadent aspects of upper-class English life (which was probably true), and that only recently, during the War (when he was interned in France), Wodehouse had been making propaganda broadcasts on behalf of Germany. This was true, too; although years later when I read the texts of those broadcasts (in *Performing Flea*), they seemed harmless enough.

But Mr Jones did have a point — Wodehouse was hopelessly out of date, for when I went to England after leaving school, I couldn't find anyone remotely resembling a Wodehouse character. Except perhaps Ukridge, who was always borrowing money from his friends in order to set up in some business or the other; he was universal.

The school library — the Anderson Library — was fairly well stocked, and it was to be something of a haven for me over the next three years. There were always writers, past or present, to 'discover' — and I still have a tendency to ferret out writers who have been ignored, neglected or forgotten.

After *Copperfield* the novel that most influenced me was Hugh Walpole's *Fortitude*, an epic account of another young writer in the making. Its opening line still acts as a clarion call when I feel depressed or as though I am getting nowhere: 'Tisn't life that matters, but the courage you bring to it.'

Walpole's more ambitious works have been forgotten, but his stories and novels of the macabre are still worth reading — *Mr Perrin and Mr Trail*, *Portrait of a Man with Red Hair*, *The White Tower*. . . And, of course, *Fortitude*. I returned to it last year and found it was still stirring stuff.

But life wasn't all books. At the age of fifteen I was at my best as a football goalkeeper, hockey player, athlete. I was also acting in school plays and taking part in debates. I wasn't much of a boxer — a sport I disliked — but I had learnt to use my head to good effect, and managed to get myself disqualified by butting the other fellow in the head or midriff. As all games were compulsory, I had to overcome my fear of water and learn to swim a little. Mr Jones taught me to do the breast stroke, saying it was more suited to my temperament than the splash and dash stuff.

The only thing I couldn't do was sing, and although I loved listening to great singers, from Caruso to Gigli, I couldn't sing a note. Our music teacher, Mrs Knight, put me in the school choir because, she said, I *looked* like a choir boy, all pink and shining in a cassock and surplice, but she forbade me from actually singing. I was to open my mouth with the others, but on no account was I to allow any sound to issue from it.

This took me back to the convent in Mussoorie where I had been given piano lessons, probably at my father's request. The nun who was teaching me would get so exasperated with my stubborn inability to strike the right chord or play the right notes that she would crack me over the knuckles with a ruler — thus effectively putting an end to any interest I might have had in learning to play a musical instrument. Mr Priestley's violin, in the prep school, and now Mrs Knight's organ playing, were none too inspiring.

Insensitive though I may have been to high notes and low notes, diminuendos and crescendos, I was nevertheless sensitive to sound — birdsong, the hum of the breeze playing in tall trees, the rustle of autumn leaves, crickets chirping, water splashing and murmuring in brooks, the sea sighing on the sand — all natural sounds, indicating a certain harmony in the natural world.

Man-made sounds — the roar of planes, the blare of horns, the thunder of trucks and engines, the baying of a crowd — are usually ugly. But some gifted humans have tried to rise above it by creating great music; and we must not scorn the also-rans, those who come down hard on their organ pedals, or emulate cicadas with their violin playing.

Although I was quite popular at Bishop Cotton's, after Omar's departure I did not have many close friends. There was, of course, young A — , my junior by two

years, who followed me everywhere until I gave in and took him to the pictures in town, or fed him at the tuck shop.

There were just one or two boys who actually read books for pleasure. We tend to think of that era as one when there were no distractions such as television, computer games and the like. But reading has always been a minority pastime. People say children don't read any more. This may be true of the vast majority, but I know many boys and girls who enjoy reading, far more than I encountered when I was a schoolboy. In those days there were comics and the radio and the cinema. I went to the cinema whenever I could, but that did not keep me from reading almost everything that came my way. And so it is today. Book readers are special

people, and they will always turn to books as the ultimate pleasure. Those who do not read are the unfortunate ones. There's nothing wrong with them; but they are missing out on one of life's compensations and rewards. A great book is a friend that never lets you down. You can return to it again and again, and the joy first derived from it will still be there.

I think it is fair to say that when I was a boy, reading was my true religion. It helped me to discover my soul.



Miss Romola and Others

Though their numbers have diminished over the years, there are still a few compulsive daily walkers around: the odd ones, the strange ones, who will walk all day, here, there and everywhere, not in order to get somewhere, but to escape from their homes, their lonely rooms, their mirrors, themselves . . .

Those of us who must work for a living and would love to be able to walk a little more don't often get the chance. There are offices to attend, deadlines to be met, trains or planes to be caught, deals to be struck, people to deal with. It's the rat race for most people, whether they like it or not. So who are these lucky ones, a small minority it has to be said, who find time to walk all over this hill station from morn to night?

Some are fitness freaks, I suppose; but several are just unhappy souls who find some release, some meaning, in covering miles and miles of highway without so much as a nod in the direction of others on the road. They are not looking at anything as they walk, not even at a violet in a mossy stone.

Here comes Miss Romola. She's been at it for years. A retired schoolmistress who never married. No friends. Lonely as hell. Not even a visit from a former pupil. She could not have been very popular.

She has money in the bank. She owns her own flat. But she doesn't spend much time in it. I see her from my window, tramping up the road to Lal Tibba. She strides around the mountain like the character in the old song 'She'll be coming round the mountain', only she doesn't wear pink pyjamas; she dresses in slacks and a shirt. She doesn't stop to talk to anyone. It's quick march to the top of the mountain, and then down again, home again, jiggety-jig. When she has to go down to Dehradun (too long a walk even for her), she stops a car and cadges a lift. No taxis for her, not even the bus.

Miss Romola's chief pleasure in life comes from conserving her money. There are people like that. They view the rest of the world with suspicion. An overture of friendship will be construed as taking an undue interest in her assets. We are all part

of an international conspiracy to relieve her of her material possessions! She has no servants, no friends; even her relatives are kept at a safe distance.

A similar sort of character but even more eccentric is Mr Sen, who used to live in the USA and walks from the Happy Valley to Landour (five miles) and back every day, in all seasons, year in and year out. Once or twice every week he will stop at the Community Hospital to have his blood pressure checked or undergo a blood or urine test. With all that walking he should have no health problems, but he is a hypochondriac and is convinced that he is dying of something or the other.

He came to see me once. Unlike Miss Romola, he seemed to want a friend, but his neurotic nature turned people away. He was convinced that he was surrounded by individual and collective hostility. People were always staring at him, he told me. I couldn't help wondering why, because he looked fairly nondescript. He wore conventional Western clothes, perfectly acceptable in urban India, and looked respectable enough except for a constant nervous turning of the head, looking to the left, right, or behind, as though to check on anyone who might be following him. He was convinced that he was being followed at all times.

'By whom?' I asked.

'Agents of the government,' he said.

'But why should they follow you?'

'I look different,' he said. 'They see me as an outsider. They think I work for the CIA.'

'And do you?'

'No, no!' He shied nervously away from me. 'Why did you say that?'

'Only because you brought the subject up. I haven't noticed anyone following you.'

'They're very clever about it. Perhaps you're following me too.'

'I'm afraid I can't walk as fast or as far as you,' I said with a laugh; but he wasn't amused. He never smiled, never laughed. He did not feel safe in India, he confided. The saffron brigade was after him!

'But why?' I asked. 'They're not after me. And you're a Hindu with a Hindu name.'

'Ah yes, but I don't look like one!'

'Well, I don't look like a Taoist monk, but that's what I am,' I said, adding, in a more jocular manner: 'I know how to become invisible, and you wouldn't know I'm around. That's why no one follows me! I have this wonderful cloak, you see, and when I wear it I become invisible!'

‘Can you lend it to me?’ he asked eagerly.

‘I’d love to,’ I said, ‘but it’s at the cleaners right now. Maybe next week.’

‘Crazy,’ he muttered. ‘Quite mad.’ And he hurried on.

A few weeks later he returned to New York and safety. Then I heard he’d been mugged in Central Park. He’s recovering, but doesn’t do much walking now.

Neurotics do not walk for pleasure; they walk out of compulsion. They are not looking at the trees or the flowers or the mountains; they are not looking at other people (except in apprehension); they are usually walking away from something — unhappiness or disarray in their lives. They tire themselves out, physically and mentally, and that brings them some relief.

Like the journalist who came to see me last year. He’d escaped from Delhi, he told me. Had taken a room in Landour Bazaar and was going to spend a year on his own, away from family, friends, colleagues, the entire rat race. He was full of noble resolutions. He was planning to write an epic poem or a great Indian novel or a philosophical treatise. Every fortnight I meet someone who is planning to write one or the other of these things, and I do not like to discourage them, just in case they turn violent!

In effect he did nothing but walk up and down the mountain, growing shabbier by the day. Sometimes he recognized me. At other times there was a blank look on his face, as though he was on some drug, and he would walk past me without a sign of recognition. He discarded his slippers and began walking about barefoot, even on the stony paths. He did not change or wash his clothes. Then he disappeared; that is, I no longer saw him around.

I did not really notice his absence until I saw an ad in one of the national papers, asking for information about his whereabouts. His family was anxious to locate him. The ad carried a picture of the gentleman, taken in happier, healthier times; but it was definitely my acquaintance of that summer.

I was sitting in the bank manager’s office, up in the cantonment, when a woman came in, making inquiries about her husband. It was the missing journalist’s wife. Yes, said Mr Ohri, the friendly bank manager, he’d opened an account with them; not a very large sum, but there were a few hundred rupees lying to his credit. And no, they hadn’t seen him in the bank for at least three months.

The journalist couldn’t be found. Several months passed, and it was presumed that he had moved on to some other town, or that he’d lost his mind or his memory. Then some milkmen from Kolti Gaon discovered bones and remnants of clothing at the bottom of a cliff. In the pocket of the ragged shirt was the journalist’s press card.

How he'd fallen to his death remains a mystery. It's easy to miss your footing and take a fatal plunge on the steep slopes of this range. He may have been high on something or he may simply have been trying out an unfamiliar path. Walking can be dangerous in the hills if you don't know the way or if you take one chance too many.

And here's a tale to illustrate that old chestnut that truth is often stranger than fiction:

Colonel Parshottam had just retired and was determined to pass the evening of his life doing the things he enjoyed most: taking early morning and late evening walks, afternoon siestas, a drop of whisky before dinner, and a good book on his bedside table.

A few streets away, on the fourth floor of a block of flats, lived Mrs L, a stout, neglected woman of forty, who'd had enough of life and was determined to do away with herself.

Along came the Colonel on the road below, a song on his lips, strolling along with a jaunty air, in love with life and wanting more of it.

Quite unaware of anyone else around, Mrs L chose that moment to throw herself out of her fourth-floor window. Seconds later she landed with a thud on the Colonel. If this was a Ruskin Bond story, it would have been love at first flight. But the grim reality was that he was crushed beneath her and did not recover from the impact. Mrs L, on the other hand, survived the fall and lived on into a miserable old age.

There is no moral to the story, any more than there is a moral to life. We cannot foresee when a bolt from the blue will put an end to the best-laid plans of mice and men.



Respect Your Breakfast

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‘Laugh and be fat, sir!’ Thus spoke Ben Jonson, poet and playwright, Shakespeare’s contemporary and a lover of good food, wine and laughter.

Merriment usually accompanies food and drink, and laughter is usually enjoyed in the company of friends and people of goodwill. Laugh when you’re alone, and you are likely to end up in a lunatic asylum.

‘Honour your food,’ said Manu, the law-giver, ‘receive it thankfully. Do not hold it in contempt.’ He did go on to say that we should avoid excess and gluttony, but his message was we should respect what is placed before us.

This was Granny’s message, too. ‘Better a small fish than an empty dish’ was one of the sayings inscribed on her kitchen accounts notebook. She was apt to quote several of these little proverbs, and one of them was directed at me whenever I took too large a second helping of my favourite kofta curry.

‘Don’t let your tongue cut your throat,’ she would say ominously. ‘You don’t want to grow up to be like Billy Bunter.’ She referred to the Fat Boy of Greyfriars School, a popular fictional character in the late 1930s.

‘Just one more kofta, Granny,’ I’d beg, ‘I promise, I won’t take a third helping.’

Sixty-five years later, I’m still trying to keep that promise. I keep those second helpings small, just in case I’m tempted into a third one. I’m not quite a Bunter yet, possibly because I still walk quite a bit. But the trouble with walking is it gives you an appetite, and that means you are inclined to tuck in when you get to the dining table.

Last winter, when I was staying at the India International Centre (IIC), I would go for an early morning walk in the Lodi Gardens, followed by breakfast at the Centre. They give you a good breakfast at IIC, and I did full justice to the scrambled eggs, buttered toasts, marmalade and coffee. I could have done with a little bacon, too, but apparently it wasn’t the season for it. Well, when I looked across at the next table I saw a solitary figure breakfasting on watermelon — and nothing else! This made me feel terribly guilty, and I refrained from finishing off the marmalade.

‘Aren’t you Bond?’ asked the man at the next table.

I confessed I was — not the other Bond, but the real one — and it turned out that we’d been at school together, in the dim distant past.

‘You were always a good eater,’ he said reflectively. ‘In fact, you used to help yourself to my jam tarts when I wasn’t looking.’

We chatted about our school days and companions of that era, and then he went on to tell me that he was suffering from various ailments — hence the frugal watermelon breakfast. As I wasn’t suffering from anything worse than a bruised shin (due to falling over a courting couple in the Gardens) I felt better about my breakfast, and immediately ordered more marmalade and a third toast. When we parted, he urged me to switch to watermelons for breakfast, though I couldn’t help noticing that he eyed my scrambled egg with a look that was full of longing. I guess healthy eating and happy eating are two different things.

Diwali, Christmas and the New Year are appropriate times for a little indulgence, and if someone were to send me a Christmas pudding I would respect the giver and the pudding by at least enjoying a slice or two — and sharing the rest!

But strictly speaking I’m a breakfast person, and I stand by another of Granny’s proverbs: ‘If the breakfast is bad, the rest of the day will go wrong.’ So make it a good breakfast; linger over it, enjoy the flavours. And if you happen to be someone who must prepare their own breakfast, do so with loving care and precision. As Granny said, ‘There is skill in all things, even in scrambling eggs.’

Simla and Delhi, 1943

We took the railcar to Simla. It was the nicest way of travelling through the mountains. The narrow-gauge train took twice as long and left you covered in soot. Going up in a motor car made you nauseous. The railcar glided smoothly round and up gradients, slipping through the 103 tunnels without subjecting the passengers to blasts of hot, black smoke.

We stopped at Barog, a pretty little wayside station, famous for its breakfasts and in winter, for its mistletoe. We got into Simla at lunchtime and dined at Davico's. Simla was well served by restaurants. Davico's was famous for its meringues, and I experienced one for the first time. Then we trudged off to a lodging house called Craig Dhu, which was to be another of our temporary homes.

The Bishop Cotton Prep School was situated in Chotta Simla, at some distance from the Senior School. The boys were at play when I first saw them from the road above the playing field.

'You can see they're a happy lot,' said my father.

They certainly seemed a good deal noisier (and less inhibited) than their counterparts at the Mussoorie convent. Some spun tops; others wrestled with each other; several boys were dashing about with butterfly nets, chasing a large blue butterfly. Three or four sat quietly on the steps, perusing comics. In those days you had story comics or papers, such as *Hotspur*, *Wizard* or *Champion*, and you actually had to read them.

It was to be a month before I joined the school (admission took time), and in the interim I enjoyed an idyllic holiday with my father. If Davico's had its meringues, Wenger's had its pastries and chocolate cakes, while at Kwality the curry puffs and ice creams were superb. The reader will consider me to have been a spoilt brat, and so I was for a time; but there was always the nagging fear that my father would be posted to some inaccessible corner of the country, and I would be left to rot in boarding school for the rest of my days.

During a rickshaw ride around Elysium Hill, my father told me Kipling's story of the phantom rickshaw — my first encounter with hill station lore. He also showed

me the shop where Kim got his training as a spy from the mysterious Lurgan Sahib. I had not read Kipling at the time, but through my father's retellings I was already familiar with many of his characters and settings. The same Lurgan Sahib (I learnt later) had inspired another novel, F. Marion Crawford's *Mr Isaacs*. A Bishop Cotton's boy, Richard Blaker, had written a novel called *Scabby Dixon*, which had depicted life in the school at the turn of the century. And Bishop Cotton, our founder, had himself been a young master at Rugby under the famous Dr Arnold who was to write *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Cotton became the first headmaster at Marlborough before coming out to India.

All these literary traditions were beginning to crowd upon me. And of course there was the strange fact that my father had named me Ruskin, after the Victorian essayist and guru of art and architecture. Had my father been an admirer of Mr Ruskin? I did not ask him, because at that time I thought I was the *only* Ruskin. At some point during my schooldays I discovered John Ruskin's fairy story, *The King of the Golden River*, and thought it rather good. And years later, my mother was to confirm that my father had indeed named me after the Victorian writer. My other Christian name, Owen, was seldom used, and I have never really bothered with it. An extra Christian name seems quite superfluous. And besides, Owen (in Welsh) means 'brave', and I am not a brave person. I have done some foolhardy things, but more out of ignorance than bravery.

I settled down in the prep school without any fuss. Compared to the Mussoorie convent it was luxury. For lunch there was usually curry and rice (as compared to the spartan meat boiled with pumpkin, the convent speciality); for dinner there would be cutlets or a chop. There was a wartime shortage of eggs, but the school kitchen managed to make some fairly edible omelettes out of egg powder. Occasionally there were sausages, although no one could say with any certainty what was in them. On my questioning our housemaster as to their contents, he smiled mysteriously and sang the first line of a Nelson Eddy favourite — *Ah, sweet mystery of life!*

Our sausages came to be known as 'Sweet Mysteries'. This was 1943, and the end of the War was still two years away.

Flying heroes were the order of the day. There were the *Biggles* books, with a daredevil pilot as hero. And *Champion* comic books featured Rockfist Rogan of the RAF, another flying ace who, whenever he was shot down in enemy territory, took on the Nazis in the boxing ring before escaping in one of their aircraft.

Having a father in the RAF was very prestigious and I asked my father to wear his uniform whenever he came to see me. This he did, and to good effect.

‘Bond’s father is in the RAF,’ word went round, and other boys looked at me with renewed respect. ‘Does he fly bombers or fighter planes?’ they asked me.

‘Both,’ I lied. After all, there wasn’t much glamour in codes and ciphers, although they were probably just as important.

My own comic book hero was Flying O’Flynn, an acrobatic goalkeeper who made some breathtaking saves in every issue, and kept his otherwise humble team at the top of the football league. I was soon emulating him, on our stony football field, and it wasn’t long before I was the prep school goalkeeper.

Quite a few of the boys read books, the general favourites being the *William* stories, R.M. Ballantyne’s adventure novels, Capt. W.E. Johns (Biggles), and any sort of spy or murder mystery. There was one boy, about my age, who was actually writing a detective story. As there was a paper shortage, he wrote in a small hand on slips of toilet paper, and stored these away in his locker. I can’t remember his name, so have no idea if he grew up to become a professional writer. He left the following year, when most of the British boys began leaving India. Some had grown up in India; others had been sent out as evacuees during the Blitz.

I don’t remember any special friend during the first year at the prep school, but I got on quite well with teachers and classmates. As I’d joined in midterm, the rest of the year seemed to pass quickly. And when the Kalka-Delhi Express drew into Delhi, there was my father on the platform, wearing his uniform and looking quite spry and of course happy to see me.

He had now taken a flat in Scindia House, an apartment building facing Connaught Circus. This suited me perfectly, as it was only a few minutes from cinemas, bookshops and restaurants. Just across the road was the newly opened Milk Bar, and while my father was away at his office, I would occasionally slip out to have a milkshake — strawberry, chocolate or vanilla — and dart back home with a comic paper purchased at one of the newsstands.

All those splendid new cinemas were within easy reach too, and my father and I soon became regular cinegoers; we must have seen at least three films a week on an average. I again took to making lists of all the films I saw, including the casts as far as I could remember them. Even today, to reiterate, I can rattle off the cast of almost any Hollywood or British production of the 1940s. The films I enjoyed most that winter were *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (with James Cagney quite electric as George M. Cohan) and *This Above All*, a drama of wartime London.

When I asked my father how the film had got its title, he wrote down the lines from Shakespeare that had inspired it:

*This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou can'st not then be false to any man.*

I kept that piece of paper for many years, losing it only when I went to England. Helping my father with his stamp collection, accompanying him to the pictures, dropping in at Wenger's for tea and muffins, bringing home a book or record — what more could a small boy of eight have asked for?

And then there were the walks.

In those days, you had only to walk a short distance to be out of New Delhi and into the surrounding fields or scrub forest. Humayun's Tomb was surrounded by a wilderness of babul and keekar trees, and so were other old tombs and monuments on the periphery of the new capital. Today they have all been swallowed up by new housing estates and government colonies, and the snarl of traffic is wonderful to behold.

New Delhi was still a small place in 1943. The big hotels (Maidens, the Swiss) were in Old Delhi. Only a few cars could be seen on the streets. Most people, including service personnel, travelled by pony-drawn tongas. When we went to the station to catch a train, we took a tonga. Otherwise we walked.

In the deserted Purana Kila my father showed me the narrow steps leading down from Humayun's library. Here the Emperor had slipped and fallen to his death. Not far away was Humayun's tomb. These places had few visitors then, and we could relax on the grass without being disturbed by hordes of tourists, guides, vagrants and health freaks. New Delhi still has its parks and tree-lined avenues — but oh, the press of people! Who could have imagined then that within forty years' time, the city would have swallowed huge tracts of land way beyond Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Gurgaon, Najafgarh, Tughlaqabad, small towns, villages, fields, most of the Ridge and all that grew upon it!

Change and prosperity have come to Delhi, but its citizens are paying a high price for the privilege of living in the capital. Too late to do anything about it now. Spread on, great octopus — your tentacles have yet to be fully extended.

If, in writing this memoir, I appear to be taking my father's side, I suppose it is only human nature for a boy to be loyal to the parent who stands by him, no matter how difficult the circumstances. An eight-year-old is bound to resent his mother's liaison with another man. Looking back on my boyhood, I feel sure that my mother must have had her own compulsions, her own views on life and how it should be lived. After all, she had only been eighteen when she had married my father, who was about fifteen years her senior. She and her sisters had been a fun-loving set; they enjoyed going to dances, picnics, parties. She must have found my father too serious, too much of a stay-at-home, happy making the morning butter or sorting through his stamps in the evening. My mother told me later that he was very jealous, keeping her away from other men. And who wouldn't have been jealous? She was young, pretty, vivacious — everyone looked twice at her! They were obviously incompatible. They should never have married, I suppose. In which case, of course, I would not be here, penning these memoirs.



Hill of the Fairies

Fairy hill, or Pari Tibba as the paharis call it, is a lonely, uninhabited mountain lying to the east of Mussoorie, at a height of about 6000 feet. I have visited it occasionally, scrambling up its rocky slopes where the only paths are the narrow tracks made by goats and the small hill cattle. Rhododendrons and a few stunted oaks are the only trees on the hillsides, but at the summit is a small, grassy plateau ringed by pine trees.

It may have been on this plateau that the early settlers tried building their houses. All their attempts met with failure. The area seemed to attract the worst of any thunderstorm, and several dwellings were struck by lightning and burnt to the ground. People then confined themselves to the adjacent Landour hill, where a flourishing hill station soon grew up.

Why Pari Tibba should be struck so often by lightning has always been something of a mystery to me. Its soil and rock seem no different from the soil or rock of any other mountain in the vicinity. Perhaps a geologist can explain the phenomenon, or perhaps it has something to do with the fairies.

‘Why do they call it the Hill of the Fairies?’ I asked an old resident, a retired schoolteacher. ‘Is the place haunted?’

‘So they say,’ he said.

‘Who say?’

‘Oh, people who have heard it’s haunted. Some years after the site was abandoned by the settlers, two young runaway lovers took shelter for the night in one of the ruins. There was a bad storm and they were struck by lightning. Their charred bodies were found a few days later. They came from different communities and were buried far from each other, but their spirits hold a tryst every night under the pine trees. You might see them if you’re on Pari Tibba after sunset.’

There are no ruins on Pari Tibba, and I can only presume that the building materials were taken away for use elsewhere. And I did not stay on the hill till after sunset. Had I tried climbing downhill in the dark, I would probably have ended up as the third ghost on the mountain. The lovers might have resented my intrusion, or,

who knows, they might have welcomed a change. After a hundred years together on a windswept mountaintop, even the most ardent of lovers must tire of each other.

Who could have been seeing ghosts on Pari Tibba after sunset? The nearest resident is a woodcutter who makes charcoal at the bottom of the hill. Terraced fields and a small village straddle the next hill. But the only inhabitants of Pari Tibba are the langurs. They feed on oak leaves and rhododendron buds. The rhododendrons contain an intoxicating nectar, and after dining — or wining — to excess, the young monkeys tumble about on the grass in high spirits.

The black bulbuls also feed on the nectar of the rhododendron flower, and perhaps this accounts for the cheekiness of these birds. They are aggressive, disreputable little creatures, who go about in rowdy gangs. The song of most bulbuls consists of several pleasant tinkling notes; but that of the Himalayan black bulbul is as musical as the bray of an ass. Men of science, in their wisdom, have given this bird the sibilant name of *Hypsipetes psaroides*. But the hillmen, in their greater wisdom, call the species the ban bakra, which means the ‘jungle goat’.

Perhaps the flowers have something to do with the fairy legend. In April and May, Pari Tibba is covered with the dazzling yellow flowers of St John’s Wort (wort meaning herb). The paharis call the flower a wild rose, and it does resemble one. In Ireland it is called the Rose of Sharon.

In Europe this flower is reputed to possess certain magical and curative properties. It is believed to drive away all evil and protect you from witches. But do not tread on St John’s Wort after sunset, a fairy horseman will come and carry you off, landing you almost anywhere.

By day, St John’s Wort is kindly. Are you insane? Then drink the sap from the leaves of the plant, and you will be cured. Are you hurt? Take the juice and apply it to your wound — and if at first this doesn’t help, just keep applying juice until you stop bleeding, or breathing. Are you bald? Then rise early and bathe your head with the dew from St John’s Wort, and your hair will grow again — if you don’t catch pneumonia.

Can St John’s Wort be connected with the fairy legend of Pari Tibba? It is said that most flowers, when they die, become fairies. This might be especially true of St John’s Wort.

There is yet another legend connected with the mountain. A shepherd boy, playing on his flute, discovered a beautiful silver snake basking on a rock. The snake spoke to the boy, saying, ‘I was a princess once, but a jealous witch cast a spell over me and turned me into a snake. This spell can only be broken if someone who is pure in

heart kisses me thrice. Many years have passed, and I have not been able to find one who is pure in heart.' Then the shepherd boy took the snake in his arms, and he put his lips to its mouth, and at the third kiss he discovered that he was holding a beautiful princess in his arms. What happened afterwards is anybody's guess.

There are snakes on Pari Tibba, and though they are probably harmless, I have never tried taking one of them in my arms. Once, near a spring, I came upon a checkered water snake. Its body was a series of bulges. I used a stick to exert pressure along the snake's length, and it disgorged five frogs. They came out one after the other, and, to my astonishment, hopped off, little the worse for their harrowing experience. Perhaps they, too, were enchanted. Perhaps shepherd boys, when they kiss the snake-princess, are turned into frogs and remain inside the snake's belly until a writer comes along with a magic stick and releases them from bondage.

Biologists probably have their own explanation for the frogs, but I'm all for perpetuating the fairy legends of Pari Tibba.

The Elephant and the Cassowary Bird

The baby elephant, another of Grandfather's unusual pets, wasn't out of place in our home in north India because India is where elephants belong, and in any case our house was full of pets brought home by Grandfather, who was in the Forest Service. But the cassowary bird was different. No one had ever seen such a bird before — not in India, that is. Grandfather had picked it up on a voyage to Singapore, where he'd been given the bird by a rubber planter who'd got it from a Dutch trader who'd got it from a man in Indonesia.

Anyway, it ended up at our home in Dehra, and seemed to do quite well in the sub-tropical climate. It looked like a cross between a turkey and an ostrich, but bigger than the former and smaller than the latter — about five feet in height. It was not a beautiful bird, nor even a friendly one, but it had come to stay, and everyone was curious about it, especially the baby elephant.

Right from the start the baby elephant took a great interest in the cassowary. He would circle round the odd creature, and diffidently examine with his trunk the texture of its stumpy wings; of course, he suspected no evil, and his childlike curiosity encouraged him to take liberties which resulted in an unpleasant experience.

Noticing the baby elephant's attempts to make friends with the rather morose cassowary, we felt a bit apprehensive. Self-contained and sullen, the big bird responded only by slowly and slyly raising one of its powerful legs, all the while gazing into space with an innocent air. We knew what the gesture meant: we had seen that treacherous leg raised on many an occasion, and suddenly shooting out with a force that would have done credit to a vicious camel. In fact, camel and cassowary kicks are delivered on the same plan, except that the camel kicks backward like a horse and the bird forward.

We wished to spare our baby elephant a painful experience, and led him away from the bird. But he persisted in his friendly overtures, and one morning he received an ugly reward. Rapid as lightning, the cassowary hit straight from the hip and knee joints, and the elephant ran squealing to Grandfather.

For several days he avoided the cassowary, and we thought he had learnt his lesson. He crossed and recrossed the compound and the garden, swinging his trunk, thinking furiously. Then, a week later, he appeared on the veranda at breakfast time in his usual cheery, childlike fashion, sidling up to the cassowary as if nothing had happened.

We were struck with amazement at this and so, it seemed, was the bird. Had the painful lesson already been forgotten, that too by a member of the elephant tribe noted for its ability never to forget? Another dose of the same medicine would serve the booby right.

The cassowary once more began to draw up its fighting leg with sinister determination. It was nearing the true position for the master-kick, kung-fu style, when all of a sudden the baby elephant seized with his trunk the other leg of the cassowary and pulled it down. There was a clumsy flapping of wings, a tremendous swelling of the bird's wattle, and an undignified getting up, as if it were a floored boxer doing his best to beat the count of ten. The bird then marched off with an attempt to look stately and unconcerned, while we at the breakfast table were convulsed with laughter.

After this the cassowary bird gave the baby elephant as wide a berth as possible. But they were forced not to coexist for very long. The baby elephant, getting bulky and cumbersome, was sold to a zoo where he became a favourite with young visitors who loved to take rides on his back.

As for the cassowary, he continued to grace our veranda for many years, gaped at but not made much of, while entering on a rather friendless old age.



A New Flower

It was the first day of spring (according to the Hindu calendar), but here in the Himalayas it still seemed mid-winter. A cold wind hummed and whistled through the pines, while dark rain-clouds were swept along by the west wind only to be thrust back by the east wind.

I was climbing the steep road to my cottage at the top of the hill when I was overtaken by nine-year-old Usha hurrying back from school. She had tied a scarf round her head to keep her hair from blowing about. Dark hair and eyes, and pink cheeks, were all accentuated by the patches of snow still lying on the hillside.

‘Look,’ she said, pointing. ‘A new flower!’ It was a single, butter-yellow blossom, and it stood out like a bright star against the drab winter grass. I hadn’t seen anything like it before, and had no idea what its name might be. No doubt its existence was recorded in some botanical tome. But for me it was a discovery.

‘Shall I pick it for you?’ asked Usha. ‘No, don’t,’ I said. ‘It may be the only one. If we break it, there may not be any more. Let’s leave it there and see if it seeds.’ We scrambled up the slope and examined the flower more closely. It was very delicate and soft-petalled looking as though it might fall at any moment.

‘It will be finished if it rains,’ said Usha. And it did rain that night — rain mingled with sleet and hail. It rattled and swished on the corrugated tin roof; but in the morning the sun came out. I walked up the road without really expecting to see the flower again. And Usha had been right. The flower had disappeared in the storm. But two other buds, unnoticed by us the day before, had opened. It was as though two tiny stars had fallen to earth in the night.

I did not see Usha that day, but the following day, when we met on the road, I showed her the fresh blossoms. And they were still there, two days later, when I passed by, but so were two goats, grazing on the short grass and thorny thickets of the slope. I had no idea if they were partial to these particular flowers, but I did know that goats would eat almost anything and I was taking no chances.

Scrambling up the steep slope, I began to shoo them away. One goat retreated, but the other lowered his horns, gave me a baleful look, and refused to move. It

reminded me a little of my grandfather's pet goat who had once pushed a visiting official into a bed of nasturtiums; so I allowed discretion to be the better part of valour, and backed away.

Just then, Usha came along and, sizing up the situation, came to the rescue. She unfurled her pretty, blue umbrella and advanced on the goat shouting at it in goat language. (She had her own goats at home.) The beast withdrew, and the flowers (and my own dignity) were saved.

As the days grew warmer, the flowers faded and finally disappeared. I forgot all about them, and so did Usha. There were lessons and exams for her to worry about, and rent and electricity bills to occupy a freelance writer's thoughts.

The months passed, summer and autumn came and went, with their own more showy blooms; and in no time at all, winter returned with cold winds blowing from all directions.

One day I heard Usha calling to me from the hillside. I looked up and saw her standing behind a little cluster of golden star-shaped flowers — not, perhaps, as spectacular as Wordsworth's field of golden daffodils but, all the same, an enchanting sight for one who had played a small part in perpetuating their existence.

Where there had been one flowering plant, there were now several. Usha and I speculated on the prospect of the entire hillside being covered with the flowers in a few years' time.

I still do not know the botanical name for the little flower. I can't remember long Latin names anyway. But Usha tells me that she has seen it growing near her father's village, on the next mountain, and that the hill people call it 'Basant', which means spring.

Although I am just a little disappointed that we are not, after all, the discoverers of a new species, this is outweighed by our pleasure in knowing that the flower flourishes in other places. May it multiply!

POETRY



Boy in a Blue Pullover

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Boy in a faded blue pullover,
Poor boy, thin, smiling boy,
Ran down the road shouting,
Singing, flinging his arms wide.
I stood in the way and stopped him.
'What's up?' I said. 'Why are you happy?'
He showed me the nickel rupee-coin.
'I found it on the road,' he said.
And he held it to the light
That he might see it shining bright.
'And how will you spend it,
Small boy in blue pullover?'
'I'll buy —
I'll buy a buckle for my belt!'
Slim boy, smart boy,
Would buy a buckle for his belt
Coin clutched in his hot hand,
He ran off laughing, bright.
The coin I'd lost an hour ago;
But better his that night.



We Three

We three,
We're not a crowd;
We're not even company —
My echo,
My shadow,
And me.

Granny's Tree-Climbing

My grandmother was a genius. You'd like to know why?
Because she could climb trees. Spreading or high,
She'd be up their branches in a trice. And mind you,
When last she climbed a tree, she was sixty-two.
Ever since childhood, she'd had this gift
for being happier in a tree than in a lift;
And though, as years went by, she would be told
That climbing trees should stop when one grew old
And that growing old should be gone about gracefully
She'd laugh and say, 'Well, I'll grow old disgracefully.
I can do it better.' And we had to agree;
For in all the garden there wasn't a tree
She hadn't been up, at one time or another
(Having learned to climb from a loving brother
When she was six) but it was feared by all
That one day she'd have a terrible fall.
The outcome was different; while we were in town
She climbed a tree and couldn't come down!
We went to the rescue, and helped her descend . . .
A doctor took Granny's temperature and said,
'I strongly recommend a quiet week in bed.'
We sighed with relief and tucked her up well.
Poor Granny! For her, it was more like a season in hell.

Confined to her bedroom, while every breeze
Whispered of summer and dancing leaves.
But she held her peace till she felt stronger
Then sat up and said, 'I'll lie here no longer!'
And she called for my father and told him undaunted
That a house in a treetop was what she now wanted.
My dad knew his duties. He said, 'That's all right
You'll have what you want, dear, I'll start work tonight.'
With my expert assistance, he soon finished the chore:
Made her a tree house with windows and a door.
So Granny moved up, and now every day
I climb to her room with glasses and a tray.
She sits there in state and drinks mocktails with me,
Upholding her right to reside in a tree.



Love's Sad Song

There's a sweet little girl who lives down the lane,
And she's so pretty and I'm so plain,
She's clever and smart and all things good,
And I'm the bad boy of the neighbourhood.
But I'd be her best friend forever and a day
If only she'd smile and look my way.

In a Strange Cafe

Waiter, where's my soup?
On its way, sir, loop the loop!
Straight from our famous cooking pot,
Here it comes, sir, piping hot!
But waiter, there's a fly in my soup.
That's no fly, sir,
That's your chicken.
The smaller the chicken the better the soup!
Please take it away.
I'll just have the curry and a plate of rice . . .
The curry's very good, sir, full of spice!
Waiter, what's this object that's floating around?
Just a small beetle, sir,
Homeward bound!
Never mind the curry, just bring me some bread,
I have to eat something before I'm in bed.
What's on the menu? Hungarian Goulash?
I suppose it's served up with beetles and mash.
Isn't there anything else I can eat?
Yes sir, you could try the crow's feet.
Highly recommended and good for the teeth.
All our best guests
Are most happily fed here.
And where are they now?
All happily dead, sir.

If Mice Could Roar

If mice could roar
And elephants soar,
And trees grow up in the sky;
If tigers could dine
On biscuits and wine,
And the fattest of men could fly!
If pebbles could sing
and bells never ring
And teachers were lost in the post;
If a tortoise could run
And losses be won,
And bullies be buttered on toast;
If a song brought a shower
And a gun grew a flower,
This world would be nicer than most!



My Best Friend

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My best friend
Is the baker's son,
I gave him a book
And he gave me a bun!
I told him a tale
Of a magical lake,
And he liked it so much
That he baked me a cake.
Yes, he's my best friend —
We go cycling together,
On bright, sunny days,
Or in rain and bad weather.
And if we feel hungry
There's always a pie
Or a pastry to feast on,
As we go riding by!

The Cat Has Something to Say

Sir, you're a human and I'm a cat,
And I'm really quite happy to leave it at that.
It doesn't concern me if you like a dish
Of chicken masala or lobster and fish.
So why all these protests around the house
If for dinner I fancy
A succulent mouse?
Or a careless young sparrow who came my way?
Our natures, dear sir, are really the same:
Flesh, fish or fowl, we both like our game.
Only you take yours curried,
And I take mine plain.

As a Boy

As a boy I stood on the edge of the railway-cutting,
Outside the dark tunnel, my hands touching
The hot rails, waiting for them to tremble
At the coming of the noonday train.
The whistle of the engine hung on the forest's silence.
Then out of the tunnel, a green-gold dragon
Came plunging, thundering past —
Out of the tunnel, out of the dark.
And the train rolled on, every day
Hundreds of people coming or going or running away —
Goodbye, goodbye !
I haven't seen you again, bright boy at the carriage window,
Waving to me, calling,
But I've loved you all these years and looked for you everywhere,
In cities and villages, beside the sea,
In the mountains, in crowds at distant places;
Returning always to the forest's silence,
To watch the windows of some passing train
Mountains in my blood.

The Demon Driver

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At driving a car I've never been good —
I batter the bumper and damage the hood —
'Get off the road!' the traffic cops shout,
'You're supposed to go *round* that roundabout!' —
'I thought it was quicker to drive straight through.'
'Give us your licence — it's time to renew.'
I took their advice and handed a fee
To a Babu who looked on this windfall with glee.
'No problem,' he said, 'your licence now pukka,
You may drive all the way from here to Kolkata.'

So away I drove, at a feverish pitch,
Advancing some way down an unseen ditch.
Once back on the highway, I soon joined the fray
Of hundreds of drivers who wouldn't give way:
I skimmed past a truck and revolved round a van
(Good drivers can do anything that they can)
Then offered a lift to a man with a load —
'Just a little way down to the end of this road.'

As I pressed on the pedal, the car gave a shudder:
He'd got in at one door, got out at the other.
'God help you!' he said, as he hurried away,
'I'll come for a drive another fine day!'
I came to that roundabout, round it I sped
Eager to get to my dinner and bed.
Round it I went, and round it once more
'Get off the road!' That cop was a bore.
I swung to the left and went clean through a wall,
My neighbour stood there — he looked menacing, tall —
'This will cost you three thousand,' he quietly said,
'And send me your cheque before you're in bed!'
Alas! my new car was sent for repair,
But my friends gathered round and said, never despair!
'We are all going to help you to make a fresh start.'
And next day they gave me a nice bullock-cart.



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