

A black silhouette illustration of a man and a goat standing side-by-side. The man is on the left, facing right, with his arms slightly raised. The goat is on the right, facing left, with its head turned towards the man. They are positioned on a pink ground against a light blue background.

Chandni

- ★ Abbu Khan kept goats as pets.
- ★ He loved his goats, but they left him one by one.
- ★ He bought a young pretty goat and called her Chandni.

ONCE upon a time there lived an old man in Almora. He was popularly known as Abbu Khan. He lived all alone except for a few goats which he always kept as pets. He gave his goats funny names such as Kalua, Moongia or Gujri. He would take them out for grazing during the day and talk to them as one talks to one's own children; at night he would bring them back to his little hut and put a string round the neck of each goat.

Poor Abbu Khan was a little unlucky in the matter of his goats. Very often at night one of the goats would pull and pull at the string till it broke loose, and then would disappear in the hills beyond. Goats in hilly regions hate being tied to trees or poles. They love their freedom. Abbu Khan's goats were of the best hill breed. They too loved their freedom. So whenever they got the chance, they would run away only to get killed by an old wolf who lived in the hills.

Whenever one of his goats disappeared, Abbu Khan was very sad. He did not understand why even the juiciest grass and grains that he gave them, and all the love that he

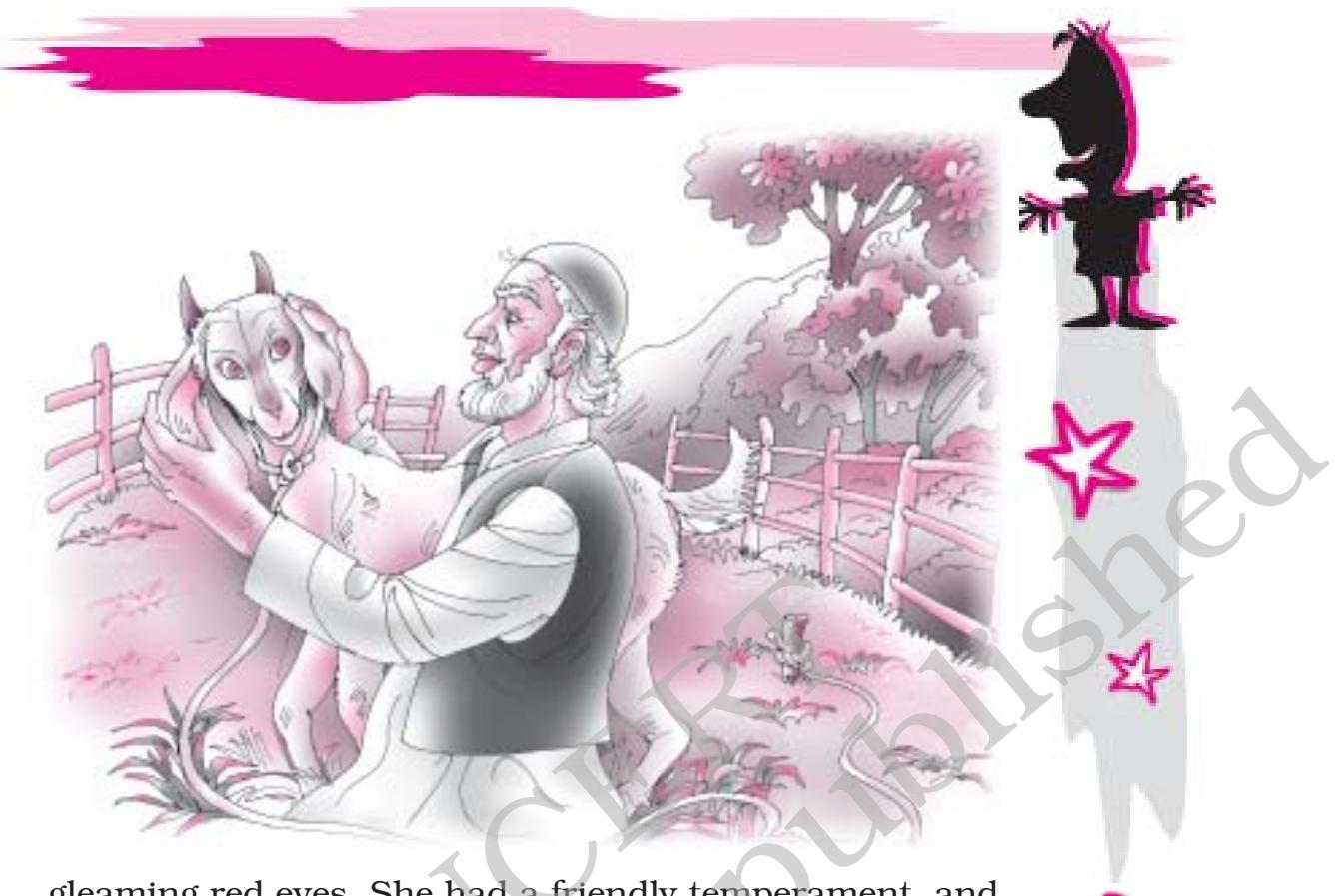


showered on them, would not stop these unfortunate goats from running straight into the jaws of death. Are these goats mad, he wondered! Or was it their love for freedom! But freedom meant struggle, hardship, even death. Abbu Khan couldn't solve the mystery.

One day, when all his goats had left him, Abbu Khan said to himself, "No more goats in my house ever again. I may yet live for a few more years but I'll live without goats." However, the poor old man was terribly lonely. He simply couldn't do without his pets. Very soon he bought a young goat. He thought, "A young goat will stay with me much longer. She will soon begin to love me as well as the food I give her every day. She will never want to go to the hills." And he laughed with joy.

The new goat was very pretty. She was white as snow, and had two little horns on her little head, and a pair of





gleaming red eyes. She had a friendly temperament, and would listen to Abbu Khan's tales with a lot of interest and affection. Abbu Khan called her Chandni, which means 'moonlight'. He loved Chandni and would narrate to her stories of all his friends who were dead and gone.

Several years passed; Chandni was still there. Abbu Khan believed that Chandni would never leave his compound for the free and fresh air of the hills beyond. Alas! he was mistaken again.

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Chandni

Comprehension Check

1. Why did Abbu Khan's goats want to run away? What happened to them in the hills?
2. Abbu Khan said, "No more goats in my house ever again." Then he changed his mind. Why?
3. Why did he buy a young goat?

- * Like other goats, Chandni too missed the hills.
- * She told Abbu Khan she must have her freedom.
- * The story of the dangerous wolf in the forest did not discourage Chandni.

Every morning Chandni watched the hilltops bathed in the sunlight. "How beautiful those hills are!" she thought. "How refreshing the breeze that blows through them! And how lovely to run across those green fields!" She ran towards the hills but had to stop with a jerk—the rope round her neck wouldn't let her go any further. How she hated that rope!

She stopped eating the green grass Abbu Khan brought for her; nor did she listen to his stories with interest and affection. She lost her appetite, grew very thin and stared moodily at the hilltops bathed in sunlight. Abbu Khan did not understand Chandni's anguish. At last, she decided to speak to him frankly. "Dear Abbu Khan," she said, "let me go to the hills, please. If I stay on in your compound, I'll die." Now Abbu Khan understood Chandni's problem, but it made him very unhappy. The earthen pot which contained Chandni's breakfast fell from his hands and broke into a thousand pieces.

"Why do you want to leave me, Chandni?" Abbu Khan asked.

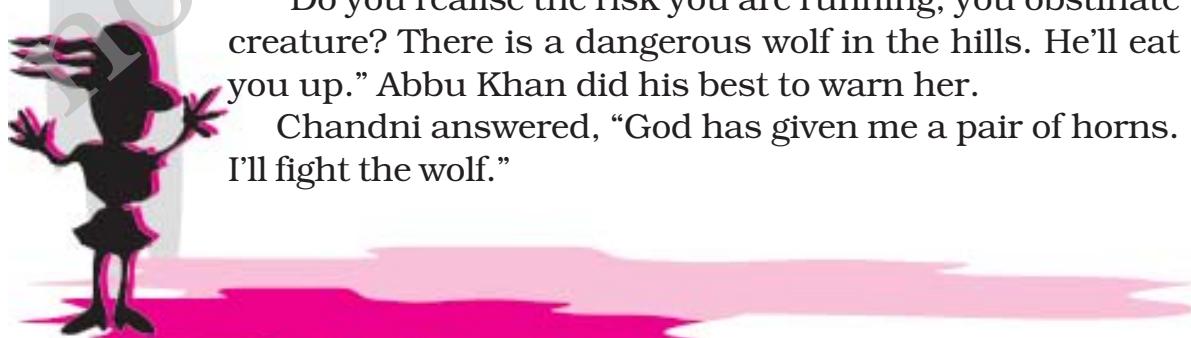
"I want to go to the hills," Chandni answered.

"Don't you like the food here? I'll give you tastier food and a much longer rope."

"No, thank you. Let me go to the hills."

"Do you realise the risk you are running, you obstinate creature? There is a dangerous wolf in the hills. He'll eat you up." Abbu Khan did his best to warn her.

Chandni answered, "God has given me a pair of horns. I'll fight the wolf."



"Fight the wolf, indeed! Have you forgotten the story of your sister Kalua who was the size of a big deer. She fought the wolf through the night but was killed in the morning." Abbu Khan narrated Kalua's story for the fiftieth time.





To all this Chandni had only one thing to say: "I want to go to the hills."

Abbu Khan got very annoyed. He thundered, "You are not going anywhere. From today you'll live in a small hut, and not move about freely in the compound. Ungrateful as you are, you must still be saved from the wolf." He pushed her into a small hut and shut the door. But he forgot to close the small window at the back. The same night Chandni made that window her passage to freedom.

Comprehension Check

1. Why did Chandni hate the rope round her neck?
2. "Now Abbu Khan understood Chandni's problem..." What was Chandni's problem?
3. Abbu Khan pushed Chandni into a small hut. This shows that he
 - (i) was cruel.
 - (ii) loved her and wanted to save her life.
 - (iii) was selfish.

- ★ Chandni went back to the hills.
- ★ She knew the wolf was somewhere there.
- ★ She was ready to put up a good fight.

Chandni reached the hills. It seemed to her that the old hills were standing in a row to welcome her. She felt like a child meeting her parents after years of separation. Wherever she went, the tall grass rose to embrace her, the flowers bloomed to amuse her and the wind sang an endless song of welcome. How different all this was from her past in the prison-house of Abbu Khan's compound! It was the happiest day in Chandni's life.

That day she played for hours on the grassy slopes of the hills. She met a herd of wild goats who asked her to join their group. But Chandni politely refused. She wanted to enjoy her new freedom all by herself.

The sun disappeared behind the hills, and soon darkness enveloped the grass, the flowers and the trees. The wind stopped blowing, and there was stillness all around except for a strange sound which was coming from the bushes. The sound was like a grunt. What was it? It wasn't Abbu Khan's voice calling her back to the compound; nor was it the voice of another goat. Then Chandni thought of the dangerous wolf who lived in the hills. She felt scared.





Should she go back to the safety of Abbu Khan's hut? "No," she said to herself, "death in an open field is far better than life in a small hut". The wolf had come out of the bushes, and was staring greedily at Chandni. His eyes were shining like burning coals in the darkness. He seemed in no hurry. He knew the new goat was his.

The wolf and the goat sized up each other. The wolf was big and ferocious whereas the goat, though healthy, was small. But small is not weak. Chandni stood firm on her legs, head slightly bent and horns jutting out. She was a picture of courage. She looked like a brave soldier ready to fight a treacherous enemy. "I must put up a good fight," Chandni thought; "success or failure is a matter of luck or chance."

The fight began. It went on through the night. The moon, which had been watching the fight, began to grow pale and



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suddenly hid behind the clouds. The stars also began to disappear one by one. A faint light appeared in the east and the morning call for prayer came from a distant mosque.

The first rays of the sun saw Chandni lying on the ground. She was completely soaked in blood. The wolf, tired and sleepy, was getting ready to devour her.

An assembly of birds perched on top of a tree nearby was debating the result of the fight. "Who is the winner?" one of them asked. "The wolf, of course," most of them said. A wise old bird declaimed with confidence, "Chandni is the winner."

ZAKIR HUSAIN
(an adaptation)

Comprehension Check

1. Why did Chandni refuse to join the group of wild goats?
2. Chandni fought the wolf because she
 - (i) was stronger than the wolf.
 - (ii) hated the wolf.
 - (iii) had to retain her freedom at all costs.

Exercises

Discuss the following topics in groups.

1. Why did the wise old bird say, "Chandni is the winner"?
2. "Death in an open field is better than life in a small hut," Chandni said to herself. Was it the right decision? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Freedom is life. Discuss this with reference to 'Chandni' and 'I Want Something in a Cage'.