



A CBT PUBLICATION

SHORT STORIES FOR CHILDREN



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SHORT STORIES FOR CHILDREN



Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

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Illustrated by Subir Roy and Geeta Verma

Man Overboard

I stood on the deck of S.S. Rajula. As she slowly moved out of Madras harbour, I waved to my grandparents till I could see them no more. I was thrilled to be on board a ship. It was a new experience for me.

"Are you travelling alone?" asked the person standing next to me.

"Yes, Uncle, I'm going back to my parents in Singapore," I replied.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Vasantha," I replied.

I spent the day exploring the ship. It looked just like a big house. There were furnished rooms, a swimming pool, a room for indoor games, and a library. Yet, there was plenty of room to 11111 around.

The next morning the passengers were seated in the dining hall, having breakfast. The loud-speaker spluttered noisily and then the captain's voice came loud and clear. "Friends we have just received a message that a storm is brewing in the Indian Ocean. I request all of you to keep calm. Do not panic. Those who are inclined to sea-

sickness may please stay in their cabins. Thank you."

There was panic everywhere. An old lady prayed aloud, "Oh God! Have mercy on us. My only son is waiting for me in Singapore."

A gentleman consoled her, "Don't worry, Madam, it's only a warning. We may not be affected at all."

Another lady, who was sitting beside me, looked very ill. "Not rough weather! I'm already seasick. A rough sea will be the end of me!"

I could not understand why all the elders were so upset. I remembered the several sea adventures I had read. Excitedly, I turned to the elderly gentleman sitting next to me. "Uncle, won't it be thrilling to face a storm on board a steamer? Have you ever been on a ship during a storm?"

"It can be quite unpleasant, you know," he replied rather severely. "I remember a time when the ship on which I was travelling ran off course. We were wandering on the ocean for a couple of days."

I remembered my class teacher, an English woman, telling us in class one day, "When I crossed the English Channel on my way to Singapore, there was a big storm near Gibraltar. The ship rocked to and fro. Everything in the cabins rolled up and down. Even the heavy pianos in the lounge went crashing against the walls."

This made my imagination run wild. Turning to 'Uncle' again, I said, "Wouldn't it be fun if the storm broke when we have lunch? Then the tables, with all the food on them, would run away from us. And the chairs, with us sitting on them, would be a merry-go-round."

Everyone round the table stared at me in horror. I thought to myself, 'Oh, these adults, they've no sense of adventure. How dull they are!'

The storm didn't break, but in the evening a strong wind started blowing. The ship rocked to and fro, rocking and rolling to the music of the wind. Huge waves were dashing against it. Even though the deck was slippery, I was running around. That's when I noticed Uncle leaning over the railings. I ran up to him, thinking he too, was enjoying the experience. "Good morning, Uncle, isn't it lovely?" I asked him.

But he wasn't well at all. He was retching over the rails and looked rather blue about the mouth. I felt sorry for him. "Can I be of any help? Shall I call the doctor?" I asked him.

He couldn't reply, but only held up his hand. As another bout of retching shook him he leaned over the railings. At the same time a huge wave lashed the ship. It lurched violently and the man tumbled over the railings into the wild sea. For a second I stood rooted to the spot. Then I ran like someone possessed, shouting, "Help! Help!"

Man overboard! Save him!" I must have made a lot of noise. I heard footsteps hurrying even that early in the morning.

Tears streaming down my face and shouting incoherently, I ran full pelt into an officer.

"What's the matter? Why are you making so much noise?" he asked in a stern voice, I was surprised to see it was the captain.

"Oh Sir!" I blurted out in relief. "A man fell into the sea. Please save him."

"Where?" he asked, immediately on the alert. "There," I said pointing a finger.

He did not wait for more details but ran at once to a room full of officers. "Man overboard," he cried. "Stop ship. Drop anchor. Quick!" His instructions were immediately obeyed. The captain then raced to the upper deck. I kept trailing behind him. "Lower the life-boats and crew into the sea towards the helm," he said. "There is a man overboard." Here again the men quickly obeyed him.

People started crowding the deck. "What's happening?" somebody asked me.

Word soon went round. Everyone was tense. Only an occasional, "There he is!" could be heard.

Someone asked, "Who is he?"

Another replied, "Don't know."

Meanwhile two life-boats moved towards the man. I stood close to the captain. In his anxiety,

he gripped my shoulder tightly and I winced.

"You're hurting me Sir," I protested.

"I am sorry, my dear. The sea is very rough today. I hope my men can reach him in time. My ship has never lost a passenger before," he said crossing himself. He was watching the rescue operations through a pair of binoculars that hung round his neck.

The boat was too far for me to see what was happening. I tugged at the Captain's sleeve. "What are they doing, Sir? Have they rescued the man?" I asked him.

"They've caught him by the arms and are pulling him towards the boat." He was giving me a running commentary. "Oh what bad luck! A sudden current has swept the man away dragging two of the sailors with him." He sounded nervous. Just then he noticed the passengers crowding against the railings. "Keep away from those railings!" he shouted. "We don't want another accident." The ship had dropped anchor but was heaving up and down.

I borrowed the captain's binoculars. Now I could see the rescue operation clearly. The crew in the rescue boats threw a strong rope to the two sailors in the sea and shouted, "Catch". Both of them were good swimmers and soon had caught hold of the rope. Then, with powerful strokes, they swam towards Uncle. One of them caught hold

of him, while the other tied the rope round his waist. With Uncle between them and the rope secure, the sailors swam back to the life-boats. The rescue team in the boats leaned over and heaved the three men into it. In a jiffy the boats were heading back to the ship.

"Thank God!" muttered the captain making the sign of the cross again, "They've managed to save him." He turned to the passengers thronging the railings. "Please do not crowd round the man when he is brought up. He will need immediate medical care." Then he saw the ship's doctor standing with a couple of nurses. A stretcher was also being brought close to the railings.

"Doctor! Is everything ready for the patient?" the captain asked.

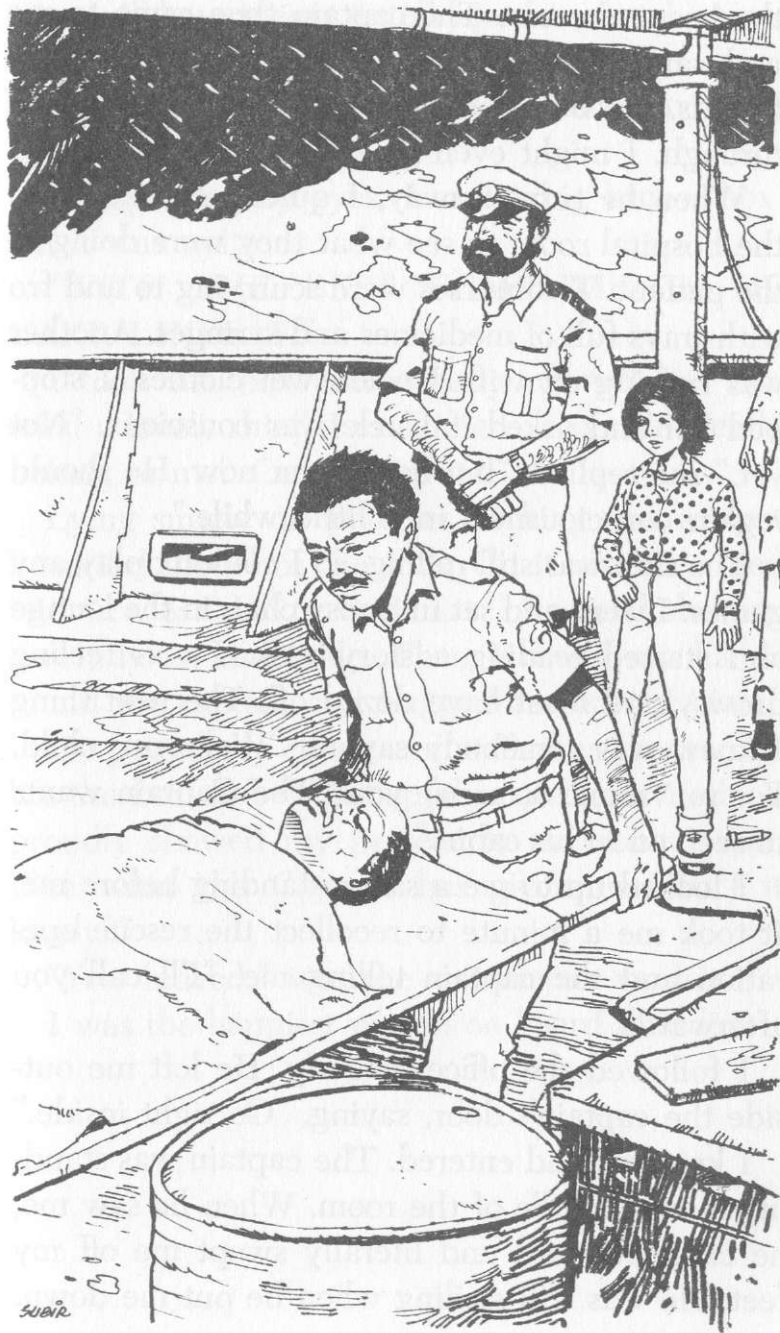
"Aye, aye, Captain," nodded the doctor.

The captain moved away to restore order on the ship. I edged close to the doctor and asked, "What will you do to him, doctor? Will he be all right?"

"Aye, I think so. All the water will have to be pumped out of him. He'll have to be given artificial respiration and kept warm."

"How do you pump the water out?" I asked. "We put him on his stomach and massage him until he brings it all up," he replied.

As soon as the rescue team reached the ship, Uncle was placed on the stretcher and rushed to



the hospital room. The captain then came to me and said, "Run along now and play with your friends. I'm busy, but will send for you when I'm through. I might even have a surprise for you."

When he turned away, I quietly sneaked into the hospital room to see what they were doing to the patient. Two nurses were scurrying to and fro with trays full of medicines and syringes. Another was rushing off with Uncle's wet clothes. I stopped her and asked if Uncle was conscious. "Not yet," she replied, "but he's better now. He should regain consciousness in a little while."

The ship was still rolling, so I couldn't play any games. I went and sat in a cosy chair in the lounge and started reading a story-book. I was feeling drowsy and must have dozed off. The next thing I knew was somebody saying, "Wake up, child. You're Vasantha, aren't you? The Captain wants to see you in his cabin."

I looked up to see a sailor standing before me. It took me a minute to recollect the rescue operation and the captain telling me, "I'll call you afterwards."

I followed the officer eagerly. He left me outside the captain's door, saying, "Go right inside."

I knocked and entered. The captain was standing in the middle of the room. When he saw me, he came forward and literally swept me off my feet. He was still smiling when he put me down.

"You will have plenty to tell your friends, eh? Now close your eyes."

I did so. Seconds later, I heard him say, "See what I've got for you."

On opening my eyes, I saw a big brown box. On it was written:

"WITH THE BEST COMPLIMENTS OF
CAPT. LINDSAY."

I took the box and eagerly opened it. "Oh, what a lovely ship!" I exclaimed. "Does this really belong to me? Can I keep it?"

Lying snugly on a velvet backing was a most beautiful model of the ship. On it was inscribed "B.I.S.N. & Co. S.S. RAJULA." I placed the box carefully on the table. Then I threw my hands round the captain and hugged and kissed him.

He patted my cheek and smiled as he saw me lift the box and walk happily out of his room. I proudly showed my present to everyone I met. "See what the Captain has given me. Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, indeed," was the unanimous verdict.

I was the happiest person on board that day.

When Papa Scolded Me

"Baby, come for breakfast. Your milk is getting cold," called *Bhaiya*, my elder brother.

I quickly put on my slippers, picked up my favourite doll, Beeta, and rushed out into the verandah. It was a beautiful day. The morning air was most refreshing. "Ah, how lovely!" I said aloud, taking a deep breath. I ran across the verandah, with Beeta tucked under my arm. While I gulped down the milk, I heard Papa calling out to the driver.

"Papa is still here, *Bhaiya*. He hasn't gone to the clinic, today," I said overwhelmed with joy.

Being engrossed in a magazine, *Bhaiya* did not reply, but I could see Papa talking to someone in his room, which was opposite the dining hall facing the verandah.

"Papa! Papa! I don't have to go to school, it's a holiday. Do you have a holiday, too? Look, Beeta has got fever," I said, all in one breath.

"No, my dear child, I don't have a holiday today. You go and play while I talk to Mr. Singh. He is very ill. I'll ask the compounder to give your doll some medicine," Papa said lovingly.

It was quite unusual to find my father at home at that time. Normally he was in his clinic before I woke up. So I was very happy. My father wiped his spectacles with the kerchief as he listened to his patient carefully.

I was on the balcony when I heard, "Baby! Baby! Come here, see this." It was my brother from the verandah. He had spread himself on an easy chair and our dog, Tom, was dancing round on his hind legs. I burst out laughing.

"Papa will give medicine to Beeta," I said, showing off.

"And I'll ask Papa to give some medicine to his darling daughter, because. . . because she laughs and laughs," said *Bhaiya*, tickling me and sending me into fits of laughter. Being the youngest child in the family I received everyone's attention and affection. Papa of course, was the most affectionate.

I ran from one end of the verandah to the other and then onto the balcony, staying close to Papa's room to attract his attention while I played. I swung on the curtain, thumped on the door, tapped on the table, pulled and pushed the chair. "Look, *Bhaiya*, what a variety of sounds they make," I said, pulling the chair, then leaping up and rapping on the door, clapping my hands, jumping all the while.

"Don't," pleaded *Bhaiya*, not taking his eyes off

the book in his hand.

Racing back to the window of Papa's room, I saw him still busy with the patient. I loved to see him there before me, while I played. 'He must be liking it, too,' I thought, 'to see me play around in his room.'

I dragged a chair and climbed onto the table. This at last drew Papa's attention.

"Baby, be careful, you'll fall down," he said tenderly.

"Look, Papa, I am taller than everyone," I grinned from ear to ear making my eyes disappear. All one could see was a set of white teeth and chubby cheeks.

Both Mr. Singh and Papa smiled. Papa did not look convinced. So I said again raising my hands above my head. "Papa I'm a big girl, now."

He nodded with a smile and continued talking to the patient.

I touched all that I could reach with my hands till I got to the black switch. 'No, you should not touch it.' I was imagining what my mother would have said.

'If you touch it, you'll get hurt,' *Bhaiya* had told me once. This was a 'forbidden' article for me, but how attractive it looked — black against the light blue wall. Unable to resist the temptation to touch it, I pressed the switch and the light came on. I immediately switched it off. I was



scared, I looked at Papa with large anxious eyes, but he was busy writing. He did not see me. I looked at Papa again and then at the switch which begged my hands to touch it again.

'I'll do it just once more, okay?' I said softly to myself. I repeated the mischief once more and was unable to stop myself from doing it again and again. I seemed to have disturbed Papa who was

concentrating on the patient's problem. Without looking up from the book, he said in a serious voice, "Don't do that, you might get a shock."

The klick-klack of the switch and the glowing bulb fascinated me, "Baby, come here, let Papa do his work," called my brother.

I ignored everybody. This was the most fascinating game for me at the moment.

"How fantastic! I press — the light is on, I push — the light goes off", I muttered.

The patient, obviously, had some serious problem. My father sat with four books open in front of him. My running around had certainly disturbed him. Completely exasperated, he put down his pen and spectacles and shouted at me, "You're not listening to me. GET DOWN FROM THERE!"

His loud voice broke my trance. I gaped at him wide-eyed. He fixed his gaze on me, expecting to be obeyed instantly. I was shocked at being scolded so loudly by him — scolded by Papa. Papa, a very soft spoken person, who was known never to raise his voice, had SHOUTED in anger at his darling daughter. I was very angry with him.

I jumped down from the table with a loud thud and raced up and down the balcony. My breath quickened, my face went red with anger, and my eyes felt hot with unshed tears. Throwing my hands about, I raced up and down wanting to

destroy everything that came in my way.

Hearing the commotion *Bhaiya* came out. "What is it?" he asked. My fury found a ready victim and I ran towards him and pushed him. I felt like bursting into tears. I rushed and pulled at the curtain in Papa's room, which came down with the force. I saw Papa talking to the patient with his usual patience.

How unthoughtful of him! He is not a bit bothered about my being so angry with him. I was fuming all the more.

I went back into the room, stamping my feet noisily in anger. Standing close to Papa, I raged vehemently, "Why couldn't you say it softly? Why did you speak so loudly to me?"

The next moment I came out on the balcony and stood beside the money-plant pot. My eyes were now full of tears. I plucked a leaf and shredded it to pieces. The sound of a chair being pushed in Papa's room reached my ears and then I heard his footsteps coming closer to me. I tried to run away in annoyance, but Papa caught me. He pulled my face towards his and picked me up. Tears came rolling down my plump cheeks. He patted my head lovingly and wiped my tears.

"Oh, you big cat!" said Papa, ruffling my hair.

This affectionate gesture melted my wrath. A moment later I was once again happy playing round the house.

To The Memory Of A Lion

Tanaji Malusare was Shivaji's childhood friend and companion at arms. He was very brave and daring. Shivaji proudly called him his *Sivnha* or Lion. Tanaji had planned and fought many a battle by the side of his leader. They were determined to free their land from Mughal domination.

Tanaji lived in the small town of Umratha. One morning, Umratha wore a festive look. Colourful bunting fluttered in the streets. There was a *Mangal Kolas** at every door. Tanaji's son was to be married that day. People went in and out of his house, busy running errands.

Just then a messenger came galloping down the street. "Look!" cried a man who had noticed him in the distance. "What news can he be bringing?" he asked Tanaji's servant who was near him. Before the servant could reply, the rider came to a stop in front of them. He leapt off his horse and said, "Where is Tanaji? I must see him at once."

"In the house Sir," answered the servant. He had recognised the rider. "I'll take you to him."

"Sire," the servant called out.

*Pots decorated with mango leaves and a coconut.

Tanaji and his wife were busy selecting and packing clothes and ornaments for the bride and the groom.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Suryaji," replied the servant.

Tanaji put aside the jewel-case he was holding and stepped forward. "Come in, Suryaji".

Suryaji entered and bowed to Tanaji and his wife.

"Welcome, my friend. What brings you here?" he asked. His wife, too, stopped inspecting the *sari* she had in her hand.

"Ka/e* wants you at Raigarh immediately," replied Suryaji.

Tanaji knew at once that it was something serious. He turned swiftly to his wife and put his hand affectionately on her shoulder. "My dear," he said, "you know I have to go. Postpone the wedding. My first duty is to my leader and my land. Come, smile and bid me farewell. Do not wony. Suryaji and my men will be with me."

Tanaji's wife was stunned. She held back her tears.

"Please wait," she said and went in to prepare the '*tilak*' and '*arti*'*** for the farewell.

"His Majesty.

^{s3}Vermillion mark on forehead.

^{co}"moving a lighted lamp round a soldier before he goes to battle.

Tanaji buckled his sword and stepped out of the room. He ordered his men to be ready to accompany him. The news spread and soon the soldiers assembled outside his house.

After his wife had applied '*tilak*' on his forehead and performed the '*arti*', Tanaji took leave of her.

Leading an army of horsemen, he rode fast to reach Raigarh fort. Tanaji walked straight into Shivaji's room and found him sitting in a pensive mood.



"*Raje*, I'm here at your service," said Tanaji bowing.

"Oh! my *Sivnha* has come!" exclaimed Shivaji. He embraced Tanaji and said, "Come, sit down. We have a difficult assignment. *Ma Sahib*⁴ feels that the other forts are not safe so long as we do not recapture Kondana fort.

"Udai Singh Rathor is in command of the Mughal forces. His men are guarding the three gates. His sons are also with him. All of them are brave fighters. There is also the killer elephant Chandrawati. She is a force by herself. I have thought and thought, but can't find a way of capturing the fort. You are the only one who may be able to find a way."

The lines deepened on Tanaji's brow. Then he spoke. "I have a plan. The fort is guarded only on three sides. We will try to enter from the west."

"What?" Shivaji sprang up. "Enter from the west? You're not planning to climb that precipice? It is unassailable."

Tanaji said coolly – "No, *Raje*, it is not the way I intend doing it." He then explained his plan to Shivaji in detail.

"It is a daring plan," said Shivaji anxiously. "Very difficult to execute. Everything depends on just one thing."

"Yes, it is difficult, *Raje*, but not impossible.

⁴Queen Mother.

We will prepare well and we will succeed." Tanaji sounded confident.

"Very well, go ahead with your preparations. May *Goddess Bhawani** bless you."

Tanaji bowed to Shivaji and left. He called Suryaji and some of his personal friends who were waiting in the adjoining room. He swore them to secrecy and then told them of the plan.

"We begin preparing at once. Drill the soldiers, perfect them in the use of arms, but do not tell them for what. We have to take the enemy by surprise."

Soon everything was ready. Tanaji called his friends, and announced, "Tonight we attack. It is a moonless night and nothing will be visible. All of you must be absolutely silent as you approach Kondana fort. I will take the iguana Yashwanti. With her help, we will scale the rock." Then he turned to Suryaji. "You are to take the rest of the men and wait at Kalyan Gate. We will throw it open for you."

Last minute preparations over, they marched to the fort quietly as shadows. In a short while they reached the foot of the precipice. Tanaji tied a rope to Yashwanti's neck. Then he threw her up hard, so she could clutch the wall. But the iguana lost her grip and slithered down.

"Shivaji's family diety.

"Oh, it is a sign of bad luck!" exclaimed one of the soldiers.

Tanaji whirled round, "Who said that? There is no place for superstition in a soldier's life. He must only have faith, in himself and in God."

Tanaji once again hurled the iguana up with greater force. This time Yashwanti gripped the top of the fort wall. Tanaji breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hand me the bag containing the ropes," said Tanaji. A soldier gave it to him and he slung it on his back.

"I go up first. I will tie the ropes to the projections on the wall and let them down. With their help you can all climb up. Remember not a sound."

Tanaji held the rope tight and climbed up and up till he reached the ramparts. The soldiers followed him. Within minutes they were at the top.

Tanaji whispered, "There must be a number of guards posted on the ramparts. Take them unawares and silence them. They should not be allowed to sound the alarm. We'll get down and attack the soldiers inside the fort. Let's go."

The men stormed the fort and overpowered the guards in no time. Shouting '*Jai Bhatoani*', they rushed into the fort. The Mughal soldiers offered stiff resistance and a fierce hand to hand fight ensued.

One of the Mughal soldiers quietly slipped out and rushed to inform Udai Singh.

"The Marathas have entered my fort? But how?" cried Udai Singh.

He sprang from his bed and hurried to the next apartment. "Wake up, my sons. Tell the *mahout** to get Chandrawati. She'll crush the Marathas in no time."

Udai Singh's sons joined in the battle and the *mahout* sent Chandrawati charging into the fray. The Marathas fought bravely. The casualties were heavy. Among the first to perish were Udai Singh's three sons and Chandrawati, the elephant. Tanaji went looking for Udai Singh.

Udai Singh had by then heard of his sons' deaths. He rushed into the melee. "Tanaji, you have a lot to answer for. You can't escape me."

"That we'll see," cried Tanaji. With drawn swords, they closed in.

Both were brilliant swordsmen. The battle raged fiercely round them. The attackers had got the better of the defenders. In a strategic move, a section of the Maratha soldiers had thrown open Kalyan Gate.

Tanaji and Udai Singh were locked in a life and death struggle.

Both were tired and bleeding profusely. Udai
"Elephant-driver.

Singh made a gallant effort and plunged his sword into Tanaji's chest. Tanaji stumbled and fell. Quite unexpectedly he sprang up and inflicted a mortal wound on a triumphant Udai Singh. He fell dead. Tanaji, too collapsed and died.

All was quiet when Suryaji entered the fort. He rushed around, looking for Tanaji. He found him lying in a pool of blood. He knelt to feel his pulse.

He looked aghast at his dead friend. His grief soon turned into anger. "We must complete your task", he muttered, drawing his sword.

The Marathas, infuriated by Tanaji's death, fell on their foes like tigers. Udai Singh's death had taken the fight out of the Mughals. After a brief struggle, the Marathas won the battle. Kondana fort was once again in their hands.

Suryaji returned to Raigarh fort to inform Shivaji of their victory. He was anxiously waiting for them.

"*Raje*, the fort is taken," said Suryaji.

"Good. But where is Tanaji?"

Suryaji hung his head and remained silent.

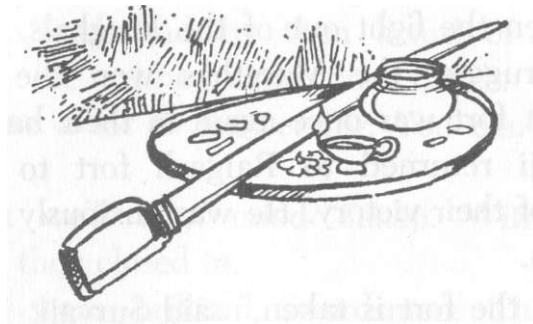
"Speak, Suryaji!" cried Shivaji shaking him by his shoulders. "What has happened to him?"

"He is dead!" Suryaji said in a broken voice.

Shivaji's face went pale as he mumbled, "The fort is won, but my lion is gone." He turned and walked to the window.

He stood there looking out.
A memorial to Tanaji stands on the spot where
he fell. It is called '*Sionha Garh*

"The lion's fort.



The Triumphant Smile

Humayun lay in a coma. His father Babar stood beside his bed, sad and worried. The Chief Vizier and the nobles crowded behind him. The queen with tears in her eyes begged of the emperor, "Save Humayun's life, my Lord". In between sobs she said again, "Save my son from the clutches of death."

Babar stood aghast and moaned in grief. "O God, how helpless am I! I can't even save my son. I can't save my own flesh, my own blood...."

The palace herald announced, "Here comes *Shahi Hakim*."*

The *Hakim* entered the room and offered his respects to the emperor. Babar knelt before him pleading, "O life-giver! Save my child." The *Hakim* was taken aback and bent down to raise the Emperor to his feet. "O my Lord," he said, "I'm just an ordinary servant of yours. I promise I won't leave any stone unturned. But to grant life is in God's hands. Have faith in Him. He is Rahim. He is Karim, the kind and the merciful. Beg His

"Royal physician.

mercy, Sir. I can only examine the patient and diagnose the illness."

The *Hakim* felt Humayun's pulse. Then he examined the closed eyelids. He tried to open his mouth too, but it was shut tight. The *Hakim* unbuttoned Humayun's shirt and applied a strong-smelling balm to his chest. The prince slowly opened his eyes and mouth too, but did not show recognition.

"*Asalam walekum* Prince," the *Hakim* greeted him. But there was no reply. "*Asalam ivalekum*," he repeated. "Look at me Prince. Look at your father. Don't you recognise your mother sitting by your side?"

There was still no response. Humayun's vacant looks were fixed on the ceiling. The queen took Humayun in her arms and moaned.

"O Humayun, my son, won't you call me *Anuria** * anymore? Here, here look at your *Abba** * * Say something my son, say a few words!"

But Humayun didn't utter a sound. Babar stood dazed beside the *Hakim*, while the queen's heart-rending cries continued to fill the room.

The *Hakim* opened another bottle and poured a few drops of nectar into Humayun's parted lips. But the drops flowed out. The *Hakim* mumbled,

"God bless you (Muslim greeting).

⁰⁰ Mother

"" Father

"He has not accepted the medicine. I'm sure his throat is swollen and clogged." He took a piece of paper and wrote down the names of some medicines. "Here my Lord! I can only prescribe these potions for the patient. Kindly try them. *Howal shaft'•!* May God cure him,*" said the *Hakim*. He handed the slip to the Emperor and left the palace in dismay.

Babar passed the prescription on to the Chief Vizier. Meanwhile, one of the court priests had entered the chamber. He bowed low and said, "My Lord! Kindly offer to God whatever you love most. I am sure God will be kind enough to give Humayun a new lease of life."

"Should I renounce my wealth and my kingdom?" asked Babar.

"That's up to you, my Lord. You should offer what you love most," the priest replied.

"What do I love most?" the Emperor muttered.

"Only you can answer that my Lord."

"Dearest to my heart is Humayun," Babar replied.

"Surely, to save the Prince, Your Majesty would not hesitate to offer something equally dear to *Allah?*" urged the priest.

"Ah! It is my own life that I love most," said Babar with a triumphant smile.

°God bless you with good health.

"*Allah-O-Akbar* In the presence of all nobles and courtiers of my empire, I, Zaheerud-Din Babar, do hereby offer my own life to God Almighty to save Humayun my dearest son. Let his malady strike me. Let Humayun recover. May I die and may Humayun live for ever and ever." As soon as he had finished speaking Babar sat down on the mat to offer prayers to the Lord.

The anguished queen flung herself at Babar's feet and cried, "No, no, my Lord. You cannot die. Let the Almighty take my life. Humayun must live under your patronage."

"No, *Begum*.⁰ My pledge to the Almighty must hold good. I must defeat death. I have lived a hero's life. Let me die a hero's death for Humayun," muttered Babar as he lay down on the mat feeling faint and dizzy from the pain in his chest.

"*Allah-O-Akbar*," whispered Babar again with the same triumphant smile on his lips, as his eyes closed.

At the same time Humayun regained consciousness and opened his eyes.

"Allah is the Greatest.

"Woman of noble rank.

The Turkish Cap

The school bell rang. Recess at last! We rushed out of the classroom. I took the 'gulli' out of my satchel before I ran out. Khushal took the '*clanda*' and followed me. Panna, Raghubir, Brijpal, Prakash, Kaushal, Bishen, Nityanand, all dashed out, followed by others. We reached the ground outside our school compound where we usually played.

Prakash drew a big circle. Khushal entered it. It was his turn to begin the game. He placed the 'gulli' in the centre of the circle, and took the '*danda*' to strike the *gulli*. The others took their positions round the circle. Everybody's eyes were on Khushal. He struck the 'gulli' hard. It flew out of the circle and went quite far. None of us could catch it.

Nityanand was the first to reach the 'gulli'. Picking it up, he threw it back with all his strength. Khushal struck hard again. It went flying in another direction.

Bishen was fielding that side. He tried to catch

"Short stick used in the game of tip-cat (*gullidanda*).

"Stick used in the same game.

it but it slipped through his fingers. He picked it up and threw it back towards Khushal. Khushal once again hit it back.

It was my turn next. But the way Khushal was hitting I felt my turn would never come. I would have to wait till the next day. I was hoping Khushal would miss just once. Then I would be able to start. But Khushal was proving too good a player for us.

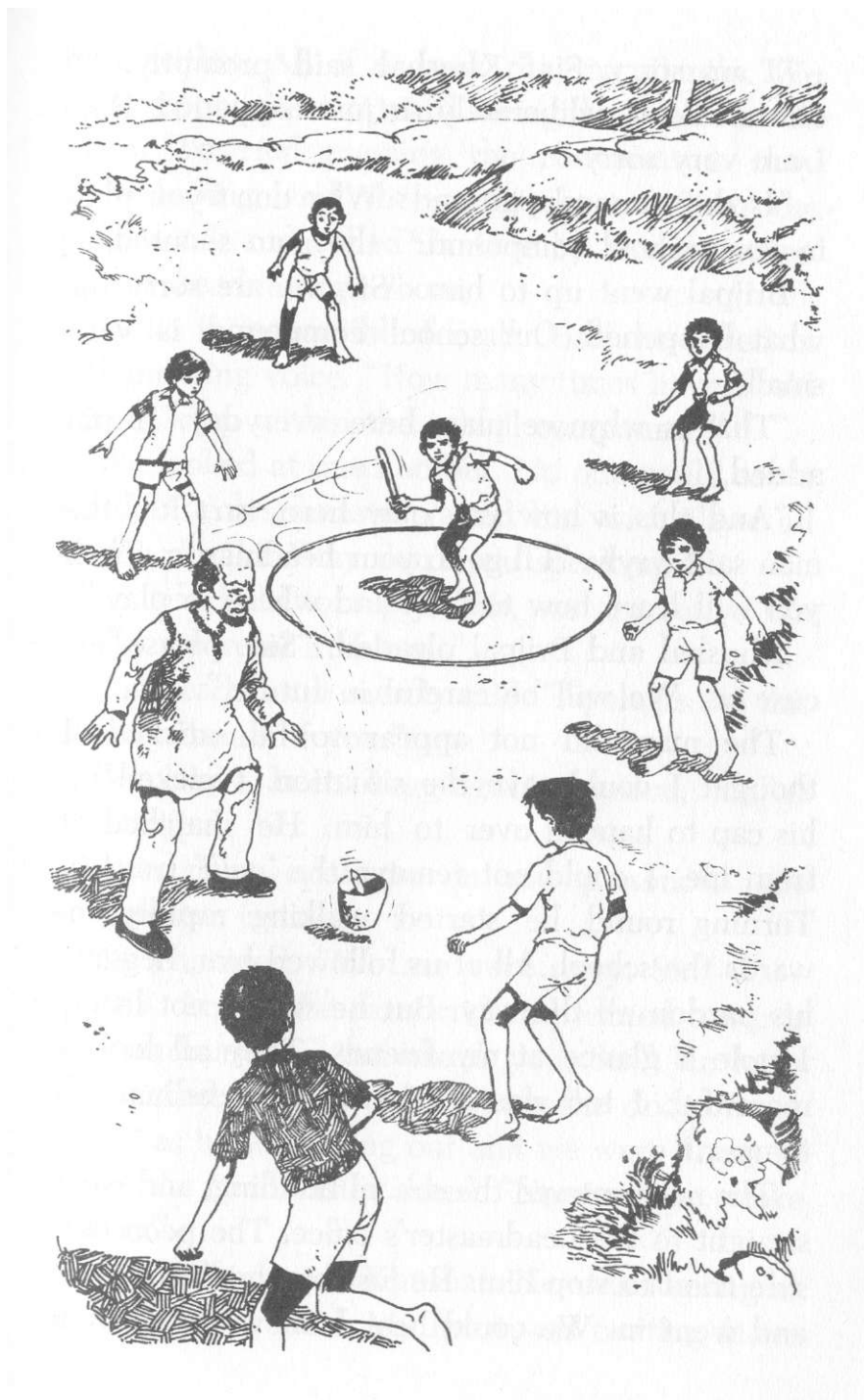
Then Panna threw the '*gulli*' to Khushal. It did not even reach the circle. Khushal struck it forcefully towards Brijpal. Brijpal could not catch it either. It should have been an easy catch. I cursed him for missing it. Brijpal was also sorry for the slip. But what could he do now? He flung the *gulli* back with a vengeance. Khushal didn't miss this time either.

The '*gulli*' was now flying towards me. I was ready to catch it. But it never came!

All of a sudden there was a lot of noise. A man in *kurtci* pyjama* was standing in the middle of the play field. His turkish cap was lying on the ground, upside down. The '*gulli*' seemed to have hit the cap on its way to me. The wonder of it all was that the '*gulli*' had landed inside the cap.

The man was furious. "You naughty boys! See, what you have done. I will teach you a lesson," he shouted.

"Long loose shirt worn with pyjamas.



"I am sorry, Sir," Khushal said promptly. "I did not do it deliberately. It just happened. But, I am very sorry."

"Is this your playground? Why don't you play in your school compound?" the man shouted.

Brijpal went up to him. "Sir, we are sorry for what happened. Our school compound is very small."

"That is why we play here everyday," Bipin added.

"And this is how you play here, isn't it?" the man said wryly. "I'll go to your headmaster. Then you will learn how to play and where to play."

Khushal and Brijpal pleaded. "Sir, please excuse us. We will be careful in future."

The man did not appear to be satisfied. I thought I could save the situation. I picked up his cap to hand it over to him. He snatched it from me. I could not remove the '*gulli*' from it. Turning round, he started walking rapidly towards the school. All of us followed him, begging his pardon all the way. But he would not listen. I stole a glance at my friends. They all looked mournful. I too was scared of the headmaster's temper.

The man entered the school building, and went straight to the headmaster's office. The peon outside tried to stop him. He just brushed him aside and went in. We could hear loud voices coming

from within. All of us were praying silently. We had crept to the courtyard facing the headmaster's room. We tried guessing the conversation they were having and the consequences. Soon the peon came and called us. One by one we entered the headmaster's room.

"Who is responsible for all this?" he asked in a thundering voice. "How many times have I told you to keep within the school compound?"

We looked at one another. No one could say a word. The headmaster raised his voice, "Are all of you dumb? Why don't you speak up?"

I made bold to reply, "Sir, we are sorry. We shall be careful in future."

The headmaster merely said, "Apologise to this gentleman, all of you."

"We have been begging his pardon, Sir," it was Brijpal.

"You must apologise in my presence," the headmaster insisted.

We chorused, "We are very sorry, Sir."

"O.K. boys," the man said and turned towards the headmaster. "And thank you, Sir." He looked satisfied, and moved towards the door.

Just as he was going out and we were about to leave, the headmaster asked, "Now, whose stroke was it?"

I looked towards Khushal. He was looking at me. I looked round. My heart was beating faster

and faster. But how could I blame my friend? With a sinking feeling, I decided I would take the blame. A faint smile played on the headmaster's face. Somehow I felt it was not for any punishment that the question was asked. I opened my mouth to reply.

But Khushal was quicker. "Sir, it was my stroke. I am very sorry."

"What a stroke!" the headmaster exclaimed. "You strike the '*gulli*', hit a man's cap, make it fall, and then land the '*gulli*' inside it! A master player, no doubt!"

I could not suppress my laughter. But I could not laugh in the headmaster's presence, either. So, I checked myself and with some difficulty managed a wide smile. When I looked round, the others were also trying to suppress their laughter. We were eager to go out and have a hearty laugh. The man with the turkish cap also turned round at the door. He too looked amused. Still smiling he went away.

We trooped out of the room. Then we let ourselves go.

The Goose Thieves

It was Bina who first got wind of what was happening. She happened to be passing the school kitchen where they cooked meals for the nuns and boarders. George, the school-bus driver, was lounging around talking to the cooks inside. Bina, who was looking for some botanical specimens in the backyard, stopped suddenly in her tracks. Waddling sedately towards her was a bevy of large, awkward looking geese.

"Oh hello, Christopher Columbus, hi Marco Polo, hi Captain Cook, hello Amundsen," she greeted them. The geese hurried towards her, their heads bobbing back and forth. The boarders had named the geese after famous explorers because they were constantly exploring the school grounds. Once they had wandered into Bina's classroom, during a very boring civics class and had scared the daylights out of Miss K. The class had roared with laughter as Miss K. tried to chase the intruders out by flapping a large, checked, board duster.

As Bina patted them, she heard one of the cooks giggle and threaten George. "If you keep

demanding more food, we'll really fatten you up and have you for the Christmas feast like those geese outside."

Bina's heart sank. These sweet, lovable geese were actually being fattened for Christmas! It couldn't be! The schoolgirls were much too fond of them. But what could they do anyway? Bina sought her friends Vinita, Valerie and Nishi and told them what she had overheard.

Nishi exploded. "Nonsense! Not our Marco Polo and Amundsen, our poor Captain Cook, and Columbus – no, no we won't let them be killed and eaten."

Valerie however was the thoughtful sort. "But how can we stop them? They have every right to do what they like with the geese. That's done every Christmas. We have no right to make anybody do anything. After all, they aren't even *our* geese!"

Vinita was close to tears. "But we've seen them around for weeks. School won't be the same without those darlings waddling in and out of the classrooms. We can't let them be killed!"

Bina had been quiet all this time, working out a plan. "I think we *can* do something about it," she said finally. "In fact there *is* something we can do to stop the geese from turning up on the school dining table for Christmas."

Nishi muttered disbelievingly, "If you're going

to suggest to Mother Superior that we should have a heart-to-heart talk about it, count me out. I quake in my boots when I see her coming."

"Besides," said Valerie, "who are we for her to listen to? "

"Listen to me," Bina interrupted. "I have a real good idea. The more I think about it, the better it appears."

"Out with it, Beans," Vinita was impatient.

"We'll kidnap them!" Bina exclaimed and sat back to watch her friends' reaction.

"What!" burst out Nishi, "kidnap!"

"You mean it'll work?" Vinita sounded doubtful.

"Why not?"

Only Valerie said slowly, "It's a possibility! We could keep them in my backyard. We have lots of space."

The four sat together and thought. Gradually it struck the other three that Bina's idea was workable. If they could but grab the four geese and smuggle them somewhere far away from school there would be no geese for the cooks to fatten and slaughter for the Christmas dinner.

The next few days, the four of them thought over and discussed plans in secret, till the rest of the class almost went crazy. They would huddle in a corner of the lawn or in the assembly hall or library. Whenever anybody wanted to find

out what they were discussing, they would innocently say like Valerie once did to an inquisitive girl – "Oh we are discussing the exploits of Marco Polo the traveller."

"But we learnt all about him in geography last year," said the stubborn girl and went off, mumbling to herself.

D-day drew nearer. It was mid-December and getting very cold. The girls came to school clad in heavy blazers. The day before the plan was put into action the four friends met on the lawn.

"All set?" Bina looked round and blew on her hands for warmth. "Everybody sure about their parts?"

"Hmmm."

"Of course."

"Everything's fine."

"Good."

The next morning Bina went to school, wearing a large sized blue overcoat. Mother Superior noticed her at once, even before morning assembly.

"What is this?" she asked Bina. "You know very well that you're not supposed to wear any coat except your blazer to school."

"Yes Mother," Bina said innocently, "but on my way here the upstairs lady threw out some water which fell on me. I couldn't come to school wearing a wet blazer."

Mother Superior nodded. "That's all right," she said.

She was however dumbfounded when three other girls of the same class turned up wearing oversized coats.

She shook her head in disbelief as they in turn made some excuse for turning up in their mothers coats.

"This is too much," she shouted. "Four of you! Is this some kind of a practical joke?"

Nishi looked nervous. Bina patted her arm and said aloud, "What a coincidence. Four of us turning up like this! It's funny, isn't it?"

There was a pause and then Mother Superior smiled, "Go on, go to your class. But I hope coincidences like this do not happen too often."

The girls fled to their classroom. The others stared at them in surprise. The moment classes were over for that day, the four friends charged out. Their natural science teacher already tottering rather unsteadily on stilettos was thrown off-balance and fell heavily against the tall human skeleton in the corner of the room, as the four ran past her. Their classmates squealed in sympathy.

Bina, Valerie, Nishi and Vinita had already disappeared down the corridor, past the library and assembly hall, across the courtyard and towards the kitchen. The kitchen was deserted and

there was nobody in sight either.

Just then, as if on cue, the four explorers walked out from behind a bush.

"Grab," yelled Nishi forgetting to whisper and lunged at Christopher Columbus.

"Eee-yowa," howled Bina as she reached for Marco Polo and was left with a feather from his tail as he slipped away.

Valerie ran after Amundsen, and Vinita after Captain Cook who was scurrying across the cabbage-patch.

Bina caught her prey and tossed him inside her overcoat. But he was larger than she had thought and he stuck out conspicuously on her left side as he straggled to free himself. Bina ignored him, and shouted instructions to the others, "Get him from over there, right there.... Oh no! he's gone behind the bench.... you go from this side.... got him. . . .no? Oh there he is... .quick get him... .great!" Nishi gripped Amundsen tightly, Christopher Columbus having fled towards Valerie who was chasing him round and round a cactus bush.

"That's enough!" a sharp authoritarian voice lashed out. The girls looked up with instinctive dread. Mother Superior stood on top of the kitchen steps, tall and unapproachable. The cook, Mary, peeped out from behind her.

There was pin-drop silence for a few seconds.

Then, as Valerie and Vinita whirled round, their prey fled cackling loudly to safer pastures.

Mother Superior looked sternly at them. "Now what's all this in aid of?" she asked in a quiet icy voice. "Is this your idea of fun?" There was a deathly silence. From inside Bina's coat Marco Polo gave an indignant squawk. Bina retrieved him and dumped him unceremoniously on the ground where he shook back his ruffled feathers and trundled off. Nishi put Amundsen down and he too waddled off.

v Mother Superior was tight lipped. "Can I ex-



pect an explanation?"

The four of them exchanged glances. "We did not really mean it, Mother Superior.... We just thought it was very cruel. . . .And we're so fond of them!"

"It's not fair to eat them...we love them so much."

"After all there are so many other animals in the whole world. Why eat these?"

Mother Superior raised one hand to silence them, "One of you explain. Not all of you together. . . ."

Bina explained. She had a soothing voice. By the time she finished, Mother Superior was quite relaxed and trying to hide a smile.

"Kidnap them!" she exclaimed. "Kidnap?"

Mary, who had been quiet all this time, suddenly roared with laughter.

"Oh! Its so funny," she burst out. They all had an uproarious laugh. Finally Mother Superior said, patting the girls on their shoulders, "Whatever gave you girls the idea we were going to eat these fellow's? Certainly not. We're too fond of them. We won't kill them for the sake of one meal. They're yours girls! Yours to play with and look after."

"Thank you, Mother Superior," four voices sang in chorus. "Its wonderful to know you never intended killing them in the first place."

Christmas Bells

Once again, father was transferred. This time to the sleepy town of Palai in Kerala.

On arrival at Palai, we moved into a house, surrounded by banana trees, beds of tapioca, roses and chrysanthemums. Bordering them were a dozen coconut palms, reaching out to the stars in the sky.

I pranced round the house, exploring every nook and corner.

My mother was busy unpacking the cartons and arranging the various articles in the proper places.

I was bored. I picked up a rubber ball and went into the garden.

I ran round the garden chasing the ball or watching squirrels scramble up the trees or observing the humming bees.

The ball which I kept bouncing up and down went over the parapet into the compound of the neighbouring house. I saw a little boy, almost my age, rushing out and collecting the ball. He rolled his eyes, put out his tongue and teased me. I did not like his attitude. I too rolled my eyes and

stuck out my tongue at him.

"Why did you throw the ball into my house?" he asked loudly.

"I did not throw it. It came by itself," I replied.

"Then let it come back by itself. I won't give it to you."

"I will snatch it from you."

Try.

I climbed up the parapet, jumped over it and chased the boy. He ran off, turning and twisting, weaving his way through the thick vegetation. I raced round the garden after him. At last, after ten minutes of running around, we sank down, panting for breath.

"I am Raman," I broke the ice.

"Thomas," he offered his hand.

"Glad to meet you."

"Let us be friends."

"All right. I need a friend."

That was the beginning of an association that soon developed into a close and intimate friendship.

We spent all our time together, eating from the same plate, playing hide and seek, chasing butterflies, climbing trees, plucking unripe mangoes and sinking our teeth into the slightly sour pulp. Occasionally we fought like cats and dogs, clawing and tearing at each other, only to forget our

differences soon, swearing never to fight again.

Nights were the hardest for us. Then we were pulled apart. We had to be carried away by force by our parents, while we raved and kicked and cried to be left to ourselves.

Thomas told me all about Christmas. I listened to him, fascinated. He told me that Christmas came in the last week of December. He invited me to spend Christmas Eve with him.

I looked forward eagerly for Christmas to come. I associated it with new clothes, sweet dishes, happiness and celebration.

Thomas suddenly became docile. I did not like this change. I threw dust on his clothes. Still, he kept on smiling. I threw a stone at him. He winced with pain. But, he did not retaliate. He only said, "I wish I could hit you back."

"Why don't you do it, then?" I teased him.

"Because I must be good and obedient. Only then will I get a gift from Father Christmas."

I too wanted a gift from Father Christmas, whoever he was. I meekly asked, "Thomas, will he give me a gift too?"

"Only if you are good," Thomas said in a superior tone.

Thomas and I waited eagerly for Christmas to come. We did not misbehave. We obeyed our parents. We gave up chasing squirrels. We gave up fighting.

It was a long wait for us.

At last, Christmas Eve came.

Dressed in my best, I ran over to my friend's house. His father, Mr. Jacob, took me by the arm. He led me round the house. Thomas accompanied me. I saw the gaily decorated Christmas tree. Tiny flames at the tips of the candles danced with the mild breeze that wafted along.

Myriad candles threw gentle shadows and changed shapes with the flickering of the flame.

Paper bunting and ornate cardboard lamps peered at us from every corner. Star-shaped lamps hung from the branches of the trees too.

A jackfruit tree, further away from the house, stood in the hazy glow cast by a star-shaped light.

We waited for Father Christmas to come.

"When will he come?" Thomas asked his father.

"Wait. He is due any moment now."

"What will he bring for me?" Thomas asked.

"New clothes and sweets."

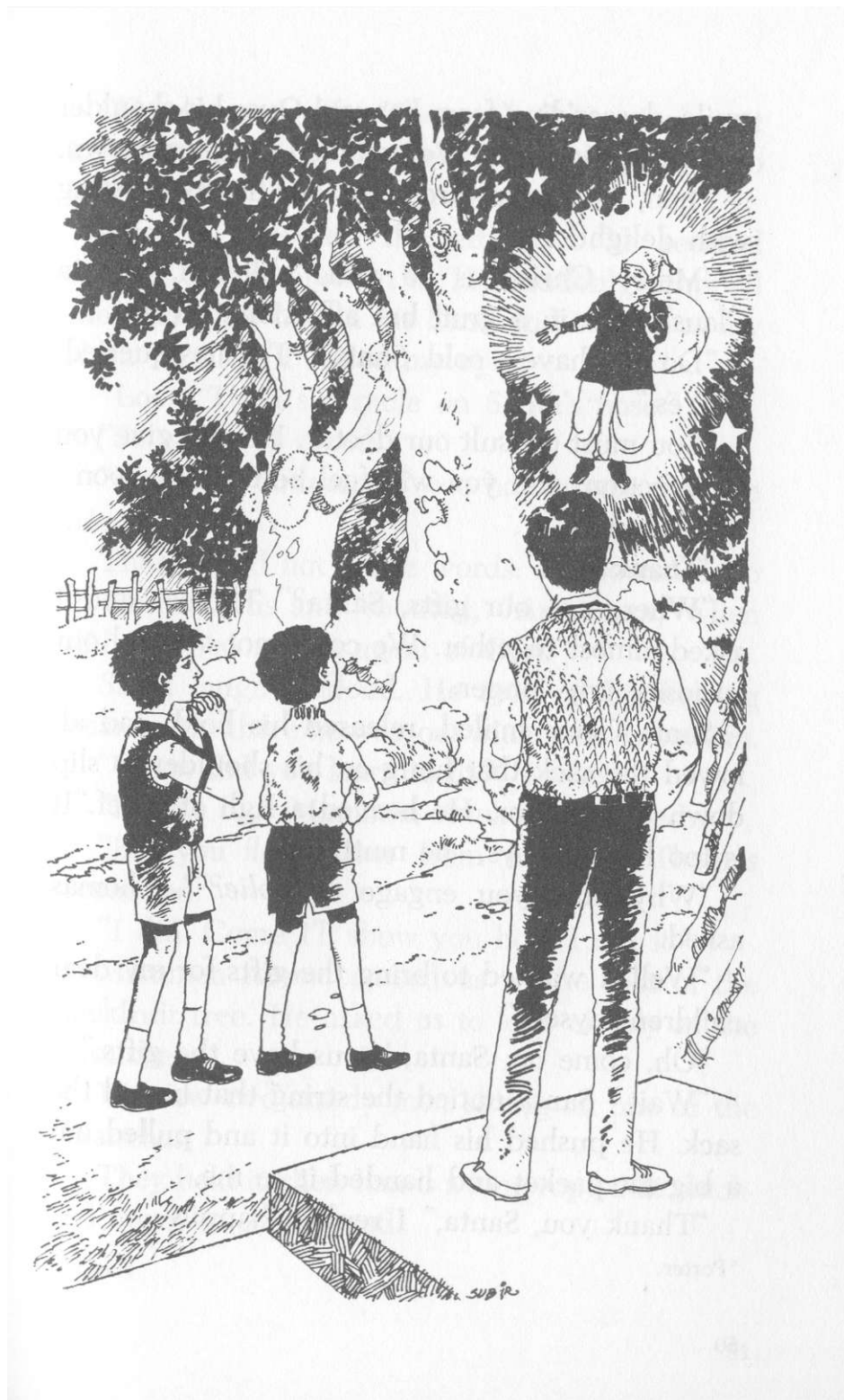
"For me too?" I asked.

"Of course, for you too, my dear."

Suddenly, Mr. Jacob shouted, "Look, there's Father Christmas, your own Santa Claus."

We did a double turn and stared in the direction of the jackfruit tree. What we saw was remarkable. We saw a bearded man, wearing a *dhoti** and a full sleeved shirt, flashing a bright

*Loin-cloth.



smile, descending from heaven! Over his shoulder hung a heavy sack. We watched him float down.

Then, we ran towards him, our hearts bursting with delight.

"Merry Christmas to you, children," Santa Claus spoke in a gruff but affectionate voice.

"Do you have a cold, Santa?" Thomas queried.

"Yes."

"You must consult our doctor. He will give you an injection, and you will feel better very soon," said Thomas.

"Thank you."

"Where are our gifts, Santa?" Thomas and I asked almost together. We could not conceal our curiosity any longer.

Santa Claus smiled, released his hold, and allowed the sack that hung on his shoulder to slip down to the floor. He heaved a sigh of relief. "It is too heavy, boys," he muttered.

"Why didn't you engage a *coolie*?"* Thomas asked.

"Well, I wanted to bring the gifts for my dear children myself."

"Oh, come on, Santa, let us have the gifts."

"Wait," Santa untied the string that bound the sack. He pushed his hand into it and pulled out a big fat packet and handed it to me.

"Thank you, Santa," I replied happily.

"Porter.

"Here's your gift, Thomas," Santa took out another packet from the sack and gave it to Thomas.

Thomas accepted the gift. But he seemed to have lost interest in it. He suddenly dropped the packet he had in his hand and tugged at my shirt. Puzzled, I raised my eyes.

"Look. There's a mole on Santa's nose."

"So what?" I asked.

"Mammen *Ammavan** too has a mole on the nose."

Thomas did not waste words. He bounded up to Santa Claus and shouted, "*Ammavan*, when did you become an agent of God?"

Santa laughed aloud. He took off his flowing beard. And there he was, our Mammen *Ammavan*.

"When did you learn to fly?" I asked.

"I can't fly," Mammen *Ammavan* replied.

"But you flew down from heaven," Thomas remarked.

"I did. Come I'll show you how I did it."

Mammen *Ammavan* led us to the foot of the jackfruit tree. He asked us to look closely at the branches.

We saw two sturdy men sitting on one of the branches.

They held in their hands a long rope that reached down to the ground.

"Uncle.

We were baffled.

We looked at *Ammavan*.

He smiled. Then, he said, "I climbed up the tree, along with those two men. I had a rope round my waist. I put the sack full of presents on my shoulder. Then I asked them to let me down, slowly, releasing the rope so that it would appear to you as if Father Christmas were coming down from heaven. I arranged it in such a way that my arrival would be sensational."

"Oh, it was a grand sight! We'll never forget this evening when a *dhoti-c\ a.d* Santa came down from heaven, bringing us gifts," Thomas and I shouted happily and moved back to the house, trailing behind Mammen *Ammavan*.



In A Guava Orchard

Safdar, Ajay and I dashed out of the classroom as the bell rang. It was the lunch break, and we had a whole hour to play. Safdar was the tallest, also the strongest amongst us. He was our leader. Ajay and I followed him meekly, like lambs!

We frisked about cheerfully over a path that led to a guava orchard. There was a mud wall round it. Safdar who was in high spirits leaped over it and bragged, "Look at the guavas! Come on, kids. Let's have a feast."

Ajay also leaped over the wall, saying, "What fun. How lovely!"

I smacked my Hps at the sight of the luscious green guavas in the orchard. I was however, afraid that we might be caught by the watchman. But Safdar's presence emboldened me.

I too jumped over the wall. There were trees and trees—all bursting with ripe and unripe guavas. We roamed freely. Safdar was greedily eating ripe guavas, while Ajay and I leaped like monkeys and devoured the unripe ones. I preferred raw guavas and I could never have enough. I stuffed my pockets. I wanted to carry them as

a souvenir of our daring expedition to the orchard. Wouldn't my classmates gape at them, eyes bulging!

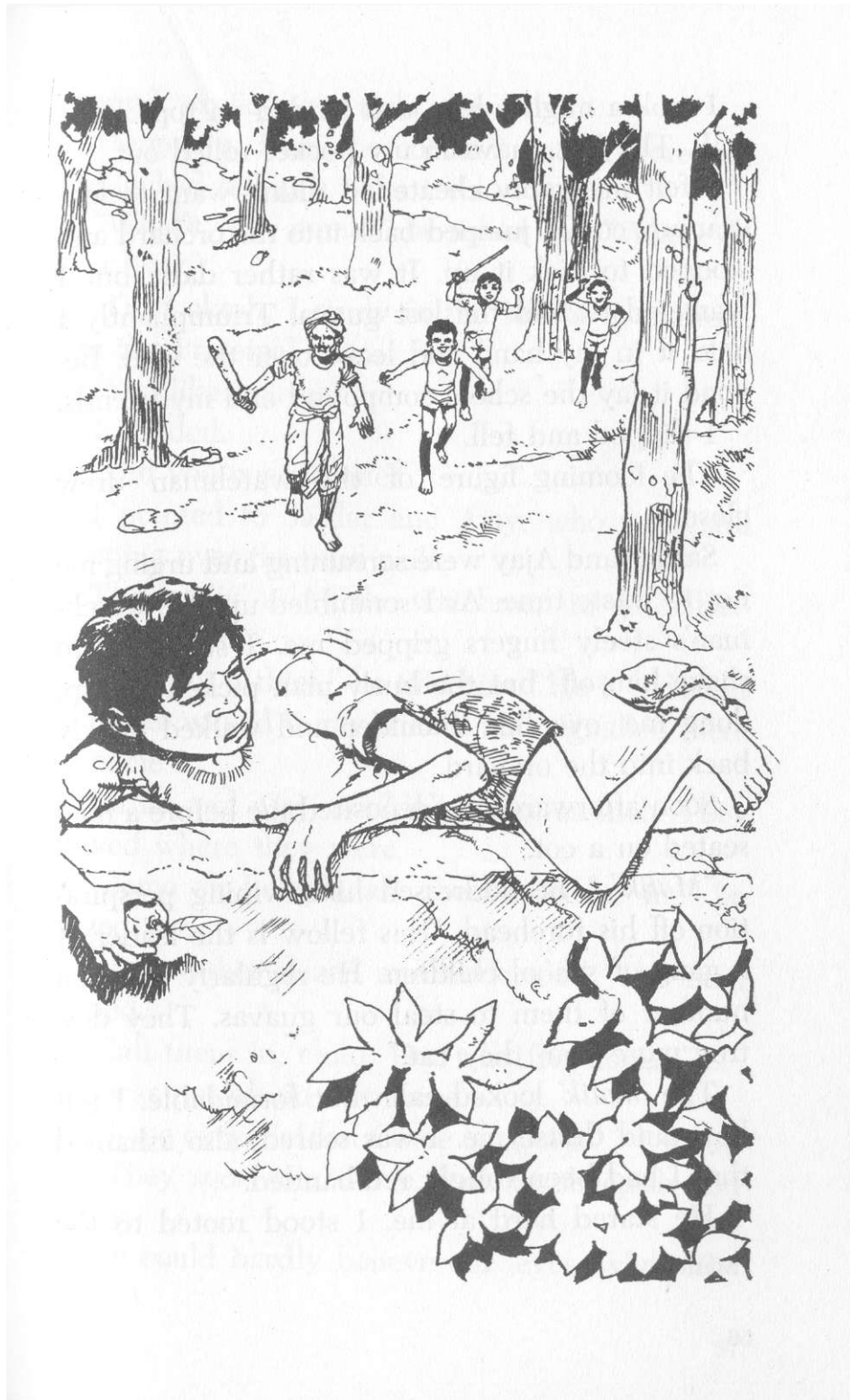
Suddenly, I heard Safdar's cry, "Ajay! Lokesh! Run, run! The watchman is coming." Perched on top of a branch, I saw the tall, sinister-looking figure of the watchman approaching. He was waving a staff in his hand. Safdar and Ajay were already on the ground, and had started running. The watchman waved his staff and ran after them, shouting, "Thieves! Thieves! See they don't escape." I lost no time; I jumped down from the tree and took to my heels. Safdar and Ajay were far ahead and I ran faster. As I leapt over ditches and boulders in the orchard, the guavas began to fall out of my pockets.

The watchman chased us furiously. After what seemed ages, the mud wall came into view. Safdar, who was the first to reach it took a flying leap over it. Ajay, close behind, managed to roll over.

Safdar kept shouting, "Run, Lokesh, run! The fellow is closing in!"

I put in every ounce of energy I had and ran like mad. The watchman came charging like a bull, bellowing curses. A host of street urchins had by then appeared from nowhere and joined the chase.

"Now jump," cried Safdar.



I took a mighty leap and landed on top of the wall. The last guava in my pocket rolled out.

I felt miserably cheated. I didn't want to lose it at any cost. I jumped back into the orchard and stooped to pick it up. It was rather dark, but I managed to find the lost guava. Triumphant I held it in my hand and leapt over the wall. Beyond it lay the school compound and my friends.

I slipped and fell.

The looming figure of the watchman drew closer.

Safdar and Ajay were screaming and urging me not to waste time. As I scrambled up, the watchman's steely fingers gripped me. I struggled to shake him off, but the burly man picked me up, flung me over his shoulder and walked briskly back into the orchard.

Soon afterwards, he deposited me before a man seated on a cot.

"*Malik*",* he addressed him, wiping perspiration off his forehead, "this fellow is the leader of a gang of school children. He regularly brings a number of them to steal our guavas. They destroy more than they eat."

The '*malik*' looked calm but formidable. I felt he would thrash me. I was scared, also ashamed that I had been caught red-handed.

He stared hard at me. I stood rooted to the

"Master.

ground, expecting a tight slap.

He got up from the cot and stood before me. He looked tall as a palm tree!

"What's your name?" he asked me. "Where do you live?"

"I'm Lokesh. I study in the school over there. I'm the Principal's son.

"You like guavas?"

I nodded. <

"Did you come alone?"

I pointed to Safdar and Ajay, who were still peeping over the mud wall.

The '*malik*' asked the watchman to get a basket of guavas.

"He's not a thief," he told him. "He is a decent kid." He waved to my friends and signalled them to come in.

Safdar and Ajay wouldn't budge an inch. They stayed where they were.

"Come on Lokesh, ask them to come in," he urged me.

I was rather dazed and undecided. The man smiled.

"Call them in, child. Don't be frightened."

I was not afraid any more.

"Come over, Safdar. Come over, Ajay," I shouted. They soon joined me, looking sheepish and guilty.

We could hardly believe our eyes when the

watchman came back with a basket of guavas. "Go ahead and eat as many as you want," said the *malik*.

We just stood looking at him. We had expected him to treat us like thieves.

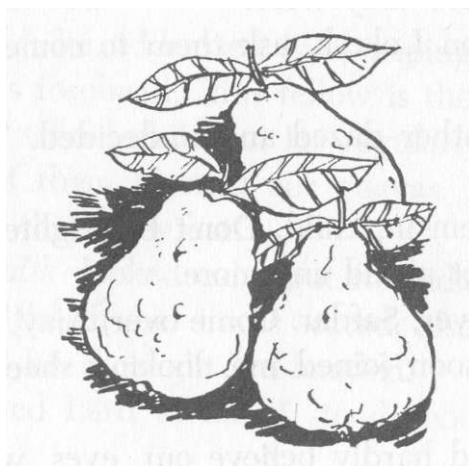
"You're like my children," his gentle voice was soothing. This is your garden. You don't have to enter it like thieves. You go to the watchman. He'll help you."

Gratefully, we accepted the guavas he offered. Thanking him profusely we took leave of him.

There was a smile on his face as he bade us good-bye. "Remember children, do not do anything that makes you feel guilty. You must always be proud of what you do."

We left the orchard. I was limping a bit but my pockets were bulging with guavas.

His words are still fresh in my mind.



All Because Of My Hair

"You good for nothing fellow!" one slap.

"You naughty boy!" another slap. "You rascal!" a shower of slaps. I could see stars dancing at midday! The portraits of Kabir, Ghalib and Einstein hanging on the wall started swinging. I lost count of the slaps raining down on my clean shaven head and face. I wondered if I really deserved them. I was in class VIII and a boarder in a Delhi school. I was a good singer and there were hardly any school functions at which I did not recite a poem or sing a song.

For days and weeks now, we had been preparing for an important function. A very prominent figure was to preside, and so excitement ran high. The classrooms were cleaned and decorated, and charts and photographs fixed. Everybody was busy.

A poem was to be recited in honour of the distinguished guest. And who else but I could be asked to recite it?

I didn't tell you that my hair was rather long in those days. Sometimes my parents would be angry with me on that account. But when I was

sent to the hostel, I thought I would have the freedom of growing my hair as long as I wanted.

The situation, I realised very soon, was worse at the hostel. The warden, a venerable old fellow, was stricter than my parents. He was an artist by profession and quite unnaturally insisted on everything being neat and clean and in perfect order. So, very soon, my hair became the bone of contention between us.

Every Sunday, an old barber whom we called '*Khalifaji*' came to the hostel. So the whole morning I spent playing hide-and-seek with the warden. However, every fourth or fifth week I'd be caught and handed over to *Khalifaji*. He himself shuddered at the mere mention of my name because I was really troublesome. His hands quivered when he touched my head.

The Sunday before the function the warden warned me repeatedly that I would be severely punished if I didn't have a hair-cut.

That was just too bad, because I wanted to appear on stage with my crowning glory untrimmed.

But I couldn't escape the warden's clutches and was duly sent to *Khalifaji*. The dreaded moment had come. I had to decide there and then whether to submit to his threats or revolt.

The devil must have egged me on. I was de-

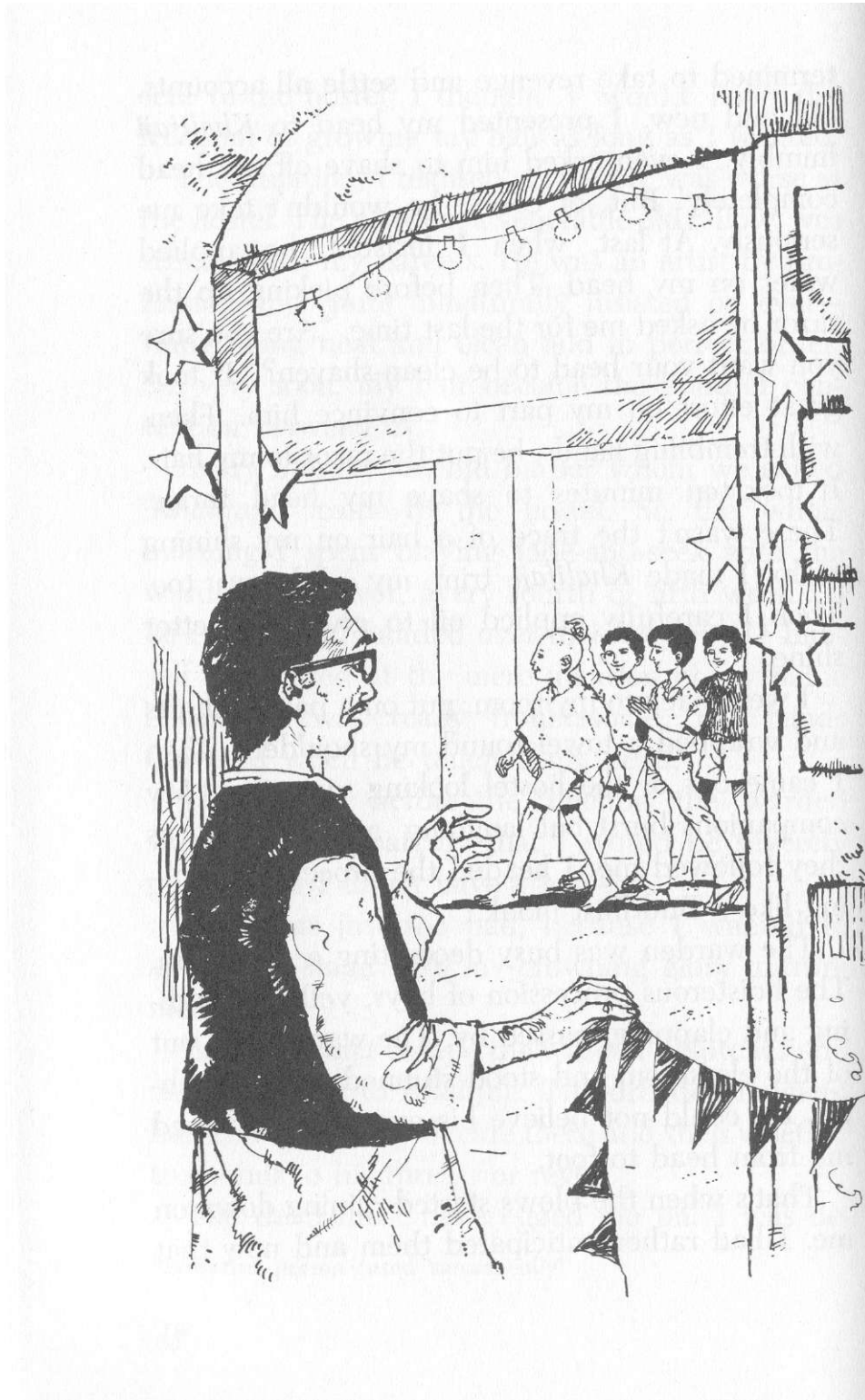
°Powerful person (used sarcastically)

terminated to take revenge and settle all accounts, old and new. I presented my head to *Khalifaji* humbly. I even asked him to shave off my head completely! But, of course he wouldn't take me seriously. At last, when I insisted, he applied water on my head. Then before picking up the razor he asked me for the last time. "Are you sure you want your head to be clean-shaven?" It took great effort on my part to convince him. Then, with trembling hands, he put the razor to my hair. It took ten minutes to shave my head thrice. There wasn't the trace of a hair on my shining scalp, I made *Khalifaji* trim my eyebrows too. Then I carefully applied oil to give it a better shine.

I went back to my room, put on a pair of shorts and wrapped a towel round my shoulders. Then I came out of the hostel looking victorious. My companions burst out laughing and clapped as they followed me. I headed the procession, looking like a Buddhist monk.

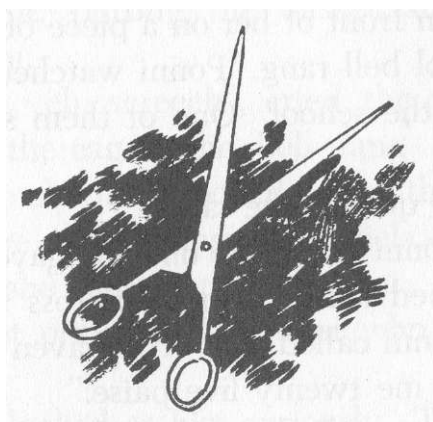
The warden was busy decorating a classroom. The boisterous procession of boys, yelling, laughing and clapping, passed by. The warden ran out of the classroom and stood stunned as he watched. He could not believe his eyes. He examined me from head to foot.

That's when the blows started raining down on me. I had rather anticipated them and now that



I think of it—deserved them too.

I was of course not permitted to appear on stage the next day. But worse still I had to remain with my monk-like appearance for many months. After that nobody ever asked me to have a haircut again, and today I am the sole master of my head and hair!



The Pink Card

Ponni sat on the footpath in front of Berywood Girls Primary School. She sold knick-knacks for little girls. Besides pencils, rubbers, sharpners, rulers, shoelaces and ribbons, she had colourful sweets and pretty trinkets too. All these were spread out in front of her on a piece of gunny.

The school bell rang. Ponni watched the girls hasten into the school. One of them stopped in front of her.

"A pencil, quick, she said.

"Here," Ponni picked up one and gave it to her. She grabbed it and turned to cross the road.

"Hev, Ponni called out, "You haven't paid me for it. Give me twenty five paise."

"Oh! I'm sorry," the girl said coming back. "The bell has rung. I was in such a hurry I forgot. She fished out a 25 paise coin from her bag, and handed it to Ponni. "Here, take it. And, don't call me 'hev'. My name's Sheela."

"I'm Ponni," said the vendor, flashing a friendly smile.

Sheela crossed the road and ran into the school.

That night, as Ponni lay on the ground beside her mother in their small hut, she said, "*Amma*,^o I want to go to school, like Sheela."

"Hush, child. I don't have money to send you to school."

The next day, as Ponni sat in her usual place under the shade of a *peepul*** tree, an old man came towards her. He carried a small cane basket in one hand and a bird-cage in the other. Tucked under his arm was a folded mat. He spread the dusty old mat under the tree and sat down on it, putting the basket and the cage beside him.

"Scree. . .ch, screech", cried the pretty green parrot in the cage. The bell rang. School was over. The children trooped out of the gate.

"What're you looking at?" Sheela called out to Ponni as she came running out.

"At that old man, I wonder who he is?" said Ponni.

Sheela looked at him curiously, "I think he's a fortune-teller. The parrot in the cage tells you what you'll be when you grow up. How exciting! I must get some money from home tomorrow to hear my fortune. Bye!" Sheela hurried home.

That night, as her mother was making *kanji*,***

^oMother

^{oo}Holy Fig Tree

^{oo}Rice porridge.

Ponni sat beside her and asked softly, "*Amma*, can I have some money?"

"Whatever for?" snapped her mother.

"I want to have my fortune told. Sheela says the parrot knows everything."

"You know I have no money to spare, Ponni. We are just able to manage one meal a day. When you grow up and start working like me as a *coolie** we can have two meals a day."

"Oh no, *Amma*" cried Ponni, "I want to go to school."

"Forget about school, my child. Get going and sweep the floor."

The next day Ponni sat under the *peepul* tree, as usual. Sheela came running to her, and said, "Ponni, you know what the fortune-teller told me? I'll study well and am going to be rich. I gave him 50 paise."

"What did the parrot do?" asked Ponni.

"The old man took a bundle of coloured cards from the basket and spread them on his mat. The parrot picked a pink card for me. The man read the card."

"Really. . . ." before Ponni could say anything more, Sheela had pranced off.

That night was hot and stuffy. Ponni lay awake and restless, beside her mother.

"*Amma*" she began.

"Unskilled labourer.

"Hm....?"

"Sheela got a pink card. It said she would study well and be a rich woman. I want the pink card too. Please give me 50 paise."

"Shut up, Ponni. Don't pester me for money, again and again."

"*Amma*, when will I go to school, like Sheela?"

"Ponni, go to sleep. I told you, you can't go to school."

The next day, the children were in school and all was quiet. Ponni turned to see what the parrot was doing. The old man was wiping the dust off his spectacles. He had the cage beside him. Ponni got up, walked up to him, and asked softly, "Will you tell me my fortune?"

The man put on his specs and looked up. His face was wrinkled and his voice gruff.

"Give me 50 paise."

Ponni shook her head, "I don't have any money."

"What?" asked the man raising his voice. "You think I run a free service? I have to earn a living and feed the parrot too. Go away and don't come here without money."

Ponni went back to her place feeling sad.

It was a hot afternoon. Ponni was thirsty. She sat watching the parrot. It kept fluttering its wings as it hopped about in the cage. Ponni quietly tiptoed to the cage, and peered in. There



were a few pieces of fruit and red chillies and a small water bowl. It was dry.

'Poor little parrot,' thought Ponni. 'It is thirsty.'

The old man was fast asleep on the mat. He was snoring.

"Wait, little bird," she whispered. "There is a tap across the road. I'll run across and get you some water." As she stood up to go, she heard a 'click,' and turned round. The parrot's flapping wings had hit the small bolt holding the cage door. The bolt slipped and the door flew open. The parrot was free to fly out. "Wake up old man," Ponni shouted a warning. The man continued to snore.

"Your parrot is about to escape, wake up," Ponni called out again. But the man was fast asleep.

The parrot flew off. It went straight to the tap and perched on it. Bending down, it began to drink the dripping drops of water. Ponni was happy the parrot had got what it wanted.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, because she saw a big black cat. It was crouching a few feet away from the tap and was ready to pounce on the parrot.

She went up to the old man and screamed, "Get up."

He stirred.

"Don't disturb me, you naughty girl. I told you I want 50 paise, before I can do anything for you."

He turned round and went to sleep again.

Ponni looked about. There was nobody around whom she could call to help her catch the parrot. Only a car was parked in front of the school gate.

Ponni decided to go to the parrot's rescue herself. Hitching up her skirt, she sprinted across the road. With one quick movement she caught the bird. Chest heaving, she held the parrot close to her heart, her eyes closed in relief. Then she turned round and ran back to the shade of the *peepul* tree.

"Old man, here is your parrot. Take him," she shouted in his ears. He opened his eyes, blinking.

"I told you not to disturb me. Why are you screaming?" he growled. He stretched his arms and yawned. Then he put on his specs and glared at Ponni.

"You naughty girl, what are you doing with my parrot? You want to steal the bird?" he asked her rudely.

Tears welled up in Ponni's eyes.

"Leave my bird alone and go back to your place," he shouted and snatched the parrot from her.

Ponni burst into tears. She ran back to her place, wiping her tears with the skirt.

"Now, now, little girl, don't cry."

Ponni looked up and saw a stranger standing before her.

"The old man is so rude to me," she sobbed.

"She stole my parrot," said the old man, getting up to put the parrot back in its cage.

"I did not steal his parrot," Ponni wept aloud. "I only tried to save it."

"Save it, bah!" growled the old man. "This girl has no money. Her mother won't give her any. She is only a *coolie*. This girl is trying to steal my parrot and sell it."

"Quiet," commanded the stranger.

The old man sat still.

"I saw this girl saving your parrot. I came to the school to take my daughter home."

Just then, the school bell rang and the children came pouring out.

"Daddy," shouted Sheela, dashing across the road.

"Daddy, this is Ponni I was talking to you about yesterday."

"Really! She is such a nice girl. But for her, a cat would have gobbled up this fellow's parrot."

"Tell me all about it," cried Sheela, catching hold of Ponni's hands.

"Ponni, come let's go home." They turned round to see Ponni's mother coming towards them. Wiping beads of perspiration off her face with her *sari*, she looked at Ponni and at Sheela. Her gaze rested on Sheela's father.

"Ponni is a good girl," he told her. "My daugh-

ter likes her very much." He paused and continued, "I would like her to go to a school."

"But I can't afford it, Sir," said Ponni's mother, looking miserable.

"I know, I know. But that shouldn't worry you. I'll meet all the expenses. She can go to school with Sheela."

"Oh, Sir," was all the woman could say. She was so overwhelmed that tears of joy ran down her dusty face.

The old man edged close to Ponni. "Do you want the parrot to pick a card for you?" he asked hoarsely, removing his spectacles and wiping them.

Ponni rushed towards the cage. Even before the old man could spread the cards fully on the mat, the parrot picked a card with its beak for Ponni. It was the pink card!

Ponni jumped with joy. "Thank you, old man, thank you, parrot dear," she burst out and turned to go home with her mother.

"Bye, bye, Sheela," she said.

"Bye, see you in school," Sheela replied.

The Unforgettable Journey

I jumped into the first coach of the train. My friends, Raman and Shyam, followed me into the compartment. I heaved a sigh of relief, when I saw they were safe. But the relief was short-lived. For, I was shocked to see Mr. Khanna, a Travelling Ticket Examiner, enter the coach from the other end.

"Where the hell is he coming from?" whispered Raman.

"Only he can answer that," replied Shyam, looking at the fast receding platform.

"No use peeping out, Shyam! The train has picked up speed. Let's not try to jump," I said.

"He must have seen us boarding this coach," said Shyam.

"I'm sure, he did. But he was nowhere on the platform. Where has he appeared from?" asked Raman.

"We saved our fare this morning, Raman. But now we may have to shell out that too, as penalty," I said.

"What bad luck!" commented Raman.

In the meantime, the T.T.E. had started ex-

aming the passengers tickets.

"Look! He is coming towards us. Let's make sad faces, and try to win his sympathy," I suggested.

It did not take long for Mr. Khanna to check the other passengers tickets and come to us.

"Show me your tickets, boys," he said.

"Sorry Sir! They fell out of my pocket, while I was boarding the train," I said.

"Yes, Sir, he had my ticket too. See, my pockets are torn." Shyam showed him his torn pockets.

"I too gave him my ticket. I don't have pockets," Raman put in.

"Are you sure, boys, you bought the tickets and lost them?"

"Certainly, Sir, we never tell lies," I answered for all of us.

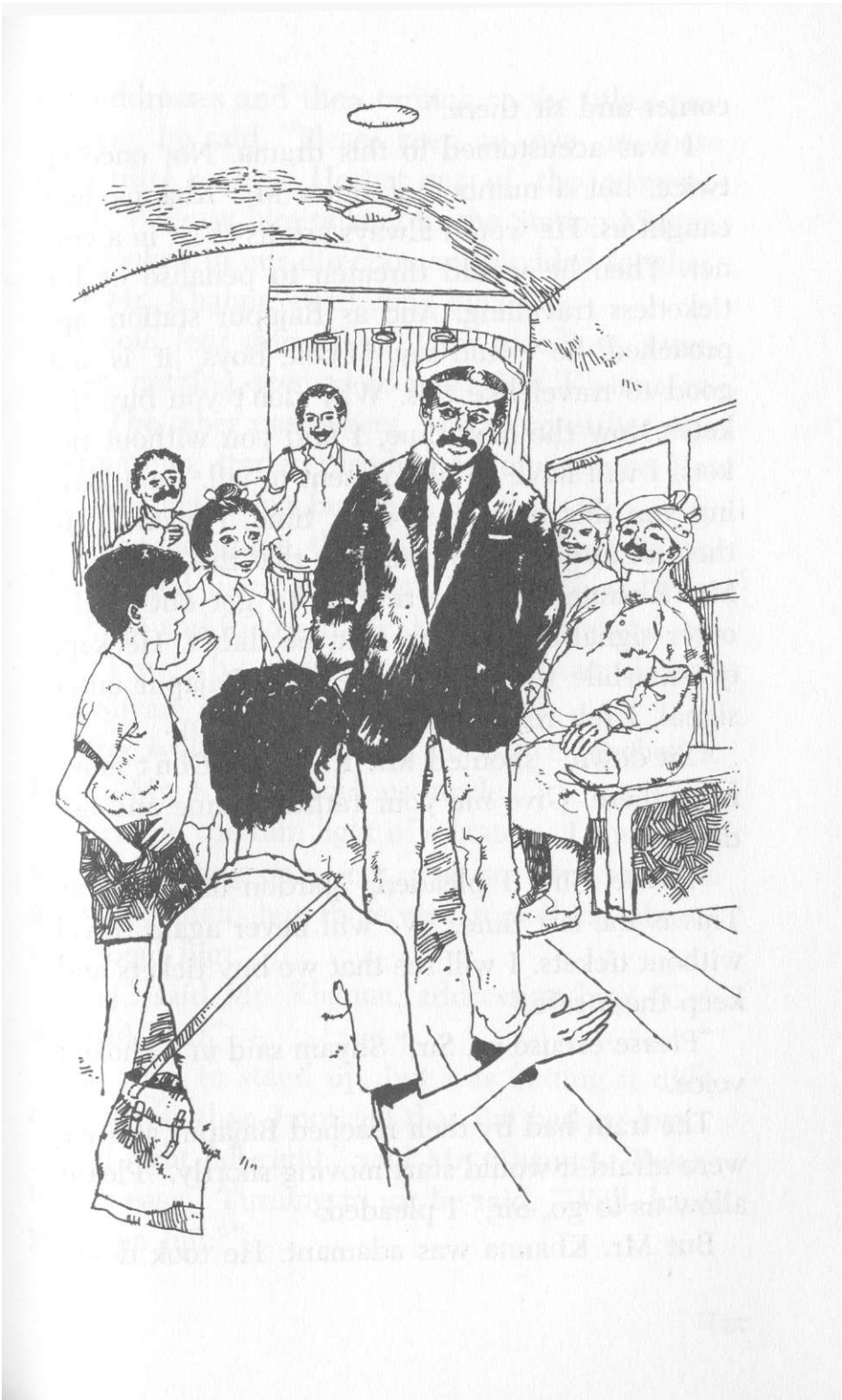
"Except to the T.T.E., particularly when he checks your tickets," added Mr. Khanna.

"No, Sir, we are telling the truth. We are all telling the truth. We have really lost our tickets," I said.

"Whenever I've checked, you haven't shown your tickets. Why?" asked Mr. Khanna in disgust.

"Because, Sir, we are only children. We lose tickets easily," I tried to smile bravely.

"Oh! is that so? I will teach you a lesson. It will help you to keep your tickets safe," Mr. Khanna shouted angrily. "Now all three of you go to that



comer and sit there."

I was accustomed to this drama. Not once or twice, but a number of times Mr. Khanna had caught us. He would always ask us to sit in a corner. Then he would threaten to penalise us for ticketless travelling. And as Rajapur station approached, he would say, "Look, boys, it is not good to travel like this. Why don't you buy tickets? Now the next time, I find you without tickets, I will have all of you sent to jail. I am leaving you this time. But, next time, I won't. He then let us go. I was confident that this time, too, Mr. Khanna would permit us to get out at the outer signal of Rajapur. But, he didn't. He kept quiet, while the train crossed the Rajapur outer signal. I felt restless and tried to get up.

"Sit down!" shouted Mr. Khanna. "Don't move from there. Give me your father's name and address."

"Please, Sir," I pleaded, "pardon us this time. This is the last time. We will never again travel without tickets. I will see that we buy tickets and keep them safe."

"Please excuse us, Sir," Shyam said in a choked voice.

The train had by then reached Rajapur and we were afraid it would start moving shortly. "Please allow us to go, Sir," I pleaded.

But Mr. Khanna was adamant. He took down

our addresses and then turning to the other passengers, he said, "Please keep an eye on these boys till I return." He got out of the compartment. We saw him talking to the Station Master, who looked in our direction and nodded to whatever Mr. Khanna was telling him.

A cold fear gripped us. Our pleading, assurances, nothing seemed to make Mr. Khanna relent. The other passengers, who were earlier supporting him, started pleading for our release. But Mr. Khanna didn't budge.

In the meantime, the train reached Ram Nagar. He ordered us to get down. We got down from the train and followed Mr. Khanna out of the station. I was, by now, very apprehensive. Raman and Shyam were anxious, too.

After walking for a mile or so, we reached a house. Mr. Khanna took us inside.

There, in the dim light of a lantern, I could see someone sitting on a cot. He seemed to be a grown-up man, but there was something abnormal about him.

"Raj," said Mr. Khanna, addressing him, "Get up, will you?"

Raj tried to stand up, but was finding it difficult. It was then I noticed that Raj had no legs.

"All right, all right," said Mr. Khanna. "Relax, take it easy." Turning to us, he said, "Well, have you seen him?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Now, tell me, do you also want to lose your legs like him?" Mr. Khanna asked with a penetrating look.

"No. . . ." we all cried in one voice. The very thought of not having legs made me feel sick. My heart sank. Shyam whispered, "Does this demon want to cut our legs?" I was badly shaken but tried to think of some way of escaping from the house.

"Look, boys," Mr. Khanna broke in on my thoughts, "for quite some time, I wanted to bring all of you here to meet Raj, to see for yourselves the hazards of ticketless travelling."

My heart started beating faster. Could what Shyam had whispered be true? Right then, I heard footsteps behind us. I was afraid to turn round to see who was approaching. I wondered if Mr. Khanna was a maniac, and had kept men to cut off people's legs for travelling without tickets.

The person who was coming from behind seemed to have come close to us. I looked at Shyam and Raman. They, too, were sweating with fear.

"Enough." said! a woman's voice behind me. "They are already very shaken. Let me talk to them."

She introduced herself as Mrs. Khanna. She

had a soft voice. "You saw Raj, boys. When he was young, he was just like you. He would travel without a ticket and was very happy about it. But once, when he was boarding a train. . . ."

Raj, suddenly, stopped her. He raised his head and looked straight at us. In a choked voice, he said, "It was great fun to travel without tickets. The money I thus saved was spent on movies and sweets. But then one day, there was a surprise check and I tried to jump off the moving train. I fell between the bogie and the signal post. My legs were caught between the wheels." He couldn't speak further, but pointed towards his legs.

I was jolted back to reality by Mrs. Khanna's soothing voice. "Now sit down, boys. Here's coffee for all of you."

Mr. Khanna added, "Yes, and you will stay with us tonight. I have already sent messages to your parents through the Station Master at Rajapur. They will not worry about you. Tomorrow morning, you can go back. I will buy tickets for your return journey. I wanted you to see for yourselves the consequence of ticketless travelling."

That evening we realised our mistake. We developed a great respect and affection for Mr. Khanna. He had shown us the right path, with rare understanding.

Varunkaka's Lemonade Pals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Paternal Uncle

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

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

He had his positive points, though.

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

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

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

*Brother's wife.

** Physicians.

***A meat preparation.

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

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

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

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

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

And sure enough he started.

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

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

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

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

"Wild Berry.

"Showman.

""Sir.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Hanuman And I

Preparations had begun for our school annual day. Two plays were to be staged. The senior section was to enact 'Merchant of Venice' and the junior section, 'The Story of Rama'. I was hoping with all my heart that the drama teacher would include me in the cast. I had never acted in a play but was sure that once on stage I would give a brilliant performance.

Radhika, the prettiest girl in our class, would certainly get Sita's role. Since I was shorter than Radhika and had a shrill voice I could not hope to be Rama. But I wouldn't mind being Rama's brother Laxmana, I decided. I went around for a few days, imagining myself on stage with a bow and arrow slung on my shoulders, giving a brilliant performance as Laxmana. How surprised my parents would be! I could almost hear my father saying, "Imagine we had such a talented daughter and we didn't even realise it."

I was terribly disappointed when the drama teacher smiled and said, "I have a role for you. You'll be one of the monkeys in the *Vanar Sena*."

"Monkey brigade that helped Lord Rama.

"Can't I at least get the role of Hanuman," I asked timidly.

"No, your voice is too squeaky," was the teacher's reply.

Our rehearsals began the next day. All I had to do along with seven other girls was to jump up and down and shout, "Jai Rama", "Jai Hanuman" in a chorus.

Finally the great day arrived. We were all very excited. I had to wear a red shirt, red pants, red vest and a monkey mask.

We were dressing up when the *chaukidar** * handed a note to the teacher. She read it aloud. "Dear Madam, I am very sorry to inform you that Alka has contracted measles and has been running a high temperature since morning. Sorry, she will not be able to act in the play."

Alka was to play Hanuman. The teacher looked round in dismay and her eyes fell on me. "Look here," she said doubtfully, "You wanted to be Hanuman? You think you can manage?" My dream was suddenly coming true! I was quite overwhelmed. "Of course I can," I said confidently. "Even if I forget, I can always think up something else."

"Oh no," she said, "You shall certainly not do any such thing. I shall be prompting from the

"Victory to Lord Rama, Victory to Lord Hanuman.

"Watchman.

wings. All you have to do is repeat what I say and, for god's sake, don't mumble. Speak as loudly as you can."

As the curtains went up for the third scene I was pushed on stage to the accompaniment of drums. I almost fell on my face. For sometime I could not see a thing. The drums were echoing in my ears and my hands and feet were cold and numb. I opened my mouth to say my lines but my throat was dry and I couldn't remember them.

Thankfully I heard my teacher reading out my lines again and again. I began repeating whatever she said without realising what I was saying. I kneeled in front of Rama telling him with folded hands that I was his faithful servant. I would gladly die for him. "Oh, my Lord", I repeated loudly what my teacher was saying, "you have



forgotten to pin your tail." "Don't be silly," hissed Rama, "I am not supposed to have a tail. You've forgotten yours." I touched the spot where the tail should have been. "I am sorry, my Lord," I said trying to make up for my mistake. "I meant my tail, I have forgotten to pin on my tail."

The teacher now whispered, "Jump, jump," I shouted, "Jump."

"You jump," Rama shouted at me. Then realising my second mistake I began to jump like mad and the curtains came down to the sound of laughter.

There and then the teacher cut short my role as much as possible, but I had to be on stage in the last act.

I was feeling less nervous now and said my lines well. I showed Rama's ring to Sita to convince her that I was Rama's messenger. Sita said some beautiful lines about Rama's greatness and how much she missed him. She hid her face in her hands and began to weep. Suddenly I realised that the teacher was prompting while Sita kept sobbing. Since Sita was not saying anything I decided that it was my turn to speak.

"My beauty is my bane," I said grandly. "It is because of my beauty that the wicked Ravana wants to marry me."

"What?" said Sita looking startled.

"Not you, you idiot," I repeated what the tea-

cher said. Seeing the startled expression of the whole cast I bit my tongue, realising my mistake too late.

Just then everyone on stage began shouting, "*Maharaja** is coming, Ravana the Great is here!"

I was struck dumb by the huge figure in six-inch heels, which I didn't know about until that time, bearing down on me with a shining sword in hand. He said in a thunderous voice that made me tremble. "Who is this puny creature who dares to intrude into my kingdom?" I was supposed to answer in a proud voice that I was the son of Pawan-dev, the wind God, the worshipper of Rama, the immortal Hanuman. But Ravana was towering over me. He raised his sword and I screamed in terror, "Don't kill me, I am not Hanuman." I pulled off my mask as I spoke. By now the audience was rolling with laughter. The sound of laughter became louder when an infuriated teacher came on stage and unceremoniously dragged me away.

"King

At The Party

"I won't, I won't, I won't. He's a greedy glutton and I won't take him to the party," said *Leeladidi** stamping her feet as she stormed out of the room. But she didn't forget to hit me hard on the head with her knuckles when she swept past me.

I screamed and began to cry. *Amma*** came out of the kitchen.

"Leela, come here!" she shouted. *Leeladidi* didn't stop. "Did you hear me? Come back!" *Amma* commanded in a louder voice.

Leeladidi turned unwillingly and slowly walked towards *Amma*. I stopped wailing and watched them anxiously. *Amma* started scolding *Leeladidi*, but she kept denying she had done anything. She argued, she pleaded, but it didn't work. *Amma* gave her an ultimatum. "Leela," she said sternly, "either you take Sudhir to the party or you too don't go."

Leeladidi agreed reluctantly, "All right, but if he behaves like a greedy worm, I'll never, never take him with me. No, never again in my life."

"Elder sister.

"Mother.

I was happy I had won. I was about to smile when *Amma* turned her angry gaze on me.

"And you, mind you, if you don't behave properly I'll give you a nice thrashing, understand?"

I just lowered my eyes and nodded. "You will not touch any cakes or biscuits or chocolates without my permission! Promise?" *Leeladidi* wanted to be absolutely sure I'd behave. I hesitated.

"Promise?" *Didi* asked again.

I knew she was trying to trap me. "And. . . and supposing you don't permit me at all?" I asked.

"Oh, I will."

"But suppose you don't then?" I persisted.

"I will, stupid," *Leeladidi* was getting impatient.

"But supposing you aren't near me or you are talking to someone, then?"

"Then?.... then you just remember that whenever someone offers you something, you mustn't grab a handful. You should say 'no thank you' at least twice or thrice, understand?"

I was still doubtful, but I promised.

"Come on, let's get you ready and dressed for the party," *Didi* said and dragged me away. She pulled me and pushed me and deliberately held my arm so tight that it hurt. She pushed and pinched even when she helped me put on my shirt and shoes. I suffered all this in silence. But when she pressed both my cheeks with her left

hand and ran the comb hard through my hair, it became unbearable and I let out a loud whine.

"Do you want to come with me or not?" she threatened and asked me to shut up. At last after dabbing a little powder over my face, she finished.

When we left the house, she once again made me promise I would behave and would not take anything before refusing it three times. She nagged all the way and stopped only when we entered the nicely decorated hall where the party was being held. There she met her friend Shyama and immediately started telling her a lengthy secret. I knew it was about me because every now and then, they kept looking at me.

After a few minutes Shyamadidi came to me and whispered in my ear, "Sudhir, remember your promise and behave yourself, okay?"

They made me sit on a chair and vanished into the crowd. A lot of boys and girls had gathered now. They were laughing and talking. All round, there were balloons and streamers. I alone was unhappy. For I was supposed to sit quietly in a corner.

At one end of the room was a large table with all the eatables arranged nicely on it. In the centre was a huge cake. It had pretty pink marzipan flowers on the icing and plenty of small silver sugar beads all round. A single red candle stood



in the centre waiting to be lit. It was beautiful. I kept gazing at it and soon my mouth started watering. Then, suddenly, everybody was getting ready to watch the cutting of the cake.

It was wonderful. First there was one cut. Then a whole piece was sliced off, then another and another, as they were quickly passed round. Soon a girl in a green *sari* held a plate piled high with slices of cake before me. I looked up. Standing beside her was Shyamadidi who was glaring at

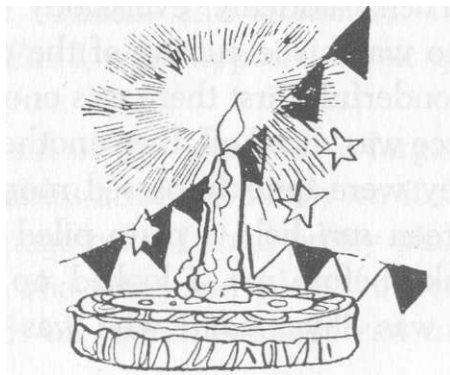
me. I was uneasy. I remembered the promise. I had to behave. I had to be a good boy! I looked round for Leela *didi*. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Yes, have some cake," the girl in green said sweetly. I gazed at the slices of cake and my mouth watered, but. . .but I must refuse three times. Yet, if I kept refusing and the girl went away, what then? An idea flashed through my mind and I blurted out in one breath, "No, no, no." Then I grabbed the biggest slice of cake and started munching.

Standing close to me Shyamarfidi burst out laughing. The girl in the green *sari* too began to laugh, and I helped myself to another slice.

Taking a big bite, I gaped at them. Then I spotted Leela *didi* coming towards me and my heart sank. She gave me a dirty look. I overheard Shyamadidi telling her what I had done and she too burst out laughing. So I knew I was safe.

The girl in the green *sari* offered me some more cake and I gladly took yet another slice.



Outwitted I

We were all very excited. This holiday was to be spent in Dindigul where Grandpa had decided to settle down, because the climate there was good for people with weak lungs. His doctor had said that the damp sea air of Madras would not suit Grandpa any more.

Dindigul is near a hill station called Kodaikanal, from where fruits and vegetables came to market every day by lorry and cart. In Dindigul itself one could get excellent bananas and grapes, as well as many varieties of vegetables and milk too. So, in every way it was an ideal place for Grandpa, who had been advised to eat lots of vegetables and drink plenty of milk.

The house was an old fashioned one with many rooms, a large garden, a cowshed, and a well. Granny, who had lived in a village, had decided to keep a cow, and said she would show us how to draw water from the well.

"I will teach you how to milk a cow, too," she said and laughed.

Our neighbours told us to be very careful at night, to lock all our doors and windows, because

a gang of burglars had been on the prowl for some time. The police had not been able to catch them, though they had tried ever so hard.

The doors in our house had heavy iron bolts and the windows had bars. In one room, there was an iron safe built into the wall, and the family jewels and money were kept in this.

"How can any burglar break open this safe?" Grandpa asked.

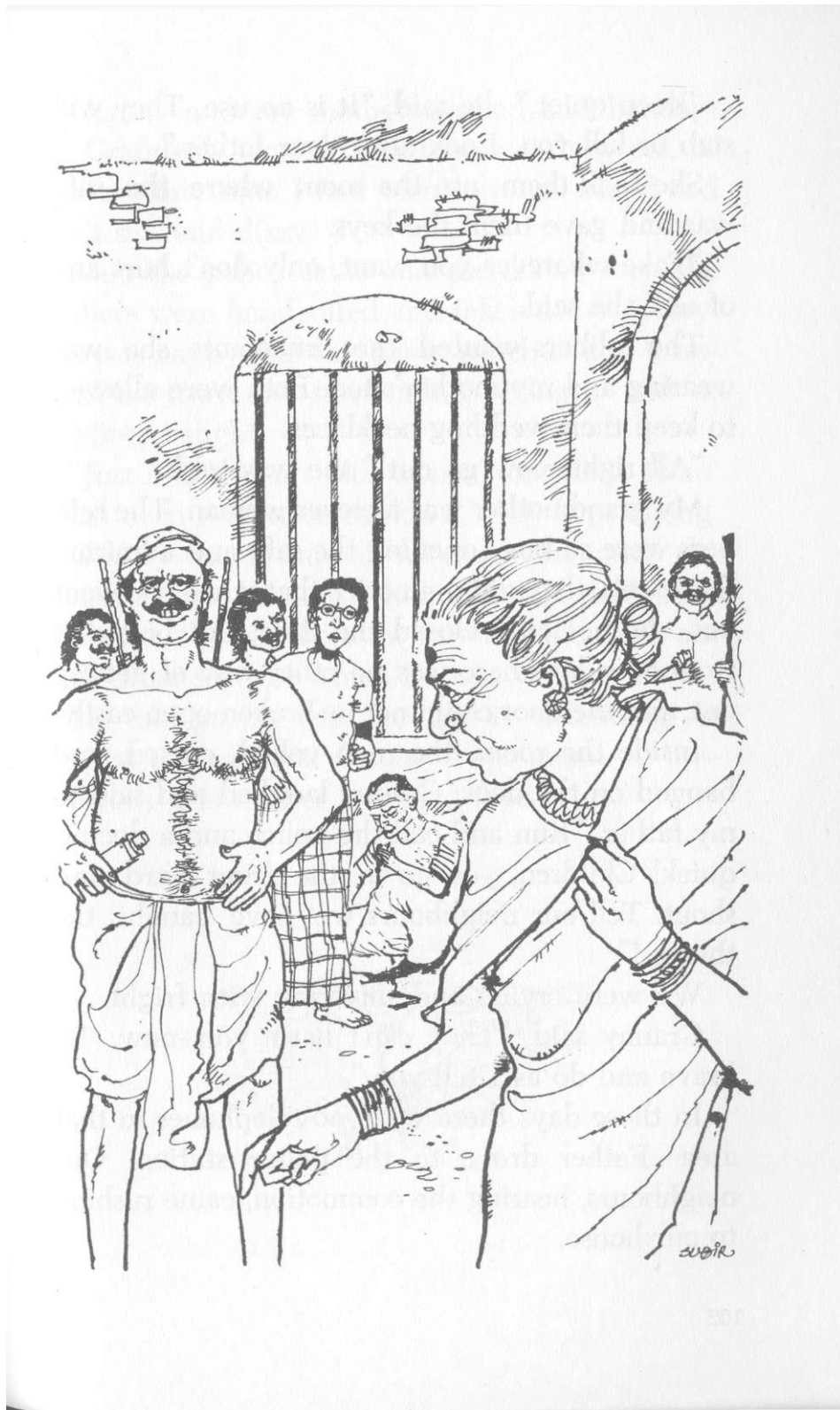
One night, when we were fast asleep, the burglars came! They were not ordinary thieves. They came armed with knives and clubs. They did not try to open the doors or windows. Instead, they made a big hole in the wall and entered the house through it.

Though our neighbours had told us to close all the doors and windows leading to each room and not to sleep in the outer rooms, Grandpa had not followed their advice. So the burglars were able to go straight into his room.

The leader, a huge dark man, with long black hair, pulled Grandpa out of bed and asked him where the jewellery and money were kept. Grandpa refused to answer. One of the men stabbed him and he fell to the ground, bleeding.

"Come, I'll show you where it is," said Granny coolly.

My father came in just then and tried to grab one of the thieves. Granny pushed him away.



"Keep quiet," she said. "It is no use. They will stab or kill you. Look after your father."

She took them into the room where the safe was and gave them the keys.

"Take whatever you want, only don't hurt any of us," she said.

The robbers wanted the ornaments she was wearing and my mother's too. Both were allowed to keep their wedding necklaces.

"All right, now go out!" she was told.

My grandmother was a clever woman. The robbers were so busy opening the safe and admiring the jewels, they did not notice that when she went out, she not only closed the door, but bolted it from outside! There was no other way of getting out, and the door could not be broken open easily.

Inside the room, the men yelled, cursed, and banged on the door. Granny laughed and said to my father, "Run and call the police and a doctor, quick! Children, you go to the front yard and shout. Tell our neighbours we have caught the thieves!"

We were crying and shivering with fright.

Granny said, "They can't harm you now. Be brave and do as I tell you."

In those days there were no telephones in that area. Father drove to the police station. Our neighbours, hearing the commotion, came rushing to our house.

Granny and my mother washed and bandaged Grandpa's wound, which was a deep cut. It was the first time I had seen so much blood and I felt sick and dizzy.

Soon the police came and the doctor too. The robbers were handcuffed and taken away. Everyone was happy that this gang, which had so terrorised the town and surrounding villages, had at last been caught.

"Just imagine an old woman catching them when even the police couldn't!" they kept saying.

Granny was rewarded in cash. She gave the money to the hospital where Grandpa had been admitted. He was there for a month and came out with a big scar, of which he was very proud.

He told people that he got it defending us against the robbers! Granny kept mum, a mischievous grin on her wrinkled face.

That Sunday Morning

My father was posted in Patna. On the first Sunday there, my brother and I decided to do a little exploring on our bikes. It was still very early in the morning, and only a few people were about. The roads were good and the trees lining them were shady. There were no imposing buildings or monuments as there are in Delhi, from where we had just come. After cycling for about half-an-hour, my brother got bored and said, "Come on, I'll race you to that corner. The loser treats the other to a chocolate, okay?"

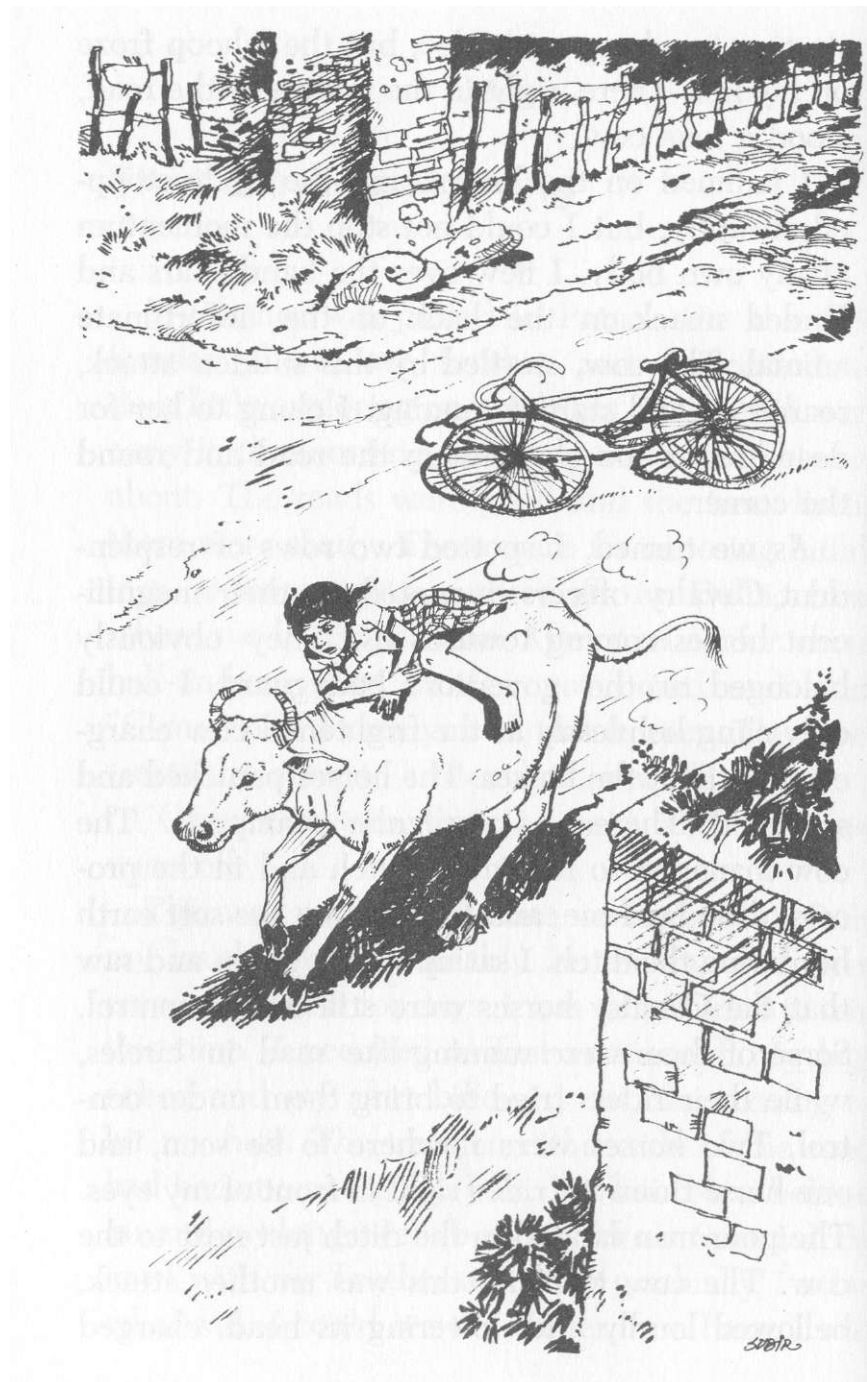
"Okay, one, two, three!" I said, and then we were off.

This was not the first time we had raced. Only my brother had invariably beaten me and then crowed about it for days. I was determined to win this time. I pedalled as fast as I could. My legs ached and my skirt billowed out, threatening to hit my face. The trees on either side of the road had become one green blur. My hair blew behind me and my lungs were bursting for air. Soon I drew level with my brother and then gradually I moved ahead. I could see the corner, in a haze. I was

starting to whoop with glee, but the whoop froze on my lips. There, right in the middle of the road, stood a lone cow!

I jammed on the brakes and the cycle stopped abruptly, but I could not stop the momentum of my own body. I flew over the handlebars and landed smack on the back of the unfortunate animal. The cow, startled by this sudden attack, reared up and started running. I clung to her for dear Me, as she charged up the road and round the corner.

As we turned, I spotted two rows of resplendent Cavalry officers, mounted on their magnificent horses coming towards us. They obviously belonged to the governor's bodyguard. I could only cling helplessly as the frightened cow charged straight at the horses. The horses panicked and scattered. There was a regular stampede. The cow managed to fall into a ditch and in the process, dislodged me, and I landed on the soft earth bordering the ditch. I sat up with a groan and saw that the Cavalry horses were still out of control. Some of them were running like mad in circles, while their riders tried to bring them under control. Two horses were nowhere to be seen, and one horse threw its rider right in front of my eyes. The poor man landed in the ditch just next to the cow. The cow thinking this was another attack, bellowed loudly and, lowering its head, charged



at the unfortunate man. The poor fellow scrambled out of the ditch, tearing his pants at rather an awkward place. Realising this, he sat down on the road with a thump and would not get up.

I saw my brother approaching with my bike in tow, coming up to me with a grin on his face. I felt like hitting him.

"You looked such a sight on top of that cow," he said and started laughing. Then he probably realised that I might have been hurt and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Of course, I am," I said haughtily and got up at once. Nothing on earth would have made me admit to him how frightened and shaken I was.

Just then my brother spotted one of the horse-riders coming towards us with a thunderous scowl on his face. Behind him was the man to whom, in all probability, the cow belonged. My brother gave them an uneasy glance and said, "I think it would be nice if we moved quickly from here." I looked round and saw that if both of us did not move fast enough, we would be called in for a lot of explanations. With one accord we got onto our bikes and beat a hasty retreat.

The morning had already been rather eventful and we did not want to add another unpleasant episode to it.

The Boy From Standard III

Father Rebello sat in his study, his vast bulk filling the roomy revolving chair. 'Swish, swish', went his pen as he wrote. Tick-tock went the clock on top of the bookshelf. Otherwise, the room was very quiet. The windows were shut against the chill mountain air. The curtains were drawn. On the carpet below lay Father's dog, Raja. In the daytime, Raja acted bone-lazy. Even his meals had to be pushed right under his nose or he wouldn't eat. But at night a change came over him. If the wind so much as stirred Father's latch, Raja let out a deep growl.

The clock had just struck ten when Father signed the last of the papers. As he put down his pen, he heard a low rumble. "Grrr, gr. . . ."

"Quiet," said Father and Raja put his head between his paws. Silence.

And then Father heard a soft footfall. Some more. . . Slowly they came up the staircase and on to the landing where they stopped. Raja was barking furiously as Father walked to the door and threw it open. "Who is there?" he called. In the dark he could just make out a small form.

"Come in," he said aloud and presently the light shone on the face of Norbu, the new Tibetan boy from Standard III.

Norbu shivered slightly as Father Rebello led him into the study. He sat huddled in one corner of a chair, his frightened eyes darting about the room. Father Rebello waited so that the thudding of the boy's heart had time to ease. At last he spoke, "What is it, Norbu? Tell me,"

Norbu tried, but the words wouldn't come. He passed his tongue over his lips once, twice, three times, before he found his small voice.

"Father," he said, "I can light some joss-sticks in chapel every evening? Yes? You not mind?"

Father was taken aback. "Of course, Norbu," he replied. "But why?"

"Because to tell God I am here."

Norbu spoke without bitterness, but on Father's ears the words fell harshly. He put an arm round the boys' shoulders. "Why son, what makes you think God has forgotten you?"

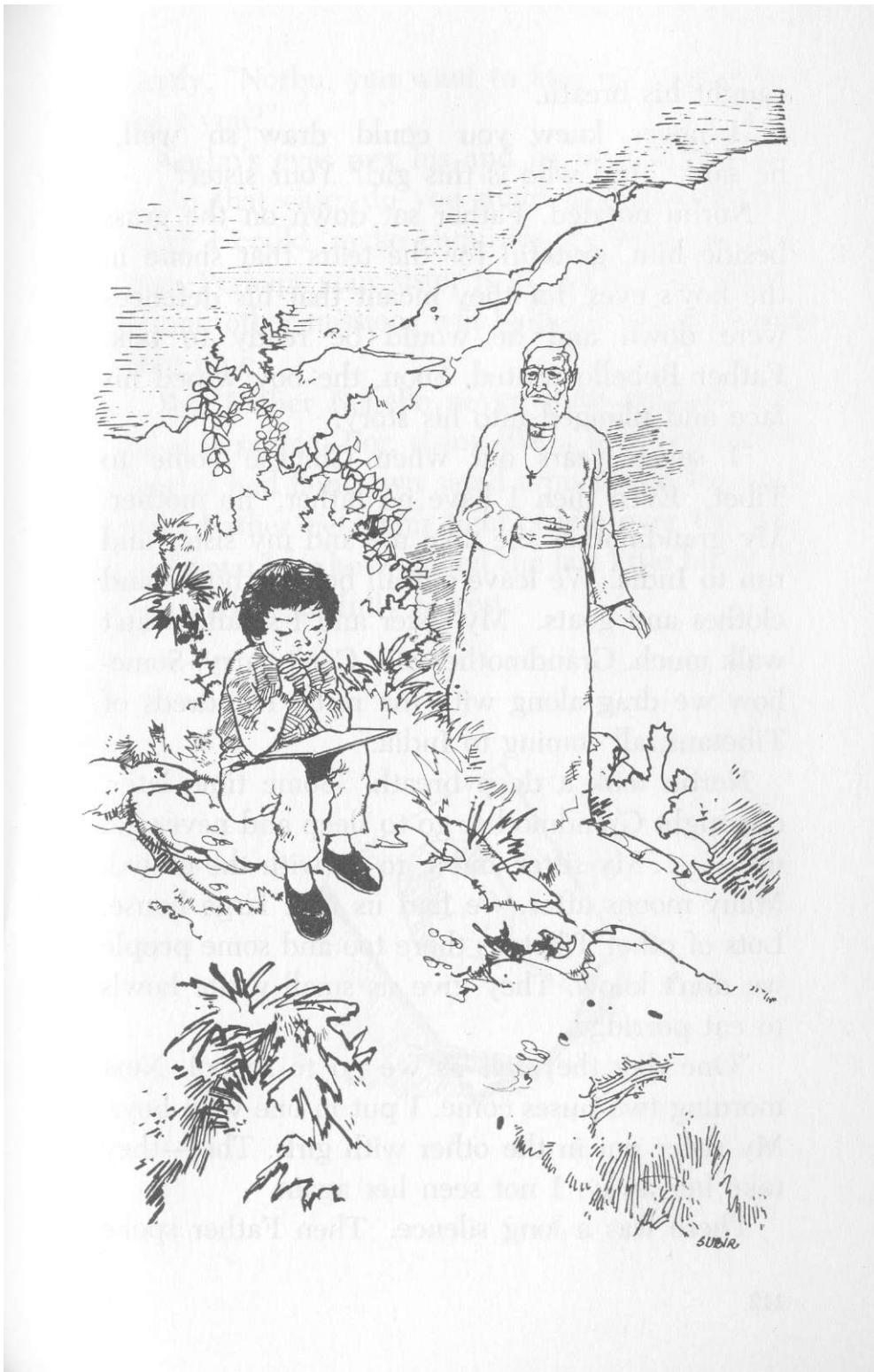
But Norbu would not say anything more, and Father did not want to press him, for already the boy's face had gone very white. They had a cup of hot milk together. Later, Father took a torch, and saw Norbu to his dormitory, half-way down the hill.

Norbu came every day, directly after evening study, while the rest of the boys went tearing

down to the dining-hall. He stole past Father's room and entered the chapel. And five minutes later, Father Rebello could smell the joss-sticks. Norbu seemed content, but Father knew that this was not the end.

The rains had come and gone early that year. Autumn twilight trailed over the land, pink and dotted with stray white clouds. Father Rebello loved the evenings—a time when he could take his mind off the day-to-day problems of running the school. He never missed his evening walk, starting from the school on top of the hill, down into the valley and up again to the little knoll that overlooked a running stream. Here Father would sit and watch the sun sink to rest among the pines.

One day Father Rebello came later than usual. As he zig-zagged up the path to the top of the knoll, something caught his eye. A blue-clad arm, jutting out from behind a bush. Someone from the school. In uniform. Father Rebello quickened his pace, for he knew the knoll was out of bounds at that hour. "Who's there?" he said sharply, drawing level with the figure behind the bush. And then he saw the startled face of Norbu. In one hand the boy clutched a pencil, in the other, a sheaf of papers. He had been drawing the face of a girl, a Tibetan girl, and her likeness to Norbu was so remarkable that Father



caught his breath.

"I never knew you could draw so well," he said. "And who is this girl? Your sister?"

Norbu nodded. Father sat down on the grass beside him, grateful for the tears that shone in the boy's eyes, for they meant that his defences were down and he would be ready to talk. Father Rebello waited. Soon, the boy wiped his face and plunged into his story.

"I seven years old when Chinese come to Tibet. Even then I have no father, no mother. My grandmother she take me and my sister and run to India. We leave our all behind, house and clothes and goats. My sister and I small. Can't walk much. Grandmother old. Can't carry. Somehow we drag along with the rest. Hundreds of Tibetans, all coming to India."

Norbu took a deep breath. "Some time later, one night Grandmother go to sleep and never get up. . . . My sister and I go on with the crowd. Many moons after, we find us in a large house. Lots of other Tibetans there too and some people we don't know. They give us small white bowls to eat porridge.

"One day they tell us we go to school. Next morning two buses come. I put in one with boys. My sister put in the other with girls. They—they take her away. I not seen her again."

There was a long silence. Then Father spoke

gently, 'Norbu, you want to look for your sister, don't you?'

Norbu's eyes met his and he said, "Yes."

"In that case, do you mind if we do it together? I could make enquiries through our mission. Perhaps your sister is in one of our schools. If not, other missions will help. Of course, it will take time

But Father Rebello never quite finished what he was saying. For, rising like a little whirlwind, Norbu had flung two small arms round his neck. And Father held him tight, while over the mop of brown hair he watched the last little bit of the sun sink peacefully to rest.





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