

MORE
SHORT STORIES
FOR
CHILDREN



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Illustrated by Jagdish Joshi

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HEART OF GOLD

My parents decided to send me to my uncle's place for a while. They felt this would help to discipline me.

"Study seriously. I've placed high hopes on you, my child," warned Father as I was leaving.

"Don't bother your aunt and don't play with the bad boys there," was Mother's parting advice.

At the new place I felt lonely. For a few days, after returning from school, I stayed at home and spent the time doing home-work and revising lessons.

Soon I made friends. All of them were fond of playing games. We went to school together and came back in a group.

The temple priest gave me sweets every Tuesday. The carpenter made a *gulli danda** for me. The blacksmith gladly sharpened my *khurpi*** But I liked Faqira, the *chowkidar*,*** most of all. He loved children. We all enjoyed his jokes. His voice was husky and he had a shrill laugh.

One evening, I came home late. "Where have you been all day?" asked aunt sternly.

"I went with Shankara to his fields," I replied meekly.

*used for playing *tipcat*

**small *spade*

*** *watchman*

"You're in our charge. I won't allow you to neglect your studies," she warned.

I opened my satchel and started studying.

"If you do this again, I'll have to tell Chachu Chawdhary," she continued. I looked at her, but did not dare ask who Chachu Chawdhary was.

"Have you seen Chachu Chawdhary?" asked Shankara on the way to school the next morning.

"Chachu Chawdhary?" I was surprised to hear the same name again. "Who is he?" I asked.

"Look there," he pointed towards a nearby field.

I craned my neck. A big able-bodied man was fighting with a bull. He was pushing the strong animal.

On the way back I asked Shankara about Chachu.

"Chachu has wild red eyes and a wide jaw," said Shankara.

Dalipu confirmed Shankara's description of Chachu by imitating his waddling gait, while Ahmedi added, "Chachu is six feet three inches tall and quite fat."

"The strongest and most feared person in our village," said Rinu.

"No, not only in our village, but in the whole area right up to the canal. No one dare oppose him." To make his point Shankara emphasized every word.

As we approached the house I saw aunt standing at the door. I ran home without even saying good-bye to my friends. I had some milk and quickly sat down to do my home-work. But Chachu remained in my mind all the time. 'Chachu is the most feared person in our village', I repeated the words to myself.

At night I asked Uncle about Chachu.

"He is a brave man with a lion's heart," said Uncle. "He killed three dacoits who had come to loot our village once."

"He killed them alone?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes, no dacoit has ever dared to come anywhere near our village after that," Uncle said proudly.

"Then he must have got a big prize for bravery."

"Would you like to meet Chachu?" asked Uncle abruptly.

"No, no, I'm afraid of him. I don't want to see him," I said frightened. Uncle laughed, but Aunt suppressed her smile.

I also came to know that the village Sarhala was popularly known as *Khooni* Sarhala, because of the murders that had taken place there. For a while, I felt ashamed of studying in a village with such a nickname.

One day, while returning from school, we saw a man digging a grave. That was the first time I was seeing a grave. It was a deep, dark pit.

At noon, one Sunday, when everybody was indoors, I decided to dig the ground in front of our house.

"What are you doing, dear?" I heard a throaty voice.

"Digging a grave," I replied without looking up. I was sure it was Faqira.

"For whom is this grave?"

"For your ghost, Faqira."

"But I'm too big for this small grave."

"I'll cut you into pieces and____"

A resonant laughter followed.

I turned. It was Chachu. I couldn't find my voice. "Why are you upset, dear?" he asked affectionately.

I ran for shelter, leaving my *khurpi* and *chappals** behind. I didn't enter the house, for I was afraid Chachu would come in.

"Why are you running away from me? I'm Chachu—your own Chachu," he spoke loudly.

I heard something more which I could not understand.

* *slipper* *



For three hours I hid behind a bush. The butterflies didn't interest me. It appeared they spied on me and would report back to Chachu about his 'grave digger'.

After this incident, I avoided Chachu as much as possible.

One rainy morning, five of us class-mates were wading happily through ankle-deep water. It was Chachu who came to our help by warning us of a *nullah** ahead.

"Chachu is really great," said Dalipu. I could only nod my head.

One evening, when we were playing on a sand mound, Dalipu boasted, "I'll catch hold of Chachu's neck when I grow stronger."

"But he has no neck," retorted Ahmedi. All of them laughed. But I did not.

"Chachu's head is like a truck's headlight," said Rinu. There was another ripple of laughter. This time I smiled, a feeble artificial smile.

"Here comes Chachu," cried Shankara. I broke into a cold sweat. But thank God, it was only a joke. My heart was still pounding.

I stood first in my class in the first quarterly test. Uncle patted me on the back. Aunt gave me a piece of sweet bread. My friends demanded a treat.

Chachu, too, came to congratulate me. On seeing him, I shut myself in the bathroom. But I could hear him talking to Uncle and Aunt.

"Where's our little nephew—our good nephew?" asked Chachu.

"He must be playing outside," said uncle.

"I'll give him a prize if he stands first in his final examination," announced Chachu.

**stream*

I felt proud and decided to step out. But when I saw Chachu at a distance, I beat a hasty retreat.

One afternoon, I was watching a juggler's show. "Is my grave ready, Pashu?" a voice asked from behind. Without looking back, I ran from the scene.

I was sure Chachu would one day catch hold of me and punish me.

In the half-yearly test, too, I stood first, in spite of the fact that I deliberately left two questions in one paper unanswered. Once again, my friends and others flocked to our house to congratulate me. My parents, too, sent me a letter of congratulation. Thank heavens, Chachu didn't come this time.

That night Uncle told me, "Chachu is quite generous to the poor."

"Does he really help them?" I asked.

"Yes," said Uncle. "Also, he loves children."

I was stunned. "Then why does he frighten us?" I asked.

"Maybe for the fun of it."

"Does Chachu beat those who don't study?"

Uncle smiled, shaking his head. But Aunt hastened to say, "Chachu never spares those who do not obey their elders."

Examinations over, I went back to my parents. I knew I would have to discontinue my studies as there was no high school in our village. Moreover, my father had a limited income. I did not want to return to *Khooni* Sarhala because of Chachu. Deep, in my heart, I did have a sneaking regard for him. I cursed myself for being so afraid of him.

The results were out.

"Pashu, you have broken the school record. You got more than 80 per cent." Uncle himself brought us the good news.

I was thrilled. But, when he said, "Chachu has not forgotten his promise," I turned pale.

"I'm not going to the village just for the sake of receiving from Chachu a gift of a couple of notebooks and pencils," I said curtly but firmly.

"Chachu won't eat you," said uncle.

"A present is a present, however small," said father.

Mother intervened. "Pashu won't go now. He'll go there after some time with me. I know Chachu loves children."

The next week, a message came from Sarhala. "Chachu is ill. He wants to see Pashu."

I thought it was only an excuse. I didn't go. But I thought of Chachu and prayed for his recovery.

Three days later, another person came from Sarhala. "Chachu Chawdhary has sent this so that Pashu can pursue his studies," said the messenger, thrusting a few currency notes into my hands.

'Why has he sent money? Isn't he well?' These questions raced through my mind as my eyes welled up with tears.

"How's my Chachu? I'll go to him. I'm not afraid of him," I cried, quite overwhelmed by now.

Mother counted the money. Five hundred rupees!

"Chachu has no child of his own and feels lonely," said the man from the village.

"I'll go there. I'll study there," I said, tears pouring down my cheeks.

FIVE GHOSTS

It had been raining heavily all week and that morning was no exception. My cousins, Rajat, Sumant and Nalini, and I were getting restless. We had come to our grandmother's house in Ranikhet to spend the summer holidays.

'If it wasn't for the nasty weather, we would have been running over hillsides', I thought as I sat down to breakfast. 'Why doesn't something interesting happen?'

That was when *Naniji*, my grandmother, made that remark. "Arun," she said to her youngest son, "it is amazing how you can never find your things, especially as you insist you know where you had kept them! One would think there was a *bhoot** following you."

Nalini and I lowered our heads and giggled into our plates. Arun Uncle was like that. He studied mathematics at the university and lived in a world of his own. It was a complicated world in which everything was one big mathematical problem.

As soon as breakfast was over, Rajat whispered, "Come to 'our room'. Shsh don't say anything just now."

I glanced at Sumant. He seemed to be very excited about something. As I made my way to 'our room', I

**ghost*

wondered what was in the offing. I did not have to wait long to find out.

"Guess what!" exclaimed Sumant as soon as we were in 'our room', which was actually a store at the back of the house.

"I have a great idea. Remember *Dadiji** telling Arun uncle that a *bhoot* is following him all the time? Why don't *we* become the *bhoots* and have some fun?"

I had visions of being dressed in white and scaring everyone out of their wits. No, I shook my head, it wouldn't work what with *Bade Mama*,** Sumant and Nalini's father around. We would be caught out in no time and given such a thrashing that we would remember it all our lives.

"Listen to me," I said, "it won't work."

"Why not?"

"Of course it will!"

"Don't be such a spoil-sport!"

They quietened down a little when I explained to them why it would not work.

"Oh, but it's too good an idea to be abandoned like that!" sighed Rajat.

"I agree," spoke Nalini, the youngest of us all. "Let's scare only Arun Uncle. He'll never guess it's us."

Once it was decided that Arun Uncle would be the victim of our *bhoot* pranks, we wasted no time. After breakfast, Uncle usually went for a bath. Often he left his spectacles on the dressing table. Sumant was deputed to find out and do the needful.

It was about fifteen minutes later that we heard the commotion.

"I know I put them there, on the dressing table."

My mother, who was plaiting my hair, shook her

**paternal grandmother*

***uncle*



head and said, "This boy, I don't think he will ever learn."

"I wonder what it is this time," said Rajat's mother. I don't know how I managed not to giggle.

"I refuse to look for them, find them yourself," said *Naniji*.

"You know I can't find them on my own. How can I find my spectacles when I am not wearing them? I can't see!"

'I heard Arun Uncle's indignant reply. Oh, it was so funny!

"Let me go and help, Mummy!" I begged. I waited impatiently as she put a ribbon through my plait and then ran to Uncle's room. Sumant and Nalini were there already, looking for the glasses, while Arun Uncle sat on his bed, looking lost.

It was Sumant, naturally, who found them eventually. "Would you believe it!" he called out in a voice full of disbelief, "they ate here, on the shoe-rack!"

"Well, I must say, that is a fine place to put them!" said *Naniji*. She had searched every corner of every drawer in the dressing table. She flounced out of the room, leaving poor uncle protesting that he had never been anywhere near the shoe-rack since the morning.

Next was Rajat's turn. He decided to hide the notebook in which Arun Uncle worked out his mathematical problems.

The next morning Uncle woke up everyone in the house at five-thirty. A possible solution to the problem he had been working at the night before had just occurred to him. But he could not find his notebook.

We cousins had a wonderful time looking for it. No one found it though. It was discovered later, by Chhoti *Mausi** when she opened the refrigerator and

**aunt*

there it was! Later in the morning, when we were in our room, I congratulated Rajat. "That surely was a super place to hide it."

Rajat did not seem too pleased. In fact, he looked worried. "Don't you think we've troubled him enough?" he sounded concerned. "Let's not____"

"No!" screamed Nalini and I together.

"Now that you've had your turn, Rajat *Bhaiya*," said Nalini accusingly, "you don't want others to get theirs! I don't care. It's my turn next."

"Listen," interrupted Sumant, "I don't think anyone believes that a *bhoot* is responsible for doing all those things. They believe it's absent-minded Arun Uncle. Let's play a prank on someone else, if we have to."

"Yes, that way we won't be troubling poor Arun Uncle," I said. "I felt so bad when nobody listened to him today. They all believe he drank water before going to bed and left his notebook in the fridge!"

"Let me make a suggestion," said Rajat. Slowly he explained his plan to us. There was no snag in it. Everyone was sure to get taken in.

I tried my best to stay awake that night, but soon my eyelids were drooping. As I drifted to sleep, I wondered how poor Nalini, who had to carry out the plan, would stay awake.

When I woke up, it seemed as though everybody was talking at the same time.

"Well, she must have imagined it!" I heard my mother.

"She has been listening to too many stories! Saw a ghost, indeed!" This was Nalini's father.

Oh, good! Nalini had managed it! I quickly ran to Uncle's room where the voices were coming from.

Nalini was lying in her mother's lap, sobbing.

Sumant, who was standing behind her, looked at me and winked. She is doing her part well, I said to myself.

"I tell you I saw it, Mummy," sobbed Nalini. "It was white, and it stood just there, near that window. I was not imagining. I tell you I was not!"

"No, child. You weren't," *Mamiji** patted her head and kissed her.

"I have never heard anything so preposterous..." started off *Mamaji***, but *Mamiji* silenced him with a look.

We had planned that Nalini would awaken her mother at night and say she had seen a *bhoot*. So the next time we performed any pranks, people would think the *bhoot* had done them!

The plan had worked to perfection, thanks to Nalini's acting. Chhoti *Mausi* and Nina *Mausi* had been discussing whether there could possibly have been a 'supernatural agency' at work!

Naturally, I was most excited when we three got together in our room, Sumant, Rajat and I. Nalini was asleep.

"It's my turn now!" I said. "Why don't I hide under someone's bed and pull off their bedclothes?"

"I'm not too happy," said Rajat, shaking his head.

"I don't care whether you approve of it or not. It's my turn and I'm going to do it. I shall hide under *Naniji's* bed..."

I refused to listen to their protests. Spoil-sports, the whole lot of them!

That's how I found myself under *Naniji's* bed that night. I had slipped off after Mummy had gone to sleep.

Suddenly I heard a noise beside me. I turned and

**aunt*

***uncle*

saw a vague shape next to me.

"Sumant!" I exclaimed keeping my voice down. "Why have you come here? I am doing all right on my own."

To tell you the truth, I was far from feeling all right. I had been more than a little scared. None of us had been allowed to see Nalini the whole day, for *Mamiji* insisted that she had had a 'nasty shock'. I wondered if she had, indeed, seen a ghost. No, I shook my head, of course not, there is no such thing as a ghost. I was glad to see Sumant, though I was not going to admit it.

"Oh, we're going to have fun. Aren't we?" he spoke. Funny how voices sound so different at night, I thought.

"A lot of fun, indeed! Shall I pull off her blanket first?" he asked, in a whisper.

"No, I'll do it! You've had your turn, hiding the spectacles!" I was getting angry and did not bother to lower my voice.

"Who's it? What's it? What's happening?" *Naniji* was awake!

"Ho, ho," Sumant burst out.

Why didn't he keep quiet?

"Ho, ho!" he went on, sounding quite gleeful. "You'll be caught, and I'll escape! It's Mina here under the bed!" he said, more loudly this time.

I could not believe my ears! Before I could turn round and kick him, he had already slipped off! What on earth had come over him?

That was how I was caught and packed off to bed.

The whole story came out bit by bit the following morning. Only Nalini stuck to her story of seeing a ghost. I had much rather not recall the punishment that followed.

All because of Sumant! And he had the cheek to deny that he had been under *Naniji's* bed with me. I nearly flew at him in anger. "Why did you have to give me away? I could have easily escaped! Why did you?"

"But that is what I have been telling you. I wasn't there! I was fast asleep in my bed! Why would I do a thing like that Mina?"

He sounded worried and scaled. "You know, I think there is actually a ghost here. Nalini is not lying when she says she saw something at the window. And let me..."

Rajat interrupted him. "There's something you all must know. Something really strange. I did not put the notebook in the refrigerator! I can't imagine how it could have got there. I had hidden it under *Mama's* mattress."

I stared at Rajat in disbelief.

"Don't be silly." In spite of my best efforts, my voice quivered. "You probably do not remember"

"I have been wanting to tell you," said Sumant, "I had not put the spectacles on the shoe-rack. I had hidden them in the bottom left drawer of the dressing table! I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw them on the shoe-rack"

We stared at each other. I was the first to find my voice.

"We are b. .b...being s.. s...stupid," I stammered. "There's n. .n...nothing, absolutely n. .n...nothing." My voice did not sound convincing, even to me.

I had barely finished speaking, when a voice broke the silence. It sounded—wistful and far off. It said, "We five *bhoots* did have fun, didn't we?"

Were we imagining? I have not ceased wondering, although years have passed.

LEG TRAP

Dhira was a shoeshine boy. He lost his father when he was very young and now lived in a *jhuggi* with his mother and sister. Dhira was a hard working boy. After school, he would sit near a cinema hall and polish shoes for a living.

One day it was very hot. Dhira sat under a tree counting his day's earnings and humming a popular tune when he overheard a passerby. "A thief has just escaped from the jewellery shop."

Dhira stopped counting. He quickly put his money back in his pocket and asked the passerby, "When? Where?"

"Just now. He stole a gold necklace and managed to run away. They say he has a beard." So saying the passerby went on his way.

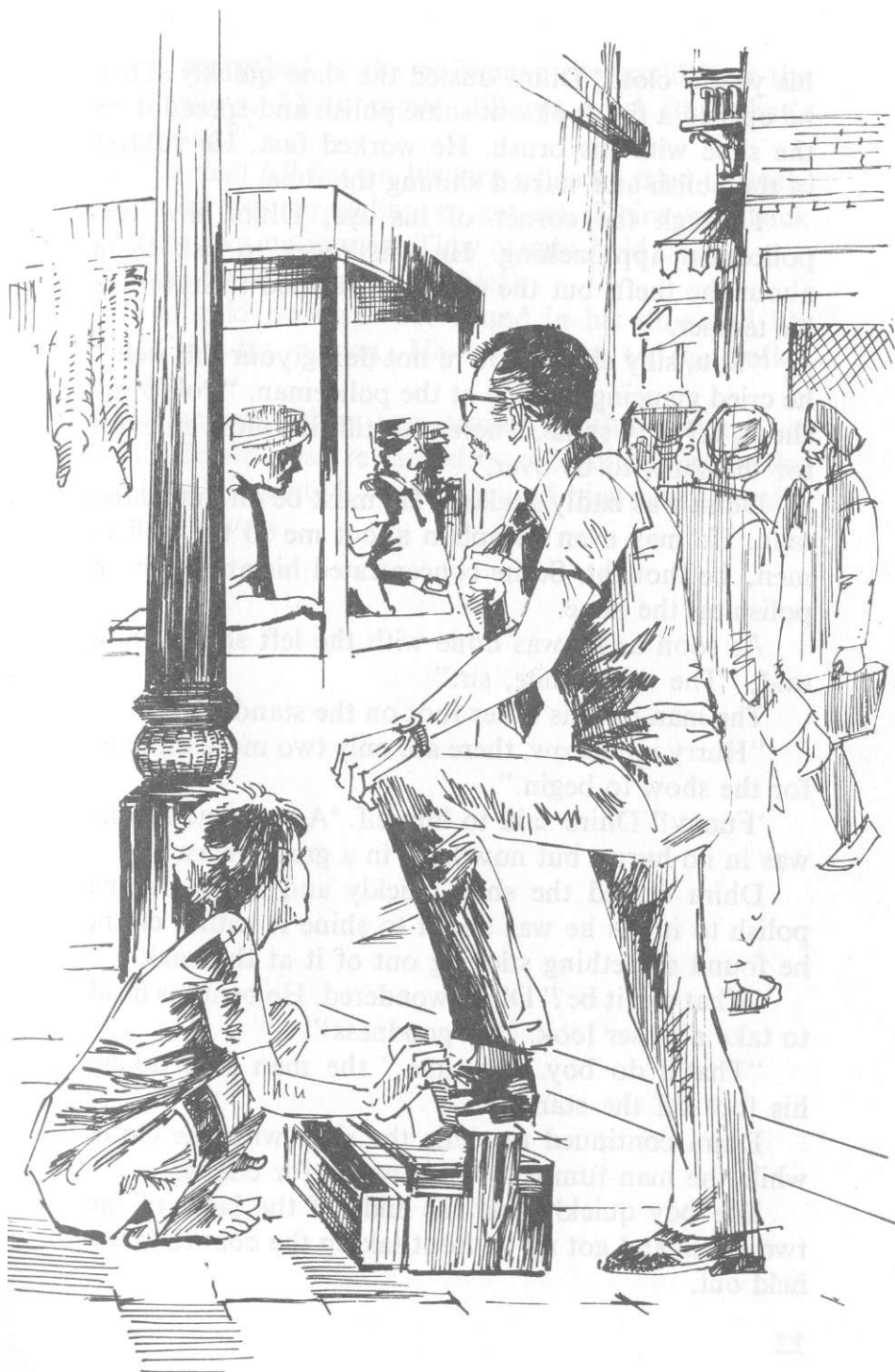
Dhira was about to go towards the jewellery shop to find out more details when a customer accosted him.

"Boy, polish my shoes nicely. There's no hurry," he said looking at his wristwatch.

The customer was wearing a blue suit and a red tie. He looked like a rich man.

Dhira sat down immediately to polish his shoes, though his mind was still on the theft.

The man first put his left shoe on the stand. With



his yellow cloth, Dhira dusted the shoe quickly. Then he opened a tin, took out some polish and spread it on the shoe with his brush. He worked fast. He rubbed in the polish and started shining the shoe.

Through the corner of his eye, Dhira saw two policemen approaching. He was eager to ask them about the theft, but the customer seemed to have lost his temper.

"You, silly chap! You're not doing your job well," he cried glancing quickly at the policeman. "Polish my shoes, till they shine. There are still five more minutes for the show to be over."

Dhira was badly shaken. 'He must be an influential man. He may even complain about me to the policemen,' he thought. So he concentrated his attention on polishing the shoe.

As soon as he was done with the left shoe, Dhira said, "The other shoe, sir."

The man put his other foot on the stand.

"Hurry up, fellow, there are only two more minutes for the show to begin."

'Funny!' Dhira said to himself. 'A moment ago he was in no hurry, but now he is in a great hurry.'

Dhira dusted the shoe quickly and applied some polish to it. As he was about to shine it with a cloth, he found something sticking out of it at the back.

'What can it be?' Dhira wondered. He bent his head to take a closer look. 'My goodness!'

"That'll do boy. It's time," the man said taking his foot off the stand.

Dhira continued to shine the shoe with the cloth, while the man fumbled in his wallet for change.

The boy quickly tied the ends of the laces of the two shoes and got up without taking the coin the man held out.

As he rushed to the policeman, he could hear the man yelling, "You rogue, I'll get you! But what's happening?"

The man fell flat on his face when he tried to walk. While he was struggling to get up, Dhira was back with the two policemen. They caught hold of him.

Yes, he was the jewel thief!

The gold necklace was found in his shoe and his 'beard' in his pocket. He was taken to the police station.

Of course, Dhira was praised for his presence of mind. He was also rewarded by the police and by the jeweller. His school, too, honoured him with a medal for his bravery.

BANGLE-SELLER

I was playing with my doll when I heard a voice sing!

*"Churi, churi**

Little girls, come and see.

I've brought *churis* for you."

I ran to the window and saw a bangle-seller with a basket on his head. He saw me and said, "Come little girl, come and buy some *churis*."

"I'd like to buy some," I replied, "but I can't, because my mother is not in. Who else will give me money?"

"Come and choose them at least. I'll take the money some other day."

I thought for a while and went down.

The bangle-seller asked with a pleasant smile, "Child, which colour do you like best?"

"Orange," said I and selected some. The *churiwala*** helped me wear them. By then my mother arrived and so she paid for the bangles.

After a few days, my uncle brought a big, beautiful doll for me. I was thrilled. I told my mother, "Mummy, I want to buy bangles for my doll also."

My mother said, "Yes, darling, you can buy some.

**bangle*

***bangle-seller*

Let the *churiwala* come."

The next day I heard the familiar song again. "*Churi-churi*, girls come and buy my *churis*."

I rushed down with my doll and called the bangle-seller. He came with his basket.

"Which one do you want?" he asked.

"Give me some nice *churis* for my doll," I said, showing him my doll.

The *churiwala* laughed and said, "Ha, ha! Is this your" baby?"

"Yes."

He chose red bangles for my doll. Then he looked at the doll and said, "You've got a very beautiful doll. It must be very expensive?"

"Yes, it is."

"My daughter would also love to have such a pretty doll."

"Oh, you have a daughter?"

"Yes, almost your age."

"Doesn't she have any dolls?"

"No... we're poor."

"Don't worry, I'll ask my uncle to buy a doll for her. How much do I have to pay for the *churis*?"

"Fifty paise."

"Please look after my doll. I'll bring the money."

I rushed to get the money from my mother, but when I came back the *churiwala* had disappeared with my doll.

"My doll, oh, my doll...!" I screamed and ran to my mother. "Mama, the *churiwala* has taken my doll away—my new doll!"

"The *churiwala*? Why did you give it to him?" she said and rushed out to look for the *churiwala*.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. My mother consoled me and warned our neighbours to be careful.



That night I sobbed myself to sleep.

I woke up early the next morning. As I sat beside the window, I noticed a man, well covered with a *chaddar** walking towards our house. With him was a little girl. I could not see his face.

The man stopped. He said something to the girl and handed her a packet.

Packet in hand, the girl tiptoed towards our gate. She wore a dirty and torn frock.

Hurriedly, I went downstairs and asked the girl, "Who are you? What do you want?"

She looked at me, for a while and asked, "Where is your mummy?"

"She's upstairs."

The girl quietly opened the packet and there was my doll!

"Oh! It's my doll. Where did you find it?"

She spoke as if she had not heard me. "Take your doll back. The man standing over there is my father, the *churiwala*. I was surprised when he brought me such an expensive doll." After a pause, she continued, "We're poor. I can't even dream of such a doll."

I couldn't say a thing. Soon the *churiwala* stepped forward and, uncovering his face, said in a low voice, "Child, please take back your doll. I took it for my daughter, Munni. But she refused to accept it when she heard I had stolen it."

I grabbed the doll and clasped it in my arms. "Thank you, Munni! I'll always remember you."

My mother came hurrying down. When she heard the story, she said, "Here's some money, *churiwala*. Buy a doll for your daughter."

As they went out of the gate, Munni turned back and smiled. I waved to her and she waved back.

**sheet*

BIRD-WATCHER

" T

I'm not going to school, I hate it!" screamed Cyril and, ran out of the house.

His mother, Mrs. Fischer, was helpless. When Cyril was younger she would cajole him and sometimes even force him to go to school. But now Cyril was a wilful eleven-year-old, and disliked being in a classroom. His father scolded him often and his mother pleaded with him, but Cyril continued to stay away from school.

Today, Cyril's parents were quite embarrassed as he had created a scene in the presence of Dr. Gopal Rao, who was staying with them. Dr. Rao had come to New Zealand all the way from India.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Rao," Mrs. Fischer said sadly, "Cyril is so fond of climbing trees and peeking into birds' nests that he just doesn't want to go to school."

"Ah, I understand," said Dr. Rao, smiling.

In the evening, while Mr. Fischer was still at work and Mrs. Fischer was busy in the kitchen, Dr. Rao and Cyril had tea together.

"Cyril, I heard you're fond of birds," Dr. Rao said, biting into a piece of delicious cake specially baked for him by Mrs. Fischer. Cyril blushed.

"Do you know, I too love birds and hated going to school when I was your age," Dr. Rao continued.

Cyril was startled. He couldn't believe that an old

man like Dr. Rao could ever have liked peeking into birds' nests. But, as Dr. Rao narrated his childhood adventures Cyril's disbelief turned to admiration. More impressed was he when he learnt that Dr. Rao had been specially invited to New Zealand to lecture on birds.

After tea, Dr. Gopal Rao took Cyril to his room and showed him several books on birds. Cyril gazed at the beautiful pictures, for a long time.

Suddenly he let out a cry, "Oh, I've seen this bird."

"Impossible," said Dr. Rao. "These books show rare birds and you can't see any of them here."

But Cyril was sure he had seen this bird, in fact a pair of them. "Uncle! I have really seen them. I have spotted their nest in a huge oak tree."

Dr. Rao walked up to Cyril and glanced at the book he was holding. Then, once again, he shook his head and said, "I'm sure you are making a mistake, Cyril. The black robin of Chathas Island is one of the rarest birds. You couldn't have seen any of them here."

Cyril insisted that he had not made any mistake. Rare or ordinary he had definitely seen two of them.

"In that case, can you show them to me?" asked Dr. Rao.

"Yes, right now, if you want to."

Dr. Rao hastily put on his coat, pulled out a pair of binoculars, and stepped out of the room. Cyril followed him.

"Mama, Uncle and I are going to watch birds," Cyril shouted from the doorway.

Mrs. Fischer was in the kitchen. She was so surprised that she dropped a spoon. By the time she picked it up and came out, the two had gone.

Dr. Rao kept talking about rare birds as they walked up to the oak tree. As soon as they were near enough Cyril said excitedly, "There, that's the nest."

Dr. Rao looked up and saw a small cup-shaped nest neatly tucked into a fork of the branches. Quickly he took his binoculars and peered at the nest through the lenses.

"I hope your black robins haven't retired already," Dr. Rao said his eyes glued to the nest.

Cyril, too, was trying to see if the black birds were there. It was getting dark and all the birds were returning to their nests.

Suddenly Dr. Rao mumbled, "Ssh! Keep quiet. Here comes one."

In the fading evening light Cyril saw a black bird prance round the nest. A while later, another hopped out of the nest.

"See, didn't I tell you? There are two of them!" Cyril exclaimed.

Dr. Rao silently watched the birds, until they went back to their nest. He looked thoughtful. "You're right, Cyril, but let's come again tomorrow morning."

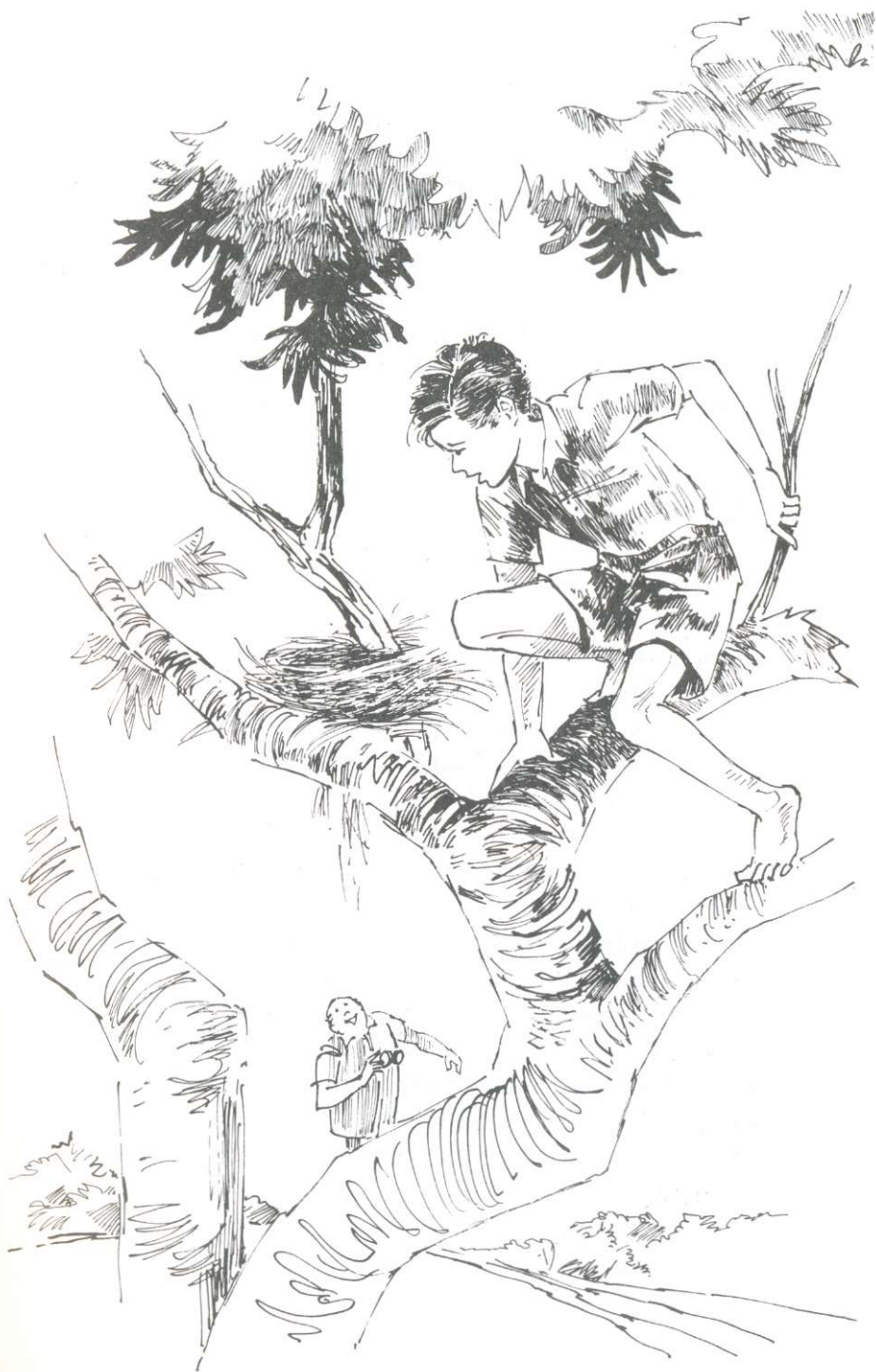
After dinner Dr. Gopal Rao turned to Mrs. Fischer and said, "If it's okay with you, I'd like to take Cyril bird-watching again tomorrow morning".

Mrs. Fischer was so startled, she dropped her napkin.

The next day, Dr. Rao and Cyril woke up before dawn and walked to the oak tree. Cyril was happy because he had Dr. Rao's spare binoculars with him.

Soon day broke and the birds began to twitter and stir out of their nests. The black birds came out too. Immediately Dr. Rao and Cyril focussed their binoculars on them. After a while Dr. Rao cried excitedly, "Hurrah, Cyril! They really are black robins. Now climb the tree quickly and look into the nest."

Cyril climbed up. "Uncle, there are two eggs," he shouted from the tree-top.



Dr. Rao beamed happily. He asked Cyril to climb several trees, peek into other nests and count the number of eggs in each of them. He noted Cyril's findings in his thick diary.

After a few hours Dr. Rao heaved a sigh. "Hmm. That should be enough. Now we can go back."

On the way back, they stopped at the village post office and spent an hour and a half sending telegrams to various places. Dr. Rao also made a long distance call. When they finally reached home it was noon and Mr. and Mrs. Fischer were anxiously waiting for them. It being the last day of Dr. Rao's stay, Mrs. Fischer had prepared a special lunch. She was upset because it was getting cold.

Dr. Rao ate very little. His mind seemed to be elsewhere.

'Maybe, he's anxious about his journey,' Mrs. Fischer thought. As soon as Cyril finished his second helping of dessert Dr. Rao said, "Mrs. Fischer, I really hope you won't mind, but Cyril and I would like to continue our bird-watching."

Mrs. Fischer nodded.

"Cyril, you must help me save the birds," Dr. Rao said as soon as they stepped out of the house.

"Save the birds?"

"Yes. What you spotted were the Chathas Island black robins. Only five of them, three females and two males are known to be living. They are on Mangare Island, east of New Zealand. Left to themselves, the birds will die without multiplying and then there will be no more black robins on earth."

"Will our black robins also die?" Cyril inquired anxiously.

"No, we won't let them die. We'll save them."

"But how?"

"We'll steal their eggs and mingle them with the eggs in other birds' nests. The black robins will then lay a fresh set of eggs. So we can double the number of eggs every season."

"Shall we steal the eggs now?" Cyril asked eagerly.

"Yes. But we'll have to be extremely careful. It will be risky to use bare hands. Not only because the eggs are tiny and delicate but also because damp and dirty hands can transfer bacteria right into the eggs through their porous shells."

Cyril listened with rapt attention. Dr. Rao had, in the meantime taken out several articles from his knapsack. He made Cyril wash his hands and dry them. Next, he gave him some kind of a spoon and a small container, both rinsed in a disinfectant.

Finally, with the help of his thick diary, he showed Cyril two nests to which they could transfer the black robin's eggs. Cyril followed the instructions and gently placed an egg in each of the two warblers' nests. The two trees were marked.

"Now we must pull down the black robin's nest," Dr. Rao said. Cyril was horrified. He couldn't believe his ears.

Dr. Rao smiled gently and added, "The black robin will lay again only after building a new nest."

Relieved Cyril smiled, and ran to the oak. In no time he was down with the tiny cup-shaped nest. "I'm going to keep this as a souvenir," he told Dr. Rao, who was busy packing his knapsack.

On their way back Dr. Rao said, "I wish I could stay and see the family of the black bird grow. But I can't. Cyril, you'll have to do a lot to see this experiment through. Of course some of my friends will soon come and camp here. You'll help them, won't you?"

"Yes," said Cyril. "I'll certainly help them save the

black robins."

"We've done enough for this season," Dr. Rao explained. "No doubt, they can lay eggs three or four more times. But we must not tire them out."

"I get your point," Cyril replied.

Back home Dr. Rao told Mr. and Mrs. Fischer the wonderful work Cyril was doing to preserve one of the rarest birds on earth.

In the days that followed there were many more surprises for Mrs. Fischer. They started receiving letters from bird lovers all over the world. Experts on birds congratulated them on having a son like Cyril.

The most pleasant surprise was when they saw Cyril's photograph splashed across the pages of a newspaper. A write-up said he had spotted two rare birds in his village, transferred their eggs and taken care of them.

It went on to describe how Cyril had cleaned up the warbler's nests twice. This had become necessary as the droppings of the baby black robin did not fall out of the warbler's small pendant shaped nest. During cold spells there was danger of the baby black robin catching a chill and dying. A baby warbler does not face this danger as nature has given it faecal sacs which the parent warblers throw away.

As a result of Cyril's efforts, the article concluded, there are now more black robins in the world.

That night Mrs. Fischer found Cyril at his desk, studying.

"Cyril!" she shouted, "you're studying geography?"

"You needn't be surprised, Mama," Cyril replied. "If I don't study geography and don't go to school how can I become an expert on birds?"

Mrs. Fischer was so pleasantly surprised that she just stood rooted to the spot.

CAMP EXPLOITS

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Just think of it!" cried Suman. "Our first camp! For five days we'll be entirely on our own."

Suman's best friend, Rashmi, nodded, but not very enthusiastically. How could she tell Suman that she was scared of being away from home?

"Are you scared?" asked Suman. "Don't worry, I'll be there!"

"I know," Rashmi squeezed her hand. "If you weren't going, Mama would not have sent me!"

"We're fifteen, old enough to look after ourselves. Don't you worry. We'll have a lovely time. All our friends are going. If only Lovy wasn't coming."

Rashmi looked hard at Suman. No one could understand why Lovy and Suman hated each other. Suman felt that Lovy was interested only in her looks and boys, while Lovy called Suman "that rude, bossy girl, who thinks too much of herself."

On Friday the girls were in high spirits as they got into the bus heading for the camp. Mrs. Lai, their teacher-in-charge made a request. "Please don't start singing till we have passed the busy part of the city."

In half an hour the singing started. Everyone joined in. Lovy's clear, thin voice was the most prominent.

"She shrieks," commented Suman.

After the group had sung all the popular hits, there

was a lull. Rashmi nudged Suman, "Sing that one you sang two years ago at the party."

"Which one?" asked Lovy.

"Oh, you wouldn't know. It's a song Suman made up," Rashmi replied.

"Oh, so she composes as well." Lovy's tone was sarcastic.

By now Suman had turned beet-red. Gita saved the situation by starting another song.

Rashmi turned to Suman, "I'm really sorry I don't know why I opened my mouth. But that song was really lovely."

"Oh, nonsense," said Suman. She had every reason, though, to feel gratified. No one was allowed to see her diary, which was full of her 'outpourings,' as she called them.

Soon they were at the camp site. Mrs. Lai gave instructions. "First we draw lots for teams. There will be five teams, seven girls in each."

Lots were drawn. Suman and Rashmi were happy to find they both were in Team Three. So were Gita, Seema and Asha.

Gita came running with the bad news. "Guess what? We have Lovy in our team." Suman grimaced, but said nothing.

Leaders were chosen. Suman was to lead Team Three.

"The teams will get points for each event," announced Mrs. Lai. "On the last evening there will be a cultural programme, each team presenting three items. Only original items please. Now time to assemble for dinner."

When they retired to their tents for the night, Suman suggested a ghost story session, but the other girls were not interested.

"What's the matter with everyone?" Suman asked irritably.

"Don't you know they are all feeling homesick. Only you and I aren't," said Lovy. Suman did not like to be in the same category as Lovy, but it appeared she was right. Her five other team mates were feeling miserable away from home. So she retired to bed in disgust and spent half an hour writing in her diary.

Suman was an early riser. At six O'clock the next morning, she was wide awake. She nudged Rashmi and said, "Let's go for a walk." Rashmi got up reluctantly.

"Where are my shoes?" Suman asked loudly.

"Who is making such a noise?" Lovy, awakened by the noise, looked around sleepily. Then she saw Suman. "I thought as much. Who else could it be?"

But for once Suman did not retaliate. As they set out, Rashmi patted Suman. "Good, you're learning to ignore her." They walked through the woods. Rashmi pointed out to her friend all the birds she could identify.

When they got back, their team mates were still asleep. "Get up everybody. Didn't you hear the bell? We'll lose points if we are late." Suman was their leader. So the other complied.

Suman turned to Lovy. "Today you'll be on tidiness duty," she told her. Lovy could say nothing.

Team Three was ready in record time and were the first to savour the piping hot porridge that Team Two, on breakfast duty, was serving.

"Oh I don't want breakfast. I never eat it," Lovy said.

Mrs. Lai overheard her. "Nonsense," she said, 're going to have a strenuous day. No refusing of food, please." Suman looked triumphantly at Lovy, but did not say anything.

Team Three was ready, waiting for Lovy to finish

tidying the tent. Lovy came up to Suman holding a book in her hand and said, "Oh, I found this while tidying up."

"Thank you," Suman said coldly, taking her diary.

"You write rather well. I read that poem. 'There's beauty in the sunset'."

Suman's face went red with anger. She slapped Lovy, hard.

"What's happening here?" Mrs. Lai's shocked voice broke the silence. "Suman, there is a limit to which you can carry your dislike. You must apologise for your conduct at once."

Rashmi glanced at Suman and her heart sank. When Suman looked like that, nobody could reason with her. She understood Suman's sensitiveness about her diary, but that was no excuse for slapping Lovy.

Mrs. Lai spoke again. "Go to your tent Suman, and don't join us till you apologise to Lovy."

Suman left without a word. Rashmi waited and then slipped out to the tent. Suman was sitting on the bed, tears streaming down her face.

"Suman please apologise!" She pleaded with her friend.

"Never! How dare that creep read my diary without my permission. She did it out of spite. Oh I could tear it up," she cried, picking up her diary.

Rashmi grabbed the diary. "Listen Suman, I know you don't like that girl," she said. "But don't you realise that, if you don't apologise, our team doesn't stand a chance? You're the team leader. For heaven's sake stop being so selfish and, for once think about others, too!"

Then she turned and stamped out of the tent.

The treasure hunt was on. Rashmi managed to solve one clue, but her mind was not in it. She kept

thinking of what would happen if Suman did not apologize soon. Luckily, Ritu was very good at riddles and Team Three managed to win second place.

It was their turn to help with lunch. Rashmi was busy serving it, when she noticed Suman cutting fruit. So she had apologised, she thought with relief.

Suman was subdued throughout lunch. The rest of the day they were kept busy with many events. The whole team met only after dinner in their tent.

"God, what a day! I'm fagged out," Asha said. "But we have to decide about the cultural programme." She turned to Suman, but she did not respond.

Rashmi got up and collected paper and a pen. "Ideas from everybody," she said.

"Let's do a dance," Ritu suggested. She was the only one of the seven who could dance. The others thought it would be very difficult. The discussion continued, with most of the ideas coming from Gita, Ritu and Seema.

"Lovy, any suggestion?" Rashmi ventured to ask.

"Oh, I think we should do a fashion show," she said.

"Oh, no, not again. I hate fashion shows. They are so artificial. Females parading their bodies. It's not____" Suman stopped suddenly.

Rashmi was so angry she could have thrown something at her.

Seema, always the peacemaker, said quietly, "I don't think it is a good idea. Adults don't appreciate it."

Two of the items decided on were a skit and a dance. Over the third they still pondered.

Finally, Gita said, "Lovy, why can't you sing a song?"

Lovy looked round and said deliberately, "I'll sing

only if everyone agrees." Suman just nodded. The others agreed.

The next day Team Three did better than the other teams in all the events. Suman took an active part in everything, but hardly spoke.

In the evening, the girls practised for their cultural events. The skit was quite successful. Ritu devised a dance number in which the others had to do simple steps. Gita kept asking Lovy what song she was planning to sing, but she refused to oblige. She disappeared to some quiet corner to practise.

The most enjoyable was the Poster Event. Each team was given a topic and was required to produce a poster on it.

"The World of Nature" was Team Three's topic, for which Rashmi provided her collection of birds feathers. The collage, with trees, flowers and birds, was judged the best.

Came the cultural programme. The items presented were mostly songs and skits. Team Three's skit went off very well. Gita was a gifted comedian and had the whole group in splits.

And now the last event. Lovy came on stage with her guitar. Her clear voice filled the air.

"There's beauty in the sunset,
There's beauty in the dawn,
One makes you think of what has been,
The other leads you on.
So while you enjoy these precious hours,
Let no regrets cloud your mind,
There's still the future, bright with hope,
And many a rainbow yet to find."

As the last strains faded, there was silence followed by loud applause.

Mr. Sen was judging the events. He stood up and

said, "Well, I have rarely enjoyed an evening so much. I congratulate all of you on your performances. About the last item, I would like to know who wrote that beautiful verse."

Everyone looked at Lovy. Only Rashmi, who had recognised the poem, looked at Suman. Shock was writ large on her face.

Lovy was patently uncomfortable, but managed to say, "I did not seek the permission of the person who wrote the verse. I cannot tell you her name."

Mr. Sen was quite surprised. But he was not to be fobbed off so easily. "It was the best item. So I would request the author to come forward. Of course, it was wrong not to have sought her permission. Would she please come forward and share the credit? For, in any song the words, the music and the singing are equally important."

Rashmi nudged Suman and practically pushed her towards where Mr. Sen was standing. He congratulated her warmly, saying, "You should not hide your talents like this."

Lovy too came up to Suman. She was looking rather embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Suman," she stammered. "I read that poem that day. You know I've only to read a thing like this once to get it by heart. I... I felt it would make a beautiful song, but I felt too that if I asked you, you wouldn't have allowed me. Would you?"

Suman knew Lovy was right.

"It doesn't matter," she replied and, looking straight at Lovy, smiled. Lovy smiled back.

FROTH AND FURY

It was a wintry afternoon. Most students in our Darjeeling school bunked classes to frolic at the Winter Festival. Seeing a virtually empty class room, the Rev. Martin Gauss, the House Master, stopped dead in his tracks.

"Hey! Where's everybody?" he asked. "How irresponsible! You know, this is really getting too much...! Well, I guess we'll just have to start without the others. The course must be completed this month." It was obvious he was quite irritated.

Seating himself, he opened his dog-eared diary. After squinting at the contents for a few moments he looked up at me. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Do you know anything about a fire extinguisher?"

Wonder struck, I goggled at him through Billy Bunter style spectacles.

"Come! come!" he said encouragingly, "Surely you know what it is. Tell me, how would you put out a fire?"

Seeing my lips quiver, he continued eagerly, "Yes! Yes! Out with it. How would you douse a fire?"

"By calling the fire brigade!" was the prompt answer.

"No! No!" groaned Mr. Gauss, "Before that, wouldn't you do something else...well what is that

something...my boy, what is that something?" By now his voice was a whimpering whine.

My face creased into a broad smile. "Well, I would yell out 'Fire Sir!' "

Snorting in disgust, Mr. Gauss shut the diary with a bang and looked frantically around for something. Then, grabbing my wrist firmly, he marched out of the room.

Outside, in the verandah, he pointed to a bright red conical contrivance mounted on the wall. "That, my boy, is a fire extinguisher...." he drilled into my ears.

Feeling that some reaction was necessary, I exclaimed, "Ah! how beautiful, Sir!"

Mr. Gauss lifted the extinguisher off its mount, awkwardly staggering under its weight. He laboriously began explaining the principle on which it worked.

'Listen carefully," he said in a matter of fact tone. "If this is inverted, and the knob, can you see it, come closer.. .yes, and that knob hit hard on the ground, a jet will shoot out of the nozzle...!"

"A jet, Sir!" I interrupted, "A real jet!"

"Yes, a jet.. .of foam.. .which when directed on the fire will cut the air supply off and smother the flames.... Got it! Now repeat the whole procedure to me."

Satisfied with my theoretical knowledge, he passed the apparatus to me and asked me to handle it. No sooner had I taken hold of it than the wretched thing slipped out of my hands. It hit the ground with a loud clang, the knob end landing first.

Instantly a thick foamy jet ejected straight out of the nozzle and travelled a considerable distance onto the wall opposite—splattering it with thick foam.

The loud swishing sound made me recoil in fright, quivering all over like an aspen leaf in a storm. I gaped



open mouthed at its amazing power.

A quick glance at Mr. Gauss's face revealed it to be forbodingly dark with pent up anger. That only served to further unnerve me.

Blurting out a "Very sorry, Sir!" I stooped to lift the messy extinguisher. But my diffident handling merely resulted in the forceful jet forming random figures in foam on the wall. Providentially, the foamy artistry stopped just short of my teacher's semi-bald head.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Everything seemed to be jinxed. After all, was I not trying my best to make good the damage done? But whatever I did was going awry.

While attempting to realign the nozzle, I was drenched in foam and felt miserable.

At this juncture, a voice like a cannon blast boomed out. "You blundering dolt, get onto the street immediately."

Eyes smarting, I staggered along, carrying the heavy equipment. By now the jet was becoming less forceful. But it still foamed and frothed like an angry bull.

On reaching the gate, I tried to prevent further damage, by directing the frothing nozzle towards the sidewalk. An unwary walker was caught smack on his chest. Stunned to a halt, he shouted, "Oi! what the...!"

Before he could complete the sentence, he was transformed into a trembling, creamy yellow foaming mass. The miserable man whimpered something which sounded like, 'Glob. Glob... Gob... Gob., ob"! Then, turning tail, the helpless victim took to his heels, looking like a giant-sized lemon blancmange.

Uncontrolled laughter caused me to drop the extinguisher again. Anyway it seemed to have served

its purpose. Now was the time to wipe my foamed face.

Just then a strident voice was heard, "Come over here. I've found the drain...."

Jerking up the spent extinguisher, I broke into a run. On reaching a ramp near the drain, I slipped on the foam and slid until stopped by an exasperated Mr Gauss.

Snatching the misspent extinguisher out of my hands, he threw it into the drain, quite suffocating it

Heaving a long sigh of relief, he turned round. But, I was aheady away like a bat out of hell!

DOGS ON STRIKE

Sameer saw Chunnu *Dada's** jonga as it turned into the main road. Chunnu *Dada* was returning to his farm after six days. He had gone to town to buy a pair of Great Danes for the farmhouse.

"Hello, Chunnu *Dada*!" Sameer shook hands with his brother as he stepped down from his jonga. Chunnu *Dada* hugged him. Seven small dogs, Boota, Dopu, Kali, Cherry, Parry, Pixie and Tooney ran out of the house, tails wagging.

Chunnu *Dada* was very fond of his dogs. Each one tried to lick his face as he kneeled to pat them. The little black dachshund, Kali, the most affectionate of them all, struggled to make her way towards him. He picked her up and walked towards Tooney, who stood behind the group. She was heavy with a litter and unable to jump about and play like the others. She waited patiently for her turn to be patted.

"How is mama-to-be?" asked Chunnu *Dada*.

Tooney wagged her tail.

Sameer went inside with Chunnu *Dada*.

"Have you brought the dogs?" he asked.

"Oh yes. But, what have you been doing?" asked Chunnu *Dada*, grasping Sameer's hand affectionately.

"I went for a ride on the tractor with Dharamvir."

"elder brother"

"That's good. So you are enjoying your holidays, aren't you?"

"Of course, *Dada*! It's so wonderful. Watching the paddy plantation, tractor rides everyday, playing with the loveliest dogs on earth and..."

A call from Ganga Singh interrupted their conversation. "Your meal is ready. Come and get it."

The dogs could hardly conceal their excitement as they heard the lattle of dogs' plates. Dopu and Pixie leapt over the rest as they made for the backyard.

"You see *Dada*, Dopu and Pixie just cannot resist food. They're always hungry," Sameer laughed. "Go, all of you!" he motioned to the rest of the dogs.

Coming out of his bedroom into the big hall, Daddy asked, "Chunnu.... is that you? Have you brought the dogs?"

"I have brought a pair of Great Danes," said Chunnu *Dada* touching his father's feet. "Come I'll show you. They are inside the jonga." They went towards the jonga.

"Where are they, *Dada*?" Sameer asked somewhat impatiently.

"In here," said Chunnu *Dada*. He opened the jonga's rear door and urged the pair to come out.

"That's Sultan and this is Ruby," Chunnu *Dada* proudly introduced the two enormous Great Danes, a dog and a bitch, as they stepped out.

"They look superb," Sameer cried out in excitement.

"Saheb, they are frightening." Ganga Singh watched them from a distance.

"Yes, that's why they are called Great Danes. They are just right for this lonely farmhouse," said Chunnu *Dada*.

The two Great Danes looked around.

The bunch of seven dogs stood away from the jonga and growled at the new comers.

"Keep quiet!" Sameer tried to quieten them.

"Come on little ones, they are your new friends. Hey, you two, come here," said Chunnu *Dada* to Sultan and Ruby.

The two did not budge. Chunnu *Dada* patted them muttering "Come on, come on."

"They are a fine pair, eh? Good size, too," said Daddy as he patted the new arrivals. Encouraged by Daddy's gesture, Sameer went close to the pair and touched their fur hesitantly.

"Look at them," cried Ganga Singh, pointing towards the little dogs which, by then, had collected near the gate. They were growling and barking.

Boota, the hairy fawn-coloured terrier, stood in front, assuming the leadership. Behind him had gathered Cherry and Pixie, the Tibetan terriers, and Kali, Dopu and Tooney, the dachshunds.

Sameer went towards them to pacify them.

"Boota, why're you so angry? Come, be a sport." He stroked the terrier, while Dopu and Pixie sniffed his hands. They were quite agitated and Sameer could sense that.

Chunnu *Dada* took Sultan and Ruby round the house. Sameer accompanied him. The servants' kids peeped through the windows, eager to catch a glimpse of the huge new dogs.

Finally, Sultan and Ruby were led to a room upstairs, where they rested on beds of gunny bag padded with straw. Food bowls were kept nearby.

Chunnu *Dada*, as usual, woke up early the next morning. But the little dogs were not there to greet him.

Entering the hall he called out, "Ganga Singh, where are Kali, Boota and the others?"

"They must be somewhere outside."

"Good morning, *Dada*," said Sameer, getting up from the sofa, "I too, missed my routine good morning from the little ones."

"Come, let's see," said Chunnu *Dada*.

As both of them came out of the house, Kali, Dopu and Parry rushed towards them.

"Where were you Boota?" asked Chunnu *Dada* affectionately. Boota wagged his tiny tail, but didn't move from where he sat.

"They are angry because the big dogs have come. How will they become friends, if they don't even come into the house?" Sameer asked anxiously.

"They'll be all right. Don't worry."

Sameer pulled up a cane chair and was soon engrossed in a book.

"Dopu, Dopu, Dopu, take it!" shouted Daddy from inside. Dopu and Pixie wagged their tails furiously and ran towards the house. A big growl from Boota stopped them. Boota's scornful gaze seemed to say, "I'm ashamed of you, greedy ones". Dopu and his companion turned round and slunk away.

At breakfast, these dogs usually collected round Daddy, who gave them each some toast and jam from his plate. But this morning not even Dopu and Pixie, forever the hungry ones, went in to claim their share.

"What's the matter? Why aren't the dogs coming in?" shouted Daddy.

But the little dogs paid no heed.

Instead, they rushed towards, Ganga Singh's quarter, whining and collected under his cot. On seeing Sultan and Ruby sprawled on the floor beside Daddy, they began barking furiously.

"See, Daddy, they are so angry with the big dogs. Yet they are too scared to fight them," Sameer said.

"Yes, I can see that," replied Daddy thoughtfully.

"These little dogs spent the night in my room. They did not enter the house," explained Ganga Singh.

Chunnu *Dada* came round the cattle house and stopped the tractor near the lawn, where his father and Sameer sat.

"Chunnu, the dogs are on strike. Look!" said his father pointing towards Ganga Singh's room.

That afternoon Tooney gave birth to five pups—four dogs and a bitch—in Ganga Singh's room. Sameer went to see them.

"Come on Tooney, I'll carry your babies and put them in a cozy blanket. Come," urged Sameer.

As though she understood every word, Tooney spread herself close to her pups with a reluctant growl. Sameer lost hope. He felt depressed. It was a pleasure to see—the little dogs jump round Daddy for a share of his meal.

"Chunnu *Dada*, let's do something. Boota and company are still on strike," said Sameer at dinner that night.

"Don't worry. I'll take them for a ride in the jonga tomorrow."

Five days passed. Boota and the little dogs would not come into the house.

One day, Tooney's pups crawled out of the quarter, squeaking like a bunch of rats. Sameer sat on the lawn enjoying the sun.

A big eagle, hovering in the sky, cried shrilly when it saw the puppies. Sultan and Ruby cocked their ears. They looked up at the eagle. Sameer looked up, too.

Suddenly the eagle swooped down and pounced on one of the pups with its claws.

"No!" cried Sameer in despair.

Instantly, Sultan leapt with a swiftness that matched



the eagle's dive. With a giant leap in the air, he caught the eagle in his mouth and shook it ferociously until it dropped the pup. The seven little dogs, standing in a row at a distance kept barking their heads off.

Ruby hastened to the scared pup, picked it up with her mouth and placed it gently among the other pups.

It was now Tooney's turn to rush to her pup. She sniffed it all over, wagging her tail furiously. Satisfied, she turned to Ruby and licked her legs as if to thank her. Off she ran to Sultan and licked him too.

"What's the matter?" asked Chunnu *Dada*, who had been woken up by the noise of the dogs barking. Daddy and Ganga Singh also came running.

Sameer was wiping the sweat off his forehead. He was so shocked by the incident that he could hardly speak. He merely pointed towards the dogs.

The little dogs had encircled Ruby and Sultan. Curled up between Sultan's paws was Boota. Dopu, Pixie and Parry played their never-ending game of chase, running round and round the Great Danes.

"They are all one family now, *Dada*," said Sameer smiling contentedly.

METAMORPHOSIS

A rush of pity swept over me when I saw her. Her small, pale face, streaked with dirt, was framed by a mass of matted hair. There she crouched, on the garbage heap, staring wide-eyed at Tipu, who was barking furiously at her.

I drew closer. Encouraged, Tipu lunged at the child. He tugged angrily at her tattered dress. The girl shrieked.

"Down, Tipu!" I cried, running towards her.

She held an old, broken toy, in one hand. I recognised it at once, for it belonged to Baby, my little sister. No wonder the dog was barking! How was he to know that Baby, who grew tired of toys as fast as she got them, had discarded this doll.

"You want it?" I asked the girl. She only clutched the doll closer to her. I gently drew the toy away from her reluctant fingers. Then I handed it back to her with a flourish.

"Look, Tipu. She didn't steal it. I've given her the toy." Satisfied, Tipu dashed off in search of fresher pastures.

The look in those eyes did something to me, for I found myself asking gently, "D'you want more toys?" I remembered all the junk that littered Baby's room.



The girl nodded.

"Look, that's my house. Come over' this evening. All right?"

The girl tucked the doll carefully in ttae folds of her rags. Then she bent down and startesd scrounging around in the waste heap.

The picture haunted me the whole (flay at school. What, I wondered, was that child doing in that dirty stinking heap?

"A penny for your thoughts, Sunila!" Nina, my friend, broke the silence. ..

"Poor girl! Wish I could help her!"

"Which girl?" asked Nina, puzzled.

I told her about the kid. "I'll give hier more toys, Nina, and Baby's old frocks. Maybe wte could teach her too! Let's do something for her, Nima. She... she looked so bad...."

"Oh come on, Sunila!" interrupted Mina, laughing. "What can we do? That's hei life. I'mswre she's quite happy."

"No," I said stubbornly, "she doesn't even go to school, I'm sure. Let's try to do something to make her happy!"

"Oh, you and your bright ideas!"

Nina's scorn did not dampen my zeal. Armed with an old dress and . toy, I waited for the little girl to turn up.

She did. I ran my eyes over her. 'I'll begin by making her wea* a clean dress,' I thought. 'After that maybe I could persuade her to comb heir hair. Then I would try to teach her_____'

"Sunila! Who's that?" an imperious voice asked.

My grandmother was standing in the verandah. The girl trembled before her august presence. My grandmother is tall and with her bright silver hair,

looks rather impressive. The girl must have been scared for she turned to flee.

I caught her hand.

"Sunila! Don't you touch that girl!" shrieked Grandmother.

"Why not, *Dadi*?"*

"She's the sweeper's daughter. You must not touch her," said Grandmother, as she glanced suspiciously at me. "What do you want to do with her anyway?"

"I.. .I want to teach her," I answered.

"Ram, Ram! What's wrong with you, girl? Didn't I tell you she's the sweeper's daughter? An untouchable!"

Grandmother and her old-fashioned ideas!

"Oh, come on, *Dadi*," I ventured, "how does that matter? We've been taught in school that we're all equal!"

But Grandmother was not listening. She had turned to the girl, "Be off with you, child!"

Her words made me indignant. I looked at the frightened girl, "Wait! What's your name?"

"Ka.. .Kaushalya," answered a meek, soft voice.

"Will you come again tomorrow, Kaushalya?" I asked her gently, "and take this. It's for you." I gave Grandmother a defiant look.

Kaushalya snatched the frock and fled.

The next evening Grandmother stationed herself strategically in the front verandah. I knew she was waiting to pounce on Kaushalya. But I could be clever too. I heard the click of the gate and rushed out. I met Kaushalya before she entered the lion's den.

There was another, older girl with Kaushalya. "Bunia, my sister," she explained.

I learnt more about the two sisters. They did not go to school. Instead, they worked. Bunia looked after the

**grandmother*

younger kids and kept house while their mother went out to clean the streets and houses. Kaushalya's job was to search garbage dumps for trash and paper scraps, which their mother sold for a few paise. She also picked up cowdung from the streets. This was dried into flat cakes by Bunia and sold or used as fuel. The children's father was too lazy to do anything except eat, sleep, drink and beat up the family.

What a miserable life, I thought. More than ever, I wished I could give them just a bit of happiness. Surely I was not wrong in trying to help?

But Grandmother did not think so.

"Sunila! Go and bathe at once!" she ordered when I entered the house, "and stop mixing with those dirty kids."

"I'll make them clean, *Dadi*," I promised.

"Humph. They'll remain what they are. You cannot change them!"

"And what are they, pray?" I retorted rudely. I was seething with anger. "Aren't they human beings like us?"

With that I ran into my room and slammed the door.

Fortunately, Mummy was more understanding. She was generous with old clothes, eats and words of advice. Nina joined me too. We began giving lessons to the two untouchable girls. I had helped Baby with her homework quite often and the experience came in handy. But we did not dare take the sisters into the house. Grandmother would have thrown a fit! Instead, we confined our meetings to the garden and bathed afterwards.

One day, even this arrangement failed. Grandmother, freshly bathed, came into the garden to gather flowers for her *puja*. On her way back.. horror of

horrors.. she bumped into Kaushalya! It was enough to spark off fireworks.

"Hai hai! The girl's touched me! I'm soiled! Chhi—chhi—chhi! *Baku** will you come here? Did you see what happened?"

Mummy came running out of the kitchen.

Grandmother stormed at her. Mummy was silent. Finally Grandmother gave an ultimatum, "Either you get rid of those filthy kids, *Baku*, or I'll leave this house!"

With that Grandmother walked off.

Kaushalya's small face grew smaller, while her eyes, round and large, looked hurt and ashamed. Bunia, her sister, hastened to put an arm around her. She looked appealingly at Mummy, waiting for the verdict.

Mummy set her lips into a firm line. "Sunila, the kids will have to go!" she said.

We could not believe it. Mummy was taking Grandmother's side.

"Surely you don't mean it, Mummy?" I cried, "They were doing so well! Learning so fast"

I stopped. There was no need to argue further. The two girls had fled. They did not come back.

*

*

*

Grandmother liked to go for a walk every morning. That Sunday, Nina and I were hanging at the gate, chatting, when Grandmother came out, resplendent in crisp white, her silver hair gleaming, and an elegant walking stick in her hand.

"Would you like to take a walk with me, Sunila?"

I ignored the peace offer. I had not forgiven her for driving the children away.

"A spoil-sport," I commented sourly as Grandmother's back receded into the distance.

** daughter-in-law*

"Don't be rude," protested Nina.

"Why not? She's a hypocrite. All that *puja* and prayer she does! How can she be unkind to poor little kids? If that's her religion_____"

My indignant speech was interrupted by loud shrieks. We rushed out to see.

"Give me that coin!" screamed a man.

"I won't. It's mine. I earned it!" we could hear a young girl shouting back.

We ran on, for the voice was familiar. We found Grandmother standing on the road, staring at a strange scene. A little girl raced down the street, pursued closely by a thin, dark man. I recognised Kaushalya.

Fists clenched, eyes desperate, Kaushalya sped past Grandmother, the man at her heels. The next moment he had caught Kaushalya.

"*Bachao! Bachao!*"* she screamed.

"So you won't give the money?" leered the man, trying to prise open her fist. Kaushalya fought like a cat. "No, no! *Maa* told me to keep it for buying rice!"

The man used all his brute strength to wrench the money from the small fist.

"*Babuji*, leave her!" we heard, as Bunia came running to her sister's help. "You'll use the money for drinking. You know we need it for rice."

This only angered the man. He glared at Bunia and shook Kaushalya hard. Still she refused to part with the precious coin. Enraged, the man slapped her. Bunia tried to pull her sister away. Her father raised his hand.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

The piercing sharp sounds made my head whirl with rage. Kaushalya reeled, staggered a few steps, and collapsed, right near Grandmother's feet. The old

**Save me*

lady stepped back hastily.

The coin fell with a tinkle on the hard pavement. With a cry of triumph the man pounced on it.

"I've got it! At last."

I could watch no longer.

"Catch that man!" I shouted and rushed forward. I had only one thought in my mind. That money must be restored to Kaushalya. But the coward had fled. Nina and I raced after him, watched by a dazed Bunia.

I was conscious of Grandmother's shocked eyes as I ran past her. A crowd watched us, but I did not care. We must catch him, we must.

We drew close to him. I stretched out my arm and caught the man's shirt. He turned, dodged and fled back the way he had come. He was out of our reach once again. Desperately, we kept running after him.

The man was again racing past Grandmother. I saw Grandmother thrust out her walking stick as he sped. Down he fell flat on his face.

Quickly the man staggered to his feet. By then Grandmother had stepped forward.

"You...you scoundrel!" raged her sharp voice. "How dare you take that money? Return it to the poor girl, this very instant!"

The man quailed before Grandmother's regal presence and her voice of authority. He looked at the old lady standing tall and erect before him and mumbled apologetically, "I...I was only____"

"Return the coin, I say," Grandmother spoke sharply. The man couldn't move. Grandmother's stern eyes were fixed on him.

He handed the coin to Bunia reluctantly and slunk off.

Grandmother looked at us. She was smiling. "That was very brave of you, girls!"

She walked over to Kaushalya who lay on the ground, eyes closed i big, ugly bruise on her cheek. Shte was unconscious.

A strange, soft lock replaced Grandmother's usually stesrn expression as ste gazed at the thin, stunned figure lyiing at her feet. **She** suddenly looked up and met our pu:zzled eyes.

"Come on girls! Don't stand and stare! Let's take thiis child into the hoise."

"What?" I cried, wondering whether I had heard heir right. "But.. .but, you said...."

"Never mind what I said " interrupted Grandmother tersely. "After all, she's a human being."

As Grandmother stooped to lift the matted hair off the small, dirty face, Kaushalya opened her eyes.

A DAY TO REMEMBER

, chug, chug, chug went our tourer, merrily down the road from Agra to Jhansi. Chug, chug, chug, chug! The hood was down to keep out the chill December wind. The blinds were drawn. Within—sat our family: father, mother and we three sisters. At the wheel was Diler Singh, our old and trusted driver. He had been with us for years and we all liked him.

It was early in the morning and a thin mist hung in the air. The roads were deserted. "We're in good time," said my father. "If all goes well, we should be in Jhansi by six in the evening." Perhaps I was the only one to notice it, but at these words Diler Singh bowed his head and his lips seemed to move in prayer.

Soon we had left the town far behind and moved into a world of wheat fields and clear blue skies. Villages rolled past. So did the bunches of children who stood by to watch us go. Chug, chug, chug, chug said the tourer as it raced the birds overhead. Chug, chug, chug, chug as the wind whistled through the trees. We clapped our hands in glee. It was a beautiful day and we were off" to Jhansi to spend a glorious week with one of our uncles. What could be better?

At midday, we pulled up by a mustard field, dotted with yellow. Here we unpacked our lunch and feasted on *puri-alu*. Mother and father had some tea. They

gave a cup to Diler Singh too. He sipped it thoughtfully as he sat under a clump of *babul* trees. Presently he stood up. "*Sahib*," he said to my father, "I think we should be on our way. This road is not safe after dark."

His words rang like a warning bell. All of us piled into the car quickly and this time Diler Singh drove a bit faster. We caught a glimpse of the giant fortress of Gwalior as we raced through the streets.

Two o'clock, said my father's wrist watch. Soon we were out of Gwalior and on our way to Shivpuri. The houses thinned out and on both sides of the road, the jungle took over. The ground was covered with a kind of red clay that blew in great clouds under the wheels of the tourer. The same dust had coated the trees and they looked strange—half green, half red. I think we were passing through a particularly dense bit of jungle when the first tyre got punctured.

Diler Singh worked at lightning speed to fix it. But the second puncture took longer because it was more like a burst tyre and we had to wait at a wayside shop for the tube to be repaired.

Once again the tourer was on its way, though we had lost valuable time. The sun no longer shone bright on the roads and the chilly wind told us that evening was approaching. The landscape changed too. The plains gave way to hillocks covered with boulders. The lush green trees were replaced by thorny bushes and clumps of grass. Very often we looked into the mouth of a ravine that dipped and rose, dipped and rose again. There were no villages in sight and for miles and miles, we did not see a soul.

We turned a bend and suddenly found the road blocked by a huge pile of boulders. Before we had time to think, there was a wild shout from somewhere to the

left of the car. A man came running and leapt on to the footboard. "Not that way," he ordered, "the road is under repair." On his instructions Diler Singh turned the tourer sharply to the left and began to drive down a mud-track leading away from the main road.

The man on the footboard was about six feet tall and very dark, with gold ear-rings and a harelip. His hands were like claws. I saw Diler Singh draw a deep breath. At the same time my father slipped his pistol out of his pocket. It was wrapped in a white napkin, but the triangular shape was unmistakable.

A five-minute drive brought us to a wide stretch of sand and pebbles, at the far end of which we could just about make out a thin stream of water. "A dried-up river-bed," said my father. "I only hope the sand isn't deep." But it was. All of us got out of the car to lighten the burden, but still the wheels kept churning the sand. And finally we fell to pushing the car. There were two men grazing a herd of goats, who helped us. But the man with the harelip stood aside. Soon some fierce-looking men joined him. They stood talking in groups and, young as I was, I felt a chill run down my spine just looking at them.

When we reached the stream, the sun had already dipped below the trees. Diler Singh whispered to my father, "*Sahib*, all of you must get in quickly. I shall race the car through the stream. It's now or never!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain later. Just get in."

Diler Singh leapt into the driver's seat and pressed the accelerator. The car shot like a bullet through the water, sprays flying. We reached the other bank and climbed up to safety.

"Ah," said Diler Singh slowing down, "now you can turn round and look."



We did so, but the scene behind us had changed completely. We saw a sheet of water where there had been a shallow stream.

"What on earth...?" began my father.

"Ah, it's a long story," said Diler Singh. "This area is full of dacoits. From time to time they erect road-blocks and force vehicles on to this river-bed. While the vehicles struggle with the sand and boulders, the dacoits simply look on. They always wait till evening before mounting an attack."

"But why?" we all asked together.

"There is a barrage upstream," said Diler Singh. "Every evening, at about six, it releases a vast quantity of water for irrigation, making this stream impossible to cross. The vehicles are trapped and that's when the dacoits get down to work."

There was a shocked silence before my father found his voice. "How did you know about it?"

"I have seen it happen," said Diler Singh. "I was brought up in a village not far from this place."

TO THE RESCUE

Daddy had been transferred to Jabalpur and it was to be my first day at the new school. I was reluctant to go because I had no friends there.

I was still dawdling over breakfast when I heard mother shout, "What's the matter with you, Anu. You will miss the bus."

"Ma, my leg"

"I understand, Anu, your limp makes you self-conscious. But you are a brave girl. I'm sure your classmates will understand."

"But, Ma, I don't know anyone and they might laugh at me. You know how awful I feel when people make fun of me."

"I don't think it's going to be all that bad. Here's some *Kaju barfi** for your classmates. Remember to share it with them. Now run along. Daddy will take you to school."

On reaching school, my father took me to the Principal's office. Later, the school peon took me to my class. On the way I noticed some children staring at me and giggling. I was miserable. My limp became more pronounced and I wanted to go home. But, with mother's words in mind, I managed to walk to the class.

* *Cashew nut sweet*

The teacher was there already. She introduced me to the class and said, "Anuradha, go and sit on that chair in the front row. The girl next to you is Mala."

"Thank you, Madam," I said and took my seat. I was happy to get a seat next to Mala. She was good-looking and I liked her. A little later when the bell rang for the lunch break, I asked Mala, "Where do you live?"

Mala did not answer. I thought she had not heard me. I was about to repeat my question when a group of girls gathered round her desk. They were busy talking and Mala was telling them how she had learnt to swim. I moved closer to her and asked, "Do you swim, Mala?"

"Yes."

"I also swim."

"Oh!" she said and turned to her friends, again ignoring me. I felt insulted. When I reached home that afternoon, mother's first question was, "How was your day, Anu?"

I burst into tears and, between sobs, said, "I'm not going there again. The girls are not friendly. In the morning some children laughed at me. Nobody spoke to me in the class."

Mummy gathered me in her arms. "Now, now, Anu, don't cry. Give them a couple of days. Do your work well and be friendly and you'll see things will work out differently."

The next morning after a talk with Mummy, I was ready again. Walking to my class, I noticed nobody had giggled. I felt slightly better.

The last two periods were for games. Mala and her friends were going to play badminton. I love watching others play. So I asked Mala, "Can I come along too".

"What'll you do there?" Mala said curtly. "You

cannot play."

"I cannot play but I can pick up the shuttlecock," I asserted.

Mala thought for a second and said, "Not today. We're going to play a match. May be some other time. Bye, bye."

She picked up her racket and breezed out. One by one they all left the classroom. I sat there lonely and depressed. I tried to read a book, but my mind was not in it.

At dinner that evening my father and I were discussing my day at school.

"How is your games teacher, Anu?"

"I don't know. I don't go for games."

"But, you are a good swimmer. Why don't you go swimming during the games period? You'll enjoy it. I'll ask your teacher to give you special permission," said Mummy.

"That'll be great. Oh Mummy will you really?" I jumped with joy.

The next day I took my swimming kit and Mummy's letter. As soon as I reached the class, I gave the letter to the teacher. She immediately agreed.

During the games period everybody went off to play, and, as usual, didn't bother about me. Feeling a little bad, I picked up my swimming kit and left for the pool.

The sight of water always makes me feel calm and relaxed. I went to the bathroom, took a shower and went and stood near the pool. I noticed bubbles in the water. 'What could it be?' I wondered. Then I saw a clump of hair. Two hands were hitting the water wildly. "A girl is drowning." I shouted looking around. But since I did not see any one I jumped into the pool to save her. I just about reached her when she went



under again. I moved fast and grabbed her hair. But her short hair slipped out of my hand and she disappeared.

I dived, shot my hand out and grabbed her tunic. Almost simultaneously she seized my hand.

Soon I found myself being pulled down. I spluttered and shouted, "Help! Help!" I kicked my legs as hard as I could. Her tunic slipped out of my hand. She too lost her grip and began to drift away.

I swam after her and grabbed her hair. Then dragging her, I swam towards the side of the pool.

Reaching the filter vent, I held on to it with my free hand. After regaining my breath I pulled her and held her up against the wall.

With all the energy left in me I shouted, "Help! Help!"

Soon I heard voices. "Help!" I shouted again. Two girls came running. Seeing me in the pool one of them asked, "Anuradha, what's happened?"

"Help me to get this girl out, please, Mala." Mala knelt immediately.

"It's my sister Kala," she exclaimed. Sprawling on the ground she stretched her hands and tried to pull Kala up. But she could not. I couldn't help either because Kala was too heavy for me. Mala shouted to her friend, "Neela, give me a hand, quick!"

Mala and Neela together pulled Kala out and laid her on the ground.

"Run, get the doctor, Neela. Hurry!" cried Mala.

As soon as I scrambled out of the pool, Mala looked at me accusingly. "Why did you push Kala in?" she demanded.

Her words hurt me. "I did not push her. She was drowning when I came," I said curtly.

Soon the doctor came. She gave Kala first-aid and

wrapped her in a blanket. After sometime Kala opened her eyes. By this time the Principal had also joined us. A peon brought a glass of hot milk for Kala.

The principal then turned to me, "Anuradha, what happened?"

"I came to the pool to swim, ma'am and I found Kala drowning."

"But, madam!_____". Before Mala could finish what she wanted to say, Kala still dazed, tugged at the Principal's saree. Pointing at me she said weakly, "Madam! this girl saved me."

The Principal patted me and said, "That was very brave of you. Go and change your clothes, dear. Otherwise you will catch a cold."

After I had changed, I came and sat down near Kala. My legs were aching and I was massaging them.

Soon Mala came to me. "You must be tired. Let me help you," she said and began to massage my leg. "Are you feeling better now?"

"I'm all right and I can see that Kala is feeling better too," I said.

"She would have drowned but for you," said Mala.

We all walked home together.

PROGRESS REPORT

Neela," called out Mrs. Nair, our class teacher.

"Yes, Madam," answered Neela. She was the class monitor.

"Have you given the progress reports to the students?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Good. Now, please put these letters on the shelf."

"Yes, Madam."

Mrs. Nair gave her five cyclostyled sheets of paper.

Neela placed them on the shelf and took her seat. The letters were meant for the guardians of students who had not done well in the examination.

The school bell rang loudly. Students rushed out of their classrooms for a short recess.

"Neela, take your lunch packet out. Hurry! I am very hungry," I said to her, opening mine.

Neela and I were chums. We usually shared our tiffin. As we ate, Neela spoke, "Raju, I was absent from class yesterday."

"Ah!" I smiled and said, "so you admit it? Then, I wasn't lying when I told your mother so."

"What did you tell mummy on the phone?"

"Well, nothing in particular. . . ."

"Don't be evasive, Raju," she said sternly.

"It was just by the way I told her that you were

absent from the class. I wanted to ask you about some doubts I had. So I called you at your house. Your mother picked up the phone and asked me why I hadn't discussed with you in school. I had no answer. Sol"

"So you promptly said that I was absent from the class the whole day," interjected Neela angrily, raising her hand to slap me. I ducked and, grabbing my lunch box, ran towards the water cooler.

"I shall teach you a lesson," Neela cried and chased me.

The school bell rang again. Recess was over. Neela and I ran back to the classroom. We had just settled down in our seats when Mrs. Nair came in with five stamped envelopes.

"Neela, please bring those letters and the results register," said Mrs. Nair. Neela did so. The teacher began to enter the details in the letters, while we made a pretence of being immersed in our books.

"Children! Don't sit idle. Learn the lesson that I taught you yesterday. I'll be giving you a test," said Mrs. Nair from the podium.

"Test____test!" There was quite a flutter.

"No noise, please. Revise your lesson quietly," Mrs. Nair said sternly as she put the letters in envelopes.

Soon her work was over. She handed the five envelopes, a blank call sheet and the results register to Neela and said, "Neela, please drop these envelopes in the post box on your way home, will you?"

"Yes, madam," said Neela collecting them and placing them on the shelf.

Then Mrs. Nair started asking the class questions relating to the lesson she had taught the day before.

When the period was over she left the class room.

Three more periods and the final bell rang. The

students hurriedly packed their bags and ran out of the school.

While Neela was taking the envelopes from the shelf the blank sheet fell down. She picked it up, folded it and put it in her pocket along with the envelopes.

"Raju," she called me, "would you please put my books in my bag?" As she was busy otherwise, I left my bag beside her and packed hers.

"Thank you, Raju," she said, biting her lip to hide a mischievous smile, and took her bag from me. I picked up my bag and we left the school, together. On the way, we parted. I went home, while Neela went to post the letters.

The next day our school's junior cricket team had a match to play at 10 a.m. with another school. We played an interesting one-day match. Our team won the match by twelve runs. My score of 53 was the highest and I took five wickets. "Well done, Captain!" my teammates congratulated me. I returned home in the evening, happy and excited.

"Mummy! We won! !" I cried as I entered the house.

"Hurrah, hero!" responded Neela.

'Neela! With her mother!' I wondered. "Good evening, Aunty," I said cheerfully to her mother.

"Good evening," she replied somewhat coldly. My mother and sister looked serious. I felt something was wrong. Maybe my father's blood pressure was again high.

"What's the matter?" I asked Mummy.

"Don't you know?" she shouted back at me.

"Where's your progress report?" barked my sister, Rajni.

I surveyed the angry faces looking at me and ran for my bag.



My bag was not to be seen. Then I remembered. I had left it in school since I had to go for the match.

"My progress report is in my bag and my bag is in school," I said. "But what makes you so angry?"

"Do you expect us to be happy and proud of you after seeing this," Rajni threw a letter at me.

At the same time Neela's mother spoke. "Raju, please tell me the truth. Was Neela really away from the class the day before yesterday?"

I looked at the letter that had dropped to the ground. It was a cyclostyled letter. I glanced at the smiling face of Neela and the sullen faces of Mother and Rajni.

"It's wrong, wrong," I screamed. "I have secured 80% marks and am second in class."

"Shameless fellow! The other day you lied that Neela was absent from class and today you are lying about your marks?" shouted mother.

"Aunty," said Neela gently, "don't be angry with him. What he says about his marks is not a lie" With a big smile, she handed my progress report to Mother.

"But why this call letter, then?" asked Rajni.

"I____I'm sorry. I played a practical joke. I filled it in and posted it. His real progress report is this," Neela explained.

'I told a lie and Neela has given me a dose of the same medicine', I said to myself.

Mama and Rajni were pouring over my marks. Neela's mother looked confused.

Neela came close to me and said, "I'm sorry, Raju."

"Neela, I'm also sorry I lied about you. Forgive me.

"Forgive and forget," smiled Neela warmly shaking my hands.

PAYAL

Adama, can I come with you?" I asked my uncle.

He paused, sipped his tea and said, "Why not?"

I turned to Mother. She nodded saying, "But only for ten days, not more. Remember your school opens soon afterwards."

And that is how I managed to board this launch travelling to the green island of Sunderbans. *Mama* was a forest officer of Pakhiralay island and I always wanted to roam the forests with him.

We got off near a small jetty and walked the rest of the way through the trees. *Mama's* bungalow was in a clearing in the forest. Sambhu saw us and came rushing to open the garden gate. He was an elderly man who did *Mama's* cooking and other household work.

"How are you, Sambhuda?" I called out.

"I'm all right," he said, "but Payal isn't."

Mama, who walked ahead of us, stopped.

"Why Sambhu, what is wrong with her?"

"From the day you went, she has not been eating properly."

Mama looked perturbed.

"I know I shouldn't have left her for so long," he said.

"Who is Payal?" I asked Sambhuda.

"Why! Don't you know? Here she is."

I turned round. My heart skipped a beat. There was Payal, a Royal Bengal tigress, giving *Mama* a tremendous welcome by licking his face.

Then she caught sight of me and came forward. I stood still while she sniffed me all over. I could have died of fright.

Mama and Sambhuda were laughing.

"Move Payal! Move! Now go!" *Mama* ordered. Payal obeyed disdainfully as if I was a dirty rag not worth looking at. She walked ahead of us, her tail waving proudly in the air.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said *Mama*.

"But she's a tigress," I protested.

"Payal is only a year old. You can't call her a tigress. She is a mere cub. As harmless as a year old baby!"

Well, she certainly doesn't seem to be innocent and playful.

While Sambhuda helped me unpack, Payal sat near my bedroom door watching us keenly.

"Sambhuda, how did *Mama* get Payal?" I asked.

"Payal's mother was killed by poachers for her skin. The villagers found three cubs. Two of them had starved to death. The third they brought to your *Mama*. She was only ten days old then."

I felt sorry for Payal. "Hello!" I said.

She did not flex a muscle and her silent stare drained all my friendliness away.

*

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We sat in the verandah. Payal turned over while *Mama* tickled her belly.

"Don't let Payal lick you," he told me. "Her tongue is rough. In fact, all tigers' tongues are. It may bruise you."

"O.K." I said, shuddering at the thought.

Soon *Mama* left for work. The morning was quiet and I wondered how to pass my time. There was a small pond behind the house and I liked to sit beside it watching the breeze ripple its smooth surface. I got up. Immediately Payal moved her tail to signify she had seen me move. I could bear it no longer, this feeling of being constantly watched by two silent eyes.

"You can go to hell", I shouted and walked off in a huff, hoping she would understand. I sat beside the pond wondering why I disliked Payal. She behaved as if she owned the place and I was a trespasser. I could not go anywhere without being followed. That too in my own uncle's house! What audacity! But *Mama* also paid more attention to her than to me. It naturally hurt my ego.

WOOSH! ! ! I heard a splashing sound.

I looked up. Payal had dived into the water and was swimming in the pond. Soon she came out of the pond and sat panting in front of me, waving her tail.

Intolerable! Impossible! Her arrogance was unbearable. She was doing it on purpose. I knew it. I jumped to my feet.

And Payal growled.

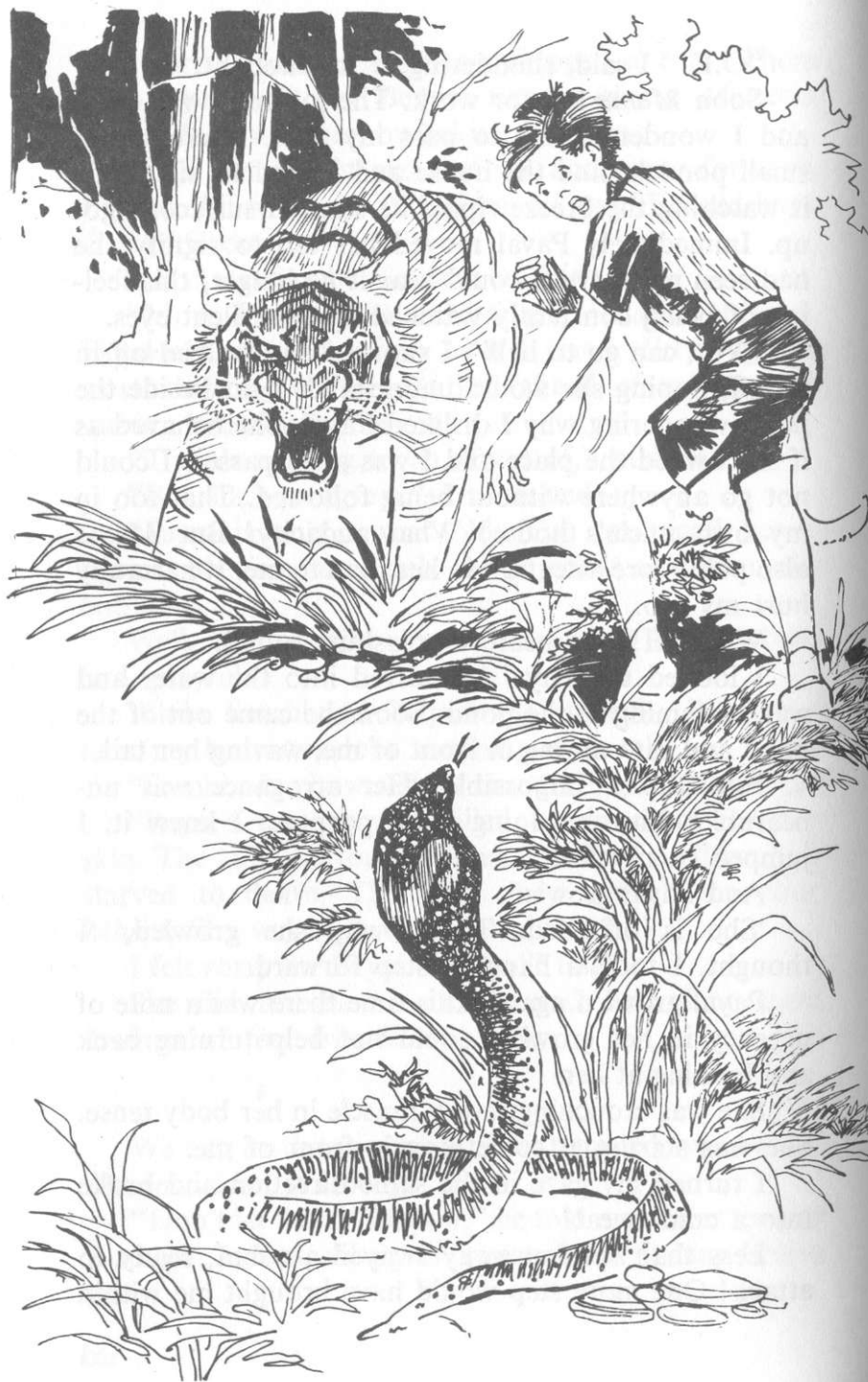
'She is offended. That's why she growled,' I thought. I took a haughty step forward.

Payal growled again. This time there was a note of urgency in her growl. I could not help turning back and looking at her.

She was crouching, every muscle in her body tense. She was staring at something in front of me.

I turned my gaze in the same direction and broke into a cold sweat!

Less than six feet away swayed a cobra, ready to attack! One more step would have brought me within



striking distance of its reared hood.

For how long I stood frozen I do not know. Payal kept growling behind me all the time as if warning the cobra to keep off.

The cobra slowly backed away. Then in a flash it was gone, into the undergrowth. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Payal! Payal! Oh sweet Payal! Oh lovely Payal!"

I found myself hugging Payal. She turned over and I tickled her belly. She rubbed her neck against my knee and I rubbed my cheek against her neck. She licked me and I did not mind. We were now the best of friends.

From that day on Payal and I could never be parted. Swimming in the pond or taking a walk, we were always together. And no matter how far we went into the forest, Payal never lost her way and always brought me back home before sun down.

VISITORS FROM THE VILLAGE

"Ma!" Rajkumar came running into the kitchen, breathless.

"What's the matter, Raja?" asked his mother, adding ghee to the potato curry she was making.

"You know, Ma!" Raja gasped, "Ahmed has come from the village."

"Ahmed! Will he be staying with us?"

"Don't you know? His father has been posted here. They will stay in Sarai Chowk."

Raja's words were interrupted by a tap on the door and a tall boy of about fifteen came in.

"Bansi!"

Bansi greeted Ma and Raja. "I came along with Rafi Saheb to the city. Thought I'd see you all and the city too."

Bansi, who had lost his parents when he was only six, had been brought up by Raja's grandmother in the village. After the old woman's death, the family had moved to the city. But Bansi had stayed on in the village with the Maulvi Saheb.

As they were exchanging pleasantries, there was another knock. "That must be Ahmed," said Bansi. "Ever since he came he's been dying to meet you Raja."

Raja ran out to meet his friend. "Look who's come,

Ma!" he cried, leading Ahmed in. Ahmed was carrying a basket of mangoes for the family.

Ma was happy to see Ahmed. She smiled warmly at him and, putting down the spoon with which she was stirring the potato curry, went up and hugged him.

Raja and Ahmed talked and talked and Raja promised to show both Bansi and Ahmed the city.

As Id drew nearer, the three friends made plans to celebrate the festival together. Bansi, being the eldest, was the chief advisor.

One day, two weeks before Id, the three boys were standing outside Ahmed's house, talking about the new *achkan** Ahmed was going to wear for the festival.

"Ahmed!" called his mother.

"Coming, Ammi!"

Ahmed ran inside for a few minutes and came out wearing a broad smile. "Raja, Bansi, come with me," he said mysteriously. And to all his friends' questions he would say no more as he led them to the bazaar, to the old tailor's shop.

"Masterji, these are my two friends that *Abba*** was talking about. Take their measurements for *achkans*."

And, despite all Raja and Bansi's protests, the tailor swooped down on them with his measuring tape and took their measurements.

Id was very close now. One afternoon, Raja and Bansi were returning from Ahmed's house.

"Raj Kumar!"

That was Chaman, a local hoodlum. He wore a fierce moustache and made a living by dubious means.

As the boys stopped, he came up to them, staggering.

**muslim dress*

***father*

"Who's this boy?" he asked, pointing at Banshi. His breath reeked of strong liquor.

"O, this is Banshi *Bhaiya*, who is visiting us from the village."

Banshi extended his hand, but Chaman did not shake it. "I thought he was also a Muslim," he said. "These days you are so lost in your Muslim friend."

"You mean Ahmed," Raja interrupted him.

"I don't know his name. The one living in Sarai Chowk".

"But he is my best friend."

"Your best friend? A Muslim boy?"

Raja was too stunned to reply. But Banshi retorted sharply, "So what! We're like brothers."

Chaman laughed unpleasantly. "Just you wait. We're not going to let the residents of Sarai Chowk pass through Hari Ka Bada on their way to the Idgah."

"And why not?" Raja exploded.

"Will the Muslims allow the Hindus to take their Ram Naami procession through Machli Bazar?" asked Chaman, with evident glee.

Raja and Banshi wasted no more time arguing with Chaman's taunts and made their way home.

"The drunken sod!" murmured Banshi.

"Disgusting fellow!" Raja supplemented.

Back home they told Raja's father what Chaman had said.

"It's a pity," he said sadly, "that a handful of jooligans like him should go about causing trouble and creating misunderstanding. Right behind our house, in that tumbledown, rickety old hutment, something fishy is going on. I wonder what they are up to."

Raja and Banshi spent several sleepless nights trying to find out what was going on in the hutment. Crouching close to a window, they could hear the

clinking of glasses and whispered plans. One voice they could easily make out was Chaman's.

Finally Bansi was able to piece together their plan. Chaman was to knock at the door of a street vendor called Bhadru, the night before Id. Bhadru would open the door and lead Chaman to his terrace. There on the terrace was to be hidden a sack filled with garbage which was to be thrown down on the procession going to the Idgah the next morning.

Bansi felt his stomach lurch as he thought of what would follow. Such an insult would surely be followed by communal riots.

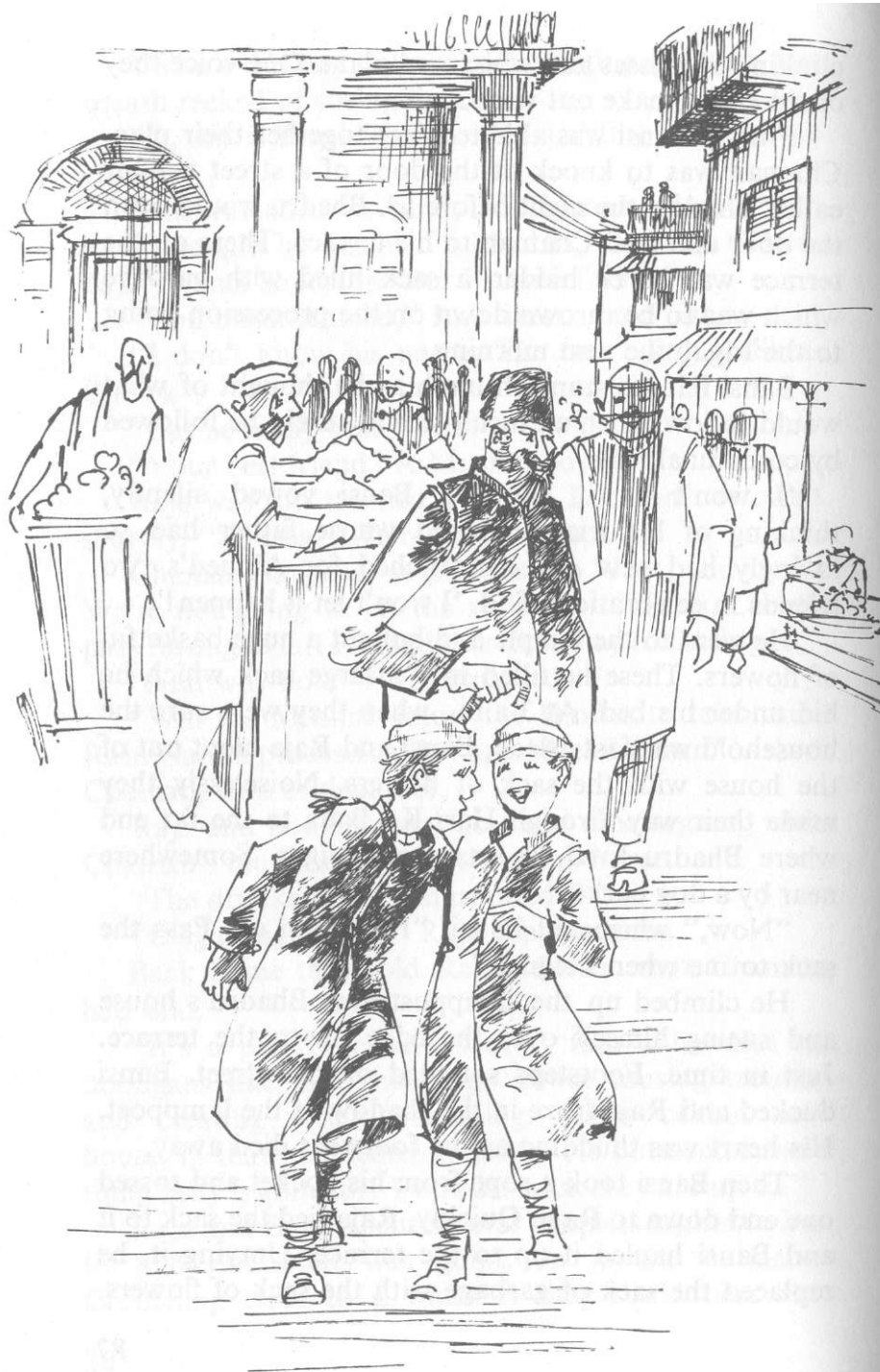
'I won't let it happen,' Bansi vowed silently, thinking of his friend Ahmed whose father had so lovingly had new *achkans* stitched for Ahmed's two friends in celebration of Id. 'I won't let it happen!'

He went to the temple and bought a huge basketful of flowers. These he filled into a large sack which he hid under his bed. At 3 a.m., when they were sure the household was fast asleep, Bansi and Raja crept out of the house with the sack of flowers. Noiselessly they made their way through Hari Ka Bada to the far end where Bhadru lived. It was a still night. Somewhere near by a dog barked.

"Now," whispered Bansi. "I'm going up. Pass the sack to me when I signal."

He climbed up the lamppost near Bhadru's house and swung himself over the edge on to the terrace. Just in time. Footsteps sounded on the street. Bansi ducked and Raja froze in the shadow of the lamppost. His heart was thudding as the footsteps died away.

Then Bansi took a rope from his pocket and tossed one end down to Raja. Quickly, Raja tied the sack to it and Bansi hauled it up to the terrace. Untying it, he replaced the sack of garbage with the sack of flowers.



Then he lowered the garbage sack down to Raja. In a moment Bansi himself followed, sliding down the lamppost. The boys hurried home and slipped back into the house.

But they could not sleep. Up again before sunrise, they bathed and, dressed in *kurta* and *pajama*, went for a walk through Hari Ka Bada, past Bhadru's house, into Sarai Chowk. The place was bustling with activity. The whole chowk wore a festive look.

After they had looked around a bit, they hurried home, donned their new *achkans* and waited for Ahmed.

Raja's parents looked fondly at the three boys.

"How smart they look!" exclaimed his mother. "And how fond they are of each other! Just like brothers!"

The boys then headed towards Bhadru's house on their way to the Idgah.

The Id procession too was slowly wending its way towards the Idgah. As it passed by Bhadru's house, there was a sudden commotion at the far end.

Chaman, twirling his moustache, stood leaning against a lamppost nearby. His drink-sodden mind was picturing a bagful of garbage being emptied on the festive crowd.

Instead, a rain of rose petals bathed the processionists. The fragrance of rose filled the air.

"Hurrah!" someone shouted and the crowd took up the cry.

A dumbfounded Bhadru glared down from the terrace. But no one saw him.

Raja, Bansi, and Ahmed were busy hugging one another.

CHEEMI

^—"heemi will be on my side."

"No, I asked her first, she'll be in my group."

Neither Radha nor Vimal would give in.

Cheemi was very good at *langdi-tang*, the hopping game. Every one wanted Cheemi to be on their side. She was in a fix. She did not want to annoy anyone.

Cheemi was a poor orphan. Nobody knew where she had come from. Yet everyone accepted the frail little girl and named her Cheemi—the little sparrow. She obliged one and all by doing odd jobs for them. Fetched vegetables from the corner shop or looked after babies when their mothers went shopping. If the maid didn't turn up, Cheemi was there to help, cleaning vessels, sweeping the floor and so on.

Cheemi lived on left-overs women in the neighbourhood gave her. The girls of her age gave her their discarded clothes. Everybody liked Cheemi, except Parvati *Kaki** She considered herself to be a pious and aristocratic woman. She had a big house with a beautiful garden full of jasmines and roses. But nobody was ever allowed in. The flowers were meant for *puja*** only. Little girls who loved flowers envied her but were too scared to go to her garden.

**aunt*

** *worship*

Cheemi, according to Parvati *Kaki* belonged to a low caste. Therefore, she looked down on the girls who played with her. She would not allow Cheemi into her house even on Ganesh Chaturthi, the day of the big *pūja*.

Parvati *Kaki's* house was almost like a mansion built in traditional style with big wooden carved doors, huge halls and chandeliers. Full sized mirrors and paintings decorated the walls. Even the pillars had beautiful pictures painted on them.

Surprisingly, the windows especially of the rooms, were very small. They were decorated with beads and *zari** curtains and hangings. It was said that Parvati *Kaki's* ancestors were related to the great Peshwas who had ruled Maharashtra during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The outhouses and surrounding houses, which also belonged to Parvati *Kaki*, were rented out. In the big house Parvati *Kaki* lived with her son, Vinayak, his wife Gauri, and her chubby little grandson, Chotu.

Chotu was a great favourite with the girls. Gauri *Bhabhi*,** as Chotu's mother was called, was a very nice, educated lady and didn't mind Chotu being carried by others. Parvati *Kaki*, however, kept vigil like a watchdog and never allowed Cheemi to touch Chotu. Cheemi had to be satisfied with cooing to Chotu from a distance. How she wished she could play with him.

Every year, during the monsoons, the river Mutha, near Pune, gets flooded. People gathered to watch the flood waters. That year, when the level of the water rose, no one bothered. It was a Saturday and the children had gone to school. The women folk were busy in the kitchen making special dishes for the

**brocade*

***elder brother's wife*

weekend. The men were in their offices and factories.

Suddenly, news came that Panshet Dam had given way and the waters of the Mutha river had entered the city. Children were asked to rush home.

Shanwar Peth, where Cheemi and her friends lived, and other areas on the river banks were in danger of being flooded.

At first the water was just knee-deep, but it rose fast. People living on the ground floors were shifted to places of safety. Those who lived in two or three-storied flats climbed to the top. There was confusion everywhere. Police vans were trying to help.

Vinayak, Parvati *Kaki's* son, had gone to Bombay on business. Parvati *Kaki* and Gauri *Bhabhi* were on the ground floor. When water entered their house, Parvati *Kaki* was in the *puja* room and Gauri *Bhabhi* in the kitchen. Within seconds the water rose. The police persuaded Parvati *Kaki* and Gauri *Bhabhi* to climb to the top floor. In the hurry and confusion, they forgot that Chotu was sleeping on the first floor!

The staircases were flooded. It was impossible to get to the bedroom on the first floor. Though the door to the room was closed, it was not bolted. Any moment the water could rush in.

The women were panicky. "Chotu!" they wailed. "What'll happen to our Chotu!"

Suddenly the police discovered that one of the bedroom windows was open, but it was too small for an adult to crawl in. Only a child could. But no one was willing to let their children take the risk.

Out of nowhere, Cheemi emerged. "Let me help. I can easily crawl in and get Chotu out," she offered.

There was no time to waste. The policemen lowered Cheemi to the window. "Jump!" they told her. "We will drop you a rope ladder through the window."

Without a moment's hesitation Cheemi jumped through the window. Chotu was sleeping soundly, picking him up, Cheemi put him on her back and tied him tight to herself with a bedsheet.

Slowly she climbed the ladder and peeped through the window. Carefully she undid the bedsheet and handed it, with the child, to a policeman. Then she crawled out of the window.

Both Cheemi and Chotu were taken to the second floor where Parvati *Kaki*, Gauri *Bhabhi* and others were watching. Chotu, who was up by now, saw so many people around that he burst out crying.

Cheers greeted Cheemi.

Gauri *Bhabhi* hugged Cheemi while Parvati *Kaki* fondled her grandson. Cheemi did not know what the fuss was all about.

"Come here, Cheemi," Parvati *Kaki* called her. Cheemi hesitated. But Parvati *Kaki* almost dragged Cheemi to her and hugged her. "*Beti* Cheemi," she said, "you have shown that it is courage and humanity that counts, not your caste or position."

After two days the flood water began to recede. As soon as life returned to normal in Pune, the Police Inspector of the locality met Cheemi and asked her what reward she would like to have for her bravery.

The entire neighbourhood was there. To everyone's surprise, Cheemi said, "I have already got the reward—an opportunity to play with Chotu." She paused for a while and added, "I should like to go to school if you can help me."

The Inspector was helpless. But Vinayak *Bhai* came forward and said, "We'll bear the expenses of Cheemi's schooling. She can stay with us as long as she wants."

Cheemi was delighted. At last she had a place to stay and little Chotu to play with.



Radha and Vimal were still fighting.

"Cheemi comes to my school," cried Radha.

"Oh, that dilapidated third-rate school of yours," retorted Vimal. "She should be admitted to my school, the best in Pune."

But Cheemi couldn't be bothered. Any school was good enough for her. She had Chotu all to herself and was busy playing with him.

HOLI

Merry shouts of "Holi Hai!" and the beating of drums woke me up early in the morning. I was staying in the school hostel, sharing a common dormitory. Rushing to the window, I looked out and saw a colourful crowd on the road. Some boys were spraying colour on one another and laughing loudly.

I felt sad and left out. Last year Mama and Papa were at home for Holi. A captain in the Merchant Navy, Papa was now at sea aboard his ship and Mama was with him. Grandma was in Delhi, but lived far from school. At the most I could expect a visit from her. She was sure to bring me a big box of sweets.

There was no sign of our warden, Miss Singh. Perhaps she was still asleep? I bathed and put on a white shirt and shorts and went down to join the other hostellers for breakfast. They too had no relations to go to. Besides, we had been strictly forbidden to play 'Holi' in the school premises. There was, therefore, nothing to do after breakfast but wait for Grandma.

I stood near the main gate, my face pressed against the iron bars. Suddenly, I heard someone call my name.

"Dilip! Dilip!"

Looking up I saw to my great joy, my friend Raj, balanced on his bicycle. He was covered with all sorts of colours. "Well, aren't you coming?" he asked.

"Where?" I yelled.

"Home, of course. Mother has prepared a lot of sweets!"

I was so pleased and tempted by this chance to play Holi that I forgot all about Grandma. Without thinking, I slipped out of the side gate and sped off with Raj on the cycle. In a few minutes we were at his house.

Raj's father owned a motor workshop. In fact, my father always got his car attended to by him. When I reached his place, the whole family—his two brothers, little sister, mother and father—was in the courtyard. Each of them held a syringe. A few more syringes lay next to a tub of coloured water. Jumping off the cycle, both of us grabbed a syringe each. But before we could fill them, we were sprayed by the others.

Laughter filled the air! We ran about filling and refilling our syringes and spraying each other. Green, red and yellow water was squirted all over.

We must have splashed, sprayed and dashed about madly for more than an hour. So we were tired and hungry. Raj's mother brought us sweets and soft drinks.

"Now, Dilip," she said, "go take a bath and change into Raj's clothes. Then we will have lunch."

I ate to my heart's content and slept the whole afternoon.

At about 5 o'clock, Raj woke me up. "Get up, Dilip, let's fetch milk." So, off we went with a can to the milk-booth nearby.

As we stood in the queue, I heard a stern voice. "Dilip! What're you doing here? Who's this boy?"

I turned round. It was the warden, Miss Singh, and she was looking daggers at us.

I was unnerved. "This is my friend, Raj," I managed to speak. "We've come to buy milk."

"Your grandmother came to see you, but you could



not be found anywhere. Did you take anybody's permission to go out with your friend? "

"No," I said softly.

"Come with me," the warden ordered. I meekly followed Miss Singh to school. She took me to the headmaster.

Mr. Kumar spoke angrily. "Dilip Chopra! You left the school premises without permission. Do you know the police have been asked to look for you? Your grandmother has also sent a telegram to your father".

I was struck dumb with fear.

"Dilip, what have you to say for yourself?" asked Mr. Kumar.

I kept mum. I knew there would be no pocket-money for me for months.

As the headmaster was about to speak again, there was a knock and Miss Singh entered, with a police officer. He asked me a lot of questions until he was satisfied that I was the boy lost and found and that I had gone to Raj's house on my own. Then he took a big book out of a bag he was carrying, got it signed by Mr. Kumar and left.

The headmaster turned to the warden. "Miss Singh, this boy should be punished. He should be confined to the chair next Sunday and should not be allowed to play. He must write a letter to his grandmother apologising for the agony he caused her. He must also ask you to forgive him."

I looked up at Miss Singh. "There is no need to punish him, Sir," she said calmly. "At least he told us the truth."

The headmaster nodded in agreement.

"Thank you, Sir, thank you, Miss," I mumbled. "I'm sorry. I shall never again leave the school premises without permission."

A SLEUTH IS BORN

Jalaluddin was twelve when he went to the best school in town. He was not very clever at studies but was smart.

When he was in the sixth class and his exams were only two months away, some of his classmates found that their books were missing. The thefts continued for some days. Initially the boys suspected one another. But, as the days passed, more and more boys started losing their books. They got worried because the exams were fast approaching.

Some of the boys were afraid of telling their parents about the loss of books for fear of punishment. They might even be suspected of having sold the books for a little extra spending money.

They also thought it prudent not to report the loss to their class teacher. "How come so many books have been lost?" the teacher would have asked. "And who can steal them anyway since all of you were in school all the time?"

To such queries, the boys had no answer. So every one suffered in silence, hoping and praying that the lost books might miraculously reappear.

One day Jalaluddin found his English grammar book missing. His parents were not rich enough to buy him another book. He had to have the grammar

book because his English teacher had always been admonishing him, "Improve your English or you will never pass."

So Jalaluddin was determined not only to pass in English but to top the class. Therefore, he had to regain the grammar book. He saved his pocket money, borrowed small amounts from some of the boys and bought a second-hand grammar book.

When he went to school the next day, instead of keeping his books in the desk, Jalaluddin kept his books on top of the almirah, which stood in a corner and in which the class teacher kept the attendance register, books and papers. But, when he returned from the assembly, the book was gone, as if it had vanished into thin air. Jalaluddin was in a quandary.

He thought and thought. It suddenly occurred to him that for the past few days, he had been seeing a stranger, a boy about their age, hanging about in the school.

'Come to think of it,' he said to himself. 'He's not a regular student. He is there some times and not at other times. How can that be?'

So far Jalaluddin had paid no attention to him, but now he was assailed with doubts. Who was this boy? Why was he around? So preoccupied was he with thoughts of the stranger that his teacher pulled him up for not paying attention to him.

The next morning, Jalaluddin entered his class room as usual, deposited the books in his desk and ran out for assembly as usual. But, instead of attending assembly, he came back by a circuitous route and hid himself in a corner of the verandah from where he could see his class room.

As soon as assembly started, he saw the stranger enter the class room stealthily, pick up a book each

from three or four desks and slip out of the school premises by the back gate.

'So that's it', said Jalaluddin to himself.

Having found the thief, Jalaluddin was not going to let him escape. He followed the boy, keeping a safe distance. The boy walked on and on and Jalaluddin followed him. When he crossed the road, Jalaluddin also crossed the road. Whenever he stopped, Jalaluddin stopped too, making sure not to arouse any suspicion. The boy entered a tall building and climbed the stairs. Jalaluddin did not follow him lest he should be noticed. So he waited outside the building. After what seemed hours he started getting worried. Perhaps the boy lives in this building, he thought. 'I can't possibly knock at every door enquiring about a boy whose name I do not know.'

Just as he was about to give up the chase, the boy emerged from the building, carrying a small packet tied up in a newspaper. But Jalaluddin was not deceived. He had no doubt that the packet contained the books.

Following the boy, Jalaluddin quickened his pace. The boy sensed he was being trailed. He quickly entered another building in an effort to dodge his pursuer. Then, coming out, he went back in the direction he had come from. But, as he turned the corner to go to the back of the tall building, he bumped right into Jalaluddin!

Jalaluddin pretended it was an accident and hurried off. The boy was relieved. He was wrong he felt in thinking that some one was shadowing him.

That was exactly what Jalaluddin wanted and, sure enough, the boy had fallen into the well-laid trap.

Seeing Jalaluddin walk off, he boldly walked on to the bazaar and entered a shop that sold second-hand



books. Jalaluddin watched the boy from the other side of the road and noted the name of the shop he had entered.

Then he rushed to the police station nearby and so excited was he that he almost barged into the Inspector's room. The policeman standing outside caught him by the arm. "Who do you think you are, barging in like this?"

Hearing the commotion, the Inspector came out. "What's going on?" he demanded to know. "What has this fellow been up to?"

Jalaluddin was past caring. "There is a thief in that bookshop, Sir," he screamed, pointing in the direction of the bazaar. "That boy has stolen our school books. Please, Sir, catch him before he runs away." The words came tumbling out of his mouth. "I followed him all the way from school, Sir. Please, Sir, hurry or he will run away!"

Jalaluddin was straining at the leash, as it were, the policeman holding him firmly.

The Inspector realised the urgency of the situation. He sent a policeman with Jalaluddin and they reached the shop in the nick of time.

"There he is!" cried Jalaluddin as the boy came out.

Seeing the policeman, the boy took to his heels. But the constable sprinted after him and caught him by the scruff of his neck.

"I'm not a thief," wailed the boy. "I have not stolen anything." "Then why were you running away?" asked the policeman.

They took the boy to the police station, where he denied that he had stolen and sold any books. So the Inspector sent for the shop-keeper. He too denied having bought any books from the boy.

"Let's take him to the school, Sir," pleaded Jalaluddin.

The Inspector called for the police van and they all went to the school.

At the school, Jalaluddin told the Principal how so many boys had been losing their books, but were afraid to report the loss for fear of being reprimanded. The Principal nodded sympathetically as he heard the story.

The shop-keeper kept denying that he had bought the stolen books from the accused boy. So the Principal and the Police Inspector took him from class to class.

"Look at those boys," thundered the Inspector. "Can you identify the boy who sold you the books?"

The boys were scared. What if the shop-keeper accused any of them? What could they say in their defence? What proof had they that they had not stolen the books? They might even be rusticated. The prospect was too alarming to contemplate.

As they went from one class to another thirty pairs of frightened eyes seemed to pierce right through the shop-keeper. He could stand the strain no longer. He broke down and confessed that he did buy the books from the boy. He volunteered to return the books and even forego the money he had paid for them.

Jalaluddin became a hero in the school. The Principal asked him to tell the whole story to a hastily summoned assembly.

Jalaluddin's proudest moment was when the Principal announced that he would be made a Prefect even though he was only in the sixth class, the Prefects were normally chosen from class seven and above.

Jalaluddin's parent[^] were indeed proud of him, more so when he received a letter of Commendation from the Police Department.

SANDALWOOD TREES

My parents and I lived near Karimunai village in the Eastern Ghats. My father owned and tilled a piece of terraced land on the hill slopes and my mother tended our goats. I helped both of them. I also studied in the village school. Gugu, the dog, was my companion. Both of us loved to run up and down the hilly slopes, whenever we could.

The day I was thirteen, a terrible thing happened. It was well after sunrise. My parents and I heard a low, rumbling sound. The goats and Gugu felt uneasy. Within minutes there was an explosion and a stone hit my head. I turned round sharply, my head throbbing with pain.

*"Amma** where are you?" I cried out. But, my voice was drowned by the noise of the boulders rolling down the hills. I thought I heard my mother call my name, "Su-nan-da-!" I tried to run, but it was no use. I gazed at the horrific landslide. Suddenly, something sharp hit my eyes. I staggered and fell. After that, I knew nothing till I woke up in Raogaru's house.

When I opened my eyes, I found it was dark around me. I had lost my eyes. Sobs shook my frail frame. Gugu stood by my side, licking my hand.

Raogaru was the headmaster of the village school.

**mother*

He had brought me to his house. My parents and the goats were killed in the landslide. Gugu and I had had a miraculous escape, Raogaru told me.

He and his wife, whom I called *Mami** were very good to me. But, I missed my parents. I missed my home. But most of all the darkness around me was shattering. I felt I was falling deeper and deeper into a dark bottomless pit.

I bravely suppressed my sobs. Gugu was a great comfort. He often sat huddled close to me. I stroked him, cuddled him and spoke to him often.

Raogaru wanted to send me back to school; but I refused to go. "I'm so different from the other girls, now. Moreover, everyone will make fun of me," I wept. Raogaru agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to let me stay at home.

I began to get used to my dark world. I spent a lot of time with *Mami*, who was very kind to me. I learnt to make garlands for the deities, while *Mami* prepared other offerings for the *puja*. In the evenings, Raogaru kept me company. We spoke on various subjects for hours together.

The landslides haunted me and I asked him one day, "Tell me, uncle, why do landslides occur."

"Man has started encroaching upon nature thoughtlessly," he explained. "He is denuding the hillsides by cutting down the trees. The trees actually help to keep the mountain mass together. Without them, any stray disturbance under the earth's surface causes chunks of the land to slide down."

"Why then, this de... de____"

"Denudation. Trees are cut down legally for various reasons, industrial development for example. But there is illegal felling of trees, too."

* *maternal aunt*

—
"So it's this denudation that has deprived me of my
Amma "

Gradually, as days passed, I gained confidence. I could touch, feel and understand pretty well. My nostrils told me a lot and I could hear extremely well. I ventured out with Gugu and went for afternoon strolls.

I was not unfamiliar with the hills around. My favourite haunt was a cluster of shady trees. There I would sit, leaning against a tree trunk, with Gugu sitting close to me. A cuckoo on the tree always greeted me with her clear call "Aa.. .koo____" If I answered back, she would call out louder still.

One day, as I approached my usual resting place, a gust of wind, with a familiar aroma, blew. I also noticed that my bird friend was silent. "Aa...koo, Aa...koo...", I called out. But there was no answer.

I became curious and sat down to think. When I tried to lean against the tree, I realised there was no tree. Just a short stump stood in its place.

I quickly bent down and smelt the stump. 'Sandalwood' I thought. I hastily picked up a stone and rubbed it against the core of the stump and I could smell sandalwood. I walked round and found three more such stumps. 'Who has cut down these sandalwood trees and why?' I wondered.

'De-nuda-tion.' I remembered Raogaru's word and slowly repeated it to myself.

"Bow-wow," cried Gugu.

"Come on, Gugu, let's go home," I said and we hastened homewards. As I entered the gates of the house, I told Raogaru, "Uncle..., some sandalwood trees have been felled on that side. Who has cut them?"

"I don't know, Sunanda. I must check with Mudaliar," said Raogaru walking away. Mudaliar was

the head constable at the village police station.

The next day, after my usual stroll with Gugu, I had fresh news for Raogaru. More sandalwood trees had been cut.

But Raogaru was emphatic. "Sunanda, I have asked Mudaliar. He says the area and the sandalwood trees are well protected and no one can break a single twig."

"Surely," said *Mami*, supporting me, "Sunanda couldn't be imagining all she said."

"In fact," continued Raogaru, "Mudaliar was quite upset and asked me to tell Sunanda that she should not spread such rumours any more."

"Well! Who would take a blind girl of thirteen seriously?" I murmured unhappily.

"Come, Sunanda. Don't feel so upset about it." *Mami* put her arm round my shoulders and comforted me.

But I was sure that valuable sandalwood was being stolen.

Early the next morning, Gugu and I walked to the sandalwood area. I let Gugu lead me and after a great search found a nice hiding place behind a bush. There I waited impatiently for a long time.

I had almost dozed off when Gugu growled. I was immediately alert. The next minute, Gugu sprang forward, barking, while I crouched well behind the bushes and waited with bated breath. I heard footsteps approaching. As they came nearer, Gugu stopped barking.

Somebody asked, "What are you doing here doggy? Patrolling like me, eh?"

I recognised Mudaliar's voice. He had not noticed me, I presumed. When I could no more hear his receding footsteps, I relaxed. However, nothing happened during the rest of the day and I returned home.



The following night, I waited for the clock to chime eleven. I heard Raogaru and his wife snoring. Motioning to Gugu to follow me, I quietly slipped out of the house.

Long before we reached the sandalwood trees. I heard a low whirring noise. Gugu became uneasy and growled. "Shsh.. .Gugu! Don't you make a noise," I whispered, holding him firmly by the collar.

We walked on and the noise became louder and louder. Suddenly, it struck me, 'Hey! Even if there's something fishy going on, the place must be well lit. Men can't be working in the dark. And they will see me.'

Hastily I pushed Gugu to one side of the path. Crouching low and holding the dog by the collar, I crept forward, listening intently.

The whirring noise was incessant and there was also the sound of moving vehicles. After what seemed an eternity, the whirring ceased and I could hear men speaking to one another.

"Enough for today, Ramesh. It's getting to be two o' clock. And remember, ten percent of the money you earn by selling this sandalwood is mine. Otherwise the authorities would be alerted and you would be behind bars for the rest of your life."

My heart skipped a beat for the voice I heard was that of Mudaliar. I held my breath, gripping Gugu's collar tight.

"Of course, Sir," replied another voice.

Soon all was quiet. My heart thumped like a steam engine as I rushed back home with Gugu. Quietly I got into bed, but could not sleep a wink. Mudaliar's voice was ringing in my ears.

In the morning, as soon as Raogaru was awake, I told him everything. "Are you sure, Sunanda?" he

asked me.

"Positive, Uncle."

"Then, I must take this up with police headquarters at Ootacamund," Raogaru said decisively.

Mami stroked my head gently. "Brave girl," she said.

After a few days, I was called to police headquarters with Raogaru. There, I was asked several questions to confirm what I had already told Raogaru. On the way home, I asked Raogaru what would happen to Mudaliar.

"If there's enough evidence against him, he will be arrested," he said.

A month or so later, one morning, Raogaru took my hands in his and said warmly, "My dear Sunanda! You have been given a reward by the police department for helping them unravel a sandalwood racket."

I grabbed both his hands and pressed them to my lips.

"Oh wonderful!" cried *Mami*. "I'll make *payasam** today and offer it to Lakshmi Devi."

"What is more," said Raogaru, "I have decided to admit Sunanda in the National School for the Blind. Sunanda, there you will learn a useful vocation. I'll put your reward money in the bank. It will help you get a good start in life."

I wanted to thank Raogaru, but words failed me. I was too overwhelmed.

**rice pudding*



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