Ruskin Bond

PANTHER’S MOON AND OTHER STORIES

Illustrated by Archana Sreenivasan

PUFFIN BOOKS
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Born in Kasauli in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi and Shimla. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, written when he was seventeen, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Since then he has written over five hundred short stories, essays and novellas (some included in the collections *Dust on the Mountains* and *Classic Ruskin Bond*) and more than forty books for children.

He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in India in 1993, the Padma Shri in 1999, and the Delhi government’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi’s Bal Sahitya Puraskar for his ‘total contribution to children’s literature’ in 2013 and was honoured with the Padma Bhushan in 2014.

He lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his extended family.
Also in Puffin by Ruskin Bond

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The Cherry Tree
Getting Granny’s Glasses
The Eyes of the Eagle
Thick as Thieves: Tales of Friendship
Uncles, Aunts and Elephants: Tales from Your Favourite Storyteller
To the memory of my father,
    Aubrey Bond,
who gave me so much
in the little time he had…
The Tiger in the Tunnel

Tembu, the boy, opened his eyes in the dark and wondered if his father was ready to leave the hut on his nightly errand. There was no moon that night, and the deathly stillness of the surrounding jungle was broken only occasionally by the shrill cry of a cicada. Sometimes from far off came the hollow hammering of a woodpecker carried along on the faint breeze. Or the grunt of a wild boar could be heard as he dug up a favourite root. But these sounds were rare and the silence of the forest always returned to swallow them up.

Baldeo, the watchman, was awake. He stretched himself, slowly unwinding the heavy shawl that covered him like a shroud. It was close to midnight and the chill air made him shiver. The station, a small shack backed by heavy jungle, was a station in name only; for trains only stopped there, if at all, for a few seconds before entering the deep cutting that led to the tunnel. Most trains merely slowed down before taking the sharp curve before the cutting.

Baldeo was responsible for signalling whether or not the runnel was dear of obstruction, and his hand-worked signal stood before the entrance. At night it was his duty to see that the lamp was burning, and that the overland mail passed through safely.

‘Shall I come too, Father?’ asked Tembu sleepily, still lying huddled in a corner of the hut.

‘No, it is cold tonight. Do not get up.’

Tembu, who was twelve, did not always sleep with his father at the station, for he had also to help in the home, where his mother and small sister were usually alone. They lived in a small tribal village on the outskirts of the forest, about three miles from the station. Their small rice fields did not provide them with more than a bare living and Baldeo considered himself lucky to have got the job of Khalasi at this small wayside signal-stop.

Still drowsy, Baldeo groped for his lamp in the darkness, then fumbled about in search of matches. When he had produced a light, he left the hut, dosed the door
behind him, and set off along the permanent way. Tembu had fallen asleep again.

Baldeo wondered whether the lamp on the signal-post was still alight. Gathering his shawl closer about him, he stumbled on, sometimes along the rails, sometimes along the ballast. He longed to get back to his warm corner in the hut.

The eeriness of the place was increased by the neighbouring hills which overhung the main line threateningly. On entering the cutting with its sheer rock walls towering high above the rails, Baldeo could not help thinking about the wild animals he might encounter. He had heard many tales of the famous tunnel tiger, a man-eater, who was supposed to frequent this spot; but he hardly believed these stories for, since his arrival at this place a month ago, he had not seen or even heard a tiger.

There had, of course, been panthers, and only a few days ago the villagers had killed one with their spears and axes. Baldeo had occasionally heard the sawing of a panther calling to its mate, but they had not come near the tunnel or shed.

Baldeo walked confidently for, being tribal himself, he was used to the jungle and its ways. Like his forefathers, he carried a small axe; fragile to look at, but deadly when in use. With it, in three or four swift strokes, he could cut down a tree as neatly as if it had been sawn; and he prided himself in his skill in wielding it against wild animals. He had killed a young boar with it once, and the family had feasted on the flesh for three days. The axe-head of pure steel, thin but ringing true like a bell, had been made by his father over a charcoal fire. This axe was part of himself and wherever he went, be it to the local market seven miles away, or to a tribal dance, the axe was always in his hand. Occasionally an official who had come to the station had offered him good money for the weapon; but Baldeo had no intention of parting with it.

The cutting curved sharply, and in the darkness the black entrance to the tunnel loomed up menacingly. The signal-light was out. Baldeo set to work to haul the lamp down by its chain. If the oil had finished, he would have to return to the hut for more. The mail train was due in five minutes.

Once more he fumbled for his matches. Then suddenly he stood still and listened. The frightened cry of a barking deer, followed by a crashing sound in the undergrowth, made Baldeo hurry. There was still a little oil in the lamp, and after an instant’s hesitation he lit the lamp again and hoisted it back into position. Having done this, he walked quickly down the tunnel, swinging his own lamp, so that the shadows leapt up and down the soot-stained walls, and having made sure that the line was clear, he returned to the entrance and sat down to wait for the mail train.
The train was late. Sitting huddled up, almost dozing, he soon forgot his surroundings and began to nod.

Back in the hut, the trembling of the ground told of the approach of the train, and a low, distant rumble woke the boy, who sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

‘Father, it’s time to light the lamp,’ he mumbled, and then, realizing that his father had been gone some time, he lay down again, but he was wide awake now, waiting for the train to pass, waiting for his father’s returning footsteps.

A low grunt resounded from the top of the cutting. In a second Baldeo was awake, all his senses alert. Only a tiger could emit such a sound.

There was no shelter for Baldeo, but he grasped his axe firmly and tensed his body, trying to make out the direction from which the animal was approaching. For some time there was only silence, even the usual jungle noises seemed to have ceased altogether. Then a thump and the rattle of small stones announced that the tiger had sprung into the cutting.

Baldeo, listening as he had never listened before, wondered if it was making for the tunnel or the opposite direction—the direction of the hut, in which Tembu would be lying unprotected. He did not have to wonder for long. Before a minute had passed he made out the huge body of the tiger trotting steadily towards him. Its eyes shone a brilliant green in the light from the signal-lamp. Flight was useless, for in the dark the tiger would be more surefooted than Baldeo and would soon be upon him from behind. Baldeo stood with his back to the signal-post, motionless, staring at the great brute moving rapidly towards him. The tiger, used to the ways of men, for it had been preying on them for years, came on fearlessly, and with a quick run and a snarl struck out with its right paw, expecting to bowl over this puny man who dared stand in the way,

Baldeo, however, was ready. With a marvelously agile leap he avoided the paw and brought his axe down on the animal’s shoulder. The tiger gave a roar and attempted to close in. Again Baldeo drove his axe with true aim; but, to his horror, the beast swerved, and the axe caught the tiger on the shoulder, almost severing the leg. To make matters worse, the axe remained stuck in the bone, and Baldeo was left without a weapon.

The tiger, roaring with pain, now sprang upon Baldeo, bringing him down and then tearing at his broken body. It was all over in a few minutes. Baldeo was conscious only of a searing pain down his back, and then there was blackness and the night dosed in on him forever.
The tiger drew off and sat down licking its wounded leg, roaring every now and then with agony. He did not notice the faint rumble that shook the earth, followed by the distant puffing of an engine steadily climbing. The overland mail was approaching. Through the trees beyond the cutting, as the train advanced, the glow of the furnace could be seen, and showers of sparks fell like Diwali lights over the forest.

As the train entered the cutting, the engine whistled once, loud and piercingly. The tiger raised his head, then slowly got to his feet. He found himself trapped like the man. Flight along the cutting was impossible. He entered the tunnel, running as fast as his wounded leg would carry him. And then, with a roar and a shower of sparks, the train entered the yawning tunnel. The noise in the confined space was deafening but, when the train came out into the open, on the other side, silence returned once more to the forest and the tunnel.
At the next station the driver slowed down and stopped his train to water the engine. He got down to stretch his legs and decided to examine the head-lamps. He received the surprise of his life; for, just above the cow-catcher lay the major portion of the tiger, cut in half by the engine.

There was considerable excitement and conjecture at the station, but back at the cutting there was no sound except for the sobs of the boy as he sat beside the body of his father. He sat there a long time, unafraid of the darkness, guarding the body from jackals and hyenas, until the first faint light of dawn brought with it the arrival of the relief-watchman.

Tembu and his sister and mother were plunged in grief for two whole days; but life had to go on, and a living had to be made, and all the responsibility now fell on Tembu. Three nights later, he was at the cutting, lighting the signal-lamp for the overland mail.

He sat down in the darkness to wait for the train, and sang softly to himself. There was nothing to be afraid of—his father had killed the tiger, the forest gods were pleased; and besides, he had the axe with him, his father’s axe, and he knew how to use it.
The Monkeys

I couldn’t be sure, next morning, if I had been dreaming or if I had really heard dogs barking in the night and had seen them scampering about on the hillside below the cottage. There had been a golden cocker, a retriever, a peke, a dachshund, a black labrador, and one or two nondescripts. They had woken me with their barking shortly after midnight, and made so much noise that I got out of bed and looked out of the open window. I saw them quite plainly in the moonlight, five or six dogs rushing excitedly through the bracket and long monsoon grass.

It was only because there had been so many breeds among the dogs that I felt a little confused. I had been in the cottage only a week, and I was already on nodding or speaking terms with most of my neighbours. Colonel Fanshawe, retired from the Indian Army, was my immediate neighbour. He did keep a cocker, but it was black. The elderly Anglo-Indian spinsters who lived beyond the deodars kept only cats. (Though why cats should be the prerogative of spinsters, I have never been able to understand.) The milkman kept a couple of mongrels. And the Punjabi industrialist who had bought a former prince’s place—without ever occupying it—left the property in charge of a watchman who kept a huge Tibetan mastiff.

None of these dogs looked like the ones I had seen in the night. ‘Does anyone here keep a retriever?’ I asked Colonel Fanshawe, when I met him taking his evening walk.

‘No one that I know of,’ he said and he gave me a swift, penetrating look from under his bushy eyebrows. Why, have you seen one around?’

‘No, I just wondered. There are a lot of dogs in the area, aren’t there?’

‘Oh, yes. Nearly everyone keeps a dog here. Of course every now and then a panther carries one off. Lost a lovely little terrier myself, only last winter.’

Colonel Fanshawe, tall and red-faced, seemed to be waiting for me to tell him something more—or was he just taking time to recover his breath after a stiff uphill climb?

That night I heard the dogs again. I went to the window and looked out. The moon was at the full, silvering the leaves of the oak trees.
The dogs were looking up into the trees, and barking. But I could see nothing in the trees, not even an owl.

I gave a shout, and the dogs disappeared into the forest.

Colonel Fanshawe looked at me expectantly when I met him the following day. He knew something about those dogs, of that I was certain; but he was waiting to hear what I had to say. I decided to oblige him.

‘I saw at least six dogs in the middle of the night,’ I said. ‘A cocker, a retriever, a peke, a dachshund, and two mongrels. Now, Colonel, I’m sure you must know whose they are.’

The Colonel was delighted. I could tell by the way his eyes glinted that he was going to enjoy himself at my expense.

‘You’ve been seeing Miss Fairchild’s dogs,’ he said with smug satisfaction.

‘Oh, and where does she live?’

‘She doesn’t, my boy. Died fifteen years ago.’

‘Then what are her dogs doing here?’

‘Looking for monkeys,’ said the Colonel and he stood back to watch my reaction.

‘I’m afraid I don’t understand,’ I said.

‘Let me put it this way,’ said the Colonel. ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’

‘I’ve never seen any,’ I said.

‘But you have, my boy, you have. Miss Fairchild’s dogs died years ago—a cocker, a retriever, a dachshund, a peke, and two mongrels. They were buried on a little knoll under the oaks. Nothing odd about their deaths, mind you. They were all quite old, and didn’t survive their mistress very long. Neighbours looked after them until they died.’

‘And Miss Fairchild lived in the cottage where I stay? Was she young?’

‘She was in her mid-forties, an athletic sort of woman, fond of the outdoors. Didn’t care much for men. I thought you knew about her.’

‘No, I haven’t been here very long, you know. But what was it you said about monkeys? Why were the dogs looking for monkeys?’

‘Ah, that’s the interesting part of the story. Have you seen the langoor monkeys that sometimes come to eat oak leaves?’

‘No,’

‘You will, sooner or later. There has always been a band of them roaming these forests. They’re quite harmless really, except that they’ll ruin a garden if given half a chance… Well, Miss Fairchild fairly loathed those monkeys. She was very keen on her dahlias—grew some prize specimens—but the monkeys would come at night, dig
up the plants, and eat the dahlia-bulbs. Apparently they found the bulbs much to their liking. Miss Fairchild would be furious. People who are passionately fond of gardening often go off balance when their best plants are ruined—that’s only human, I suppose. Miss Fairchild set her dogs at the monkeys, whenever she could, even if it was in the middle of the night. But the monkeys simply took to the trees and left the dogs barking.’

‘Then one day—or rather, one night—Miss Fairchild took desperate measures. She borrowed a shotgun, and sat up near a window. And when the monkeys arrived, she shot one of them dead.’

The Colonel paused and looked out over the oak trees which were shimmering in the warm afternoon sun.

‘She shouldn’t have done that,’ he said.

‘Never shoot a monkey. It’s not only that they’re sacred to Hindus—but they are rather human, you know. Well, I must be getting on. Good day!’ And the Colonel, having ended his story rather abruptly, set off at a brisk pace through the deodars.

I didn’t hear the dogs that night. But next day I saw the monkeys—the real ones, not ghosts. There were about twenty of them, young and old, sitting in the trees munching oak leaves. They didn’t pay much attention to me, and I watched them for some time.

They were handsome creatures, their fur a silver-grey, their tails long and sinuous. They leapt gracefully from tree to tree, and were very polite and dignified in their behaviour towards each other—unlike the bold, rather crude red monkeys of the plains. Some of the younger ones scampered about on the hillside, playing and wrestling with each other like schoolboys.

There were no dogs to molest them—and no dahlias to tempt them into the garden.

But that night, I heard the dogs again. They were barking more furiously than ever.

‘Well, I’m not getting up for them this time’ I mumbled, and pulled the blankets over my ears.

But the barking grew louder, and was joined by other sounds, a squealing and a scuffling.

Then suddenly the piercing shriek of a woman rang through the forest. It was an unearthly sound, and it made my hair stand up.

I leapt out of bed and dashed to the window.

A woman was lying on the ground, and three or four huge monkeys were on top of her, biting her arms and pulling at her throat. The dogs were yelping and trying to drag the monkeys off, but they were being harried from behind by others. The woman
gave another blood-curdling shriek, and I dashed back into the room, grabbed hold of a small axe, and ran into the garden.

But everyone—dogs, monkeys and shrieking woman—had disappeared, and I stood alone on the hillside in my pyjamas, clutching an axe and feeling very foolish.

The Colonel greeted me effusively the following day.

‘Still seeing those dogs?’ he asked in a bantering tone.

‘I’ve seen the monkeys too,’ I said.

‘Oh, yes, they’ve come around again. But they’re real enough, and quite harmless.’

‘I know—but I saw them last night with the dogs.’

‘Oh, did you really? That’s strange, very strange.’

The Colonel tried to avoid my eye, but I hadn’t quite finished with him.

‘Colonel,’ I said. ‘You never did get around to telling me how Miss Fairchild died.’

‘Oh, didn’t I? Must have slipped my memory. I’m getting old, don’t remember people as well as I used to. But of course I remember about Miss Fairchild, poor lady. The monkeys killed her. Didn’t you know? They simply tore her to pieces…’

His voice trailed off, and he looked thoughtfully at a caterpillar that was making its way up his walking stick.
‘She shouldn’t have shot one of them,’ he said. ‘Never shoot a monkey—they’re human, you know…’
Grandpa Fights an Ostrich

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Needless to say, I returned his caresses most affectionately! And I took good care to see that he did not leave my side until we were well clear of the ostrich ‘camp’.
In the entire village, he was the first to get up. Even the dog, a big hill mastiff called Sheroo, was asleep in a corner of the dark room, curled up near the cold embers of the previous night’s fire. Bisnu’s tousled head emerged from his blanket. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and sat up on his haunches; then, gathering his wits, he crawled in the direction of the loud ticking that came from the battered little clock which occupied the second most honoured place in a niche in the wall. The most honoured place belonged to a picture of Ganesh, the god of learning, who had an elephant’s head and fat boy’s body.

Bringing his face close to the clock, Bisnu could just make out the dial hands. It was five o’clock. He had half-an-hour in which to get ready and leave.

He got up, in vest and underpants, and moved quietly towards the door. The soft tread of his bare feet woke Sheroo, and the big black dog rose silently and padded behind the boy. The door opened and closed, and then the boy and the dog were outside in the early dawn. The month was June, and nights were warm, even in the Himalayan valleys, but there was fresh dew on the grass. Bisnu felt the dew beneath his feet. He took a deep breath and began walking down to the stream.

The sound of the stream filled the small valley. At that early hour of the morning, it was the only sound; but Bisnu was hardly conscious of it. It was a sound he lived with and took for granted. It was only when he was over the hill, on his way to the distant town—and the sound of the stream grew distant—that he really began to notice it. And it was only when the stream was too far away to be heard that he really missed its sound.

He slipped out of his underclothes, gazed for a few moments at the goose pimples rising on his flesh, and then dashed into the shallow stream. As he went further in, the cold mountain water reached his loins and navel, and he gasped with shock and pleasure. He drifted slowly with the current, swam across to a small inlet which formed a fairly deep pool, and plunged beneath the water. Sheroo hated cold water at this early hour. Had the sun been up, he would not have hesitated to join Bisnu. Now
he contented himself with sitting on a smooth rock and gazing placidly at the slim brown boy splashing about in the clear water, in the widening light of dawn.

Bisnu did not stay long in the water. There wasn’t time. When he returned to the house, he found his mother up, making tea and chapatties. His sister, Puja, was still asleep. She was a little older than Bisnu, a pretty girl with large black eyes, good teeth and strong arms and legs. During the day, she helped her mother in the house and in the fields. She did not go to the school with Bisnu. But when he came home in the evenings, he would try teaching her some of the things he had learnt. Their father was dead. Bisnu, at twelve, considered himself the head of the family.

He ate two chapatties, after spreading butter-oil on them. He drank a glass of hot, sweet tea. His mother gave two thick chapatties to Sheroo, and the dog wolfed them down in a few minutes. Then she wrapped two chapatties and a gourd-curry in some big green leaves, and handed these to Bisnu. This was his lunch-packet. His mother and Puja would take their meal afterwards.

When Bisnu was dressed, he stood with folded hands before the picture of Ganesh. Ganesh is the god who blesses all beginnings. The author who begins to write a new book, the banker who opens a new ledger, the traveller who starts on a journey, all invoke the kindly help of Ganesh. And as Bisnu made a journey everyday, he never left without the goodwill of the elephant-headed god.

How, one might ask, did Ganesh get his elephant’s head?

When born, he was a beautiful child. Parvathi, his mother, was so proud of him that she went about showing him to everyone. Unfortunately she made the mistake of showing the child to that envious planet, Saturn, who promptly burnt off poor Ganesh’s head. Parvati in despair went to Brahma, the creator, for a new head for her son. He had no head to give her; but he advised her to search for some man or animal caught in a sinful or wrong act. Parvati wandered about until she came upon an elephant sleeping with its head the wrong way, that is, to the south. She promptly removed the elephant’s head and planted it on Ganesh’s shoulders, where it took root.

Bisnu knew this story. He had heard it from his mother.

Wearing a white shirt and black shorts, and a pair of worn white keds, he was ready for his long walk to school, five miles up the mountain.

His sister woke up just as he was about to leave. She pushed the hair away from her face, and gave Bisnu one of her rare smiles.

‘I hope you have not forgotten,’ she said.

‘Forgotten?’ said Bisnu, pretending innocence. ‘Is there anything I am supposed to remember?’
‘Don’t tease me. You promised to buy me a pair of bangles, remember? I hope you won’t spend the money on sweets, as you did last time.’

‘Oh, yes, your bangles,’ said Bisnu. ‘Girls have nothing better to do than waste money on trinkets. Now don’t lose your temper! I’ll get them for you. Red and gold are the colours you want?’

‘Yes, brother,’ said Puja gently, pleased that Bisnu had remembered the colours. ‘And for your dinner tonight we’ll make you something special. Won’t we, mother?’

‘Yes. But hurry up and dress. There is some ploughing to be done today. The rains will soon be here, if the gods are kind.’

‘The monsoon will be late this year,’ said Bisnu. ‘Mr Nautiyal, our teacher, told us so. He said it had nothing to do with the gods.’ ‘Be off, you are getting late,’ said Puja, before Bisnu could begin an argument with his mother. She was diligently winding the old clock. It was quite light in the room. The sun would be up any minute.

Bisnu shouldered his school-bag, kissed his mother, pinched his sister’s cheeks, and left the house. He started climbing the steep path up the mountain-side. Sheroo bounded ahead; for he, too, always went with Bisnu to school.

Five miles to school. Everyday, except Sunday, Bisnu walked five miles to school; and in the evening, he walked home again. There was no school in his own small village of Manjari, for the village consisted of only five families. The nearest school was at Kemptee, a small township on the bus-route through the district of Garhwal. A number of boys walked to school, from distances of two or three miles; their villages were not quite as remote as Manjari. But Bisnu’s village lay right at the bottom of the mountain, a drop of over two thousand feet from Kemptee. There was no proper road between the village and the town.

In Kemptee, there was a school, a small mission hospital, a post office and several shops. In Manjari village there were none of these amenities. If you were sick, you stayed at home until you got well; if you were very sick, you walked or were carried to the hospital, up the five-mile path. If you wanted to buy something, you went without it; but if you wanted it very badly, you could walk the five miles to Kemptee.

Manjari was known as the Five Mile Village.

Twice a week, if there were any letters, a postman came to the village. Bisnu usually passed the postman on his way to and from school.

There were other boys in Manjari village, but Bisnu was the only one who went to school. His mother would not have fussed if he had stayed at home and worked in the fields. That was what the other boys did; all except lazy Chittru, who preferred fishing in the stream or helping himself to the fruit of other people’s trees. But Bisnu went to
school. He went because he wanted to. No one could force him to go; and no one could stop him from going. He had set his heart on receiving good schooling. He wanted to read and write as well as anyone in the big world, the world that seemed to begin only where the mountains ended. He felt cut off from the world in his small valley. He would rather live at the top of a mountain than at the bottom of one. That was why he liked climbing to Kemptee—it took him to the top of the mountain; and from its ridge he could look down on his own valley, to the north, and on the wide endless plains stretching towards the south.

The plainsman looks to the hills for the needs of his spirit, but the hillman looks to the plains for a living.

Leaving the village and the fields below him, Bisnu climbed steadily up the bare hillside, now dry and brown. By the time the sun was up, he had entered the welcome shade of an oak and rhododendron forest: Sheroo went bounding ahead, chasing squirrels and barking at langoor monkeys.

A colony of langoor monkeys lived in the oak forest. They fed on oak leaves, acorns, and other green things, and usually remained in the trees, coming down to the ground only to bask or play in the sun. They were beautiful, supple-limbed animals, with black faces and silver-grey coats and long, sensitive tails. They leapt from tree to tree with great agility. The young ones wrestled on the grass like boys.

A dignified community, the langoor monkeys did not have the cheekiness or dishonest habits of the red monkeys of the plains; they did not approach dogs or humans. But they had grown used to Bisnu’s comings and goings, and did not fear him. Some of the older ones would watch him quietly, a little puzzled. They did not go near the town, because the Kemptee boys threw stones at them; and anyway the oak forest gave them all the food they required.

Emerging from the trees, Bisnu crossed a small brook. Here he stopped to drink the fresh, clean water of a spring. The brook tumbled down the mountain, and joined the river a little below Bisnu’s village. Coming from another direction was a second path, and at the junction of the two paths, Sarru was waiting for him.

Sarru came from a small village about three miles from Bisnu’s and closer to the town. He had two large milk cans slung over his shoulders. Every morning he carried this milk to town, selling one can to the school and the other to Mrs Taylor, the lady doctor at the small mission hospital. He was a little older than Bisnu but not as well-built.

They hailed each other, and Sarru fell into step beside Bisnu. They often met at this spot, keeping each other company for the remaining two miles to Kemptee.
‘There was a panther in our village last night,’ said Sarru.
This information interested but did not excite Bisnu. Panthers were common enough in the hills and did not usually present a problem except during the winter months, when their natural prey was scarce; then, occasionally, a panther would take to haunting the outskirts of a village, seizing a careless dog or a stray goat.
‘Did you lose any animals?’ asked Bisnu.
‘No. It tried to get into the cow-shed, but the dogs set up an alarm. We drove it off.’
‘It must be the same one which came around last winter. We lost a calf and two dogs in our village.’
‘Wasn’t that the one the shikaris wounded? I hope it hasn’t became a cattle-lifter.’
‘It could be the same. It has a bullet in its leg. These hunters are the people who cause all the trouble. They think it’s easy to shoot a panther. It would be better if they missed altogether; but they usually wound it.’
‘And then the panther’s too slow to catch the barking-deer, and starts on our own animals.’
‘We’re lucky it didn’t become a man-eater. Do you remember the man-eater six years ago? I was very small then. My father told me all about it. Ten people were killed in our valley alone. What happened to it?’
‘I don’t know. Some say it poisoned itself when it ate the headman of another village.’
Bisnu laughed. ‘No one liked that old villain. He must have been a man-eater himself in some previous existence!’ They linked arms and scrambled up the stony path. Sheroo began barking and ran ahead. Someone was coming down the path.
It was Mela Ram, the postman.

‘Any letters for us?’ asked Bisnu and Sarru together.
They never received any letters but that did not stop them from asking. It was one way of finding out who had received letters.
‘You’re welcome to all of them’, said Mela Ram, ‘if you’ll carry my bag for me.’
‘Not today,’ said Sarru. ‘We’re busy today. Is there a letter from Corporal Ghanshyam for his family?’
‘Yes, there is a postcard for his people. He is posted on the Ladakh border now, and finds it very cold there.’
Postcards, unlike sealed letters, were considered public property and were read by everyone. The senders knew that, too; and so Corporal Ghanshyam Singh was careful
to mention that he expected a promotion very soon. He wanted everyone in his village to know it.

Mela Ram, complaining of sore feet, continued on his way, and the boys carried on up the path. It was eight o’clock when they reached Kemptee. Or Taylor’s out-patients were just beginning to trickle in at the hospital gate. The doctor was trying to prop up a rose-creeper which had blown down during the night. She liked attending to her plants in the mornings, before starting on her patients. She found this helped her in her work; there was a lot in common between ailing plants and ailing people.

Dr Taylor was fifty, white-haired but fresh in the face and full of vitality. She had been in India for twenty years; and ten of these had been spent working in the hill regions.

She saw Bisnu coming down the road. She knew about the boy and his long walk to school and admired him for his keenness and sense of purpose. She wished there were more like him.

Bisnu greeted her shyly. Sheroo barked and put his paws up on the gate.

‘Yes, there’s a bone for you,’ said Dr Taylor. She often put aside bones for the big black dog, for she knew that Bisnu’s people could not afford to give the dog a regular diet of meat—though he did well enough on milk and chapatties.

She threw the bone over the gate, and Sheroo caught it before it fell. The school bell began ringing, and Bisnu broke into a run. Sheroo loped along behind the boy.

When Bisnu entered the school gate, Sheroo sat down on the grass of the compound. He would remain there until the lunch-break. He knew of various ways of amusing himself during school hours, and had friends among the bazaar dogs. But just then he didn’t want company. He had his bone to get on with.

Mr Nautiyal, Bisnu’s teacher, was in a bad mood. He was a keen rose-grower, and only that morning, on getting up and looking out of his bedroom window, had been horrified to see a herd of goats in his garden. He had chased them down the road with a stick, but the damage had already been done. His prize roses had all been consumed.

Mr Nautiyal had been so upset that he had gone without his breakfast. He had also cut himself whilst shaving. Thus, his mood had gone from bad to worse. Several times during the day he brought down his ruler on the knuckles of any boy who irritated him. Bisnu was one of his best pupils. But even Bisnu irritated him by asking too many questions about a new sum which Mr Nautiyal didn’t feel like explaining.

That was the kind of day it was for Mr Nautiyal. Most school teachers know similar days.
‘Poor Mr Nautiyal,’ thought Bisnu. ‘I wonder why he’s so upset. It must be because of his pay. He doesn’t get much money. But he’s a good teacher. I hope he doesn’t take another job.’

But after Mr Nautiyal had taken his lunch, his mood improved (as it always did, after a meal), and the rest of the day passed serenely. Armed with a bundle of homework, Bisnu came out from the school compound at four o’clock, and was immediately joined by Sheroo. He proceeded down the road in the company of several of his class fellows. But he did not linger long in the bazaar. There were five miles to walk, and he did not like to get home too late. Usually he reached his house just as it was beginning to get dark.

Sarru had gone home long ago, and Bisnu had to make the return journey on his own. It was a good opportunity for memorizing the words of an English poem he had been set to learn.

Bisnu had reached the little brook when he remembered the bangles he had promised to buy for his sister.

‘Oh, I’ve forgotten them again,’ he said aloud. ‘Now I’ll catch it: and she’s probably made something special for my dinner!’

Sheroo, to whom these words were addressed, paid no attention, but bounded off into the oak forest. Bisnu looked around for the monkeys but they were nowhere to be seen.

‘Strange,’ he thought. ‘I wonder why they have disappeared.’

He was startled by a sudden sharp cry, followed by a fierce yelp. He knew at once that Sheroo was in trouble. The noise came from the bushes down the ditch, into which the dog had rushed but a few seconds previously.

Bisnu jumped off the path and ran down the slope towards the bushes. There was no dog and not a sound. He whistled and called but there was no response. Then he saw something lying on the dry grass. He picked it up. It was a portion of a dog’s collar, stained with blood. It was Sheroo’s collar, and Sheroo’s blood.

Bisnu did not search further. He knew, without a doubt, that Sheroo had been seized by a panther. No other animal could have attacked so silently and swiftly and carried off a big dog without a struggle. Sheroo was dead—must have been dead within seconds of being caught and flung into the air. Bisnu knew the danger that lay in wait for him if he followed the blood-trail through the trees. The panther would attack anyone who interfered with its meal.

With tears starting in his eyes, Bisnu carried on down the path to the village. His fingers still clutched the little bit of bloodstained collar that was all that was left to
him of his dog.

Bisnu was not a very sentimental boy, but he sorrowed for his dog, who had been his companion on many a hike into the hills and forests. He did not sleep that night, but turned restlessly from side to side, moaning softly. After some time he felt Puja’s hand on his head. She began stroking his brow. He took her hand in his own, and the clasp of her rough, warm, familiar hand gave him a feeling of comfort and security.

Next morning, when he went down to the stream to bathe, he missed the presence of his dog. He did not stay long in the water. It wasn’t so much fun when there was no Sheroo to watch him.

When Bisnu’s mother gave him his food, she told him to be careful, and to hurry home that evening. A panther, even if it is only a cowardly lifter of sheep or dogs, is not to be trifled with. And this particular panther had shown some daring by seizing the dog even before it was dark.

Still, there was no question of staying away from school. If Bisnu remained at home every time a panther put in an appearance, he might just as well stop going to school altogether.

He set off even earlier than usual, and reached the meeting of the paths long before Sarru. He did not wait for his friend, because he did not feel like talking about the loss of his dog. It was not the day for the postman, and so Bisnu reached Kemptee without meeting anyone on the way. He tried creeping past the hospital gate unnoticed, but Dr Taylor saw him, and the first thing she said was: ‘Where’s Sheroo? I’ve got something for him.’

When Dr Taylor saw the boy’s face, she knew at once that something was wrong.

‘What is it, Bisnu?’ she asked. She looked quickly up and down the road. ‘Is it Sheroo?’

He nodded gravely.

‘A panther took him,’ he said.

‘In the village?’

‘No, while we were walking home through the forest. I did not see anything—but I heard.’

Dr Taylor knew that there was nothing she could say that would console him, and she tried to conceal the bone which she had brought out for the dog; but Bisnu noticed her hiding it behind her back, and the tears welled up in his eyes. He turned away and began running down the road.
His school fellows noticed Sheroo’s absence and questioned Bisnu. He had to tell them everything. They were full of sympathy; but they were also quite thrilled at what had happened, and kept pestering Bisnu for all the details. There was a lot of noise in the classroom, and Mr Nautiyal had to call for order. When he learnt what had happened, he patted Bisnu on the head and told him that he need not attend school for the rest of the day. But Bisnu did not want to go home. After school, he got into a fight with one of the boys, and that helped him to forget.

The panther that plunged the village into an atmosphere of gloom and terror may not have been the same panther that took Sheroo; there was no way of knowing, and it would have made no difference, because the panther that came by night and struck at the people of Manjari was that most feared of wild creatures, a man-eater.

Nine-year-old Sanjay, son of Kalam Singh, was the first child to be attacked by the panther.

Kalam Singh’s house was the last in the village, and nearest the stream. Like the other houses, it was quite small, just a room above and a stable below, with steps leading up from outside the house. He lived there with his wife, two sons (Sanjay was the youngest) and little daughter Basanti who had just turned three.

Sanjay had brought his father’s cows home after grazing them on the hillside in the company of other children. He had also brought home an edible wild plant which his mother cooked into a tasty dish for their evening meal. They had their food at dusk, sitting on the floor of their single room, and soon after, settled down for the night. Sanjay curled up in his favourite spot, with his head near the door, where he got a little fresh air. As the nights were warm, the door was usually left a little ajar. Sanjay’s mother piled ash on the embers of the fire, and the family was soon asleep.

None heard the stealthy padding of a panther approaching the door, pushing it wider open. But suddenly there were sounds of a frantic struggle, and Sanjay’s stifled cries were mixed with the grunts of the panther. Kalam Singh leapt to his feet with a shout. The panther had dragged Sanjay out of the door and was pulling him down the steps when Kalam Singh started battering at the animal with a large stone. The rest of the family screamed in terror, rousing the entire village. A number of men came to Kalam Singh’s assistance, and the panther was driven off; but Sanjay lay unconscious.

Someone brought a lantern, and the boy’s mother screamed when she saw her small son with his head lying in a pool of blood. It looked as if the side of his head had been eaten off by the panther. But he was still alive; and as Kalam Singh plastered ash on the boy’s head to stop the bleeding, he found that though the scalp had been torn off one side of the head, the bare bone was smooth and unbroken.
‘He won’t live through the night,’ said a neighbour. ‘We’ll have to carry him down to the river in the morning.’

The dead were always cremated on the banks of a small river which flowed past Manjari village.

Suddenly the panther, still prowling about the village, called out in rage and frustration, and the villagers rushed to their homes in a panic, and barricaded themselves in for the night.

Sanjay’s mother sat by the boy for the rest of the night, weeping and watching. Towards dawn he started to moan and show signs of coming round. At this sign of returning consciousness, Kalam Singh rose determinedly and looked round for his stick.

He told his elder son to remain behind with the mother and daughter, as he was going to take Sanjay to Dr Taylor at the hospital.

‘See, he is moaning and in pain,’ said Kalam Singh. ‘That means he has a chance to live if he can be treated at once.’

With a stout stick in his hand, and Sanjay on his back, Kalam Singh set off on the two miles of hard mountain track to the hospital at Kemptee. His son, a blood-stained doth around his head, was moaning but still unconscious. When at last Kalam Singh climbed up through the last fields below the hospital, he asked for the doctor and stammered out an account of what had happened.

It was a terrible injury, as Dr Taylor discovered. The bone over almost one-third of the head was bare, and the scalp was torn all round. As the father told his story, the doctor deaned and dressed the wound, and then gave Sanjay a shot of penicillin to prevent sepsis. Later, Kalam Singh carried the boy home again.

After this, the panther went away for some time. But the people of Manjari could not be sure of its whereabouts. They kept to their houses after dark, and shut their doors. Bisnu had to stop going to school, because there was no one to accompany him and it was dangerous to go alone. This worried him, because his final exam was only a few weeks off, and he would be missing important class work. When he wasn’t in the fields, helping with the sowing of rice and maize, he would be sitting in the shade of a chestnut tree, going through his well-thumbed second-hand school books. He had no other reading, except for a copy of the Ramayana and a Hindi translation of Alice in Wonderland. These were well-preserved, read only in fits and starts, and usually kept locked in his mother’s old tin trunk.

Sanjay had nightmares for several nights, and woke up screaming, but with the resilience of youth, he quickly recovered. At the end of the week he was able to walk
to the hospital, though his father always accompanied him. Even a desperate panther will hesitate to attack a party of two. Sanjay, with his thin little face and huge bandaged head, looked a pathetic figure; but he was getting better and the wound looked healthy.

Bisnu often went to see him, and the two boys spent long hours together near the stream. Sometimes Chittru would join them, and they would try catching fish with a home-made net. They were often successful in taking home one or two mountain trout. Sometimes Bisnu and Chittru wrestled in the shallow water or on the grassy banks of the stream. Chittru was a chubby boy, with a broad chest, strong legs and thighs, and when he used his weight he got Bisnu under him; but Bisnu was hard and wiry, and had very strong wrists and fingers. When he had Chittru in a vice, the bigger boy would cry out and give up the struggle. Sanjay could not join in these games.

He had never been a very strong boy, and he needed plenty of rest if his wounds were to heal well.

The panther had not been seen for over a week, and the people of Manjari were beginning to hope that it might have moved on, over the mountain or further down the valley.

‘I think I can start going to school again,’ said Bisnu. ‘The panther has gone away.’
‘Don’t be too sure,’ said Puja. ‘The moon is full these days, and perhaps it is only being cautious.’

‘Wait a few days,’ said their mother. ‘It is better to wait. Perhaps you could go the day after tomorrow, when Sanjay goes to the hospital with his father. Then you will not be alone.’

And so, two days later, Bisnu went up to Kemptee with Sanjay and Kalam Singh. Sanjay’s wound had almost healed over. Little islets of flesh had grown over the bone. Dr Taylor told him that he need come to see her only once a fortnight, instead of every third day.

Bisnu went to his school, and was given a warm welcome by his friends and by Mr Nautiyal.

‘You’ll have to work hard,’ said his teacher. ‘You have to catch up with the others. If you like, I can give you some extra time after classes.’

‘Thank you sir, but it will make me late,’ said Bisnu. ‘I must get home before it is dark, otherwise my mother will worry. I think the panther has gone, but nothing is certain.’

‘Well, you mustn’t take risks. Do your best, Bisnu. Work hard, and you’ll soon catch up with your lessons.’
Sanjay and Kalam Singh were waiting for him outside the school. Together they took the path down to Manjari, passing the postman on the way. Mela Ram said that he had heard that the panther was in another district, and that there was nothing to fear; he was on his rounds again.

Nothing happened on the way. The langoors were back in their favourite part of the forest. Bisnu got home just as the kerosene lamp was being lit. Puja met him at the door with a winsome smile.

‘Did you get the bangles?’ she asked.

But Bisnu had forgotten again.

There had been a thunderstorm and some rain—a short, sharp shower which gave the villagers hope that the monsoon would arrive on time. It brought out the thunder-lilies—pink, crocus-like flowers which sprang up on the hillsides immediately after a summer shower.

Bisnu, on his way home from school, was caught in the rain. He knew the shower would not last, so he took shelter in a small cave and, to pass the time, began doing sums, scratching figures in the damp earth with the end of a stick.

When the rain stopped, he came out from the cave and continued down the path. He wasn’t in a hurry. The rain had made everything smell fresh and good. The scent from fallen pine-needles rose from the wet earth. The leaves of the oak trees had been washed dean, and a light breeze turned them about, showing their silver undersides. The birds, refreshed and high-spirited, set up a terrific noise. The worst offenders were the yellow-bottomed bulbuls, who squabbled and fought in the blackberry bushes. A barbet, high up in the branches of a deodar, set up its querulous, plaintive call. And a flock of bright green parrots came swooping down the hill, to settle in a wild plum tree and feast on the under-ripe fruit. The langoors, too, had been revived by the rain; they leapt friskily from tree to tree, greeting Bisnu with little grunts.

He was almost out of the oak forest when he heard a faint bleating. Presently a little goat came stumbling up the path towards him. The kid was far from home, and must have strayed from the rest of the herd. But it was not yet conscious of being lost. It came to Bisnu with a hop, skip and a jump, and started nuzzling against his legs like a cat.

‘I wonder who you belong to,’ mused Bisnu, stroking the little creature. ‘You’d better come home with me until someone claims you.’

He didn’t have to take the kid in his arms. It was used to humans and followed close at his heels. Now that darkness was coming on, Bisnu walked a little faster.

He had not gone very far when he heard the sawing grunt of a panther.
The sound came from the hill to the right, and Bisnu judged the distance to be anything from a hundred to two hundred yards. He hesitated on the path, wondering what to do; then he picked the kid up in his arms, and hurried on in the direction of home and safety.

The panther called again, much closer now. If it was an ordinary panther, it would go away on finding that the kid was with Bisnu. If it was the man-eater it would not hesitate to attack the boy, for no man-eater fears a human. There was no time to lose, and there did not seem much point in running. Bisnu looked up and down the hillside. The forest was far behind him, and there were only a few trees in his vicinity. He chose a spruce.

The branches of the Himalayan spruce are very brittle and snap easily beneath a heavy weight. They were strong enough to support Bisnu’s light frame. It was unlikely they would take the weight of a full-grown panther. At least that was what Bisnu hoped.

Holding the kid with one arm, Bisnu gripped a low branch and swung himself up into the tree. He was a good climber. Slowly but confidently he climbed half-way up the tree, until he was about twelve feet above the ground. He couldn’t go any higher without risking a fall.

He had barely settled himself in the crook of a branch when the panther came into the open, running into the clearing at a brisk trot. This was no stealthy approach, no wary stalking of its prey. It was the man-eater, all right. Bisnu felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He felt a little sick.

The panther stood in the clearing with a slight thrusting forward of the head. This gave it the appearance of gazing intently and rather short-sightedly at some invisible object in the clearing. But there is nothing short-sighted about a panther’s vision; its sight and hearing are acute.

Bisnu remained motionless in the tree and sent up a prayer to all the gods he could think of; but the kid began bleating. The panther looked up, and gave its deepthroated, rasping grunt—a fearsome sound, calculated to strike terror into any tree-borne animal. Many a monkey, petrified by a panther’s roar, has fallen from its perch to make a meal for Mr Spots. The man-eater was trying the same technique on Bisnu. But though the boy was trembling with fright, he clung firmly to the base of the spruce tree.

The panther did not make any attempt to leap into the tree. Perhaps it knew instinctively that this was not the type of tree that it could climb. Instead it described a
semi-circle round the tree, keeping its face turned towards Bisnu. Then it disappeared into the bushes.

The man-eater was cunning. It hoped to put the boy off his guard, perhaps entice him down from the tree; for a few seconds later, with a half-humorous growl, it rushed back into the clearing and then stopped, starting up at the boy in some surprise. The panther was getting frustrated. It snarled, and putting its forefeet up against the tree-trunk, began scratching the bark in the manner of an ordinary domestic cat. The tree shook at each thud of the beast’s paw.

Bisnu began shouting for help.

The moon had not yet come up. Down in Manjari village, Bisnu’s mother and sister stood in their lighted doorway, gazing anxiously up the pathway. Every now and then Puja would turn to take a look at the small clock.

Sanjay’s father appeared in a field below. He had a kerosene lantern in his hand.

‘Sister, isn’t your boy home as yet?’ he asked.

‘No, he hasn’t arrived. We are very worried. He should have been home an hour ago. Do you think the panther will be about tonight? There’s going to be a moon.’

‘True, but it will be dark for another hour. I will fetch the other menfolk, and we will go up the mountain for your boy. There may have been a landslip during the rain. Perhaps the path has been washed away.’

‘Thank you, brother, But arm yourselves, just in case the panther is about.’

‘I will take my spear,’ said Kalam Singh. ‘I have sworn to spear that devil when I find him. There is some evil spirit dwelling in the beast, and it must be destroyed!’

‘I am coming with you,’ said Puja.

‘No, you cannot go,’ said her mother. ‘It’s bad enough that Bisnu is in danger. You stay at home with me. This is work for men.’

‘I shall be safe with them,’ insisted Puja. ‘I am going, mother!’ And she jumped down the embankment into the field, and followed Sanjay’s father through the village.

Ten minutes later, two men armed with axes had joined Kalam Singh in the courtyard of his house, and the small party moved silently and swiftly up the mountain path. Puja walked in the middle of the group, holding the lantern. As soon as the village lights were hidden by a shoulder of the hill, the men began to shout—both to frighten the panther, if it was about, and to give themselves courage.

Bisnu’s mother closed the front door, and turned to the image of Ganesh the god for comfort and help.

Bisnu’s calls were carried on the wind, and Puja, and the men heard him while they were still half-a-mile away. Their own shouts increased in volume, and, hearing their
voices, Bisnu felt strength return to his shaking limbs. Emboldened by the approach of his own people, he began shouting insults at the snarling panther, then throwing twigs and small branches at the enraged animal. The kid added its bleats to the boy’s shouts, the birds took up the chorus, the langoors squealed and grunted, the searchers shouted themselves hoarse, and the panther howled with rage. The forest had never before been so noisy.

As the search party drew near, they could hear the panther’s savage snarls, and hurried, fearing that perhaps Bisnu had been seized. Puja began to run.

Don’t rush ahead, girl,’ said Kalam Singh. ‘Stay between us.’

The panther, now aware of the approaching humans, stood still in the middle of the clearing, head thrust forward in a familiar stance. There seemed too many men for one panther. When the animal saw the light of the lantern dancing between trees, it turned, snarled defiance and hate, and without another look at the boy in the tree, disappeared into the bushes. It was not yet ready for a showdown.

Nobody turned up to claim the little goat, so Bisnu kept it. A goat was a poor substitute for a dog; but like Mary’s lamb, it followed Bisnu wherever he went, and the boy couldn’t help being touched by its devotion. He took it down to the stream, where it would skip about in the shallows and nibble the sweet grass that grew on the banks.

As for the panther, frustrated in its attempt on Bisnu’s life, it did not wait long before attacking another human.

It was Chittru who came running down the path one afternoon, bubbling excitedly about the panther and the postman.

Chittru, deeming it safe to be gathering ripe bilberries in the daytime, had walked about half-a-mile up the path from the village when he had stumbled across Mela Ram’s mail-bag lying on the ground. Of the postman himself there was no sign. But a trail of blood led through the bushes.

Once again, a party of men headed by Kalam Singh and accompanied by Bisnu and Chittru, went out to look for the postman; but though they found Mela Ram’s bloodstained clothes, they could not find his body. The panther had made no mistake this time.

It was to be several weeks before Manjari had a new postman.

A few days after Mela Ram’s disappearance, an old woman was sleeping with her head near the open door of her house. She had been advised to sleep inside with the door closed; but the nights were hot, and anyway the old woman was a little deaf,
in the middle of the night, an hour before moonrise the panther seized her by the throat. Her strangled cry woke her grown up son, and all the men in the village woke up at this shouts and came running.

The panther dragged the old woman out of the house and down the steps but left her when the men approached with their axes and spears, and made off into the bushes. The old woman was still alive, and the men made a rough stretcher of bamboo and vines and started carrying her up the path; but they had not gone far when she began to cough, and because of her terrible throat wounds her lungs collapsed, and she died.

It was the ‘dark of the month’—the week of the new moon when nights are darkest.

Bisnu, closing the front door and lighting the kerosene lantern, said, ‘I wonder where that panther is tonight!’

The panther was busy in another village—Sarru’s village.

A woman and her daughter had been out in the evening, bedding the cattle down in the stable. The girl had gone into the house, and the woman was following. As she bent down to go in at the low door, the panther sprang from the bushes. Fortunately, one of its paws hit the door-post and broke the force of the attack, or the woman would have been killed. When she cried out, the men came round shouting and the panther slunk off. The woman had deep scratches on her back, and was badly shocked.

Next day a small party of villagers presented themselves in front of the magistrate’s office at Kemptee, and demanded that something be done about the panther; but the magistrate was away on tour, and there was no one else in Kemptee who had a gun. Mr Nautiyal met the villagers, and promised to write to a well-known shikari, but said that would be at least a fortnight before he could come.

Bisnu was fretting because he could not go to school. Most boys would be only too happy to miss school; but when you are living in a remote village in the mountains, and having an education is the only way of seeing the world, you look forward to going to school, even if it is five miles from home. Bisnu’s exams were only two weeks off, and he didn’t want to remain in the same class while the others were promoted. Besides, he knew he could pass even though he had missed a number of lessons. But he had to sit for the exams; he couldn’t miss them.

‘Cheer up, Bhaiya,’ said Puja, as they sat drinking glasses of hot tea after their evening meal. ‘The panther may go away once the rains break.’

‘Even the rains are late this year,’ said Bisnu. ‘It’s so hot and dry. Can’t we open the door?’
‘And be dragged down the steps by the panther?’ said his mother. ‘It isn’t safe to have the window open, let alone the door.’ And she went to the small window—through which a cat could have found difficulty in passing—and bolted it firmly.

With a sigh of resignation Bisnu threw off all his clothes except his underwear, and stretched himself out on the earthen floor.

‘We will be rid of the beast soon,’ said his mother. ‘I know it in my heart. Our prayers will be heard, and you shall go to school and pass your exams.’

To cheer up her children, she told them a humorous story which had been handed down to her by her grandmother. It was all about a tiger, a panther and a bear, the three of whom were made to feel very foolish by a thief hiding in the hollow trunk of banyan tree. Bisnu was sleepy and did not listen very attentively; he dropped off to sleep before the story was finished.

When he woke it was dark, and his mother and sister were asleep on the cot. He wondered what it was that had woken him. He could hear his sister’s easy breathing, and the steady ticking of the clock. Far away, an owl hooted—an unlucky sign, his mother would have said; but she was asleep, and Bisnu was not superstitious.

And then he heard something scratching at the door, and the hair on his head felt tight and prickly. It was like a cat scratching, only louder. The door creaked a little whenever it felt the impact of the paw—a heavy paw, as Bisnu could tell from the dull sound it made.

‘It’s the panther,’ he muttered under his breath, sitting up on the hard floor. The door, he felt, was strong enough to resist the panther’s weight; and, if he set up an alarm, he could rouse the village. But the middle of the night was no time for the bravest of men to tackle a panther.

In a corner of the room stood a long bamboo stick with a sharp knife tied to one end, which Bisnu sometimes used for spearing fish. Crawling on all fours across the room, he grasped the home-made spear; and then, scrambling on to a cupboard, he drew level with the skylight window. He could get his head and shoulders through the window.

‘What are you doing up there?’ said Puja, who had woken up at the sound of Bisnu shuffling about the room.

‘Be quiet,’ said Bisnu. ‘You’ll wake mother.’

Their mother was awake by now. ‘Come down from there, Bisnu. I can hear some noise outside.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Bisnu, who found himself looking down on the wriggling animal which was trying to get its paw in under the door. With his mother and Puja
awake, there was no time to lose. He had got the spear through the window, and though he could not manoeuvre it so as to strike the panther’s head, he brought the sharp end down with considerable force on the animal’s rump.

With a roar of pain and rage, the man-eater leapt down from the steps and disappeared into the darkness. It did not pause to see what had struck it. Certain that no human could have come upon it in that fashion, it ran fearfully to its lair, howling until the pain subsided.

A panther is an enigma. There are occasions when he proves himself to be the most cunning animal under the sun, and yet the very next day he will walk into an obvious trap that no self-respecting jackal would ever go near. One day a panther will prove himself to be a complete coward and run like a hare from a couple of dogs, and the very next he will dash in amongst half-a-dozen men sitting round a camp-fire, and inflict terrible injuries on them.

It is not often that a panther is taken by surprise, as his powers of sight and hearing are very acute. He is a master at the art of camouflage, and his spotted coat is admirably suited for the purpose. He does not need heavy jungle to hide in. A couple of bushes, and the light and shade from surrounding trees, are enough to make him almost invisible.

Because the Manjari panther had been fooled by Bisnu, it did not mean that he was a stupid panther; it simply meant that he had been a little careless. And Bisnu and Puja, growing in confidence since their midnight encounter with the animal, became a little careless themselves.

Puja was hoeing the last field above the house, and Bisnu, at the other end of the same field, was chopping up several branches of green oak, prior to leaving the wood in the loft to dry. It was late afternoon, and the descending sun glinted in patches on the small river. It was a time of day when only the most desperate and daring of man-eaters would be likely to show itself.

Pausing for a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow, Bisnu glanced up at the hillside, and his eye caught sight of a rock on the brow of the hill which seemed unfamiliar to him. Just as he was about to look elsewhere, the round rock began to grow and then alter its shape, and Bisnu, watching in fascination, was at last able to make out the head and forequarters of the panther. It looked enormous from the angle at which he saw it, and for a moment he thought it was a tiger. But Bisnu knew instinctively that it was the man-eater.
Slowly the wary beast pulled itself to its feet and began to walk round the side of the great rock. For a second it disappeared, and Bisnu wondered if it had gone away. Then it reappeared, and the boy was all excitement again. Very slowly and silently the panther walked across the face of the rock until it was in a direct line with that corner of the field where Puja was working.

With a thrill of horror, Bisnu realised that the panther was stalking his sister. He shook himself free from the spell which had woven itself round him, and shouting hoarsely, ran forward.

‘Run, Puja, run!’ he called. ‘It’s on the hill above you!’

Puja turned to see what Bisnu was shouting about. She saw him gesticulate to the hill behind her, looked up just in time to see the panther crouching for its spring.

With great presence of mind, she leapt down the banking of the field, and tumbled into an irrigation ditch.

The springing panther missed its prey, lost its foothold on the slippery shale banking, and somersaulted into the ditch a few feet away from Puja. Before the animal could recover from its surprise, Bisnu was dashing down the slope, swinging his axe and shouting ‘Maro, Maro!’ (Kill, Kill!).
Two men came running across the field. They, too, were armed with axes. Together with Bisnu they made a half-circle around the snarling animal, which turned at bay and plunged at them in order to get away. Puja wriggled along the ditch on her stomach. The men aimed their axes at the panther’s head, and Bisnu had the satisfaction of getting in a well-aimed blow between the eyes. The animal then charged straight at one the men, knocked him over, and tried to get at his throat. Just then Sanjay’s father arrived with his long spear. He plunged the end of the spear into the panther’s neck.

The panther left its victim and ran into the bushes, dragging the spear through the grass and leaving a trail of blood on the ground. The men followed cautiously—all except the man who had been wounded and who lay on the ground while Puja and the other womenfolk rushed up to help him.

The panther had made for the bed of the stream, and Bisnu, Sanjay’s father, and their companion were able to follow it quite easily. The water was red where the panther had crossed the stream, and the rocks were stained with blood. After they had gone downstream for about a furlong, they found the panther lying still on its side at the edge of the water. It was mortally wounded, but it continued to wave its tail like an angry cat; then even the tail lay still.

‘It’s dead,’ said Bisnu. ‘It will not trouble us again in this body.’

‘Let us be certain,’ said Sanjay’s father, and he bent down and pulled the panther’s tail.

There was no response.

‘It’s dead,’ said Kalam Singh. ‘No panther would suffer such an insult were it alive!’

They cut down a long piece of thick bamboo and tied the panther to it by its feet. Then, with their enemy hanging upside down from the bamboo pole, they started back for the village.

‘They will be a feast at my house tonight,’ said Kalam Singh. ‘Everyone in the village must come. And tomorrow we will visit all the villages in the valley, and show them the dead panther, so that they may move about again without fear.’

‘We can sell the skin in Kemptee,’ said their companion. ‘It will fetch a good price.’

‘But the claws we will give to Bisnu,’ said Kalam Singh, putting his arm around the boy’s shoulders. ‘He has done a man’s work today. He deserves the claws.

A panther’s or a tiger’s claws are considered to be lucky charms.

‘I will take only three claws,’ said Bisnu. ‘One each for my mother and sister, and one for myself. You may give the others to Sanjay and Chittru and the smaller
As the sun set, a big fire was lit in the middle of the village of Manjari, and the people gathered round it, singing and laughing. Kalam Singh killed his fattest goat, and there was meat for everyone.

Bisnu was on his way home. He had just handed in his first paper, arithmetic, which he had found quite easy. Tomorrow it would be algebra, and when he got home he would have to practise square roots and cube roots and fractional co-efficients.

Mr Nautiyal and the entire class had been happy that he had been able to sit for the exams. He was also a hero to them for his part in killing the panther. The story had spread through the villages with the rapidity of a forest fire, a fire which was now raging in Kemptee town.

When he walked past the hospital, he was whistling cheerfully. Dr Taylor waved to him from the verandah steps.

‘How is Sanjay now?’ she asked.
‘He is well,’ said Bisnu.
‘And your mother and sister?’
‘They are well,’ said Bisnu.
‘Are you going to get yourself a new dog?’
‘I am thinking about it,’ said Bisnu. ‘At present I have a baby goat—I am teaching it to swim!’

He started down the path to the valley. Dark clouds had gathered, and there was a rumble of thunder. A storm was imminent.

‘Wait for me!’ shouted Sarru, running down the path behind Bisnu, his milk-pails clanging against each other. He fell into step beside Bisnu.

‘Well, I hope we don’t have any more man-eaters for some time,’ he said. ‘I’ve lost a lot of money by not being able to take milk up to Kemptee.’

‘We should be safe as long as a shikari doesn’t wound another panther. There was an old bullet-wound in the man-eater’s thigh. That’s why it couldn’t hunt in the forest. The deer were too fast for it.’

‘Is there a new postman yet?’
‘He starts tomorrow. A cousin of Mela Ram’s.’

When they reached the parting of their ways it had begun to rain a little.
‘I must hurry,’ said Sarru. ‘It’s going to get heavier any minute.’
‘I feel like getting wet,’ said Bisnu. ‘This time it’s the monsoon, I’m sure.’
Bisnu entered the forest on his own, and at the same time the rain came down in heavy opaque sheets. The trees shook in the wind, the langoors chattered with excitement.

It was still pouring when Bisnu emerged from the forest, drenched to the skin. But the rain stopped suddenly, just as the village of Manjari came in view. The sun appeared through a rift in the clouds. The leaves and the grass gave out a sweet, fresh smell.

Bisnu could see his mother and sister in the field transplanting the rice seedlings. The menfolk were driving the yoked oxen through the thin mud of the fields, while the children hung on to the oxen’s tails, standing on the plain wooden harrows and with weird cries and shouts sending the animals almost at a gallop along the narrow terraces.

Bisnu felt the urge to be with them, working in the fields. He ran down the path, his feet falling softly on the wet earth. Puja saw him coming and waved to him. She met him at the edge of the field.

‘How did you find your paper today?’ she asked.

‘Oh, it was easy.’ Bisnu slipped his hand into hers and together they walked across the field. Puja felt something smooth and hard against her fingers, and before she could see what Bisnu was doing, he had slipped a pair of bangles over her wrist.

‘I remembered,’ he said, with a sense of achievement.

Puja looked at the bangles and burst out: ‘But they are blue, Bhai, and I wanted red and gold bangles!’ And then, when she saw him looking crestfallen, she hurried on: ‘But they are very pretty, and you did remember…. Actually, they’re just as nice as red and gold bangles! Come into the house when you are ready. I have made something special for you.’

‘I am coming,’ said Bisnu, turning towards the house. ‘You don’t know how hungry a man gets, walking five miles to reach home!’
Eyes of the Cat

Her eyes seemed flecked with gold when the sun was on them. And as the sun set over the mountains, drawing a deep red wound across the sky, there was more than gold in Binya’s eyes, there was anger; for she had been cut to the quick by some remarks her teacher had made—the culmination of weeks of insults and taunts.

Binya was poorer than most of the girls in her class and could not afford the tuitions that had become almost obligatory if one was to pass and be promoted. ‘You’ll have to spend another year in the 9th,’ said Madam. ‘And if you don’t like that, you can find another school—a school where it won’t matter if your blouse is torn and your tunic is old and your shoes are falling apart.’ Madam had shown her large teeth in what was supposed to be a good-natured smile, and all the girls had tittered dutifully. Sycophancy had become part of the curriculum, in Madam’s private academy for girls.

On the way home in the gathering gloom, Binya’s two companions commiserated with her.

‘She’s a mean old thing,’ said Usha. ‘She doesn’t care for anyone but herself.’

‘Her laugh reminds me of a donkey braying,’ said Sunita, who was more forthright.

But Binya wasn’t really listening. Her eyes were fixed on some point in the far distance, where the pines stood in silhouette against a night sky that was growing brighter every moment. The moon was rising, a full moon, a moon that meant something very special to Binya, that made her blood tingle and her skin prickle and her hair glow and send out sparks. Her steps seemed to grow lighter, her limbs more sinewy as she moved gracefully, softly over the mountain path.

Abruptly she left her companions at a fork in the road.

‘I’m taking the short cut through the forest,’ she said.

Her friends were used to her sudden whims. They knew she was not afraid of being alone in the dark. But Binya’s moods made them feel a little nervous, and now, holding hands, they hurried home along the open road.
The short cut took Binya through the dark oak forest. The crooked, tormented branches of the oaks threw twisted shadows across the path. A jackal howled at the moon; a nightjar called from the bushes. Binya walked fast, not out of fear but from urgency, and her breath came in short, sharp gasps. Bright moonlight bathed the hillside when she reached her home on the outskirts of the village.

Refusing her dinner, she went straight to her small room and flung the window open. Moonbeams crept over the window-sill and over her arms which were already covered with golden hair. Her strong nails had shredded the rotten wood of the window-sill.

Tail swishing and ears pricked, the tawny leopard came swiftly out of the window, crossed the open field behind the house, and melted into the shadows.

A little later it padded silently through the forest.

Although the moon shone brightly on the tin-roofed town, the leopard knew where the shadows were deepest and merged beautifully with them. An occasional intake of breath, which resulted in a short, rasping cough, was the only sound it made.

Madam was returning from dinner at a ladies’ club called the Kitten Club—a sort of foil to their husbands’ club affiliations. There were still a few people in the street, and while no one could help noticing Madam, who had the contours of a steamroller, none saw or heard the predator who had slipped down a side alley and reached the steps of the teacher’s house. It sat there silently, waiting with all the patience of an obedient schoolgirl.

When Madam saw the leopard on her steps, she dropped her handbag and opened her mouth to scream; but her voice would not materialize. Nor would her tongue ever be used again, either to savour chicken biryani or to pour scorn upon her pupils, for the leopard had sprung at her throat, broken her neck, and dragged her into the bushes.

In the morning, when Usha and Sunita set out for school, they stopped as usual at Binya’s cottage and called out to her.

Binya was sitting in the sun, combing her long, black hair.

‘Aren’t you coming to school today, Binya?’ asked the girls.

‘No, I won’t bother to go today,’ said Binya. She felt lazy, but pleased with herself, like a contented cat.

‘Madam won’t be pleased,’ said Usha. ‘Shall we tell her you’re sick?’

‘It won’t be necessary,’ said Binya, and gave them one of her mysterious smiles.

‘I’m sure it’s going to be a holiday.’

Her gentle mouth and slender hands were still smeared with blood.
The Leopard

I first saw the leopard when I was crossing the small stream at the bottom of the hill.

The ravine was so deep that for most of the day it remained in shadow. This encouraged many birds and animals to emerge from cover during daylight hours. Few people ever passed that way: only milkmen and charcoal-burners from the surrounding villages.

As a result, the ravine had become a little haven of wildlife, one of the few natural sanctuaries left near Mussoorie, a hill-station in northern India.

Below my cottage was a forest of oak and maple and Himalayan rhododendron. A narrow path twisted its way down through the trees, over an open ridge where red sorrel grew wild, and then steeply down through a tangle of wild raspberries, creeping vines and slender bamboo.

At the bottom of the hill the path led on to a grassy verge, surrounded by wild dog-roses. (It is surprising how closely the flora of the lower Himalayas, between 5,000 to 8,000 feet, resembles that of the English countryside.)

The stream ran close by the verge, tumbling over smooth pebbles, over rocks worn yellow with age, on its way to the plains and to the little Song River and finally to the sacred Ganges.

When I first discovered the stream it was early April and the wild roses were flowering—small white blossoms lying in clusters.
I walked down to the stream almost every day, after two or three hours of writing. I had lived in cities too long, and had returned to the hills to renew myself, both physically and mentally. Once you have lived with mountains for any length of time, you belong to them, and must return again and again.

Nearly every morning, and sometimes during the day, I heard the cry of the barking deer. And in the evening, walking through the forest, I disturbed parties of pheasants. The birds went gliding down the ravine on open, motionless wings. I saw pine martens and a handsome red fox, and I recognized the footprints of a bear.

As I had not come to take anything from the forest, the birds and animals soon grew accustomed to my presence; or possibly they recognized my footsteps. After some time, my approach did not disturb them.
The young ones scuffled and wrestled like boys, while their parents groomed each other’s coats, stretching themselves out on the sunlit hillside. But one evening, as I passed, I heard them chattering in the trees, and I knew I was not the cause of their excitement.

As I crossed the stream and began climbing the hill, the grunting and chattering increased, as though the langoors were trying to warn me of some hidden danger. A shower of pebbles came rattling down the steep hillside, and I looked up to see a sinewy, orange-gold leopard poised on a rock about twenty feet above me.

It was not looking towards me, but had its head thrust attentively forward, in the direction of the ravine. Yet it must have sensed my presence, because it slowly turned its head and looked down at me.

It seemed a little puzzled at my presence there; and when, to give myself courage, I clapped my hands sharply, the leopard sprang away into the thickets, making absolutely no sound as it melted into the shadows.

I had disturbed the animal in its quest for food. But a little after I heard the quickening cry of a barking deer as it fled through the forest. The hunt was still on.

The leopard, like other members of the cat family, is nearing extinction in India, and I was surprised to find one so close to Mussoorie. Probably the deforestation that had been taking place in the surrounding hills had driven the deer into this green valley; and the leopard, naturally, had followed.

It was some weeks before I saw the leopard, although I was often made aware of its presence. A rasping cough sometimes gave it away. At times I felt almost certain that I was being followed.

Once, when I was late getting home, and the brief twilight gave way to a dark, moonless night, I was startled by a family of porcupines running about in a clearing. I looked around nervously, and saw two bright eyes staring at me from a thicket. I stood still, my heart banging away against my ribs. Then the eyes danced away, and I realized that they were only fireflies.

In May and June, when the hills were brown and dry, it was always cool and green near the stream, where ferns and maidenhair and long grasses continued to thrive.

Downstream I found a small pool where I could bathe, and a cave with water dripping from the roof, the water spangled gold and silver in the shafts of sunlight that pushed through the slits in the cave roof.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.” Perhaps I, too, would write good words. The hill-station’s summer visitors
had not discovered this haven of wild and green things. I was beginning to feel that the place belonged to me, that this dominion was mine.

The stream had at least one other regular visitor, a spotted forktail, and though it did not fly away at my approach it became restless if I stayed too long, and then it would move from boulder to boulder uttering a long complaining cry.

I spent an afternoon trying to discover the bird’s nest, which I was certain contained young ones, because I had seen the forktail carrying grubs in her bill. The problem was that when the bird flew upstream, I had difficulty in following her rapidly enough as the rocks were sharp and slippery.

Eventually I decorated myself with bracken fronds and, after slowly making my way upstream, hid myself in the hollow stump of a tree at a spot where the forktail often disappeared. I had no intention of robbing the bird: I was simply curious to see its home.

By crouching down, I was able to command a view of a small stretch of the stream and the sides of the ravine; but I had done little to deceive the forktail, who continued to object strongly to my presence so near her home.

I summoned up my reserves of patience and sat perfectly still for about ten minutes. The forktail quietened down. Out of sight, out of mind. But where had she gone? Probably into the walls of the ravine where I felt sure she was guarding her nest.

I decided to take her by surprise, and stood up suddenly, in time to see, not the forktail on her doorstep, but the leopard bounding away with a grunt of surprise! Two urgent springs, and it had crossed the stream and plunged into the forest.

I was as astonished as the leopard, and forgot all about the forktail and her nest. Had the leopard been following me again? I decided against this possibility. Only man-eaters follow humans, and as far as I knew, there had never been a man-eater in the vicinity of Mussoorie.

During the monsoon the stream became a rushing torrent. Bushes and small trees were swept away, and the friendly murmur of the water became a threatening boom. I did not visit the place too often, as there were leeches in the long grass.

One day I found the remains of a barking deer which had only been partly eaten. I wondered why the leopard had not hidden the rest of his meal, and decided that it must have been disturbed while eating.

Then, climbing the hill, I met a party of hunters resting beneath the oaks. They asked me if I had seen a leopard. I said I had not. They said they knew there was a leopard in the forest.
Leopard skins, they told me, were selling in Delhi at over 1,000 rupees each. Of course there was a ban on the export of skins, but they gave me to understand that there were ways and means...I thanked them for their information and walked on, feeling uneasy and disturbed.

The hunters had seen the carcase of the deer, and they had seen the leopard’s pug-marks, and they kept coming to the forest. Almost every evening I heard their guns banging away; for they were ready to fire at almost anything.

‘There’s a leopard about,’ they always told me. ‘You should carry a gun.’

‘I don’t have one,’ I said.

There were fewer birds to be seen and even the langoors had moved on. The red fox did not show itself; and the pine martens, who had become quite bold, now dashed into hiding, at my approach. The smell of one human is like the smell of any other.

And then the rains were over and it was October; I could lie in the sun, on sweet-smelling grass, and gaze up through a pattern of oak leaves into a blinding blue heaven. And I would praise God for leaves and grass and the smell of things, the smell of mint and bruised clover, and the touch of things—the touch of grass and air and sky, the touch of the sky’s blueness.

I thought no more of the men. My attitude towards them was similar to that of the denizens of the forest. These were men, unpredictable, and to be avoided if possible.

On the other side of the ravine rose Pari Tibba, Hill of the Fairies: a bleak, scrub-covered hill where no one lived.

It was said that in the previous century Englishmen had tried building their houses on the hill, but the area had always attracted lightning, due to either the hill’s location or due to its mineral deposits; after several houses had been struck by lightning, the settlers had moved on to the next hill, where the town now stands.

To the hillmen it is Pari Tibba, haunted by the spirits of a pair of ill-fated lovers who perished there in a storm; to others it is known as Burnt Hill, because of its scarred and stunted trees.

One day, after crossing the stream, I climbed Pari Tibba—a stiff undertaking, because there was no path to the top and I had to scramble up a precipitous rock-face with the help of rocks and roots that were apt to come loose in my groping hand.

But at the top was a plateau with a few pine trees, their upper branches catching the wind and humming softly. There I found the ruins of what must have been the houses of the first settlers—just a few piles of rubble, now overgrown with weeds, sorrel, dandelions and nettles.
As I walked through the roofless ruins, I was struck by the silence that surrounded me, the absence of birds and animals, the sense of complete desolation.

The silence was so absolute that it seemed to be ringing in my ears. But there was something else of which I was becoming increasingly aware: the strong feline odour of one of the cat family. I paused and looked about. I was alone. There was no movement of dry leaf or loose stone. The ruins were for the most part open to the sky. Their rotting rafters had collapsed, jamming together to form a low passage like the entrance to a mine; and this dark cavern seemed to lead down into the ground.

The smell was stronger when I approached this spot, so I stopped again and waited there, wondering if I had discovered the lair of the leopard, wondering if the animal was now at rest after a night’s hunt.

Perhaps he was crouching there in the dark, watching me, recognizing me, knowing me as the man who walked alone in the forest without a weapon.

I like to think that he was there, that he knew me, and that he acknowledged my visit in the friendliest way: by ignoring me altogether.

Perhaps I had made him confident—too confident, too careless, too trusting of the human in his midst. I did not venture any further; I was not out of my mind. I did not seek physical contact, or even another glimpse of that beautiful sinewy body, springing from rock to rock. It was his trust I wanted, and I think he gave it to me.

But did the leopard, trusting one man, make the mistake of bestowing his trust on others? Did I, by casting out all fear—my own fear, and the leopard’s protective fear—leave him defenceless?

Because next day, coming up the path from the stream, shouting and beating drums, were the hunters. They had a long bamboo pole across their shoulders; and slung from the pole, feet up, head down, was the lifeless body of the leopard, shot in the neck and in the head.

‘We told you there was a leopard!’ they shouted, in great good humour. ‘Isn’t he a fine specimen?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘He was a beautiful leopard’.

I walked home through the silent forest. It was very silent, almost as though the birds and animals knew that their trust had been violated.

I remembered the lines of a poem by D. H. Lawrence; and, as I climbed the steep and lonely path to my home, the words beat out their rhythm in my mind: “There was room in the world for a mountain lion and me.”
Grandpa Tickles a Tiger

Timothy, the tiger-cub, was discovered by Grandfather on a hunting expedition in the Terai jungle near Dehra.

Grandfather was no shikari, but as he knew the forest of the Siwalik hills better than most people, he was persuaded to accompany the party—it consisted of several Very Important Persons from Delhi—to advise on the terrain and the direction the beaters should take once a tiger had been spotted.

The camp itself was sumptuous—seven large tents (one for each shikari), a dining-tent, and a number of servants’ tents. The dinner was very good, as Grandfather admitted afterwards; it was not often that one saw hot-water, plates, finger-bowls, and seven or eight courses, in a tent in the jungle! But that was how things were done in the days of the Viceroy's.... There were also some fifteen elephants, four of them with howdahs for the shikaris, and the others especially trained for taking part in the beat.

The sportsmen never saw a tiger, nor did they shoot anything else, though they saw a number of deer, peacock, and wild boar. They were giving up all hope of finding a tiger, and were beginning to shoot at jackals, when Grandfather, strolling down the forest path at some distance from the rest of the party, discovered a little tiger about eighteen inches long, hiding among the intricate roots of a banyan tree. Grandfather picked him up, and brought him home after the camp had broken up. He had the distinction of being the only member of the party to have bagged any game, dead or alive.
At first the tiger cub, who was named Timothy by Grandmother, was brought up entirely on milk given to him in a feeding-bottle by our cook, Mahmoud. But the milk proved too rich for him, and he was put on a diet of raw mutton and cod-liver oil, to be followed later by a more tempting diet of pigeons and rabbits.

Timothy was provided with two companions—Toto the monkey, who was bold enough to pull the young tiger by the tail, and then climb up the curtains if Timothy lost his temper; and a small mongrel puppy, found on the road by Grandfather.

At first Timothy appeared to be quite afraid of the puppy, and darted back with a spring if it came too near. He would make absurd dashes at it with his large forepaws, and then retreat to a ridiculously safe distance. Finally, he allowed the puppy to crawl on his back and rest there!

One of Timothy’s favourite amusements was to stalk anyone who would play with him, and so, when I came to live with Grandfather, I became one of the tiger’s favourites. With a crafty look in his glittering eyes, and his body crouching, he would creep closer and closer to me, suddenly making a dash for my feet, rolling over on his back and kicking with delight, and pretending to bite my ankles.
He was by this time the size of a full-grown retriever, and when I took him out for walks, people on the road would give us a wide berth. When he pulled hard on his chain, I had difficulty in keeping up with him. His favourite place in the house was the drawing-room, and he would make himself comfortable on the long sofa, reclining there with great dignity, and snarling at anybody who tried to get him off.

Timothy had clean habits, and would scrub his face with his paws, exactly like a cat. He slept at night in the cook’s quarters, and was always delighted at being let out by him in the morning.

‘One of these days,’ declared Grandmother in her prophetic manner, ‘We are going to find Timothy sitting on Mahmoud’s bed, and no sign of the cook except his clothes and shoes!’

Of course, it never came to that, but when Timothy was about six months old a change came over him; he grew steadily less friendly. When out for a walk with me, he would try to steal away to stalk a rat or someone’s pet cekinese. Sometimes at night we would hear frenzied cackling from the poultry house, and in the morning there would be feathers lying all over the verandah. Timothy had to be chained up more often. And finally, when he began to stalk Mahmoud about the house with what looked like villainous intent, Grandfather decided it was time to transfer him to a zoo.

The nearest zoo was at Lucknow, two hundred miles away. Reserving a first class compartment for himself and Timothy—no one would share a compartment with them—Grandfather took him to Lucknow where the zoo authorities were only too glad to receive as a gift a well-fed and fairly civilized tiger.

About six months later, when my grandparents were visiting relatives in Lucknow, Grandfather took the opportunity of calling at the zoo to see how Timothy was getting on. I was not there to accompany him, but I heard all about it when he returned to Dehra.

Arriving at the zoo, Grandfather made straight for the particular cage in which Timothy had been interned. The tiger was there, crouched in a corner, full-grown and with a magnificent striped coat.

‘Hello Timothy!’ said Grandfather and, climbing the railing with ease, he put his arm through the bars of the cage.

The tiger approached the bars, and allowed Grandfather to put both hands around his head. Grandfather stroked the tiger’s forehead and tickled his ears, and, whenever he growled, smacked him across the mouth, which was his old way of keeping him quiet.
It licked Grandfather’s hands and only sprang away when a leopard in the next cage snarled at him. Grandfather “shooed” the leopard away, and the tiger returned to lick his hands; but every now and then the leopard would rush at the bars, and he would slink back to his corner.

A number of people had gathered to watch the reunion, when a keeper pushed his way through the crowd and asked Grandfather what he was doing.

‘I’m talking to Timothy,’ said Grandfather. ‘Weren’t you here when I gave him to the zoo six months ago?’

‘I haven’t been here very long,’ said the surprised keeper. ‘Please continue your conversation. But I have never been able to touch him myself, he is always bad tempered.’

‘Why don’t you put him somewhere else?’ suggested Grandfather. ‘That leopard keeps frightening him. I’ll go and see the superintendent about it.’

Grandfather went in search of the superintendent of the zoo, but found that he had gone home early; and so, after wandering about the zoo for a little while, he returned to Timothy’s cage to say goodbye. It was beginning to get dark.

He had been stroking and slapping Timothy for about five minutes when he found another keeper observing him with some alarm. Grandfather recognised him as the keeper who had been there when Timothy had first come to the zoo.

‘You remember me,’ said Grandfather. ‘Now why don’t you transfer Timothy to another cage, away from this stupid leopard?’

‘But—sir,’—stammered the keeper. ‘It is not your tiger.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Grandfather testily. ‘I realize he is no longer mine. But you might at least take a suggestion or two from me.’

‘I remember your tiger very well,’ said the keeper. ‘He died two months ago.’

‘Died!’ exclaimed Grandfather.

‘Yes, sir, of pneumonia. This tiger was trapped in the hills only last month, and he is very dangerous!’

Grandfather could think of nothing to say. The tiger was still licking his arm, with increasing relish. Grandfather took what seemed to him an age to withdraw his hand from the cage.

With his face near the tiger’s he mumbled, ‘Goodnight, Timothy,’ and giving the keeper a scornful look, walked briskly out of the zoo.
The Eye of the Eagle

It was a high, piercing sound, almost like the yelping of a dog. Jai stopped picking the wild strawberries that grew in the grass around him, and looked up at the sky. He had a dog—a shaggy guard-dog called Motu—but Motu did not yet yelp, he growled and barked. The strange sound came from the sky, and Jai had heard it before. Now, realizing what it was, he jumped to his feet, calling to his dog, calling his sheep to start for home. Motu came bounding towards him, ready for a game.

‘Not now, Motu!’ said Jai. ‘We must get the lambs home quickly.’ Again he looked up at the sky.

He saw it now, a black speck against the sun, growing larger as it circled the mountain, coming lower every moment—a Golden Eagle, king of the skies over the higher Himalayas, ready now to swoop and seize its prey.

Had it seen a pheasant or a pine marten? Or was it after one of the lambs? Jai had never lost a lamb to an eagle, but recently some of the other shepherds had been talking about a golden eagle that had been preying on their flocks.

The sheep had wandered some way down the side of the mountain, and Jai ran after them to make sure that none of the lambs had gone off on its own.

Motu ran about, barking furiously. He wasn’t very good at keeping the sheep together—he was often bumping into them and sending them tumbling down the slope—but his size and bear-like look kept the leopards and wolves at a distance.

Jai was counting the lambs; they were bleating loudly and staying close to their mothers. One—two—three—four…

There should have been a fifth. Jai couldn’t see it on the slope below him. He looked up towards a rocky ledge near the steep path to the Tung temple. The golden eagle was circling the rocks.

The bird disappeared from sight for a moment, then rose again with a small creature grasped firmly in its terrible talons.

‘It has taken a lamb!’ shouted Jai. He started scrambling up the slope. Motu ran ahead of him, barking furiously at the big bird as it glided away over the tops of the
stunted junipers to its eyrie on the cliffs above Tung.

There was nothing that Jai and Motu could do except stare helplessly and angrily at the disappearing eagle. The lamb had died the instant it had been struck. The rest of the flock seemed unaware of what had happened. They still grazed on the thick, sweet grass of the mountain slopes.

‘We had better drive them home, Motu,’ said Jai, and at a nod from the boy, the big dog bounded down the slope, to take part in his favourite game of driving the sheep homewards. Soon he had them running all over the place, and Jai had to dash about trying to keep them together. Finally they straggled homewards.

‘A fine lamb gone,’ said Jai to himself gloomily. ‘I wonder what Grandfather will say.’

Grandfather said, ‘Never mind. It had to happen some day. That eagle has been watching the sheep for some time.’

Grandmother, more practical, said; ‘We could have sold the lamb for three hundred rupees. You’ll have to be more careful in future, Jai. Don’t fall asleep on the hillside, and don’t read story-books when you are supposed to be watching the sheep!’

‘I wasn’t reading this morning,’ said Jai truthfully, forgetting to mention that he had been gathering strawberries.

‘It’s good for him to read,’ said Grandfather, who had never had the luck to go to school. In his days, there weren’t any schools in the mountains. Now there was one in every village.

Time enough to read at night,’ said Grandmother, who did not think much of the little one-room school down at Maku, their home village.

‘Well, these are the October holidays,’ said Grandfather. ‘Otherwise he would not be here to help us with the sheep. It will snow by the end of the month, and then we will move with the flock. You will have more time for reading then, Jai.’

At Maku, which was down in the warmer valley, Jai’s parents tilled a few narrow terraces on which they grew barley, millets and potatoes. The old people brought their sheep up to the Tung meadows to graze during the summer months. They stayed in a small stone hut just off the path which pilgrims took to the ancient temple. At 12,000 feet above sea level, it was the highest Hindu temple on the inner Himalayan ranges.

The following day Jai and Motu were very careful. They did not let the sheep out of sight even for a minute. Nor did they catch sight of the golden eagle. ‘What if it attacks again?’ wondered Jai. ‘How will I stop it?’
The great eagle, with its powerful beak and talons, was more than a match for boy or dog. Its hindclaw, four inches round the curve, was its most dangerous weapon. When it spread its wings, the distance from tip to tip was more than eight feet.

The eagle did not come that day because it had fed well and was now resting in its eyrie. Old bones, which had belonged to pheasants, snow-cocks, pine martens and even foxes, were scattered about the rocks which formed the eagle’s home. The eagle had a mate, but it was not the breeding season and she was away on a scouting expedition of her own.

The golden eagle stood on its rocky ledge, staring majestically across the valley. Its hard, unblinking eyes missed nothing. Those strange orange-yellow eyes could spot a field-rat or a mouse-hare more than a hundred yards below.

There were other eagles on the mountain but usually they kept to their own territory. And only the bolder ones went for lambs, because the flocks were always protected by men and dogs.

The eagle took off from its eyrie and glided gracefully, powerfully over the valley, circling the Tung mountain.

Below lay the old temple, built from slabs of grey granite. A line of pilgrims snaked up the steep, narrow path. On the meadows below the peak, the sheep grazed peacefully, unaware of the presence of the eagle. The great bird’s shadow slid over the sunlit slopes.

The eagle saw the boy and the dog, but he did not fear them. He had his eye on a lamb that was frisking about on the grass, a few feet away from the other grazing sheep.

Jai did not see the eagle until it swept round an outcrop of rocks about a hundred feet away. It moved silently, without any movement of its wings, for it had already built up the momentum for its dive. Now it came straight at the lamb.

Motu saw the bird in time. With a low growl he dashed forward and reached the side of the lamb at almost the same instant that the eagle swept in.

There was a terrific collision. Feathers flew. The eagle screamed with rage. The lamb tumbled down the slope, and Motu howled in pain as the huge beak struck him high on the leg.

The big bird, a little stunned by the clash, flew off rather unsteadily, with a mighty beating of its wings.

Motu had saved the lamb. It was frightened but unhurt. Bleating loudly, it joined the other sheep, who took up the bleating. Jai ran up to Motu, who lay whimpering on
the ground. There was no sign of the eagle. Quickly he removed his shirt and vest; then he wrapped his vest round the dog’s wound, tying it in position with his belt.

Motu could not get up, and he was much too heavy for Jai to carry. Jai did not want to leave his dog alone, in case the eagle returned to attack.

He stood up, cupped his hand to his mouth, and began calling for his grandfather.

‘Dada, dada!’ he shouted, and presently Grandfather heard him and came stumbling down the slope. He was followed by another shepherd, and together they lifted Motu and carried him home.

Motu had a bad wound, but Grandmother cleaned it and applied a paste made of herbs. Then she laid strips of carrot over the wound—an old mountain remedy—and bandaged the leg. But it would be some time before Motu could run about again. By then it would probably be snowing and time to leave these high-altitude pastures and return to the valley. Meanwhile, the sheep had to be taken out to graze, and Grandfather decided to accompany Jai for the remaining period.

They did not see the golden eagle for two or three days, and, when they did, it was flying over the next range. Perhaps it had found some other source of food, or even another flock of sheep. ‘Are you afraid of the eagle?’ Grandfather asked Jai.

‘I wasn’t before,’ said Jai. ‘Not until it hurt Motu. I did not know it could be so dangerous. But Motu hurt it too. He banged straight into it!’

‘Perhaps it won’t bother us again,’ said Grandfather thoughtfully. ‘A bird’s wing is easily injured—even an eagle’s.’

Jai wasn’t so sure. He had seen it strike twice, and he knew that it was not afraid of anyone. Only when it learnt to fear his presence would it keep away from the flock.

The next day Grandfather did not feel well; he was feverish and kept to his bed. Motu was hobbling about gamely on three legs; the wounded leg was still very sore.

‘Don’t go too far with the sheep,’ said Grandmother. ‘Let them graze near the house.’

‘But there’s hardly any grass here,’ said Jai.

‘I don’t want you wandering off while that eagle is still around.’

‘Give him my stick,’ said Grandfather from his bed. Grandmother took it from the corner and handed it to the boy.

It was an old stick, made of wild cherry wood, which Grandfather often carried around. The wood was strong and well-seasoned; the stick was stout and long. It reached up to Jai’s shoulders.

‘Don’t lose it,’ said Grandfather. ‘It was given to me many years ago by a wandering scholar who came to the Tung temple. I was going to give it to you when
you got bigger, but perhaps this is the right time for you to have it. If the eagle comes near you, swing the stick around your head. That should frighten it off!’

Clouds had gathered over the mountains, and a heavy mist hid the Tung temple. With the approach of winter, the flow of pilgrims had been reduced to a trickle. The shepherds had started leaving the lush meadows and returning to their villages at lower altitudes. Very soon the bears and the leopards and the golden eagles would have the high ranges all to themselves.

Jai used the cherry wood stick to prod the sheep along the path until they reached the steep meadows. The stick would have to be a substitute for Motu. And they seemed to respond to it more readily than they did to Motu’s mad charges.

Because of the sudden cold and the prospect of snow, Grandmother had made Jai wear a rough woollen jacket and a pair of high boots bought from a Tibetan trader. He wasn’t used to the boots—he wore sandals at other times—and had some difficulty in climbing quickly up and down the hillside. It was tiring work, trying to keep the flock together. The cawing of some crows warned Jai that the eagle might be around, but the mist prevented him from seeing very far.

After some time the mist lifted and Jai was able to see the temple and the snow-peaks towering behind it. He saw the golden eagle, too. It was circling high overhead. Jai kept close to the flock—one eye on the eagle, one eye on the restless sheep.
Then the great bird stooped and flew lower. It circled the temple and then pretended to go away. Jai felt sure it would be back. And a few minutes later it reappeared from the other side of the mountain. It was much lower now, wings spread out and back, taloned feet to the fore, piercing eyes fixed on its target—a small lamb that had suddenly gone frisking down the slope, away from Jai and the flock.

Now it flew lower still, only a few feet off the ground, paying no attention to the boy.

It passed Jai with a great rush of air, and as it did so the boy struck out with his stick and caught the bird a glancing blow.

The eagle missed its prey, and the tiny lamb skipped away.

To Jai’s amazement, the bird did not fly off. Instead it landed on the hillside and glared at the boy, as a king would glare at a humble subject who had dared to pelt him with a pebble.

The golden eagle stood almost as tall as Jai. Its wings were still outspread. Its fierce eyes seemed to be looking through and through the boy.
Jai’s first instinct was to turn and run. But the cherry wood stick was still in his hands, and he felt sure there was power in it. He saw that the eagle was about to launch itself again at the lamb. Instead of running away, he ran forward, the stick raised above his head.

The eagle rose a few feet off the ground and struck out with its huge claws.

Luckily for Jai, his heavy jacket took the force of the blow. A talon ripped through the sleeve, and the sleeve fell away. At the same time the heavy stick caught the eagle across its open wing. The bird gave a shrill cry of pain and fury. Then it turned and flapped heavily away, flying unsteadily because of its injured wing.

Jai still clutched the stick, because he expected the bird to return; he did not even glance at his torn jacket. But the golden eagle had alighted on a distant rock and was in no hurry to return to the attack.

Jai began driving the sheep home. The clouds had become heavy and black, and presently the first snow-flakes began to fall.

Jai saw a hare go lolloping down the hill. When it was about fifty yards away, there was a rush of air from the eagle’s beating wings, and Jai saw the bird approaching the hare in a sidelong drive.

‘So it hasn’t been badly hurt,’ thought Jai, feeling a little relieved, for he could not help admiring the great bird. ‘Now it has found something else to chase for its dinner.’

The hare saw the eagle and dodged about, making for a clump of junipers. Jai did not know if it was caught or not, because the snow and sleet had increased and both bird and hare were lost in the gathering snow-storm.

The sheep were bleating behind him. One of the lambs looked tired, and he stooped to pick it up. As he did so, he heard a thin, whining sound. It grew louder by the second. Before he could look up, a huge wing caught him across the shoulders and sent him sprawling. The lamb tumbled down the slope with him, into a thorny bilberry bush.

The bush saved them. Jai saw the eagle coming in again, flying low. It was another eagle! One had been vanquished, and now here was another, just as big and fearless, probably the mate of the first eagle.

Jai had lost his stick and there was no way in which he could fight the second eagle. So he crept further into the bush, holding the lamb beneath him. At the same time he began shouting at the top of his voice—both to scare the bird away and to summon help. The eagle could not easily get at them now; but the rest of the flock was exposed on the hillside. Surely the eagle would make for them.
Even as the bird circled and came back in another dive, Jai heard fierce barking. The eagle immediately swung away and rose skywards.

The barking came from Motu. Hearing Jai’s shouts and sensing that something was wrong, he had come limping out of the house, ready to do battle. Behind him came another shepherd and—most wonderful of all—Grandmother herself, banging two frying-pans together. The barking, the banging and the shouting frightened the eagles away. The sheep scattered too, and it was some time before they could all be rounded up. By then it was snowing heavily.

‘Tomorrow we must all go down to Maku,’ said the shepherd.

‘Yes, it’s time we went,’ said Grandmother. ‘You can read your story-books again, Jai.’

‘I’ll have my own story to tell,’ said Jai.

When they reached the hut and Jai saw Grandfather, he said, ‘Oh, I’ve forgotten your stick!’

But Motu had picked it up. Carrying it between his teeth, he brought it home and sat down with it in the open doorway. He had decided the cherry wood was good for his teeth and would have chewed it up if Grandmother hadn’t taken it from him.

‘Never mind,’ said Grandfather, sitting up on his cot. ‘It isn’t the stick that matters. It’s the person who holds it.’
A Crow for All Seasons

Early to bed and early to rise makes a crow healthy, wealthy and wise.

They say it’s true for humans too. I’m not so sure about that. But for crows it’s a must.

I’m always up at the crack of dawn, often the first crow to break the night’s silence with a lusty caw. My friends and relatives, who roost in the same tree, grumble a bit and mutter to themselves, but they are soon cawing just as loudly. Long before the sun is up, we set off on the day’s work.

We do not pause even for the morning wash. Later in the day, if it’s hot and muggy, I might take a dip in some human’s bath water; but early in the morning we like to be up and about before everyone else. This is the time when trash cans and refuse dumps are overflowing with goodies, and we like to sift through them before the dustmen arrive in their disposal trucks.

Not that we are afraid of a famine in refuse. As human beings multiply, so does their rubbish.

Only yesterday I rescued an old typewriter ribbon from the dustbin, just before it was emptied. What a waste that would have been! I had no use for it myself, but I gave it to one of my cousins who got married recently, and she tells me it’s just right for her nest, the one she’s building on a telegraph pole. It helps her bind the twigs together, she says.

My own preference is for toothbrushes. They’re just a hobby, really, like stamp-collecting with humans. I have a small but select collection which I keep in a hole in the garden wall. Don’t ask me how many I’ve got—crows don’t believe there’s any point in counting beyond two—but I know there’s more than one, that there’s a whole lot of them in fact, because there isn’t anyone living on this road who hasn’t lost a toothbrush to me at some time or another.

We crows living in the jackfruit tree have this stretch of road to ourselves, but so that we don’t quarrel or have misunderstandings we’ve shared the houses out. I picked the bungalow with the orchard at the back. After all, I don’t eat rubbish and throw-
aways all the time. Just occasionally I like a ripe guava or the soft flesh of a papaya. And sometimes I like the odd beetle as an hors d’oeuvre. Those humans in the bungalow should be grateful to me for keeping down the population of fruit-eating beetles, and even for recycling their refuse; but no, humans are never grateful. No sooner do I settle in one of their guava trees than stones are whizzing past me. So I return to the dustbin on the back veranda steps. They don’t mind my being there.

One of my cousins shares the bungalow with me, but he’s a lazy fellow and I have to do most of the foraging. Sometimes I get him to lend me a claw; but most of the time he’s preening his feathers and trying to look handsome for a pretty young thing who lives in the banyan tree at the next turning.

When he’s in the mood he can be invaluable, as he proved recently when I was having some difficulty getting at the dog’s food on the veranda.

This dog who is fussied over so much by the humans I’ve adopted is a great big fellow, a mastiff who pretends to a pedigree going back to the time of Genghis Khan—he likes to pretend one of his ancestors was the great Khan’s watchdog—but, as often happens in famous families, animal or human, there is a falling off in quality over a period of time, and this huge fellow—Tiger, they call him—is a case in point. All brawn and no brain. Many a time I’ve removed a juicy bone from his plate or helped myself to pickings from under his nose.

But of late he’s been growing canny and selfish. He doesn’t like to share any more. And the other day I was almost in his jaws when he took a sudden lunge at me. Snap went his great teeth; but all he got was one of my tail feathers. He spat it out in disgust. Who wants crow’s meat, anyway?

All the same, I thought, I’d better not be too careless. It’s not for nothing that a crow’s IQ is way above that of all other birds. And it’s higher than a dog’s, I bet.

I woke Cousin Slow from his midday siesta and said, ‘Hey, Slow, we’ve got a problem. If you want any of that delicious tripe today, you’ve got to lend a claw—or a beak. That dog’s getting snappier day by day.

Slow opened one eye and said, ‘Well, if you insist. But you know how I hate getting into a scuffle. It’s bad for the gloss on my feathers.’

‘I don’t insist,’ I said politely, ‘but I’m not foraging for both of us today. It’s every crow for himself.’

‘Okay, okay, I’m coming,’ said Slow, and with barely a flap he dropped down from the tree to the wall.

‘What’s the strategy?’ I asked.
‘Simple. We’ll just give him the old one-two.’

We flew across to the veranda. Tiger had just started his meal. He was a fast, greedy eater who made horrible slurping sounds while he guzzled his food. We had to move fast if we wanted to get something before the meal was over.

I sidled up to Tiger and wished him good afternoon.

He kept on gobbling—but quicker now.

Slow came up from behind and gave him a quick peck near the tail—a sensitive spot—and, as Tiger swung round snarling, I moved in quickly and snatched up several tidbits.

Tiger went for me, and I flew free-style for the garden wall. The dish was untended, so Slow helped himself to as many scraps as he could stuff in his mouth.

He joined me on the garden wall, and we sat there feasting, while Tiger barked himself hoarse below.

‘Go catch a cat,’ said Slow, who is given to slang. ‘You’re in the wrong league, big boy.’

The great sage Pratyasataka—ever heard of him? I guess not—once said, ‘Nothing can improve a crow.’

Like most human sages, he wasn’t very clear in his thinking, so there has been some misunderstanding about what he meant. Humans like to think that what he really meant was that crows were so bad as to be beyond improvement. But we crows know better. We interpret the saying as meaning that the crow is so perfect that no improvement is possible.

It’s not that we aren’t human—what I mean is, there are times when we fall from our high standards and do rather foolish things. Like at lunch time the other day.

Sometimes, when the table is laid in the bungalow, and before the family enters the dining room, I nip in through the open window and make a quick foray among the dishes. Sometimes I’m lucky enough to pick up a sausage or a slice of toast, or even a pat of butter, making off before someone enters and throws a bread knife at me. But on this occasion, just as I was reaching for the toast, a thin slouching fellow—Junior sahib they call him—entered suddenly and shouted at me. I was so startled that I leapt across the table, seeking shelter. Something flew at me and in an effort to dodge the missile I put my head through a circular object and then found it wouldn’t come off.

It wasn’t safe to hang around there, so I flew out of the window with this dashed ring still round my neck.

Serviette or napkin rings, that’s what they are called. Quite unnecessary objects, but some humans—particularly the well-to-do sort—seem to like having them on their
tables, holding bits of cloth in place. The cloth is used for wiping the mouth. Have you ever heard of such nonsense?

Anyway, there I was with a fat napkin ring round my neck, and as I perched on the wall trying to get it off, the entire human family gathered on their veranda to watch me.

There was the Colonel sahib and his wife, the memsahib; there was the scrawny Junior sahib (worst of the lot); there was a mischievous boy (the Colonel sahib’s grandson) known as the Baba; and there was the cook (who usually flung orange peels at me) and the gardener (who once tried to decapitate me with a spade), and the dog Tiger who, like most dogs, tries unsuccessfully to be a human.

Today they weren’t cursing and shaking their fists at me; they were just standing and laughing their heads off. What’s so funny about a crow with its head stuck in a napkin ring?

Worse was to follow.

The noise had attracted the other crows in the area, and if there’s one thing crows detest, it’s a crow who doesn’t look like a crow.

They swooped low and dived on me, hammering at the wretched napkin ring, until they had knocked me off the wall and into a flower-bed. Then six or seven toughs landed on me with every intention of finishing me off.

‘Hey, boys!’ I cawed. ‘This is me, Speedy! What are you trying to do—kill me?’

‘That’s right! You don’t look like Speedy to us. What have you done with him, hey?’

And they set upon me with even greater vigour.

‘You’re just like a bunch of lousy humans!’ I shouted. ‘You’re no better than them—this is just the way they carry on amongst themselves!’

That brought them to a halt. They stopped trying to peck me to pieces, and stood back, looking puzzled. The napkin ring had been shattered in the onslaught and had fallen to the ground.

‘Why, it’s Speedy!’ said one of the gang.

‘None other!’

‘Good old Speedy—what are you doing here? And where’s the guy we were hammering just now?’

There was no point in trying to explain things to them. Crows are like that. There’re all good pals—until one of them tries to look different. Then he could be just another bird.

‘He took off for Tibet,’ I said. ‘It was getting unhealthy for him around here.’
Summertime is here again. And although I’m a crow for all seasons, I must admit to a preference for the summer months.

Humans grow lazy and don’t pursue me with so much vigour. Garbage cans overflow. Food goes bad and is constantly being thrown away. Overripe fruit gets tastier by the minute. If fellows like me weren’t around to mop up all these unappreciated riches, how would humans manage?

There’s one character in the bungalow, the Junior sahib, who will never appreciate our services, it seems. He simply hates crows. The small boy may throw stones at us occasionally, but then, he’s the sort who throws stones at almost anything. There’s nothing personal about it. He just throws stones on principle.

The memsahib is probably the best of the lot. She often throws me scraps from the kitchen—onion-skins, potato peels, crusts, and leftovers—and even when I nip in and make off with something not meant for me (like a jam tart or a cheese pakora) she is quite sporting about it. The Junior sahib looks outraged, but the lady of the house says, ‘Well, we’ve all got to make a living somehow, and that’s how crows makes theirs. It’s high time you thought of earning a living.’ Junior sahib’s her nephew—that’s his occupation. He has never been known to work.

The Colonel sahib has a sense of humor but it’s often directed at me. He thinks I’m a comedian.

He discovered I’d been making off with the occasional egg from the egg basket on the veranda, and one day, without my knowledge, he made a substitution.

Right on top of the pile I found a smooth, round egg, and before anyone could shout ‘Crow!’ I’d made off with it. It was abnormally light. I put it down on the lawn and set about cracking it with my strong beak; but it would keep slipping away or bouncing off into the bushes. Finally I got it between my feet and gave it a good hard whack. It burst open. To my utter astonishment there was nothing inside!

I looked up and saw the old man standing on the veranda, doubled up with laughter.

‘What are you laughing at?’ asked the memsahib, coming out to see what it was all about.

‘It’s that ridiculous crow!’ guffawed the Colonel, pointing at me. ‘You know he’s been stealing our eggs. Well, I placed a ping-pong ball on top of the pile, and he fell for it! He’s been struggling with that ball for twenty minutes! That will teach him a lesson.’

It did. But I had my revenge later, when I pinched a brand new toothbrush from the Colonel’s bathroom.
The Junior sahib has no sense of humor at all. He idles about the house and grounds all day, whistling or singing to himself.

‘Even that crow sings better than Uncle,’ said the boy.

A truthful boy; but all he got for his honesty was a whack on the head from his uncle.

Anyway, as a gesture of appreciation, I perched on the garden wall and gave the family a rendering of my favourite crow song, which is my own composition. Here it is, translated for your benefit:

Oh, for the life of a crow!
A bird who’s in the know,
Although we are cursed,
We are never dispersed—
We’re always on the go!

I know I’m a bit of a rogue
(And my voice wouldn’t pass for a brogue),
But there’s no one as sleek
Or as neat with his beak—
So they’re putting my picture in Vogue!

Oh, for the life of a crow!
I reap what I never sow,
They call me a thief—
Pray I’ll soon come to grief—
But there’s no getting rid of a crow!

I gave it everything I had, and the humans—all of them on the lawn to enjoy the evening breeze, listened to me in silence, struck with wonder at my performance. When I had finished, I bowed and preened myself, waiting for the applause. They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then the Junior sahib stooped, picked up a bottle opener, and flung it at me.

Well, I ask you!

What can one say about humans? I do my best to defend them from all kinds of criticism, and this is what I get for my pains.

Anyway, I picked up the bottle opener and added it to my collection of odds and ends.

It was getting dark, and soon everyone was stumbling around, looking for another bottle opener. Junior sahib’s popularity was even lower than mine.

One day Junior sahib came home carrying a heavy shotgun. He pointed it at me a few times and I dived for cover. But he didn’t fire. Probably I was out of range.
‘He’s only threatening you,’ said Slow, from the safety of the jamun tree, where he sat in the shadows. ‘He probably doesn’t know how to fire the thing.’

But I wasn’t taking any chances. I’d seen a sly look on Junior sahib’s face, and I decided that he was trying to make me careless. So I stayed well out of range.

Then one evening I received a visit from my cousin brother, Charm. He’d come to me for a loan. He wanted some new bottle caps for his collection and brought me a mouldy old toothbrush in exchange.

Charm landed on the garden wall, toothbrush in his beak, and was waiting for me to join him there, when there was a flash and a tremendous bang. Charm was sent several feet into the air, and landed limp and dead in a flower bed.

‘I’ve got him, I’ve got him!’ shouted Junior sahib. ‘I’ve shot that blasted crow!’

Throwing away the gun, Junior sahib ran out into the garden, overcome with joy. He picked up my fallen relative, and began running around the bungalow with his trophy.

The rest of the family had collected on the veranda.

‘Drop that thing at once!’ called the memsahib.

‘Uncle is doing a war dance,’ observed the boy.

‘It’s unlucky to shoot a crow,’ said the Colonel.

I thought it was time to take a hand in the proceedings and let everyone know that the right crow—the one and only Speedy—was alive and kicking. So I swooped down the jack-fruit tree, dived through Junior sahib’s window and emerged with one of his socks.

Triumphantly flaunting his dead crow, Junior sahib came dancing up the garden path, then stopped dead when he saw me perched on the window sill, a sock in my beak. His jaw fell, his eyes bulged; he looked like the owl in the banyan tree.

‘You shot the wrong crow!’ shouted the Colonel, and everyone roared with laughter.

Before Junior sahib could recover from the shock, I took off in a leisurely fashion and joined Slow on the wall.

Junior sahib came rushing out with the gun, but by now it was too dark to see anything, and I heard the memsahib telling the Colonel, ‘You’d better take that gun away before he does himself a mischief.’ So the Colonel took Junior indoors and gave him a brandy.

I composed a new song for Junior sahib’s benefit, and sang it to him outside his window early next morning:

_I understand you want a crow_
To poison, shoot or smother;
My fond salaams, but by your leave
I’ll substitute another:
Allow me then, to introduce
My most respected brother.

Although I was quite understanding about the whole tragic mix-up—I was, after all, the family’s very own house-crow—my fellow crows were outraged at what happened to Charm, and swore vengeance on Junior sahib.

‘Corvus splendens!’ they shouted with great spirit, forgetting that this title had been bestowed on us by a human.

In times of war, we forget how much we owe to our enemies.

Junior sahib had only to step into the garden, and several crows would swoop down on him, screeching and swearing and aiming lusty blows at his head and hands. He took to coming out wearing a sola-topee, and even then they knocked it off and drove him indoors. Once he tried lighting a cigarette on the veranda steps, when Slow swooped low across the porch and snatched it from his lips.
Junior sahib shut himself up in his room, and smoked countless cigarettes—a sure sign that his nerves were going to pieces.

Every now and then the memsahib would come out and shoo us off; and because she wasn’t an enemy, we obliged by retreating to the garden wall. After all, Slow and I depended on her for much of our board if not for our lodging. But Junior sahib had only to show his face outside the house, and all the crows in the area would be after him like avenging furies.

‘It doesn’t look as though they are going to forgive you,’ said the memsahib.

‘Elephants never forget, and crows never forgive,’ said the Colonel.

‘Would you like to borrow my catapult, Uncle?’ asked the boy. ‘Just for self-protection, you know.’

‘Shut up,’ said Junior sahib and went to bed.
One day he sneaked out of the back door and dashed across to the garage. A little later the family’s old car, seldom used, came out of the garage with Junior sahib at the wheel. He’d decided that if he couldn’t take a walk in safety he’d go for a drive. All the windows were up.

No sooner had the car turned into the driveway than about a dozen crows dived down on it, crowding the bonnet and flapping in front of the windscreen. Junior sahib couldn’t see a thing. He swung the steering wheel left, right and center, and the car went off the driveway, ripped through a hedge, crushed a bed of sweet peas and came to a stop against the trunk of a mango tree.

Junior sahib just sat there, afraid to open the door. The family had to come out of the house and rescue him.

‘Are you all right?’ asked the Colonel.
‘I’ve bruised my knees,’ said Junior sahib.
‘Never mind your knees,’ said the memsahib, gazing around at the ruin of her garden. ‘What about my sweet peas?’
‘I think your uncle is going to have a nervous breakdown,’ I heard the Colonel saying.
‘What’s that?’ asked the boy. ‘Is it the same as a car having a breakdown?’
‘Well—not exactly… But you could call it a mind breaking up,’

Junior sahib had been refusing to leave his room or take his meals. The family was worried about him. I was worried, too. Believe it or not, we crows are among the very few who sincerely desire the preservation of the human species.

‘He needs a change,’ said the memsahib.
‘A rest cure,’ said the Colonel sarcastically. ‘A rest from doing nothing.’
‘Send him to Switzerland,’ suggested the boy.
‘We can’t afford that. But we can take him up to a hill-station.’

The nearest hill-station was some fifty miles as the human drives (only ten as the crow flies). Many people went up during the summer months. It wasn’t fancied much by crows.

For one thing, it was a tidy sort of place, and people lived in houses that were set fairly far apart. Opportunities for scavenging were limited. Also, it was rather cold and the trees were inconvenient and uncomfortable. A friend of mine who had spent a night in a pine tree said he hadn’t been able to sleep because of prickly pine needles and the wind howling through the branches.

‘Let’s all go up for a holiday,’ said the memsahib. ‘We can spend a week in a boarding house. All of us need a change.’
A few days later the house was locked up, and the family piled into the old car and drove off to the hills.

I had the grounds to myself.

The dog had gone too, and the gardener spent all day dozing in his hammock. There was no one around to trouble me.

‘We’ve got the whole place to ourselves,’ I told Slow.

‘Yes, but what good is that? With everyone gone, there are no throw-aways, give-aways and take-aways!’

‘We’ll have to try the house next door.’

‘And be driven off by the other crows? That’s not our territory, you know. We can go across to help them, or to ask for their help, but we’re not supposed to take their pickings. It just isn’t cricket, old boy.’

We could have tried the bazaar or the railway station, where there is always a lot of rubbish to be found, but there is also a lot of competition in those places. The station crows are gangsters. The bazaar crows are bullies. Slow and I had grown soft. We’d have been no match for the bad boys.

‘I’ve just realized how much we depend on humans.’ I said.

‘We could go back to living in the jungle,’ said Slow.

‘No, that would be too much like hard work. We’d be living on wild fruit most of the time. Besides, the jungle crows won’t have anything to do with us now. Ever since we took up with humans, we became the outcasts of the bird world.’

‘That means we’re almost human.’

‘You might say we have all their vices and none of their virtues.’

‘Just a different set of values, old boy.’

‘Like eating hens’ eggs instead of crows’ eggs. That’s something in their favour. And while you’re hanging around here waiting for the mangoes to fall, I’m off to locate our humans.’

Slow’s beak fell open. He looked like—well, a hungry crow.

‘Don’t tell me you’re going to follow them up to the hill-station? You don’t even know where they are staying.’

‘I’ll soon find out,’ I said, and took off for the hills.

You’d be surprised at how simple it is to be a good detective, if only you put your mind to it. Of course, if Ellery Queen had been able to fly, he wouldn’t have required fifteen chapters and his father’s assistance to crack a case.

Swooping low over the hill-station, it wasn’t long before I spotted my humans’ old car. It was parked outside a boarding house called the Climber’s Rest. I hadn’t seen
anyone climbing, but, dozing in an armchair in the garden, was my favourite human.

I perched on top of a colourful umbrella and waited for Junior sahib to wake up. I decided it would be rather inconsiderate of me to disturb his sleep, so I waited patiently on the brolly, looking at him with one eye and keeping one eye on the house. He stirred uneasily, as though he’d suddenly had a bad dream; then he opened his eyes. I must have been the first thing he saw.

‘Good morning,’ I cawed, in a friendly tone—always ready to forgive and forget, that’s Speedy!

He leapt out of the armchair and ran into the house, hollering at the top of his voice.

I supposed he hadn’t been able to contain his delight at seeing me again. Humans can be funny that way. They’ll hate you one day and love you the next.

Well, Junior sahib ran all over the boarding house, screaming: ‘It’s that crow, it’s that crow! He’s following me everywhere!’

Various people, including the family, ran outside to see what the commotion was about, and I thought it would be better to make myself scarce. So I flew to the top of a spruce tree and stayed very still and quiet.

‘Crow! What crow?’ said the Colonel.

‘Our crow!’ cried Junior sahib. ‘The one that persecutes me. I was dreaming of it just now, and when I opened my eyes, there it was, on the garden umbrella!’

‘There’s nothing there now,’ said the memsahib. ‘You probably hadn’t woken up completely.’

‘He is having illusions again,’ said the boy.

‘Delusions,’ corrected the Colonel.

‘Now look here,’ said the memsahib. ‘You’ll have to pull yourself together. You’ll take leave of your senses if you don’t.’

‘I tell you, it’s here!’ sobbed Junior sahib. ‘It’s following me everywhere.’

‘It’s grown fond of Uncle,’ said the boy. ‘And it seems Uncle can’t live without crows.’

Junior sahib looked up with a wild glint in his eye.

‘That’s it!’ he cried. ‘I can’t live without them. That’s the answer to my problem. I don’t hate crows—I love them!’

Everyone just stood around, goggling at Junior sahib.

‘I’m feeling fine now,’ he carried on. ‘What a difference it makes if you can just do the opposite to what you’ve been doing before!’ And flapping his arms, and trying to caw like a crow, he went prancing about the garden.

‘Now he thinks he’s a crow,’ said the boy. ‘Is he still having delusions?’
‘That’s right,’ said the memsahib. ‘Delusions of grandeur.’

After that, the family decided that there was no point in staying on in the hill-station any longer. Junior sahib had completed his rest cure. And even if he was the only one who believed himself cured, that was all right, because after all he was the one who mattered…. If you’re feeling fine, can there be anything wrong with you?

No sooner was everyone back in the bungalow than Junior sahib took to hopping barefoot on the grass early every morning, all the time scattering food about for the crows. Bread, chapatties, cooked rice, curried eggplants, the memsahib’s home-made toffee—you name it, we got it!

Slow and I were the first to help ourselves to these dawn offerings, and soon the other crows had joined us on the lawn. We didn’t mind. Junior sahib brought enough for everyone.

‘We ought to honour him in some way,’ said Slow.

‘Yes, why not?’ said I. ‘There was someone else, hundreds of years ago, who fed the birds. They followed him wherever he went.’

‘That’s right. They made him a saint. But as far as I know, he didn’t feed any crows. At least, you don’t see any crows in the pictures—just sparrows and robins and wagtails.’

‘Small fry. Our human is dedicated exclusively to crows. Do you realise that, Slow?’

‘Sure. We ought to make him the patron saint of crows. What do you say, fellows?’

‘Caw, caw, caw!’ All the crows were in agreement.

‘St Corvus!’ said Slow, as Junior sahib emerged from the house, laden with good things to eat.

‘Corvus, corvus, corvus!’ we cried.

And what a pretty picture he made—a crow eating from his hand, another perched on his shoulder, and about a dozen of us on the grass, forming a respectful ring around him.

From persecutor to protector; from beastliness to saintliness. And sometimes it can be the other way round: you never know with humans!
On the left bank of the Ganga, where it emerges from the Himalayan foothills, there is a long stretch of heavy forest. There are villages on the fringe of the forest, inhabited by bamboo-cutters and farmers, but there are few signs of commerce or pilgrimage. Hunters, however, have found the area an ideal hunting-ground during the last seventy years, and as a result the animals are not as numerous as they used to be. The trees, too, have been disappearing slowly; and, as the forest recedes, the animals lose their food and shelter and move on further into the foothills. Slowly, they are being denied the right to live.

Only the elephants can cross the river. And two years ago, when a large area of forest was cleared to make way for a refugee resettlement camp, a herd of elephants—finding their favourite food, the green shoots of the bamboo, in short supply—waded across the river. They crashed through the suburbs of Hardwar, knocked down a factory wall, pulled down several tin roofs, held up a train, and left a trail of devastation in their wake until they found a new home in a new forest which was still untouched. Here, they settled down to a new life—but an unsettled, wary life. They did not know when men would appear again, with tractors, bulldozers and dynamite.

There was a time when the forest on the banks of the Ganga had provided food and shelter for some thirty or forty tigers; but men in search of trophies had shot them all, and now there remained only one old tiger in the jungle. Many hunters had tried to get him, but he was a wise and crafty old tiger, who knew the ways of men, and he had so far survived all attempts on his life.

Although the tiger had passed the prime of his life, he had lost none of his majesty. His muscles rippled beneath the golden yellow of his coat, and he walked through the long grass with the confidence of one who knew that he was still a king, even though his subjects were fewer. His great head pushed through the foliage, and it was only his tail, swinging high, that showed occasionally above the sea of grass.

He was heading for water, the only water in the forest (if you don’t count the river, which was several miles away), the water of a large jheel, which was almost a lake.
during the rainy season, but just a muddy marsh at this time of the year, in the late spring.

Here, at different times of the day and night, all the animals came to drink—the long-horned sambar, the delicate chital, the swamp deer, the hyenas and jackals, the wild boar, the panthers—and the lone tiger. Since the elephants had gone, the water was usually clear except when buffaloes from the nearest village came to wallow in it, and then it was very muddy. These buffaloes, though they were not wild, were not afraid of the panther or even of the tiger. They knew the panther was afraid of their massive horns and that the tiger preferred the flesh of the deer.

One day, there were several sambars at the water’s edge; but they did not stay long. The scent of the tiger came with the breeze, and there was no mistaking its strong feline odour. The deer held their heads high for a few moments, their nostrils twitching, and then scattered into the forest, disappearing behind a screen of leaf and bamboo.

When the tiger arrived, there was no other animal near the water. But the birds were still there. The egrets continued to wade in the shallows, and a kingfisher darted low over the water, dived suddenly, a flash of blue and gold, and made off with a slim silver fish, which glistened in the sun like a polished gem. A long, brown snake glided in and out among the water-lilies and disappeared beneath a fallen tree which lay rotting in the shallows.

The tiger waited in the shelter of a rock, his ears pricked up for the least unfamiliar sound; for he knew that it was at that place that man sometimes sat up for him with guns; for they coveted his beauty—his stripes, and the gold of his body, his fine teeth, his whiskers, and his noble head. They would have liked to hang his skin on a wall, with his head stuffed and mounted, and pieces of glass replacing his fierce eyes; they would have boasted of their triumph over the king of the jungle.

The tiger had been hunted before, so he did not usually show himself in the open during the day. But of late he had heard no guns, and if there were hunters around, you would have heard their guns (for a man with a gun cannot resist letting it off, even if it is only at a rabbit—or at another man). And, besides, the tiger was thirsty.

He was also feeling quite hot. It was March; and the shimmering dust-haze of summer had come early. Tigers—unlike other cats—are fond of water, and on a hot day will wallow in it for hours.

He walked into the water, in amongst the water-lilies, and drank slowly. He was seldom in a hurry when he ate or drank. Other animals might bolt down their food, but
they were only other animals. A tiger is a tiger; he has his dignity to preserve even though he isn’t aware of it!

He raised his head and listened, one paw suspended in the air. A strange sound had come to him on the breeze, and he was wary of strange sounds. So he moved swiftly into the shelter of the tall grass that bordered the jheel, and climbed a hillock until he reached his favourite rock. This rock was big enough both to hide him and to give him shade. Anyone looking up from the jheel might think it strange that the rock had a round bump on the top. The bump was the tiger’s head. He kept it very still.

The sound he heard was only the sound of a flute, rendered thin and reedy in the forest. It belonged to Ramu, a slim, brown boy who rode a buffalo. Ramu played vigorously on the flute. Shyam, a slightly smaller boy, riding another buffalo, brought up the rear of the herd.

There were about eight buffaloes in the herd, and they belonged to the families of the two friends, Ramu and Shyam. Their people were Gujars, a nomadic community who earned a livelihood by keeping buffaloes and selling milk and butter. The boys were about twelve years old, but they could not have told you exactly because in their village nobody thought birthdays were important. They were almost the same age as the tiger, but he was old and experienced while they were still cubs.

The tiger had often seen them at the tank, and he was not worried by their presence. He knew the village people would do him no harm as long as he left their buffaloes alone. Once when he was younger and full of bravado, he had killed a buffalo—not because he was hungry, but because he was young and wanted to try out his strength—and after that the villagers had hunted him for days, with spears, bows and an old muzzle-loader. Now he left the buffaloes alone, even though the deer in the forest were not as numerous as before.

The boys knew that a tiger lived in the jungle, for they had often heard him roar; but they did not suspect that he was so near just then.

The tiger gazed down from his rock, and the sight of eight fat, black buffaloes made him give a low, throaty moan. But the boys were there, and besides—a buffalo was not easy to kill.

He decided to move on and find a cool, shady place in the heart of the jungle, where he could rest during the warm afternoon and be free of the flies and mosquitoes that swarmed around the jheel. At night he would hunt.

With a lazy, half-humorous roar—‘A-oonh!’—he got up off his haunches and sauntered off into the jungle.
Even the gentlest of the tiger’s roars can be heard half a mile away, and the boys, who were barely fifty yards away, looked up immediately.

‘There he goes!’ said Ramu, taking the flute from his lips and pointing it towards the hillocks. He was not afraid, for he knew that this tiger was not interested in humans. ‘Did you see him?’

‘I saw his tail, just before he disappeared. He’s a big tiger!’

‘Do not call him tiger. Call him Uncle, or Maharaj.’

‘Oh, why?’

‘Don’t you know that it’s unlucky to call a tiger a tiger? My father always told me so. But if you meet a tiger, and call him Uncle, he will leave you alone.’

‘I’ll try and remember that,’ said Shyam.

The buffaloes were now well inside the water, and some of them were lying down in the mud. Buffaloes love soft, wet mud and will wallow in it for hours. The slushier the mud, the better. Ramu, to avoid being dragged down into the mud with his buffalo, slipped off its back and plunged into the water. He waded to a small islet covered with reeds and water-lilies. Shyam was close behind him.

They lay down on their hard, flat stomachs, on a patch of grass, and allowed the warm sun to beat down on their bare brown bodies.

Ramu was the more knowledgeable boy, because he had been to Hardwar and Dehradun several times with his father. Shyam had never been out of the village.

Shyam said, ‘The pool is not so deep this year.’

‘We have had no rain since January,’ said Ramu. ‘If we do not get rain soon the jheel may dry up altogether.’

‘And then what will we do?’

‘We? I don’t know. There is a well in the village. But even that may dry up. My father told me that it failed once, just about the time I was born, and everyone had to walk ten miles to the river for water.’

‘And what about the animals?’

‘Some will stay here and die. Others will go to the river. But there are too many people near the river now—and temples, houses and factories—and the animals stay away. And the trees have been cut, so that between the jungle and the river there is no place to hide. Animals are afraid of the open—they are afraid of men with guns.’

‘Even at night?’

‘At night men come in Jeeps, with searchlights. They kill the deer for meat, and sell the skins of tigers and panthers.’

‘I didn’t know a tiger’s skin was worth anything.’
'It's worth more than our skins,' said Ramu knowingly. 'It will fetch six hundred rupees. Who would pay that much for one of us?'

'Our fathers would.'

'True—if they had the money.'

'If my father sold his fields, he would get more than six hundred rupees.'

'True—but if he sold his fields, none of you would have anything to eat. A man needs land as much as a tiger needs a jungle.'

'Yes,' said Shyam. 'And that reminds me—my mother asked me to take some roots home.'

'I will help you.'

They walked deeper into the jheel until the water was up to their waists, and began pulling up water-lilies by the roots. The flower is beautiful but the villagers value the root more. When it is cooked, it makes a delicious and strengthening dish. The plant multiples rapidly and is always in good supply. In the year when famine hit the village, it was only the root of the water-lily that saved many from starvation.

When Shyam and Ramu had finished gathering roots, they emerged from the water and passed the time in wrestling with each other, slipping about in the soft mud which soon covered them from head to toe.

To get rid of the mud, they dived into the water again and swam across to their buffaloes. Then, jumping on their backs and digging their heels into their thick hides, the boys raced them across the jheel, shouting and hollering so much that all the birds flew away in fright, and the monkeys set up a shrill chattering of their own in the dhak trees.

In March, the flame of the forest, or dhak trees, are ablaze with bright scarlet and orange flowers.

It was evening, and the twilight fading fast, when the buffalo-herd finally wended its way homeward, to be greeted outside the village by the barking of dogs, the gurgle of hookah-pipes, and the homely smell of cow-dung smoke.

The tiger made a kill that night—a chital. He made his approach against the wind so that the unsuspecting spotted deer did not see him until it was too late. A blow on the deer’s haunches from the tiger’s paw brought it down, and then the great beast fastened his fangs on the deer’s throat. It was all over in a few minutes. The tiger was too quick and strong, and the deer did not struggle much.

It was a violent end for so gentle a creature. But you must not imagine that in the jungle the deer live in permanent fear of death. It is only man, with his imagination
and his fear of the hereafter, who is afraid of dying. In the jungle it is different. Sudden death appears at intervals. Wild creatures do not have to think about it, and so the sudden killing of one of their number by some predator of the forest is only a fleeting incident soon forgotten by the survivors.

The tiger feasted well, growling with pleasure as he ate his way up the body, leaving the entrails. When he’d had his night’s fill he left the carcase for the vultures and jackals. The cunning old tiger never returned to the same carcase, even if there was still plenty left to eat. In the past, when he had gone back to a kill he had often found a man sitting in a tree waiting up for him with a rifle.

His belly filled, the tiger sauntered over to the edge of the forest and looked out across the sandy wasteland and the deep, singing river, at the twinkling lights of Rishikesh on the opposite bank, and raised his head and roared his defiance at mankind.

He was a lonesome bachelor. It was five or six years since he’d had a mate. She had been shot by the trophy-hunters, and her two cubs had been trapped by men who did trade in wild animals. One went to a circus, where he had to learn tricks to amuse men and respond to the flick of a whip; the other, more fortunate, went first to a zoo in Delhi and was later transferred to a zoo in America.

Sometimes, when the old tiger was very lonely, he gave a great roar, which could be heard throughout the forest. The villagers thought he was roaring in anger, but the jungle knew that he was really roaring out of loneliness.

When the sound of his roar had died away, he paused, standing still, waiting for an answering roar; but it never came. It was taken up instead by the shrill scream of a barbet high up in a sal tree.

It was dawn now, dew-fresh and cool, and jungle-dwellers were on the move….

The black, beady little eyes of a jungle rat were fixed on a small brown hen who was pecking around in the undergrowth near her nest. He had a large family to feed, this rat, and he knew that in the hen’s nest was a clutch of delicious fawn-coloured eggs. He waited patiently for nearly an hour before he had the satisfaction of seeing the hen leave her nest and go off in search of food.

As soon as she had gone, the rat lost no time in making his raid. Slipping quietly out of his hole, he slithered along among the leaves; but, clever as he was, he did not realize that his own movements were being watched.

A pair of grey mongooses scouted about in the dry grass. They too were hungry, and eggs usually figured large on their menu. Now, lying still on an outcrop of rock, they watched the rat sneaking along, occasionally sniffing at the air and finally
vanishing behind a boulder. When he reappeared, he was struggling to roll an egg uphill towards his hole.

The rat was in difficulty, pushing the egg sometimes with his paws, sometimes with his nose. The ground was rough, and the egg wouldn’t move straight. Deciding that he must have help, he scuttled off to call his spouse. Even now the mongoose did not descend on that tantalizing egg. He waited until the rat returned with his wife, and then watched as the male rat took the egg firmly between his forepaws and rolled over on to his back. The female rat then grabbed her mate’s tail and began to drag him along.

 Totally absorbed in their struggle with the egg, the rat did not hear the approach of the mongooses. When these two large furry visitors suddenly bobbed up from behind a stone, the rats squealed with fright, abandoned the egg, and fled for their lives.

The mongooses wasted no time in breaking open the egg and making a meal of it. But just as, a few minutes ago, the rat had not noticed their approach, so now they did not notice the village boy, carrying a small, bright axe and a net bag in his hands, creeping along.

Ramu too was searching for eggs, and when he saw the mongooses busy with one, he stood still to watch them, his eyes roving in search of the nest. He was hoping the mongooses would lead him to the nest; but, when they had finished their meal and made off into the undergrowth, Ramu had to do his own searching. He failed to find the nest, and moved further into the forest. The rat’s hopes were just reviving when, to his disgust, the mother hen returned.

Ramu now made his way to a mahua tree.

The flowers of the mahua can be eaten by animals as well as by men. Bears are particularly fond of them and will eat large quantities of flowers which gradually start fermenting in their stomachs with the result that the animals get quite drunk. Ramu had often seen a couple of bears stumbling home to their cave, bumping into each other or into the trunks of trees. They are short-sighted to begin with, and when drunk can hardly see at all. But their sense of smell and hearing are so good that in the end they find their way home.

Ramu decided he would gather some mahua flowers, and climbed up the tree, which is leafless when it blossoms. He began breaking the white flowers and throwing them to the ground. He had been on the tree for about five minutes when he heard a whining grumble, and presently a young sloth bear ambled into the clearing beneath the tree.
He was a small bear, little more than a cub, and Ramu was not frightened; but, because he thought the mother might be in the vicinity, he decided to take no chances, and sat very still, waiting to see what the bear would do. He hoped it wouldn’t choose the mahua tree for a meal.

At first the young bear put his nose to the ground and sniffed his way along until he came to a large ant-hill. Here he began huffing and puffing, blowing rapidly in and out of his nostrils, causing the dust from the ant-hill to fly in all directions. But he was a disappointed bear, because the ant-hill had been deserted long ago. And so, grumbling, he made his way across to a tall wild-plum tree, and, shining rapidly up the smooth trunk, was soon perched on its topmost branches. It was only then that he saw Ramu.

The bear at once scrambled several feet higher up the tree, and laid himself out flat on a branch. It wasn’t a very thick branch and left a large expanse of bear showing on either side. The bear tucked his head away behind another branch, and so long as he could not see Ramu, seemed quite satisfied that he was well hidden, though he couldn’t help grumbling with anxiety, for a bear, like most animals, is afraid of man.

Bears, however, are also very curious—and curiosity has often led them into trouble. Slowly, inch by inch, the young bear’s black snout appeared over the edge of the branch; but as soon as the eyes came into view and met Ramu’s, he drew back with a jerk and the head was once more hidden. The bear did this two or three times, and Ramu, highly amused, waited until it wasn’t looking, then moved some way down the tree. When the bear looked up again and saw that the boy was missing, he was so pleased with himself that he stretched right across to the next branch, to get a plum. Ramu chose this moment to burst into loud laughter. The startled bear tumbled out of the tree, dropped through the branches for a distance of some fifteen feet, and landed with a thud on a heap of dry leaves.

And then several things happened at almost the same time.

The mother bear came charging into the clearing. Spotting Ramu in the tree, she reared up on her hind legs, grunting fiercely. It was Ramu’s turn to be startled. There are few animals more dangerous than a rampaging mother bear, and the boy knew that one blow from her clawed forepaws could rip his skull open.

But before the bear could approach the tree, there was a tremendous roar, and the old tiger bounded into the clearing. He had been asleep in the bushes not far away—he liked a good sleep after a heavy meal—and the noise in the clearing had woken him.
He was in a bad mood, and his loud ‘A—oonh!’ made his displeasure quite clear. The bears turned and ran from the clearing, the youngster squealing with fright.

The tiger then came into the centre of the clearing, looked up at the trembling boy, and roared again.

Ramu nearly fell out of the tree.

‘Good-day to you, Uncle’ he stammered, showing his teeth in a nervous grin.

Perhaps this was too much for the tiger. With a low growl, he turned his back on the mahua tree and padded off into the jungle, his tail twitching in disgust.

That night, when Ramu told his parents and his grandfather about the tiger and how it had saved him from a female bear, it started a round of tiger stories—about how some of them could be gentlemen, others rogues. Sooner or later the conversation came round to man-eaters, and Grandfather told two stories which he swore were true, although his listeners only half-believed him.

The first story concerned the belief that a man-eating tiger is guided towards his next victim by the spirit of a human being previously killed and eaten by the tiger. Grandfather said that he actually knew three hunters, who sat up in a machan over a human kill, and that, when the tiger came, the corpse sat up and pointed with his right hand at the men in the tree. The tiger then went away. But the hunters knew he would return, and one man was brave enough to get down from the tree and tie the right arm of the corpse to its side. Later, when the tiger returned, the corpse sat up and this time pointed out the men with his left hand. The enraged tiger sprang into the tree and killed his enemies in the machan.

‘And then there was a Bania,’ said Grandfather, beginning another story, ‘who lived in a village in the jungle. He wanted to visit a neighbouring village to collect some money that was owed to him, but as the road lay through heavy forest in which lived a terrible man-eating tiger, he did not know what to do. Finally, he went to a sadhu who gave him two powders. By eating the first powder, he could turn into a huge tiger, capable of dealing with any other tiger in the jungle, and by eating the second he could become a Bania again.

‘Armed with his two powders, and accompanied by his pretty young wife, the Bania set out on his journey. They had not gone far into the forest when they came upon the man-eater sitting in the middle of the road. Before swallowing the first powder, the Bania told his wife to stay where she was, so that when he returned after killing the tiger, she could at once give him the second powder and enable him to resume his old shape.
‘Well, the Bania’s plan worked, but only up to a point. He swallowed the first powder and immediately became a magnificent tiger. With a great roar, he bounded towards the man-eater, and after a brief, furious fight, killed his opponent. Then, with his jaws still dripping blood, he returned to his wife.

‘The poor girl was terrified and spilled the second powder on the ground. The Bania was so angry that he pounced on his wife and killed and ate her. And afterwards this terrible tiger was so enraged at not being able to become a human again that he killed and ate hundreds of people all over the country.’

‘The only people he spared,’ added Grandfather, with a twinkle in his eyes, ‘were those who owed him money. A Bania never gives up a loan as lost, and the tiger still hoped that one day he might become a human again and be able to collect his dues.’

Next morning, when Ramu came back from the well which was used to irrigate his father’s fields, he found a crowd of curious children surrounding a Jeep and three strangers. Each of the strangers had a gun, and they were accompanied by two bearers and a vast amount of provisions.

They had heard that there was a tiger in the area, and they wanted to shoot it.

One of the hunters, who looked even more strange than the others, had come all the way from America to shoot a tiger, and he vowed that he would not leave the country without a tiger’s skin in his baggage. One of his companions had said that he could buy a tiger’s skin in Delhi, but the hunter said he preferred to get his own trophies.

These men had money to spend, and, as most of the villagers needed money badly, they were only too willing to go into the forest to construct a machan for the hunters. The platform, big enough to take the three men, was put up in the branches of a tall tun, or mahogany tree.

It was the only night the hunters used the machan. At the end of March, though the days are warm, the nights are still cold. The hunters had neglected to bring blankets, and by midnight their teeth were chattering. Ramu, having tied up a buffalo calf for them at the foot of the tree, made as if to go home but instead circled the area, hanging up bits and pieces of old clothing on small trees and bushes. He thought he owed that much to the tiger. He knew the wily old king of the jungle would keep well away from the bait if he saw the bits of clothing—for where there were men’s clothes, there would be men.

The vigil lasted well into the night but the tiger did not come near the tun tree. Perhaps he wasn’t hungry; perhaps he got Ramu’s message. In any case, the men in the tree soon gave themselves away.
The cold was really too much for them. A flask of rum was produced, and passed round, and it was not long before there was more purpose to finishing the rum than to finishing off a tiger. Silent at first, the men soon began talking in whispers; and to jungle creatures a human whisper is as telling as a trumpet-call.

Soon the men were quite merry, talking in loud voices. And when the first morning light crept over the forest, and Ramu and his friends came back to fetch the great hunters, they found them fast asleep in the *machan*.

The hunters looked surly and embarrassed as they trudged back to the village.

‘No game left in these parts,’ said the American.

‘Wrong time of the year for tiger,’ said the second man.

‘Don’t know what the country’s coming to,’ said the third.

And complaining about the weather, the poor quality of cartridges, the quantity of rum they had drunk, and the perversity of tigers, they drove away in disgust.

It was not until the onset of summer that an event occurred which altered the hunting habits of the old tiger and brought him into conflict with the villagers.

There had been no rain for almost two months, and the tall jungle grass had become a billowy, dry, yellow sea. Some refugee settlers, living in an area where the forest had been cleared, had been careless while cooking and had started a jungle fire. Slowly it spread into the interior, from where the acrid smell and the fumes smoked the tiger out towards the edge of the jungle. As night came on, the flames grew more vivid, and the smell stronger. The tiger turned and made for the *jheel*, where he knew he would be safe provided he swam across to the little island in the centre.

Next morning he was on the island, which was untouched by the fire. But his surroundings had changed. The slopes of the hills were black with burnt grass, and most of the tall bamboo had disappeared. The deer and the wild pig, finding that their natural cover had gone, fled further east.

When the fire had died down and the smoke had cleared, the tiger prowled through the forest again but found no game. Once he came across the body of a burnt rabbit, but he could not eat it. He drank at the *jheel* and settled down in a shady spot to sleep the day away. Perhaps, by evening, some of the animals would return. If not, he too would have to look for new hunting-grounds—or new game.

The tiger spent five more days looking for suitable game to kill. By that time he was so hungry that he even resorted to rooting among the dead leaves and burnt-out stumps of trees, searching for worms and beetles. This was a sad come-down for the king of the jungle. But even now he hesitated to leave the area, for he had a deep
suspicion and fear of the forests further east—forests that were fast being swallowed up by human habitation. He could have gone north, into high mountains, but they did not provide him with the long grass he needed. A panther could manage quite well up there, but not a tiger who loved the natural privacy of the heavy jungle. In the hills, he would have to hide all the time.

At break of day, the tiger came to the jheel. The water was now shallow and muddy, and a green scum had spread over the top. But it was still drinkable and the tiger quenched his thirst.

He lay down across his favourite rock, hoping for a deer but none came. He was about to get up and go away when he heard an animal approach.

The tiger at once leaped off his perch and flattened himself on the ground, his tawny, striped skin merging with the dry grass. A heavy animal was moving through the bushes, and the tiger waited patiently.

A buffalo emerged and came to the water.

The buffalo was alone.

He was a big male, and his long curved horns lay right back across his shoulders. He moved leisurely towards the water, completely unaware of the tiger’s presence.

The tiger hesitated before making his charge. It was a long time—many years—since he had killed a buffalo, and he knew the villagers would not like it. But the pangs of hunger overcame his scruples. There was no morning breeze, everything was still, and the smell of the tiger did not reach the buffalo. A monkey chattered on a nearby tree, but his warning went unheeded.

Crawling stealthily on his stomach, the tiger skirted the edge of the jheel and approached the buffalo from the rear. The water birds, who were used to the presence of both animals, did not raise an alarm.
Getting closer, the tiger glanced around to see if there were men, or other buffaloes, in the vicinity. Then, satisfied that he was alone, he crept forward. The buffalo was drinking, standing in shallow water at the edge of the tank, when the tiger charged from the side and bit deep into the animal’s thigh.

The buffalo turned to fight, but the tendons of his right hind leg had been snapped, and he could only stagger forward a few paces. But he was a buffalo—the bravest of the domestic cattle. He was not afraid. He snorted, and lowered his horns at the tiger; but the great cat was too fast, and circling the buffalo, bit into the other hind leg.

The buffalo crashed to the ground, both hind legs crippled, and then the tiger dashed in, using both tooth and claw, biting deep into the buffalo’s throat until the blood gushed out from the jugular vein.

The buffalo gave one long, last bellow before dying.
The tiger, having rested, now began to gorge himself, but, even though he had been starving for days, he could not finish the huge carcase. At least one good meal still remained, when satisfied and feeling his strength returning, he quenched his thirst at the jheel. Then he dragged the remains of the buffalo into the bushes to hide it from the vultures, and went off to find a place to sleep.

He would return to the kill when he was hungry.

The villagers were upset when they discovered that a buffalo was missing; and next day, when Ramu and Shyam came running home to say that they found the carcase near the jheel, half eaten by a tiger, the men were disturbed and angry. They felt that the tiger had tricked and deceived them. And they knew that once he got a taste for domestic cattle, he would make a habit of slaughtering them.

Kundan Singh, Shyam’s father and the owner of the dead buffalo, said he would go after the tiger himself.

‘It is all very well to talk about what you will do to the tiger,’ said his wife, ‘but you should never have let the buffalo go off on its own.’

‘He had been out on his own before,’ said Kundan. ‘This is the first time the tiger has attacked one of our beasts. A devil must have entered the Maharaj.’

‘He must have been very hungry,’ said Shyam.
‘Well, we are hungry too,’ said Kundan Singh.
‘Our best buffalo—the only male in our herd.’
‘The tiger will kill again,’ said Ramu’s father.
‘If we let him,’ said Kundan.
‘Should we send for the shikaris?’

‘No. They were not clever. The tiger will escape them easily. Besides, there is no time. The tiger will return for another meal tonight. We must finish him off ourselves!’

‘But how?’

Kundan Singh smiled secretively, played with the ends of his moustache for a few moments, and then, with great pride, produced from under his cot a double-barrelled gun of ancient vintage.

‘My father bought it from an Englishman,’ he said.
‘How long ago was that?’
‘At the time I was born.’
‘And have you ever used it?’ asked Ramu’s father, who was not sure that the gun would work.
‘Well, some years back, I let it off at some bandits. You remember the time when those dacoits raided our village? They chose the wrong village, and were severely beaten for their pains. As they left, I fired my gun off at them. They didn’t stop running until they crossed the Ganga!’

‘Yes, but did you hit anyone?’

‘I would have, if someone’s goat hadn’t got in the way at the last moment. But we had roast mutton that night! Don’t worry, brother, I know how the thing fires.’

Accompanied by Ramu’s father and some others, Kundan set out for the jheel, where, without shifting the buffalo’s carcase—for they knew that the tiger would not come near them if he suspected a trap—they made another machan in the branches of a tall tree some thirty feet from the kill.

Later that evening—at the hour of cow-dust—Kundan Singh and Ramu’s father settled down for the night on their crude platform in the tree.

Several hours passed, and nothing but a jackal was seen by the watchers. And then, just as the moon came up over the distant hills, Kundan and his companion were startled by a low ‘A-ooonh’, followed by a suppressed, rumbling growl.

Kundan grasped his old gun, whilst his friend drew closer to him for comfort. There was complete silence for a minute or two—time that was an agony of suspense for the watchers—and then the sound of stealthy footfalls on dead leaves under the trees.

A moment later the tiger walked out into the moonlight and stood over his kill.

At first Kundan could do nothing. He was completely overawed by the size of this magnificent tiger. Ramu’s father had to nudge him, and then Kundan quickly put the gun to his shoulder, aimed at the tiger’s head, and pressed the trigger.

The gun went off with a flash and two loud bangs, as Kundan fired both barrels. Then there was a tremendous roar. One of the bullets had grazed the tiger’s head.

The enraged animal rushed at the tree and tried to leap up into the branches. Fortunately the machan had been built at a safe height, and the tiger was unable to reach it. It roared again and then bounded off into the forest.

‘What a tiger!’ exclaimed Kundan, half in fear and half in admiration. ‘I feel as though my liver has turned to water,’

‘You missed him completely,’ said Ramu’s father. ‘Your gun makes a big noise; an arrow would have done more damage.’

‘I did not miss him,’ said Kundan, feeling offended. ‘You heard him roar, didn’t you? Would he have been so angry if he had not been hit? If I have wounded him badly, he will die.’
‘And if you have wounded him slightly, he may turn into a man-eater, and then where will we be?’
‘I don’t think he will come back,’ said Kundan. ‘He will leave these forests.’

They waited until the sun was up before coming down from the tree. They found a few drops of blood on the dry grass but no trail led into the forest, and Ramu’s father was convinced that the wound was only a slight one.

The bullet, missing the fatal spot behind the ear, had only grazed the back of the skull and cut a deep groove at its base. It took a few days to heal, and during this time the tiger lay low and did not go near the jheel except when it was very dark and he was very thirsty.

The villagers thought the tiger had gone away, and Ramu and Shyam—accompanied by some other youths, and always carrying axes and lathis—began bringing buffaloes to the tank again during the day; but they were careful not to let any of them stray far from the herd, and they returned home while it was still daylight.

It was some days since the jungle had been ravaged by the fire, and in the tropics the damage is repaired quickly. In spite of it being the dry season, new life was creeping into the forest.

While the buffaloes wallowed in the muddy water, and the boys wrestled on their grassy islet, a tawny eagle soared high above them, looking for a meal—a sure sign that some of the animals were beginning to return to the forest. It was not long before his keen eyes detected a movement in the glade below.

What the eagle with its powerful eyesight saw was a baby hare, a small fluffy thing, its long pink-tinted ears laid flat along its sides. Had it not been creeping along between two large stones, it would have escaped notice. The eagle waited to see if the mother was about, and as he waited he realized that he was not the only one who coveted this juicy morsel. From the bushes there had appeared a sinuous, yellow creature, pressed low to the ground and moving rapidly towards the hare. It was a yellow jungle cat, hardly noticeable in the scorched grass. With great stealth the jungle cat began to stalk the baby hare.

He pounced. The hare’s squeal was cut short by the cat’s cruel claws; but it had been heard by the mother hare, who now bounded into the glade and without the slightest hesitation went for the surprised cat.

There was nothing haphazard about the mother hare’s attack. She flashed around behind the cat and jumped clean over it. As she landed, she kicked back, sending a stinging jet of dust shooting into the cat’s face. She did this again and again.
The bewildered cat, crouching and snarling, picked up the kill and tried to run away with it. But the hare would not permit this. She continued her leaping and buffeting, till eventually the cat, out of sheer frustration, dropped the kill and attacked the mother.

The cat sprang at the hare a score of times, lashing out with its claws; but the mother hare was both clever and agile enough to keep just out of reach of those terrible claws, and drew the cat further and further away from her baby—for she did not as yet know that it was dead.

The tawny eagle saw his chance. Swift and true, he swooped. For a brief moment, as his wings overspread the furry little hare and his talons sank deep into it, he caught a glimpse of the cat racing towards him and the mother hare fleeing into the bushes. And then with a shrill ‘*kee-ee-ee*’ of triumph, he rose and whirled away with his dinner.

The boys had heard his shrill cry and looked up just in time to see the eagle flying over the *jheel* with the small little hare held firmly in its talons.

‘Poor hare,’ said Shyam. ‘Its life was short.’

‘That’s the law of the jungle,’ said Ramu. ‘The eagle has a family too, and must feed it.’

‘I wonder if we are any better than animals,’ said Shyam

‘Perhaps we are a little better, in some ways,’ said Ramu. ‘Grandfather always says, “To be able to laugh and to be merciful are the only things that make man better than the beast”.’

The next day, while the boys were taking the herd home, one of the buffaloes lagged behind. Ramu did not realize that the animal was missing until he heard an agonized bellow behind him. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the big, striped tiger dragging the buffalo into a clump of young bamboo. At the same time the herd became aware of the danger, and the buffaloes snorted with fear as they hurried along the forest path. To urge them forward, and to warn his friends, Ramu cupped his hands to his mouth and gave vent to a yodelling call.

The buffaloes bellowed, the boys shouted, and the birds flew shrieking from the trees. It was almost a stampede by the time the herd emerged from the forest. The villagers heard the thunder of hooves, and saw the herd coming home amidst clouds of dust and confusion, and knew that something was wrong.

‘The tiger!’ shouted Ramu. ‘He is here! He has killed one of the buffaloes.’

‘He is afraid of us no longer,’ said Shyam.

‘Did you see where he went?’ asked Kundan Singh, hurrying up to them.
‘I remember the place,’ said Ramu. ‘He dragged the buffalo in amongst the bamboo.’

‘Then there is no time to lose,’ said his father. ‘Kundan, you take your gun and two men, and wait near the suspension bridge, where the Garur stream joins the Ganga. The jungle is narrow there. We will beat the jungle from our side, and drive the tiger towards you. He will not escape us, unless he swims the river!’

‘Good!’ said Kundan, running into his house for his gun, with Shyam close at his heels. ‘Was it one of our buffaloes again?’ he asked.

‘It was Ramu’s buffalo this time,’ said Shyam. ‘A good milk buffalo.’

‘Then Ramu’s father will beat the jungle thoroughly. You boys had better come with me. It will not be safe for you to accompany the beaters.’

Kundan Singh, carrying his gun and accompanied by Ramu, Shyam and two men, headed for the river junction, while Ramu’s father collected about twenty men from the village and, guided by one of the boys who had been with Ramu, made for the spot where the tiger had killed the buffalo.

The tiger was still eating when he heard the men coming. He had not expected to be disturbed so soon. With an angry ‘whoof!’ he bounded into a bamboo thicket and watched the men through a screen of leaves and tall grass.

The men did not seem to take much notice of the dead buffalo, but gathered round their leader and held a consultation. Most of them carried hand-drums slung from their shoulder. They also carried sticks, spears and axes.

After a hurried conversation, they entered the denser part of the jungle, beating their drums with the palms of their hands. Some of the men banged empty kerosene tins. These made even more noise than the drums.

The tiger did not like the noise and retreated deeper into the jungle. But he was surprised to find that the men, instead of going away, came after him into the jungle, banging away on their drums and tins, and shouting at the top of their voices. They had separated now, and advanced single or in pairs, but nowhere were they more than fifteen yards apart. The tiger could easily have broken through this slowly advancing semicircle of men—one swift blow from his paw would have felled the strongest of them—but his main aim was to get away from the noise. He hated and feared noise made by men.

He was not a man-eater and he would not attack a man unless he was very angry or frightened or very desperate; and he was none of these things as yet. He had eaten
well, and he would have liked to rest in peace—but there would be no rest for any animal until the men ceased their tremendous clatter and din.

For an hour Ramu’s father and the others beat through the jungle, calling, drumming and trampling the undergrowth. The tiger had no rest. Whenever he was able to put some distance between himself and the men, he would sink down in some shady spot to rest; but, within five or ten minutes, the trampling and drumming would sound nearer, and the tiger, with an angry snarl, would get up and pad north, pad silently north along the narrowing strip of jungle, towards the junction of the Garur stream and the Ganga. Ten years back, he would have had the jungle on his right in which to hide; but the trees had been felled long ago, to make way for humans and houses, and now he could only move to the left, towards the river.

It was about noon when the tiger finally appeared in the open. He longed for the darkness and security of the night, for the sun was his enemy. Kundan and the boys had a clear view of him as he stalked slowly along, now in the open with the sun glinting on his glossy side, now in the shade or passing through the shorter reeds. He was still out of range of Kundan’s gun, but there was no fear of his getting out of the beat, as the ‘stops’ were all picked men from the village. He disappeared among some bushes but soon reappeared to retrace his steps, the beaters having done their work well. He was now only one hundred and fifty yards from the rocks where Kundan Singh waited, and he looked very big.

The beat had closed in, and the exit along the bank downstream was completely blocked, so the tiger turned into a belt of reeds, and Kundan Singh expected that the head would soon peer out of the cover a few yards away. The beaters were now making a great noise, shouting and beating their drums, but nothing moved; and Ramu, watching from a distance, wondered, ‘Has he slipped through the beaters?’ And he half hoped so.

Tins clashed, drums beat, and some of the men poked into the reeds with their spears or long bamboos. Perhaps one of these thrusts found a mark, because at last the tiger was roused, and with an angry desperate snarl he charged out of the reeds, splashing his way through an inlet of mud and water.

Kundan Singh fired, and his bullet struck the tiger on the thigh.

The mighty animal stumbled; but he was up in a minute, and rushing through a gap in the narrowing line of beaters, he made straight for the only way across the river—the suspension bridge that passed over the Ganga here, providing a route into the high hills beyond.

‘We’ll get him now,’ said Kundan, priming his gun again. ‘He’s right in the open!’
The suspension bridge swayed and trembled as the wounded tiger lurched across it. Kundan fired, and this time the bullet grazed the tiger’s shoulder. The animal bounded forward, lost his footing on the unfamiliar, slippery planks of the swaying bridge, and went over the side, falling headlong into the strong, swirling waters of the river.

He rose to the surface once, but the current took him under and away, and only a thin streak of blood remained on the river’s surface.

Kundan and the others hurried downstream to see if the dead tiger had been washed up on the river’s banks; but though they searched the riverside for several miles, they did not find the king of the forest.

He had not provided anyone with a trophy. His skin would not be spread on a couch, nor would his head be hung up on a wall. No claw of his would be hung as a charm around the neck of a child. No villager would use his fat as a cure for rheumatism.

At first the villagers were glad because they felt their buffaloes were safe. Then the men began to feel that something had gone out of their lives, out of the life of the forest; they began to feel that the forest was no longer a forest. It had been shrinking year by year, but, as long as the tiger had been there and the villagers had heard it roar at night, they had known that they were still secure from the intruders and newcomers who came to fell the trees and eat up the land and let the flood waters into the village. But, now that the tiger had gone, it was as though a protector had gone, leaving the forest open and vulnerable, easily destroyable. And, once the forest was destroyed, they too would be in danger…

There was another thing that had gone with the tiger, another thing that had been lost, a thing that was being lost everywhere—something called “nobility”.

Ramu remembered something that his grandfather had once said: ‘The tiger is the very soul of India, and when the last tiger has gone, so will the soul of the country.’

The boys lay flat on their stomachs on their little mud island and watched the monsoon clouds, gathering overhead.

‘The king of our forest is dead,’ said Shyam. ‘There are no more tigers.’

‘There must be tigers,’ said Ramu. ‘How can there be an India without tigers?’

The river had carried the tiger many miles away from its home, from the forest it had always known, and brought it ashore on a strip of warm yellow sand, where it lay in the sun, quite still, but breathing.

Vultures gathered and waited at a distance, some of them perching on the branches of nearby trees.
But the tiger was more drowned than hurt, and as the river water oozed out of his mouth, and the warm sun made new life throb through his body, he stirred and stretched, and his glazed eyes came into focus. Raising his head, he saw trees and tall grass.

Slowly he heaved himself off the ground and moved at a crouch to where the grass waved in the afternoon breeze. Would he be harried again, and shot at? There was no smell of Man. The tiger moved forward with greater confidence.

There was, however, another smell in the air—a smell that reached back to the time when he was young and fresh and full of vigour—a smell that he had almost forgotten but could never quite forget—the smell of a tigress!

He raised his head high, and new life surged through his tired limbs. He gave a full-throated roar and moved purposefully through the tall grass. And the roar came back to him, calling him, calling him forward—a roar that meant there would be more tigers in the land!
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Ruskin Bond
Read More in Puffin

*Hip-Hop Nature Boy and Other Poems*
Ruskin Bond

_If a tortoise could run_
_And losses be won,_
_And bullies be buttered on toast;_
_If a song brought a shower_
_And a gun grew a flower,_
_This world would be nicer than most!_

Beautiful, poignant and funny, Ruskin Bond’s verses for children are a joy to read to yourself on a lazy summer afternoon or to recite in school among friends. For the first time, his poems for children, old and new, come together in this illustrated volume. Nature, love, friends, school, books—all find a place in the poetry of India’s favourite children’s writer.
Read More in Puffin

Thick as Thieves: Tales of Friendship
Ruskin Bond

Somewhere in life
There must be someone
To take your hand
And share the torrid day.
Without the touch of friendship
There is no life and we must fade away.

Discover a hidden pool with three young boys, laugh out loud as a little mouse makes demands on a lonely writer, follow the mischievous ‘four feathers’ as they discover a baby lost in the hills and witness the bond between a tiger and his master. Some stories will make you smile, some will bring tears to your eyes, some may make your heart skip a beat but all of them will renew your faith in the power of friendship.
I know the world’s a crowded place,
And elephants do take up space,
But if it makes a difference, Lord,
I’d gladly share my room and board.
A baby elephant would do…
But, if he brings his mother too,
There’s Dad’s garage. He wouldn’t mind.
To elephants, he’s more than kind.
But I wonder what my Mum would say
If their aunts and uncles came to stay!

Ruskin Bond has entertained generations of readers for many decades. This delightful collection of poetry, prose and non-fiction brings together some of his best work in a single volume. Sumptuously illustrated, *Uncles, Aunts and Elephants* is a book to treasure for all times.
THE BEGINNING

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