

RISHIKUMAR

Amarendra Chakravorty

The thick masses of clouds in the sky were, from time to time is making angry sounds. Cowherds had led their cows from the field— there was a lone calf tied by somebody to a post and frightened at the roar of clouds was bellowing for her mother.

Rishi was intent on catching grasshoppers. He frowned at the bellowing of the calf. Could one catch grasshoppers amidst all these bellows? The grasshoppers were so clever. He went up to the calf and asked, 'who had tied you? You can't even butt, with those tender horns. Go, saying this he uprooted the post and released the calf giving a twist to its tail.

A large grasshopper came to sit on a prickly thistle, which swayed at the weight of the grasshopper. How lovely were its colours! Just like a foreign postage stamp. Rishi knelt, an arm away. Holding his breath, he advanced inch by inch to grab the unsuspecting grasshopper. Alas! all in vain. Startled, Rishi found his fingers move. But the grasshoppers flew away with a sweep and swayed in the air.

Rishi's eyes narrowed in excitement, he was thrilled to watch the grasshoppers. He was desperate to catch one of them. He gave it a try again. He could almost catch one of them within a moment when the clouds roared very loudly and the grasshoppers danced away to a corner of the field.

Rishi was angry. He looked up at the sky and asked, 'who made the sound? Do you think people on earth have no work? Idiots!'

Rishi's anger did not subside. He picked up a stone and threw it at one of the cloud-masses. One of the clots of the cloud had descended lower than the others and was considered responsible for the escape of the grasshoppers. But the stone did not rise up to that height. Rishi challenged it as loudly, "Come down a little more, if you have the courage. I'll pound you to a pulp."

Some people were passing by. Hearing Rishi shouting they glanced at the field and talked to one another about Rishi. Two of them stood at two opposite points of the road and six others came quickly to the middle of the field to surround Rishi. By appearance some of them did not look like Bengalis. Some of them were very tall, with long moustaches like black

cats', wide whiskers, red eyes, strong builds. One of them asked Rishi in Bengali. "Who else was here with you? Whom were you talking to?"

Rishi was watching them. He did not answer the question and asked instead, "Are you dacoits from Chambal?"

One of the fellows was looking around. He held Rishi's chin by his left hand and said, "Your father has sent us. He has bought you a big gun. Come, you'll see."

"I've a gun. Are you Chambal dacoits?"

The fellow was about to say something when another stopped him, in Hindi, "Don't talk much. You are much too clever." He turned towards Rishi "Come quick."

"I'll not go home now. Tell me, are you Chambal dacoits?"

The fourth one blurted out, "Yes, yes, you've got it right. We are indeed coming from Chambal."

As he mentioned Chambal, there was a roar from the clouds and a streak of lightning ran up the sky, almost hissing like a snake.

Rishi was no more concerned with the clouds. He said, "That's good! For a long time I was thinking of you. Tell me, are there hills or big and dry canals in Chambal? When the police come, do you take shelter in those trenches and fight with your guns?"

"Yes, yes."

"Will you take me there, to your joints."

The fellow who was speaking Hindi gave a weird smile. He swung one side of his moustache, as a cat swung its tail and said, "We are looking just for you. Come on' and pulled Rishi's hand."

As Rishi crossed the field along with the fellows, he heard them discussing in a hushed voice which way they should take him, on to the station. Rishi did not know Hindi but could get a hang of it. They were looking this and that way very cautiously and went on talking in that hush-hush fashion. Could be, this was because they were real dacoits from Chambal.

Rishi was engrossed in his thought that he would be going to Chambal with those dacoits. As they reached the road, they discussed with those who were on guard, in whispers all the time. Rishi asked, "Are there jungles in Chambal?"

The fellow, who was short with deep wound on his left cheek, said. "Yes, there are many dense jungles."

"Are there deer? Can they be seen?"

"Yes there are in plenty. We kill them every day."

Rishi was taken aback. "Kill them! Why?"

"We kill them, cook them with spices and eat them with a relish."

"Oh my!" Rishi was pained to hear that. "No, I won't go with you." He turned back, walking towards his home. A couple of them ran after him, one clasping his hand over Rishi's mouth and another tried to get hold of his hand. Rishi took back his hand and with both hands force the fellow off his mouth and turned back to them, "Take care! people who kill deer must not touch me."

No sooner had he uttered the word 'touch' than another thrust a handkerchief to his nose and mouth and the others clasped him stoutly. A man, who was paddling his cycle and whistling towards them, hands in air, saw this sight, forgot his whistling, took hold of the handle of the cycle and sped off.

Rishi could get strong smell from the handkerchief. But he was held so tightly that he could not move. It was strange, but he felt like sleeping. He fell asleep after a while.

The sound and jerk of the train carriage broke Rishi's sleep. He was a bit surprised about the ties that bound his hands, legs and mouth. The ties reminded him of the Chambal dacoits. He was aware that he was in grave danger. His limbs ached because of the bonds; his body was wet in sweat. He realised that he had been put in a jute sack.

He could hear people in the compartment talking— so there were other people around. He tried his utmost to talk to them but he could make no sound. His efforts to free his limbs gave him more pain. Gathering all his strength he pushed the compartment walls with his legs and moved up. He had no idea, which way he moved, where exactly he was. Was he underneath a seat or above a bunk? If he were above the bunk, he would fall. He was shaking his body as much as he could.

Some people in the compartment were looking suspiciously at the moving sack.

"Whose sack is this?" "What's in it?" "Isn't bit ghostly"— Some such words filled the air. The others in the compartment were inquisitive—"What's the matter?" "Where?" "What?" "What's happened?" —so said they and crowded around the sack.

Some came forward and untied the knot of the sack. Rishi saw one of the dacoits was clutching at the door handle of the moving train and leaning outside. Was he trying to jump out?

As the ties were loosened, Rishi shouted, "Catch him, catch him, he's a dacoit from Chambal." The train was running so fast that the dacoit tried but dared not jump out. He was bound up thoroughly by those very ties with which Rishi was bound. Rishi searched every nook and corner of the compartment but found no trace of other dacoits. They had put one chap of the gang on guard in this compartment and divided themselves in various compartments so that they did not attract notice.

"They were eight people, eight. Has anyone got a gun here?" Rishi looked up at the people and asked. An old man with white beard and white hair was engrossed in a fat book beside a window— he came to sense that there was a commotion in the compartment. Now he was listening, with his book closed. He came near Rishi and said, "No need for a gun. They had all fled. What's your name?"

"Rishikumar Chaudhuri".

"How do you know they are Chambal dacoits?" asked somebody.

"What else are they? They told me themselves."

A young man in shirts and pants, with light blue spectacles, asked Rishi, "Why did the Chambal dacoits take you?"

Rishi was angry. "Why would they take me? I chose to go with them. When I learnt that they kill deer, I didn't feel like going. Then they applied medicine to my nose, made me sleep and were forcibly taking me."

A grams and nuts vendor was listening to Rishi, his eyes widened at the shock caused by Rishi's tale. Rishi told him, "I don't have money on me now. Will you give me five packets of grams and nuts? I'll send you the price when I get back home, if you give me your address." Others were embarrassed to hear him, "What are you saying! Why should you pay the price? We shall share it. You eat as much as you want. Will you be able to eat five packets?"

"I'm feeling hungry. The Dacoits have starved me." said Rishi.

"Aha, I should have thought before." said one lady, bringing out from her Tiffin-carrier fried puffed up bread, potato curry and two pieces of sweetmeat. She served them on a dish and offered Rishi, "Eat, your mother must be greatly worried, I don't know why she doesn't keep an eye on you."

A little while later, Rishi finishing his food, said, "Now, give me grams and nuts. Five packets."

The lady objected, "Should you eat so much grams and nuts? Take some more bread. Will you like two more sweetmeats?"

Her son, of the same age as Rishi, whispered from her side, "Give him my share, mother."

The woman asked, "What will you like? Sweetmeat of potato curry?"

"No more of that now. That packet of grams and nuts is so nicely coloured, like cockroaches' wings."

Rishi went on munching grams and replying to many questions, when an old man, who was carrying green coconuts on a bamboo pole, came to Rishi and asked, "Like to have a coconut?"

"How lovely these are" said Rishi "as green as a parrot."

"Like to eat? You don't have to pay."

"No, I don't like to see cutting a coconut."

"Why are you filling your belly with grams and nuts." said another. "When you come to Kharagpur, you will get so many good foodstuff to eat. And just wait and see, how much the police will reward you with. A live Chambal dacoit has been caught, just because of you. Not a matter to trifle with. May be they will reward us too.

The chap who was bound up suddenly broke into tears loudly, "I'm no Chambal dacoit, sirs, I don't even know where Chambal is. I am a poor man please get me free."

"Weren't you going along with the dacoits kidnapping this boy? How could he recognise you?"

"I was just accompanying them. They took me on as an apprentice and were teaching how to steal boys. They are in this very train. Hand them over to the police but free me, please."

"We'll see to it that they are arrested when the train stops. Just tell the police all this."

Rishi was all the time munching nuts. He frowned at the chap, "You aren't a Chambal Dacoit?"

"No sir, I can touch your feet and swear on you", saying this the fellow made a gesture with both tied hands.

Rishi forgot to munch. He looked outside, beyond the windows, saying nothing.

As the train stopped at Khargpur, a few went up to inform the police. Those who were scheduled to get down at Kharagpur accompanied them. The Railway police tied the fellow's waist with ropes, untied the ropes tied to him and handcuffed him. They took him to other compartments and caught hold of the rest of the gang. Only one jumped through the door and got lost in the crowd.

The dacoits tied at waist and handcuffed led to the platform. They all were made to stand in a line and a police officer started questioning them and taking notes.

Rishi was asked to sit on a chair. Waiting and waiting, he yawned. He reclined on the back of the chair and gazed at the wires of the electric train. The wires, just like lines on a notebook, were drawn long and straight against the sky. Those must have been stretched right up to Delhi or Mumbai or Chambal from Kolkata. That set Rishi on further thoughts. Kolkata to Delhi— the wires must be very long. How many posts in between? And where exactly was Chambal? Were Chambal dacoits used to cry so loud?

As he was engrossed in these thoughts, Rishi saw a flock of parrots flying over the wires like a slice of green. The police officer was writing all the time when suddenly Rishi asked him, "I say, man can build aeroplanes, but why can't he fly along? Birds cannot even make a pencil."

The officer had stopped writing and was rocking the pencil. He stared at Rishi and asked, "Sri Prabhat Kumar Chaudhuri is your father's name?"

Rishi said "yes". After giving his home address, Rishi pointing towards the rifle of a policeman asked again "Where can one buy those rifles?"

This time the officer broke into laughter and said, "You want some? Okay, I'll write to the Prime Minister. If he agrees to give you one such rifle, I'll deliver it at your house. Now, tell me, what do you want? You'll be glad to know we were trying for a long time to apprehend this gang of child-snatchers. What do you want?"

"I want to go home in a police jeep."

"That's all? Nothing else? Take something else."

"Well, give me a bow and arrows. Real things. Like those which Santhals have."

"All right. A jeep will take you home right now. And I'll ask carpenters to make you bows just like Santhals. Only I can't give you real arrows."

"Then I don't want bows or arrows."

"Well, you seem to take offence quickly. This is not right." Smiling, the officer looked at his wristwatch. He switched on his radio. The radio was playing a song by Purnadas Baul. Rishi listened with attention. When the song ended, he said, "There's a good deal of similarity between birds and bauls. If I can, I will be a baul when I grow up."

Just at that time the radio announced. "Rishikumar Chaudhuri, aged eight, with a slight build, fair complexion, good features, a sign of incision at the bottom of his chin, intelligent, rather prone to fancy, is missing since yesterday afternoon. If you have a clue, inform the Detective Department at the police headquarters in Kolkata". Rishi blurted out before the announcement was finished. "Wow! Very amusing! Well, what does that mean, prone to fancy?"

The officer said, "Prone to fancy indicates those who want to become a bird or a baul. Yesterday also, the radio announced you missing. I'd sent a message to the police headquarters. I can see it has not reached the radio station as yet." He stood up from his chair, after a little while, he ordered a smart policeman with a revolver fitted to his belt, "Your jeep is ready, Datta, you'll go with Rishi. Take some sandwiches, fish fry, apples or something for him. The officer shook hands with Rishi.

Rishi sat straight beside Datta in the jeep. Now and then the real revolver at Datta's waist brushed sometimes against his skin as the jeep stumbled on. Rishi was grave and taut. After some time his head wobbled quite frequently and rested on Datta's shoulders. Datta gently put Rishi's head on his lap.

He did not wake up even after they reached home. His father and mother tried to wake him up but Rishi was dead asleep. People from nearby who were waiting to see Rishi since evening tried to rouse him from sleep but noise or shake could disturb his profound sleep. Rishi's father asked Datta, feeling his pulse, "What's the matter? Is he ill or something?"

Datta smiled, "Don't worry over him. May be he is tired after his fight with the Chambal dacoits. We've fed him. When he wakes up tomorrow morning, he'll himself narrate his adventure in Chambal. Goodbye."

Rishi's mother was pale with anxiety. She took Rishi in her arms, laid him on the bed, brushed off hair from his forehead and said, "Can you believe such a small child could do all those things?"

Rishi's father was pacing up and down. He was very grave, "From now on, we'll have to keep a firm watch on him."

Once more, an attempt was made to rouse Rishi from sleep and to make him drink milk, but he only murmured, "Well, do your moustaches grow bugs?"

The next morning Rishi got up from sleep and told his mother, "Ma, was food served regularly at my zoo?" Rishi's mother had been beside

herself, worrying over Rishi. She just had no thought for grasshoppers and bats. "Bipin's mother must have fed them", she said.

Rishi sprang up and ran to the roof. There were a few small sheds made up of brick and wood, alongside the wall of the roof. Titmouses in one shed, grasshoppers in another, cockroaches in one, crickets in another and even large green grasshoppers in one. There was one young yellow-beaked black bird in one shed. Rishi's heart gave a leap. The black bird was dead, flat on its back at the corner of the cage, its tender legs crumpled against its belly. Rishi shot off to his mother, just like a dry leaf blown by wind from one place to another. His mother was reading a newspaper. Rishi shouted, "Ma, food was not surely served two days in my zoo. Go and see the black bird lying dead. How cruel you all can be!"

Rishi's mother looked up. There were tears in Rishi's eyes. "Shame on you, Rishi. You are becoming unreasonable. I was constantly worrying where you were, whether you had anything to eat. Can one remember feeding cockroaches and birds during such times? Tell me." she said.

"My train companions fed me, even the police fed me and you clearly forgot to feed my small friends."

Rishi wiped off tears with his shirtsleeves, went to the roof and picked up the dead black bird softly.

The flower garden nurtured by mother was at the back of the house. Rishi dug a hole at the corner of the garden and laid the bird there. He knelt by the hole and spent a while gazing at the bird. Tears were streaming down his eyes. His eyes fixed on the eyes of the bird, he murmured, "Bird, please forgive me." He heaped soil on the little grave and planted a flower sapling on it.

It was raining in the garden, as if dust was falling. From out of nowhere, two black birds, with raindrops on their wing came and hovered over Rishi's head making shrill calls. Rishi looked up and stared at the birds. He pondered a while, went up to the roof, and unbolted all the doors of his zoo. The grasshoppers, titmouses, green grasshoppers, finding themselves freed suddenly, all came out and moved, as if in light dances, in the rain, beneath the sky.

"Rishi, where are you Rishi, it's time for your school", his mother was saying as she climbed up to the roof. She found Rishi sitting silently in the rain and staring at the sky. "My god, you're here! You'll catch cold if you sit like this. Come, come along." As his mother clasped his hand, Rishi burst into tears.

"What's up, why are you crying, what's happened?" Mother dragged him from out of the rains towards the top of the steps. "Come, let's see, raise your face", Mother lifted Rishi's tear-stained face. Rishi hid his face in his mother's breast and cried. "There are so many birds in the sky, but where, is my bird Ma?"

In the geography class at the school, Jitenbabu was giving lessons on volcanoes but Rishi paid no heed to the lessons. He was making a promise, as he seemed to still hear the cries of the two black birds, that in future he would never put any creatures of the sky and wind in cages. Jitenbabu stopped his lessons suddenly, closed his book, came near Rishi and asked, "What is volcano?" Rishi was taken by surprise and replied, staring at the teacher, "I've never seen a volcano. Do birds rebirth as birds, sir?"

Jitenbabu was a stern teacher, with an irritable temperament. He had asked Rishi because he found him inattentive; now his reply made him fly into a rage but the mention of the birth reminded him of his son and he calmed down. A few months ago his son went to bathe in Ganga and was never found, carried by the tide of the river. He paused a moment on hearing the query of Rishi and said, "Who can say if one takes rebirth after death. Now I'm teaching you about volcanoes, please pay attention, my boy."

"Sir, are volcanoes to be found on mountains?"

"Volcanoes are mountains. The mountains that have fire inside them are called volcanoes. Fire and lava."

A thought struck Rishi. He interrupted his teacher, 'Sir, I once dreamt of a spring. The springs are also born in mountains'.

From that moment on, Rishi's head brimmed with mountains, springs, and volcanoes. He returned home in the afternoon and paced up and down, rapt in thought.

The next day was holiday. Rishi was busy right from the morning with clay and water. There was piece of uneven land at one corner of the flower garden. He dug up the soil, mixed it with water and made hills with mud. The sun rose high up. Rishi was drenched with sweat, water and clay. There were calls for lunch several times, mother rebuked him but Rishi had no other thought. Stopping and surveying and starting again, he built mountain peaks and drew channels round the hills so that spring could flow. At the back of the peak, a tank was carved out from where water would seep down. A hole was dug beneath to make a furnace, which zigzagged along a small lane right up to the top— it was as if some vertical lines criss-crossing diagonal lines.

The sun was leaning towards the west. Far away, the railway lines could be seen like a large bow. The sun hung like a full moon behind trees that clustered alongside the railway lines. The sky blazed, red and orange, above the trees. Rishi poured water at the top of the peaks, set fire to the dry leaves and branches at the bottom of the hills. Smoke was coming from hill peaks and water trickled, as if a small spring flowing down the side of the hills. Rishi took a few steps down and from a distance watched his creation—mountains, springs and volcanoes. A bit of a sun was still hanging on the sky. Uncouth shadows of the mountain lay on the ground and muddy water, oh! where was the spring, trickled down and the volcano looked as if Kalicharan of class nine was smoking and blowing smoke through his mouth.

Rishi remembered the spring he had dreamt as he watched the violet dance of the setting sun. He took up a crowbar that lay at his feet, struck the mountain repeatedly, and smashed his mountain, spring and volcano into the ground.

The evening fell. Through the darkness he returned to the room and asked his father, "How do mountains, springs and volcanoes grow, Father?" His father looked up from his business papers, cast his glance over Rishi, top to toe, and said, "How awful you look, almost a ghost! You haven't started your studies yet? Where have you been so long?"

"First tell me how springs grow out of mountains, how volcanoes are built?"

Father was annoyed. "All in due time. How did you get all this mud on your body? Where did you go?"

Rishi was about to reply when his mother entered. She was coming that way in search of her son, and hearing their conversation came into the room.

"Can you recognise this ghost?", said his father.

"Don't provoke me. What do I do with this son? He is killing me with his antics."

"Killing you? I'm killing you? Why do you talk like this, Ma?" Rishi was offended.

"All right. I won't talk like this. But you should see yourself in the mirror. Come along, I have to rinse you with soap." Mother almost dragged him into the bathroom.

Rishi looked at the mirror and was surprised. There was no much of a change in his looks. Don't peasants pick up mud on their feet, nose or hair? So what?

As Rishi was ruminating in his dismantled zoo on the roof, something swept by his ear. He plucked it smartly. It was a very long string, sailing by, as if hung from the sky. As he clutched it, there was a pull on the string. Rishi looked up at the sky to find a kite tied to the string high in the air. The kite must have been snapped along with the string and was sailing up in the air, with the string grazing Rishi's roof. Now, held by Rishi, it began to fly. It looked like a small still hawk very high in the air. Rishi played with the string, making the kite dance and touch the clouds. But he failed because the string was not that long. He wished it was longer so that he could have touched the clouds with the kite.

A flight of cranes was speeding from the south to the north, as if a garland of white lotuses. Lest colliding with the kite hurt the cranes. Rishi carefully tried to pull the kite to the west. But Rishi did not know how, one of the cranes tumbled down, as if a flower plucked from a tree. One of its wings was torn and just hung on its body. The crane was trying to keep itself afloat by flapping its other wing, but in vain.

Rishi's heart ached. Did his string cut up the wing? The crane was toppling, pathetically, through the rays of the sun. It dropped down, behind the palm trees at the end of the village and went out of sight. That was the area where gypsies stayed. A few families of the nomads were living there for some time, making huts out of palm leaves.

Rishi climbed down like a hare and ran towards that area. He had let the string go, in sorrow and excitement, and the kite was sailing along to a distant point. Rishi was not thinking of the kite and more. He found the crane put under a basket, with the soil beneath wet with blood, and the crane white as a lotus was breathing with difficulty, drenched in blood and dust.

A thin man, near the basket, was drawing furiously at a clay pipe held between his two hands. His eyes were closed. It looked as if he was sleeping as he smoked.

Rishi drew near him and shouted, 'Hey, can you hear me? I've come to take the crane.'

The man opened his eyes, but only a bit. Rishi could see, his eyes were as red as the furiously red sky. He was a bit taken aback to see human eyes of such a colour. Even then, he persisted. "This crane is mine. I have come to take it."

The man did not respond. He quietly drew a long puff at the pipe and blew out smoke slowly. Then he cast a look at Rishi with half-closed eyes and said, "You want to snatch a frog out of the mouth of a snake? Don't you know Mother Manasa, the goddess of snake, has sent this to me from the heavens?"

Saliva was trickling out the corner of his lips. He clucked with his tongue and turned his head towards the hut, "Hey, Sonali, bring the knife. Let me finish the kill." Somebody threw a knife from inside the hut.

Rishi fretted and pleaded, "Don't kill it. Mother Manasa did not send it. It was flying with its friends but the string of my kite slashed its wing. Give it to me. I'll treat it with medicine." The red eyes of the fellow grew ablaze like the eyes of the female goblins of Mother Kali. He snapped open a cane basket, tapped with his finger the head of a coiled snake and said, "You want to take? Take it."

The snake hissed, heaved up, expanded its hood and curled its tongue. Rishi leapt back, sweat streaming down his body. He folded his hand and pleaded, "Take back your snake. If you give my crane back to me, I'll give your whatever you want."

The fellow thought for a moment and put the snake back into the basket, closing the lid. Rishi was still standing with his hands folded, the diamond ring on the finger of his right hand glistening in the sun of the autumn. The red eyes of the fellow glared— the diamond flashed, as if it were the jewel of the snake's crown.

"I see", the gypsy said, "Mother Manasa has sent you too. Give me that ring and take the crane." Rishi took off the ring at once and handed it over to the fellow. The crane was still panting under the basket. As Rishi sought to pick it, it contracted, embracing the ground. Rishi picked it by force, carefully lifted it, and clasped it to his bosom affectionately. Blood was oozing from his slashed wing. Rishi bent his head to give the crane a shade from the sun and came back to his home. Behind the red-eyed gypsy was heard saying. "Take care, you must not talk of the ring to anybody."

Rishi's shirt was wet with the crane's blood. As he entered his house with the crane, his mother was once more confounded. "Up to your tricks, again, again!"

"No, Ma, I won't keep it as a pet. The string of my kite slashed its wing. I'll just treat it and set it free."

"Were you a bird or something in your previous birth? Whatever happens, happens only to you. When will you come out of all these troubles?"

Rishi wailed, "Ma, how do I cure it? It has bled so much. It needs a doctor immediately."

"Doctor?" said Mother, "It needs a veterinary doctor. Where do you get one here?"

Bipin's mother was crossing the courtyard, after having fed cows, to wash her hands. "Doctor, my foot! Take a bit of camphor, mix it with the juice of Dholkalmi plant, and paste it on the wing. The other day a fox was carrying Panchu's duck. When chased, the fox fled, dropping the duck. The duck bled so much. Camphor and Dholkalmi juice— that's all and bleeding stopped. Go and see how that duck is swimming in the tank and eating water snails."

Rishi put the crane down and ran to snap a few Dholkalmi leaves. Crushing the leaves to bring out juice, Rishi pasted the juice on the crane's wounded wing. Sprinkling camphor dust on the juice, Rishi found that the bleeding had really stopped flowing. Bipin's mother tied the severed wing to its chest with a fine jute string.

Rishi milked a cow in the cowshed, collected it in a coconut shell and held it before the long beak of the crane. The crane turned away its beak. Rishi took the milk once again to its turned beak but the crane once again held back its beak. Bipin's mother was hanging clothes in the courtyard. She burst out laughing seeing Rishi's dilemma, "Does a crane drink milk?"

"It is as white as milk. It won't drink milk?"

"What a word! I'll arrange its food."

Bipin's mother went to the tank, fished out red snails and three-eyed fish in a thin napkin and placed those before the crane. The creature this time curled one of its leg and stood on the other leg with much pain, stood thus a few moments and then cautiously walked towards the snails. Its long neck sort of danced and with its beak, the crane swooped on the snails and fish, one after another, but with obvious pain.

Rishi could not think of anything else. Everyday, after he woke up from sleep, he would rush to the cage of the crane, feed it with his own hands, softly rub its wounded wing, and sit the whole afternoons beneath the blue sky at a corner of the roof with the crane held against his bosom.

The crane recovered fully within seven days. It could fly some distance. Once it flew one corner of the roof to the other, beautifully, its neck elongated, its wings dancing.

The next morning Rishi tore off a page from his notebook and wrote on it, "My name is Rishikumar Chaudhuri. I was flying a kite and the string of the kite slashed the wing of a crane. The crane fell in the gypsy village. A fellow kept it under a basket and would eat it. He had fiercely red eyes. I exchanged my ring for the crane and brought the crane home. I've cured the crane after that. Now it can fly beautifully. I now let it go. If ever its left wing develops a pain again, if it falls on the ground, whoever finds it should nurture it to recover. It eats red snails and small fish."

Rishi read out what he wrote and tied the paper to the wing of the crane with a string. He paced up and down on the roof restlessly with the crane clasped against his breast. When he found a flight of cranes, very white and as well laid-out as decorative lines against a very blue sky, he took the crane off his breast, raised his hands and let the crane fly. The crane flew up some distance but came back above Rishi's head, the paper fluttering at its feet. This it did seven times and then flew away to a distance, towards where the flight of cranes was seen as decorative lines, looking smaller and smaller.

As Rishi gazed, his heart ached, he hid his face with his hands and burst into a cry.

Hearing the cry, his mother rushed up, cradled Rishi's head on her chest and asked, "Rishi, my Rishi, what happened, tell me."

What should he say, he went on crying. Rishi's mother noticed his finger suddenly and said, "My god, where's the ring. What've you done with the ring? Tell me, please. Have you lost it? Where have you lost it? Tell me. If your father knows, he'll kill you. Have you give it to somebody? Say something."

Rishi sobbed and said, "I exchanged the ring for the crane, at the gypsy village. Why did my crane leave me?"

"What do you mean? You have not been wearing the ring so many days? Your Grandma advised us to have the ring on you always, when she died. I know you well, your father warned me so many times but I never took it off your finger. Now, what to do? What do I tell your father?"

Coming down along with Rishi, his mother summoned their gatekeeper, unable to think up anything else. The small but stout Nepalese gatekeeper said after he listened to Rishi's mother. "Don't you give it a

thought, madam? If the ring is still with the gypsy, I'll bring it back. Kindly let the young master come with me. It will be easy if he kindly identifies the gypsy."

"No, no," Rishi's mother was worried, "he should not go there. Who knows what harm they'll perpetrate on him. You take the description of the gypsy thoroughly. Take with you some other people."

The gatekeeper returned within an hour, bringing the ring with him. He handed it over to his lady and said, "The damned fellow said, ring, what ring? When I threatened to call for police, he surrendered the ring without much ado. My small master roams around in the fields, don't put it on him again. Everybody knows now that it is a diamond ring."

Rishi's mother felt as if she was given a fresh lease of life. She said, "Are you mad! Shall I take it out again? My son's life will be in danger then."

When Rishi was lying in the bed at night, he saw the red-eyed gypsy at his window. The gypsy gave a mysterious laugh and said, "You're worse than I am, I can see. You take things back after gifting them."

"Believe me, I didn't want it back," saying this Rishi rose and walked towards the window. He stumbled against a table-leg. Was he asleep? Was he dreaming of the gypsy? How could that be, he had heard his voice clearly. Perhaps he was dozing and that's why he thought he was dreaming. Could this be a dream? It was true he had the ring back, after giving it away.

The next day since dawn Rishi tried to find his crane in the sky. He spent the time on his roof, but where was the crane? Bits of clouds were floating in the sky like beaten cotton. His eyes got fatigued when it seemed a string of moon-like flowers was sailing along from a distant corner of the sky. After gazing at the string, Rishi was convinced, it was really a flight of cranes. He could not close his eyes lest it got lost out of his sight. He looked very critically to locate his crane in the flight. The cranes came atop Rishi and then flew away to another direction. Rishi watched closely but could not see the paper tied to any of the cranes. Did the wounded crane fall off somewhere? Or it went away to another country, just in one day? If it was all right and flying in this land, could it not remember Rishi even once?

As he was thinking thus, somebody called Rishi by his name from below. Rishi leaned down and saw Ismail. He was going by, on a bullock-cart full of earthen pots and pitchers. Ismail used to study in their school, in the same class, even a few months ago. Now he took to drive the cart because his father had died suddenly. He had to take pots and pitchers from

pottery, potatoes and cabbages from peasants, paddy and jute, to distant markets. Rishi called back, "what's it, why do you call me? Listen, did you see a crane fly with a paper tied to its leg?"

"What? A crane? No. Listen, do you want to go to Suyyipur? Today is the market day. Come along, if you want to go." Rishi's heart leapt in joy. He could visit Suyyipur, for one thing. Moreover, there was a chance, he could see his crane, if it flew that way.

The two sides of the road were white with tall reeds. Whatever was white pained Rishi. Anything, which was white, reminded him of the crane. He looked up whenever a bird flew over his head. This bird that bird, all sorts of birds but no sign of his crane. Did it forget him?

Ismail said, "What is this crane you were talking about?" Rishi watched the reeds and said. "Oh, that's nothing. Listen, we can hear the noise from the market." After a while they reached the market place. Ismail tied his bullocks to trunk of a tamarind tree and unloaded his merchandise.

Rishi said, "I'm going for a walk and will come back here. Don't go back, leaving me here."

It was almost a fair, not just a market place. Rishi was hovering around when a sound of flute attracted him amidst all the noise of the market. He searched for the flute-player. An old man, with a white beard and torn, dirty robe, was sitting on a mound of earth and playing on a flute, his eyes closed. He had many flutes in his cloth-bag. How wonderfully he was playing, as if trying to drown the cacophony of the market. Rishi listened to the tune and burst into tears silently. The sun was reflecting on the beard of the man. How many shades of white were there! The man stopped playing and opened his eyes.

Rishi wiped his tears and approached the man, "I want to learn flute. Will you teach me?"

"You have to learn everything by yourself. Take this and give me a rupee and half." The old man took out a flute from his cloth-bag and gave it to Rishi.

"What do I do with it? I'll live with you in your house and you'll teach me the way you play flutes."

The flute-player looked intently at Rishi and then signalled him with his eyes to come out of the crowd and go with him. The old man started to walk. He walked and walked, across the market, beyond the field, beyond the compound where the Holi festival was played and reached a deserted

junction of roads. The old man looked back for the first time. Observing Rishi, he said. "So, you're still with me." and resumed his fast walk.

As evening fell, the man reached a hut surrounded with trees and looked back for the second time. Rishi was following him but had fallen back a bit, he took rapid strides and came near. The man again looked at him intently and said, "So, you've come."

He unlocked the door, entered his room of mud, and lighted a kerosene lamp. Picking a silken seat, which was inserted into the straw ceiling he offered it to Rishi and said, "Sit."

Rishi sat upon the silk and said, "Now teach me to play."

'I'll teach. Wait, let me think,' saying this the man lay down on the ground, his back on the floor, eyes closed. Rishi could not make out if he was thinking or sleeping – if thinking, what. The darkness of the room danced as the kerosene light flickered. Rishi was silent and waiting, and being tired fell asleep after a while.

He did not know how long he slept but woke up startled at the bidding of the flute-player.

The man offered him hot steaming rice and burnt eggfruit on an enamel plate, and said, "Eat. Afterwards I'll teach you how to play the flute." The man too drew up the clay-pot of rice and began to eat. Rishi had no idea when the man had cooked rice and burnt the eggfruit. He was saying that he would teach him to play the flute but it did not appear then he had much interest.

While eating the man said, "Why were you weeping when you were listening to the flute? Have you lost somebody?"

"I look for a wounded crane everyday but I can't find him. I feel a pain whenever I remember my crane. Anything white reminds me of my crane. The reeds remind me, even your white hair brought memories of the crane."

The man stopped eating and looked at Rishi mysteriously.

'When do you start lessons', asked Rishi.

The man looked as if he was meditating. Breaking the meditation, he said, 'I'll give you a flute. It'll be your flute and you'll learn by yourself.'

'I don't know how to.'

'It'll be your flute and you'll play.'

The next morning the man raised Rishi from sleep and brought a pen of old bamboo from a recess of the wall. He gave it to Rishi, "Take it. This is your flute. Go home and play it as much as you like.'

'But this looks like a pen. Does it play?'

'All flutes are not alike. You'll write with this whatever your mind wants to. Go home, go.'

It was not day-break quite. One or two birds were chirping when the man took Rishi along with him. When they reached the market, the man said, 'Wait, I'll play you the flute for the last time. Do you know your way home?'

'Yes, that's the way, beyond the tamarind tree.'

The man closed eyes and played on. How the air all around reacted! Rishi thought, the morning sky looked different. Rishi bade the man farewell and began his walk towards home. Village people around were waking up, dew was sparkling on the dust of the road and grass. The long walk, all alone, Rishi's heart was sort of filled with joy. He suddenly felt that the morning sky was just like the tune of the fluteplayer. He reached home and before anybody could talk to him, Rishi showed his mother the bamboo pen and said, 'Look, Ma, my pen.'