

1

The Clever Old Woman



Once upon a time, there lived an old widow in a village. She lived alone. She worked hard. She used to weave on the loom during daytime and spin at night. In addition to her hard work, she was wise and witty.



One dark night, a thief entered her house silently. The old widow was spinning by the fireside. There was a *thaomei* burning nearby. The thief hid himself in a dark corner. He was waiting for the old woman to fall asleep. A little later the woman realized that there was someone hiding in the corner behind the *thaomei*. She was scared but she did not shout. Instead, she pretended as if she were not aware of the presence of the thief. She went on spinning. But she thought of a plan to catch the thief. Suddenly she called out, “*Ita-thaomei! Ita-thaomei!*”. Since there was no reply from the *thaomei*, she

went on, “It is strange that you have not replied today. Everyday we talk to each other. What has happened today? Are you not responding because you are feeling sleepy? Or is there a stranger in the house tonight?” The thief was surprised. The woman talked loudly, “***Ita-thaomei***, if you don’t reply, it means that there is a stranger in the house.

The thief thought deeply, “A wonderful thing! A ***thaomei*** responding to a human call. Perhaps it is not responding tonight because of my presence. I cannot let the woman know of my presence. I will answer her call this time. She will think that every thing is all right.”

Soon, the old woman called again, “***Ita-thaomei***, can you hear me?” The thief replied, “Yes ***Ita***, I can hear you.” The widow felt quite certain now. She knew that she could catch the thief easily. She asked, “Were you asleep a little while ago?” “Yes, I felt so sleepy; I slept for some time,” replied the thief. The widow continued, “As usual, let me tell you a story. Listen to it carefully.” “I am listening, please go on,” replied the thief.

The old widow began her story:

“Once upon a time, there lived an old woman in a village. She lived alone. One night, while spinning, she fell asleep. In her dream, she saw a thief breaking into her house. Actually a thief had already broken into her house and was trying to steal the utensils in the house. The old woman woke up and saw it. Immediately, she began to shout, “Thief, thief. There is a thief in my house.” The old widow actually kept shouting at the top

of her voice. Finally, her neighbours woke up and rushed to her house. The old widow told them of the thief hiding in the corner. The thief who was listening to the story of the old woman was caught by the villagers. Thus, her wit and wisdom saved her. The villagers thanked the clever widow. She helped them catch the thief so easily.

- A Manipuri folk tale retold

GLOSSARY

| | | |
|------------|---|---|
| thaomei | : | Manipuri word for a lamp; here, a wick lamp |
| scared | : | frightened |
| Ita | : | term used by Manipuri women while addressing their female friends |
| responding | : | answering |
| stranger | : | unknown person |
| rushed | : | ran |

COMPREHENSION

I. Answer the following questions:

1. What did the old woman do during daytime?
2. What did the old woman pretend when she realized that there was a thief behind the ***thaomei***?
3. Why did the thief decide to answer the old widow's call?
4. How did the widow feel certain that there was a thief behind the ***thaomei***?
5. Why did the woman shout, "Thief, thief" at the top of her voice?
6. What did the neighbours do?
7. Write how and why the old widow is called a clever woman.

II. Answer the following questions:

A. *Read the following passage :*

In 1667, Aurangzeb sent a huge army to conquer Assam. The Ahom army under Lachit, the Barphukan of Gauhati, had to fight this huge army to defend Assam. Aurangzeb's general Raja Ram Singh of Amber came with an army of ten thousand soldiers to conquer Assam. Lachit made preparations to defend his motherland. He gave the charge of repairing a broken fort near Amingaon to his uncle. He said, "Dear uncle, please finish repairing this fort tonight. Otherwise, our position will be lost tomorrow."

(a) Now, answer the following questions in one sentence each :

(i) In which year did Aurangzeb send a huge army to conquer Assam ?

.....

(ii) Who was there to fight Aurangzeb's army ?

.....

(iii) What is the name of Aurangzeb's general ?

.....

(iv) Which place did Raja Ram Singh belong to ?

.....

(v) Of which place was Lanchit, the Barphukan ?

.....

(vi) Who came to conquer Assam, and with how many soldiers ?

.....

B. Answer the following questions in about 20-25 words each :

(i) What plan did Aurangzeb make to conquer Assam in the year 1667 ?

.....

.....

(ii) How did Lanchit prepare to defend his motherland ?

.....

.....

2

Kakhuigai



Once upon a time, there lived a woman in a lonely village. She was expecting a baby soon. But her husband had died before she delivered her child. One day, with a *sham* on her head, she went out to pick flowers and collect some firewood. On the way, she met a huge python. She was frightened. She could not move because of fear. The python was also surprised to see a human being. Neither the widow nor the python moved for some time. A little later, the widow broke the silence, “O great python, I am a helpless woman. I cannot even hunt animals. If I had been a man I would have fought you.”



Then she pleaded, “Let the child I am going to bear be a boy. When he grows up, he will fight you. Let his name be called Kakhuigai. When the time comes I’ll bring him to you. Please wait till that time.”

The python felt pity for the widow. It decided to wait for the time. The widow folded a piece of cloth and gave it to the python to lay its head on. The python crawled and rested its head on the folded cloth. The widow came back home happily.

After a few days, the widow went to the spot to check whether the python was still there. To her surprise, she found that it was still there. Days and months passed and the widow finally gave birth to a son. The child was called Kakhuigai. As the child grew up, the widow secretly went to see the python. It was still waiting for the boy to grow up and fight him. She thanked the python and said, “O revered python, with your blessings I have given birth to a son. His name is Kakhuigai. He is growing up. Please wait till he grows into a young man. When the time comes, I’ll bring him to you.”

Years passed. Kakhuigai grew into a strong young man. One day, his mother called him and narrated the story of her encounter with the python. She told him about the promise that she had made to the python. Kakhuigai felt sad. Seeing this, the widow said lovingly, “Kakhuigai, my dear son, don’t worry. Consider yourself lucky. It is not an ordinary python; it is a spirit. You will not go alone. I will request the entire village to go with you. You will be accompanied by your kinsmen, uncles and cousins. We will take gifts and other offerings to

the spirit. It will bless you.” Assured by his mother, Kakhuigai felt happy.

From that day onwards, the widow brewed wine. She took the wine to the village elders and requested them to accompany her son when he went to meet the python. The villagers decided to catch the python soon. Next morning, the widow and her son prepared the offerings – crushed ginger, sprouted paddy, herbs and wine. Along with the villagers they approached the python. The widow spoke, “O great python, I have brought my son along with offerings for you. Please accept them.” Kakhuigai made the offerings, spread a large piece of cloth over the python’s head and prayed loudly, “O revered python, please lead me home.” The python slowly raised its head and started to lead Kakhuigai and his mother. They were followed by the villagers. When they reached the outskirts of the village, the python showed Kakhuigai the ***Pakhang-phan*** meant for the young unmarried males and the ***Leisa-phan*** meant for the young unmarried females. Initiating the rites, the python raised its head on a block of wood placed by the young man. Then, Kakhuigai lifted its head with a pair of wooden tongs and prayed to show him the spot to lay his sword. Soon, the python showed him the spot. Kakhuigai beheaded the python and split its belly with a sharp knife. Inside its belly, he found a magic box. Finishing the rituals, the python was cut into seven parts, cooked and eaten with a lot of merrymaking in the entire village. Its head was hung on the threshold of Kakhuigai’s home.

Because of the magic box, Kakhuigai grew richer day by day. He became a wealthy man and soon married the village chief's daughter. The following year, his wife gave birth to a son. He was named Galsungsung. A few years later, Kakhuigai's mother died. Soon, the magic box became an object of envy and all his relatives tried to steal it. They poisoned his family's food. Kakhuigai, his wife and child began to suffer from many diseases. Soon, Kakhuigai and his family died leaving the magic box behind.

But all his relatives fought over the box. It fell down on the ground and broke into pieces.

- A Kabui folk tale retold

GLOSSARY

| | | |
|-----------|---|---|
| python | : | a large serpent commonly found in forests |
| pleaded | : | requested |
| crawled | : | moved slowly on the belly |
| revered | : | respectable |
| encounter | : | meeting |
| brewed | : | made wine |
| crushed | : | made into very small pieces |
| sprouted | : | started to show new leaves and buds |

Pakhang-phan

| | | |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| and <i>Leisa-phan</i> | : | separate dormitories for unmarried young males and females respectively |
| initiating | : | introducing, beginning |
| tongs | : | a tool with two long parts, joining at one end, and used for lifting things |
| beheaded | : | cut off the head |
| threshold | : | the floor or ground beneath the doorway, entrance |

COMPREHENSION

I. *Answer the following questions:*

1. What would the widow do when Kakhuigai grew up?
2. What did the widow give to the python and what did the python do?
3. What did the widow say to Kakhuigai when she found him sad?
4. What did the villagers decide to do?
5. How did Kakhuigai pray to the python as he made the offerings?

6. What did Kakhugai find inside the python's belly?
7. How did the villagers finish the ritual?
8. How did Kakhugai become a rich man?
9. What did Kakhugai's relatives try to do?
10. What finally happened to the magic box?
11. Write how Kakhugai's family suffered because of the magic box.

2. *Read the passage and answer the following questions:*

Abraham Lincoln spent his boyhood days in poverty. There was no schooling for him. He educated himself slowly and with difficulty in the little time he could snatch from work on his father's farm. But he was a person of strong determination. At last he became a lawyer. He travelled throughout the country and knew men and their ways of thinking. He loved justice and stood for truth. He even opposed his friends who supported injustice and dishonesty. He never defended any case if he did not believe in the justice of the cause.

a. (*Now answer the questions in one sentence each*)

(i) Under what condition did Abraham Lincoln spend his boyhood days?

.....

(ii) Was there proper schooling for Abraham Lincoln?

.....

(iii) What kind of person was Abraham Lincoln ?

.....

(iv) What did Abraham Lincoln become at last ?

.....

(v) What did he love ?

.....

(vi) How did Abraham Lincoln know men and their ways of thinking ?

.....

b. (Answer the questions in about 20-25 words each)

(i) How did Abraham Lincoln educate himself in his boyhood days ?

.....

.....

(ii) How did he work as a lawyer ?

.....

.....

3

The Banyan Tree



W4D5S9

Though the house and grounds belonged to my grandparents, the magnificent old banyan tree was mine – chiefly because grandfather, at sixty-five, could no longer climb it.



Its spreading branches, which hung to the ground and took root again, forming a number of twisting passages, gave me endless pleasure. Among them were squirrels and snails and butterflies. The tree was older than the house, older than grandfather, as old as Dehradun itself. I could hide myself in its branches, behind thick green leaves, and spy on the world below.

My first friend was a small grey squirrel. Arching his back and sniffing into the air, he seemed at first to resent my invasion of his privacy. But when he found that I did not arm myself with catapult or air-gun, he became friendly, and when I started bringing him pieces of cake and biscuit, he grew quite bold and was soon taking morsels from my hand.

Before long he was delving into my pockets and helping himself to whatever he could find. He was a very young squirrel, and his friends and relatives probably thought him foolish and headstrong for trusting a human.

In the spring, when the banyan tree was full of small red figs, birds of all kinds would flock into its branches: red-bottomed bulbul, cheerful and greedy, gossipy rosy-pastors, parrots, mynas and crows squabbling with one another. During the fig season, the banyan tree was the noisiest place in the garden.

Half way up the tree I had built a crude platform where I would spend the afternoons when it was not too hot. I could read there, propping myself up against the bole of the tree with

a cushion from the living-room. *Treasure Island*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* were some of the books that made up my banyan tree library.

When I did not feel like reading, I could look down through the leaves at the world below. And on one particular afternoon I had a grand-stand view of that classic of the Indian wilds, a fight between a mongoose and a cobra. And this one had not been staged for my benefit!

The warm breezes of approaching summer had sent everyone, including the gardener, into the house. I was feeling drowsy myself, wondering if I should go to the pond and have a swim with Ramu and the buffaloes, when I saw a huge black cobra gliding out of a clump of cactus. At the same time a mongoose emerged from the bushes and went straight for the cobra.

In a clearing beneath the banyan tree, in bright sunshine, they came face to face.

The cobra knew only too well that the grey mongoose, three feet long, was a superb fighter, clever and aggressive. But the cobra, too, was a skilful and experienced fighter. He could move swiftly and strike with the speed of light; and the sacks behind his long sharp fangs were full of deadly poison.



It was to be a battle of champions.

Hissing defiance, his forked tongue darting in and out, the cobra raised three of his six feet off the ground, spread his broad, spectacled hood. The mongoose bushed his tail. The long hair on his spine stood up.

Though the combatants were unaware of my presence in the tree, they were soon made aware of the arrival of two other spectators. One was a myna, the other a jungle crow. They had seen these preparations for battle, and had settled on the cactus to watch the outcome. Had they been content only to watch, all would have been well with both of them.

The cobra stood on the defensive, swaying slowly from side to side, trying to mesmerise the mongoose into making a false move. But the mongoose knew the power of his opponent's glassy, unwinking eyes, and refused to meet them. Instead he fixed his gaze at a point just below the cobra's hood and opened the attack.

Moving forward quickly until he was just within the cobra's reach, the mongoose made a pretended move to one side. Immediately the cobra struck. His great hood came down so swiftly that I thought nothing could save the mongoose. But the little fellow jumped neatly to one side, and darted in as swiftly as the cobra, biting the snake on the back and darting away again out of reach.



At the same moment that the cobra struck, the crow and the myna hurled themselves at him, only to collide heavily in mid-air. Shrieking insults at each other, they returned to the cactus plant.

A few drops of blood glistened on the cobra's back.

The cobra struck again and missed. Again the mongoose sprang aside, jumped in and bit. Again, the birds dived at the snake, bumped into each other instead, and returned shrieking to the safety of the cactus.

The third round followed the same course as the first but with one dramatic difference. The crow and the myna, still determined to take part in the proceedings, dived at the cobra; but this time they missed each other as well as their mark. The myna flew on and reached its perch, but the crow tried to pull up in mid-air and turn back. In the second that it

took the bird to do this, the cobra whipped his head back and struck with great force, his snout thudding into the crow's body.

I saw the bird flung nearly twenty feet across the garden. It fluttered about for a while, then lay still. The myna remained on the cactus plant, and when the snake and the mongoose returned to the fight, very wisely decided not to interfere again!

The cobra was weakening, and the mongoose fearlessly walked up to it, raised himself on his short legs and with a lightning snap had the big snake by the snout. The cobra writhed and lashed about in a frightening manner, and even coiled itself about the mongoose but to no avail. The little fellow hung grimly on, until the snake ceased to struggle. He then smelt along its quivering length, gripped it around the hood, and dragged it into the bushes.

The myna dropped cautiously to the ground, hopped about, peered into the bushes from a safe distance, and then, with a shrill cry of congratulation, flew away.

The banyan tree was also the setting for what we were to call the Strange Case of the Grey Squirrel and the White Rat.

The white rat was grandfather's – he had bought it for one-quarter of a rupee – but I would often take it with me into the banyan tree, where it soon struck up a friendship with one of the squirrels. They would go off together on little excursions among the roots and branches of the old tree.

Then the squirrel started building a nest. At first she tried building it in my pockets, and when I went indoors and took off my clothes I would find straw and grass falling out.

Then one day grandmother's knitting was missing. We hunted for it everywhere but without success.

The next day I saw something glinting in a hole in the banyan tree. Going up to investigate, I saw that it was the end of grandmother's steel knitting-needle. On looking further, I discovered that the hole was crammed with knitting. Amongst the wool were three baby squirrels – and all of them were white!

We gazed at the white squirrels in wonder and fascination. Grandfather was puzzled at first, but when I told him about the white rat's visits to the tree, his brow cleared. He said the white rat must be the father.

Ruskin Bond

GLOSSARY

| | | |
|----------|---|--|
| passages | : | ways through which men can walk |
| spy | : | watch secretly |
| arching | : | curving, forming a curved shape |
| resent | : | feel angry |
| catapult | : | a forked stick shaped like a 'Y' with a rubber band attached to it, used by children for shooting stones |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| morsels | : small pieces of foodstuff |
| delving | : digging |
| headstrong | : one who is determined to do a thing in one's own way and refuses to listen to advice |
| squabbling | : quarrelling noisily |
| bole | : branch |
| grand-stand | : a covered structure for watching sports, a convenient place to watch something |
| classic | : an event full of all the exciting aspects |
| ‘staged for my benefit’ | : it means the fight is not for show, but a real fight |
| clearing | : clear area |
| sacks | : bags |
| fangs | : sharp teeth of animals |
| darting | : moving quickly |
| spectacled hood | : hood of the cobra that has impressions on it resembling spectacles |
| bushed | : made the hair stand on end, puffed up |
| combatants | : fighters |
| mesmerise | : to hypnotise, to fascinate |
| glassy | : glass-like, showing no emotion or feeling |

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| collide | : | hit against each other |
| dramatic | : | sudden and showing action |
| proceedings | : | activities that are going on |
| flung | : | thrown |
| snout | : | area around the nose |
| writched | : | turned and twisted |
| lashed | : | beat with its body |
| peered | : | looked |
| setting | : | a place or a locale where something happens |
| glinting | : | reflecting light |
| crammed | : | filled |
| fascination | : | charm |
| brow cleared | : | the confusion disappeared |

COMPREHENSION

I. Answer the following questions:

1. Why does the writer say that the banyan tree belonged to him?
2. What does the author mean by the statement that the banyan tree was '*as old as Dehradun itself*'?
3. How did the writer gain the confidence of the grey squirrel?
4. How did the writer make a '*banyan tree library*'?
5. What is being described as the '*classic of the Indian wilds*'?

6. How does the writer describe the fighting skill of the mongoose and the cobra?
7. How did the cobra try to fight the mongoose at the initial stage of their fight?
8. What happened to the crow and mynah during the third round of the fight between the cobra and the mongoose?
9. Why was the cobra weakening?
10. Describe the death of the cobra.
11. What did the mongoose do to the dead cobra?
12. What happened to grandmother's knitting needles?
13. Write why the writer says that the fight between the cobra and the mongoose was to be a battle of champions.
14. Write what happened to the mynah and the crow during the cobra-mongoose fight.
15. Narrate the '*Strange Case of the Grey Squirrel and the White Rat.*'

II. Read the following passage :

We know a hippopotamus. This is a strange name and is a descriptive one. In Greek, "hippōn" mean "horse" and "potamus" means "river" So, the hippotamus is a "river horse". Rhinoceros came from two Greek words, "renos" the nose and "keras", a horn. That's just this creature has; a horn on the nose ! Thus "Leopard" is from the Latin word "Leopardus" which means a "spotted lion".

Some names of animals that we use are based on names used in other places. "Camel" comes from the Arabic "gamel" and "giraffe" from the Arabic " Zirafah", meaning long neck.

Now, read the passage given above and answer the following questions:

(i) What is the meaning of hippopotamus ?

Ans.

(ii) Which animals has a horn on the nose ?

Ans.

(iii) What does the Latin word "leopardus" mean ?

Ans.

(iv) How has the names of camel and giraffe developed ?

Ans.

4

Perseus And Andromeda



Perseus¹, a hero in the Greek myth, killed the dreaded Gorgon², Medusa³. Medusa was a cruel monster. She had hundreds of poisonous snakes instead of hair. Whoever looked Medusa in the face was immediately turned to stone. Perseus killed Medusa by using a mirror-shield which reflected her face in it. It was while he was returning from his adventure that he met and rescued Andromeda⁴.

On an island near Greece, there lived a woman called Cassiopeia⁵. She was very beautiful. She was also very proud. One day she boasted that she was more beautiful than any of the sea nymphs. They were very angry when they heard this.

The sea nymphs sent a sea serpent to the island where Cassiopeia lived. The sea serpent did much harm to the people living on the island. At last, the people consulted the oracle at the temple.

This was an old custom among the ancient people to go to the temples to consult oracles in times of doubt and trouble and to know the future. They would offer something as a sacrifice to the god. In return, the oracle would utter words of warning or advice.

¹Perseus ; per-siyus ²Gorgon ; gor-gun ³Medusa ; may-dyoo-za
⁴Andromeda ; an-drom-e-da ⁵Cassiopeia ; kas-si-o-pee-aa

When the people of the island went to the oracle to know the reason for their trouble they were told that it was because of the vanity of Cassiopeia. If she gave her daughter Andromeda to the serpent, the sea nymphs would be satisfied. And the sea serpent would not trouble them any longer.

The people were very sad to hear those words. Everybody loved the gentle and beautiful Andromeda. When Cassiopeia heard this, she rushed to the temple. She fell on her knees. She offered to make any sacrifice if the oracle would help her.

But, the oracle repeated the same answer, "If you wish your town and all the people to be saved from ruin, you must give up your daughter to the sea serpent."

The helpless people led Andromeda to the seashore, and bound her with chains to an overhanging rock. Then, they stood around sadly, waiting for the monster who would come to devour the fairest and best of all their young maidens.

All were watching anxiously. Suddenly, something black was seen above the water. They knew that it was the dreaded creature. Nearer and nearer came the serpent, lashing the water with its tail and snorting in the most horrible manner. Now it had almost reached the rock to which Andromeda was chained. The poor girl shrieked in terror and all the people covered their eyes with their hands. They could not bear to see what was going to happen.

Suddenly something like a little cloud came darting through the air. It was Perseus who was flying above the spot.



He had seen the girl bound to the rock and the cruel serpent raising itself to attack her. In a flash, he darted down, and was engaged in a fierce battle with the monster.

The people watched the long combat with eager eyes. At last, the sword pierced the heart of the serpent. The ugly creature floated lifeless on the water. Then Perseus unfastened Andromeda's chains and led her to her parents. All the people shed tears of joy.

Perseus had fallen in love with Andromeda at the first sight. So, he asked for her hand in marriage. Andromeda too had loved Perseus from the moment she saw him. Thus, she gladly consented to be his wife.

All the people of the island were invited to the feast of their wedding. But, there was an old man feared by Andromeda's parents. Sometime before, he had asked for the hand of their daughter. The parents had been afraid of saying no. But, the girl hated this old man.

When the merriment of the marriage ceremony was at its height, suddenly the wide doors swung open. The startled people saw an ugly, little man. He was angry, and was standing there holding a sword. He was followed by a band of armed soldiers.

There was complete silence in the room. Then the old man spoke, "Perseus, I have come to claim my bride." His right hand put on a bag which he wore at his side and said, "The one you call your bride, sir, is my wife, and no power of yours can take her from me."

"We shall see," was the old man's answer; and he moved towards Perseus.

But, in the middle of the room, he stopped suddenly, and stood there motionless, his sword raised to strike. For, Perseus had lifted the terrible Gorgon's head, and instantly the old man was turned to stone.

When his followers saw what had happened to their master, they turned and fled from the house. The merry-making went on as though nothing had happened.

The marriage ceremony being over, Perseus took his wife to his island home. There they lived happily together in the cottage of his mother.

Source: Greek Mythology

GLOSSARY

| | | |
|-----------|---|---|
| sea nymph | : | a goddess of the sea (in Greek Mythology) |
| serpent | : | a large snake |
| boasted | : | talked proudly |
| oracle | : | a person through whom God was supposed to speak |
| satisfied | : | pleased |
| rushed | : | moved with great speed |
| devour | : | to eat all of something quickly |
| dreaded | : | (adj) greatly feared |
| lashing | : | hitting very hard |
| snorting | : | making loud sound through the nose by breathing air out noisily |
| horrible | : | frightening |
| shrieked | : | gave a loud shout |
| darted | : | moved suddenly and quickly |
| consented | : | agreed |
| startled | : | surprised somebody suddenly |
| peaceably | : | in a peaceful way |

COMPREHENSION

I. *Answer the following questions:*

1. How did Perseus kill Medusa?
2. Why did the sea nymph decide to punish Cassiopeia?
3. What were oracles? What powers did they have?
4. What answer did the oracle give to the problem of the sea serpent?
5. Who rescued Andromeda and how?
6. Why did Andromeda marry Perseus?
7. What happened in the midst of the wedding feast?
8. What did Perseus carry in his bag?
9. How did Perseus prevent the old man from carrying Andromeda away?

II. *Read the following passage :*

The councillor told King Solomon that the Queen of Sheba had come from the land of Yemen. The land was known for its craftspeople. They were highly skilled. As an example, the councillor showed the queen's palanquin. It was a real beauty. It was made of metal that looked like silver. It had the most finely carved designs and curtains of the softest leather. King Solomon wondered why the queen wanted to meet him. The councillor told the King that she wanted to ask him questions to solve her problems.

Now, answer the following questions.

(i) Why was the land of Yemen known for ?

.....

(ii) What proof did the councillor have about the skill of the crafts people ?

.....

(iii) What feeling did the queen's visit give to the King?

.....

(iv) How did the queen hope to solve her problems ?

.....

(v) How was the queen's palanquin a real beauty ?

.....

5

The Special Prize



What a naughty boy! He deserves to be thrashed. I have also received reports of his getting into fights with other boys. Send for him. "Mohan! Hey, Mohan!" the headmaster shouted for the chowkidar. Mohan guessed from the growl in the voice that the headmaster was very angry. He rushed in and asked apprehensively, "Yes, Sir?"

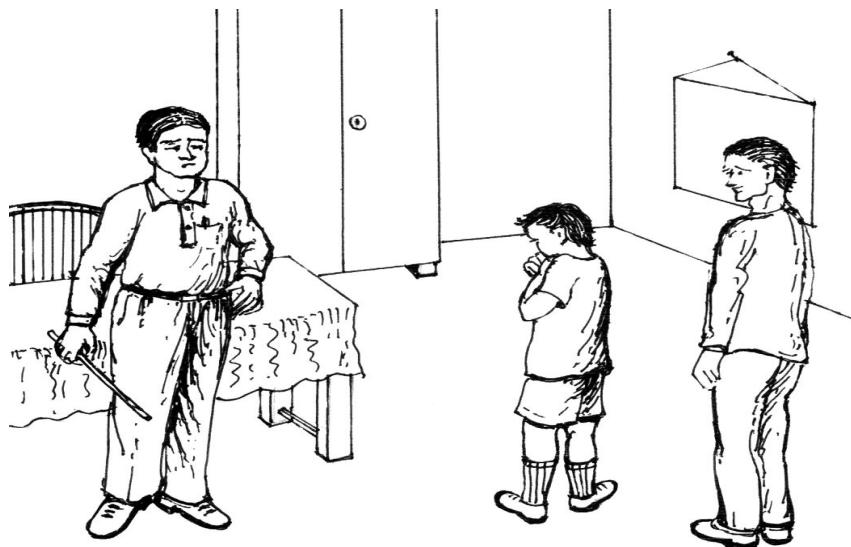
"Hurry and get Tapan of Class V," the headmaster ordered.

Let me introduce the reader to the boy named Tapan. He is the second son of Ratan, the clerk of Padumani village. Although rather thin, he is strong, somewhat dark and has bright eyes. He is quite good at his studies. But both at home and outside, there is no end to his pranks. He is always getting into trouble. But it must be admitted that he is never the first to pick a quarrel. But if anybody offends him he never hesitates to give as good as he gets. He is the leader of his age-group and is always ready to take up the cudgels on their behalf. He is popular and respected by his companions.

After completing primary school at the village, Tapan had gone for a year to a High School, fifteen miles away and stayed

with his uncle. Now he is back home and is studying at Jnanpeeth High School, a mile and a half from his village.

He had only been at Jnanpeeth a month and already there was a complaint against him. Haren, the shopkeeper of Padumani village, had complained to the headmaster that Tapan and a number of other boys had without provocation thrown stones at his shop the previous evening. Tapan had been the ring-leader.



Tapan came in with the chowkidar and after glancing timidly at the headmaster stood with head lowered. Swinging his cane the headmaster demanded, "You are Tapan, aren't you?"

"Yes, Sir," Tapan replied politely.

"Do you know this gentleman?" the headmaster asked pointing at the shopkeeper.

“Yes, Sir. He lives in our village.”

“Well, is it true that last evening you and your friends threw stones at his shop? Tell me the truth, or I will flog the skin off your back.”

“Yes, Sir. It is true that I threw stones at his shop with Ratan and others.”

“Why? Why did you do that, you rascal? Answer me,” the headmaster thundered.

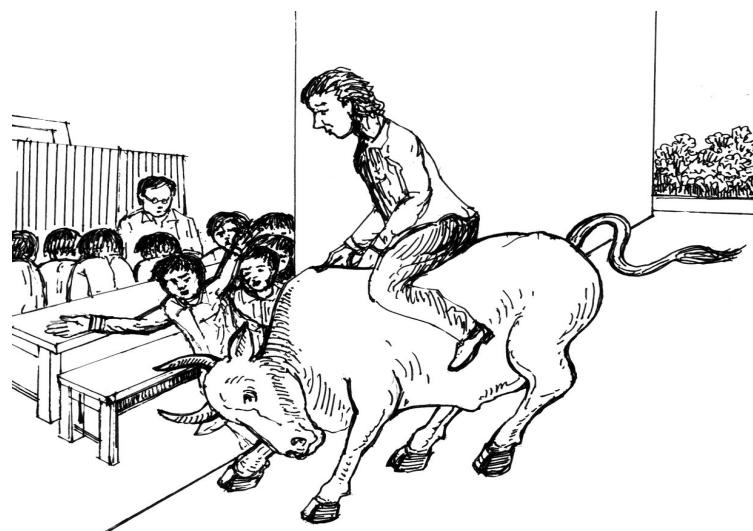
“Sir, this man cheats. He charges higher prices and gives less. Moreover, he has introduced a new kind of paper bag which is padded at the bottom. The day before yesterday we bought a kilo of *dal* from him. When we weighed the contents at home, it turned out to be only eight hundred grammes. The padding in the bag weighed fifty grammes; he had short-weighed one hundred and fifty grammes. It is common knowledge in the village. When I questioned him about it yesterday he abused me and chased me out of his shop. That is why I and the other boys threw stones at his shop.”

The headmaster looked at the shopkeeper; his face was crimson.

The headmaster thought for some time. Then turning to Tapan he said, “Even so, what you did was not right. It is wrong to harm the property of others. If the shopkeeper is dishonest it is for the Government or the village panchayat to take up the matter. It is none of your business. Hold out your hand!”

Tapan received five strokes of the cane. When he returned to his class, his classmates looked at him sideways and sniggered.

There was another incident a few days later. It concerned a fierce ox which was menacing the locality. It had gored several people. If anyone approached it with a stave it would charge at them. Everyone was terrified of it.



The effrontery of the animal aroused Tapan's spirit. "Wait, you big bully! I will tame you," he mumbled. During the school-break he brought a stave and a piece of string and slowly approached the ox. Waiting for the right opportunity he jumped onto its back and put the string in its mouth as if bridling a horse. The ox was taken by surprise but the moment it felt the weight on its back it started stamping, and buckling. It broke into a gallop, hoping to throw the tormentor off its back.

Meanwhile the school-break was over and class had resumed but Tapan was busy taming the ox. He managed to keep himself on the back of the tossing, buckling bronco, holding the string firmly. He patted the ox's back. That further enraged the animal. It crashed into the school compound and then into the room of Class VII. The teacher and students were petrified and scattered in all directions, shoving and pushing their way out of the classroom. In the stampede many of them stumbled and fell. The teacher, Rajani Saharia, managed to escape unhurt by running outside. Several glass-panes were broken by the horns of the wildly prancing animal. Finally, the dazed ox ran bellowing desperately into the school field and fell on its side. A few seconds later it jumped up and ran for its life, without a backward glance.

So there was another complaint lodged against Tapan; this time by the teacher Rajani Saharia. The headmaster flew into a rage. The boy was a menace and a trouble-maker. Not only the students but even the school building had suffered. The headmaster summoned Tapan again.

Tapan appeared with Mohan the chowkidar. On seeing him the headmaster's temper boiled over.

“You are a wicked boy! Why did you lead the ox into the classroom? Speak up!” the headmaster demanded, brandishing his cane.

Tapan replied, head lowered, “Sir, I didn't lead the ox into the classroom. I was only riding on its back to tame it, and it suddenly ran into the room.”

“ Who asked you to ride an ox during school hours? Hold out your hand.”

Tapan received fifteen strokes of the headmaster’s cane. His classmates again sniggered and ridiculed him. He was branded the bad boy of the school.

Soon afterwards a notice was circulated in the school. It read: Tapan of Class V has been given fifteen strokes for riding an ox into Class VII and upsetting the teacher and students; also for breaking glass-panes; he has been further fined Rs. 25.00 to pay for the damage. The notice concluded that Tapan would be expelled from school if he committed any such offence in future. A few boys who came out of their classes on the pretext of spitting outside made faces at Tapan.

On the same evening the headmaster had returned home, had his tea and was taking a stroll. This was his daily routine. Dusk was falling as he was on his way back when he saw the school’s bad boy. Tapan was holding an old beggar woman’s hand, while on his head he carried her begging basket. Walking alongside jeering at him were two boys of his class – Naren, the one who came first, and Mahesh. The old woman had fever. She had the fever during her begging round. She could hardly walk, leave alone carry her basket. On seeing the plight of the old woman Tapan had lifted her basket on his head and taking the old woman’s hand said, “Granny, hold on to me. I’ll walk you home.”

When Naren and Mahesh saw the headmaster they saluted him and looked at Tapan with a derisive smile, pleased

that the headmaster was witnessing himself one of Tapan's misdeeds. When the headmaster questioned the old woman she told him how Tapan had come forward to help her. Her voice trembling she pointed to Tapan and said, "Had this dear boy not been there, I would still have been lying on the road. May God shower him with blessings. The other two boys there also saw how ill I was but far from lending a hand they have been making fun of this dear boy. How heartless they are!" The old woman began panting for breath. The headmaster scolded Naren and Mahesh and sent them away. He asked Tapan to take the old woman to her home.

Two weeks later the headmaster was returning home from his walk. On the road he saw the ox lying with a leg broken and kneeling beside it was Tapan rubbing some medicine on its injured leg and bandaging it. There were tears in Tapan's eyes. He was startled when the headmaster came and stood near him. He saluted the headmaster with folded hands. The headmaster asked, "What are you doing here, Tapan?"

"Sir, some wicked boys have broken the ox's leg. It is in great pain. Sir, is it not wrong to hurt dumb animals?" Tapan asked sadly.

"Didn't you ride this same ox the other day, saying that it was wicked and needed to be tamed? How has it become so good in your eyes today?"

"Well, Sir, it was very wicked. But since the day I rode it, it has reformed. It has not only stopped attacking people

but even makes way for them. So they shouldn't have hurt it. It is in agony. I have chewed a few medicinal leaves and dressed the injured leg with the pulp. I have heard father say that it is very good for injuries, Sir," Tapan said, his heart full of sympathy for the ox and his eyes brimming with tears.

The headmaster stood engrossed in thought. Then he looked at Tapan's face and affectionately patted him. Without a word, he started on his way home. His eyes were moist.

It was the prize-giving day of Jnanpeeth High School. The principal of a Gauhati college had been invited to preside over the function. This time the headmaster Rabin Barua had decided to award a special prize to the student with the best character. Three books – the biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, were to be given as prizes.

In the classrooms students were discussing the special prize. In Class V Naren laughed jeeringly and said loudly to Bhabesh, sitting next to him, "Do you know, Bhabesh, that the special prize for the best character is being awarded to Tapan?" The boys roared with laughter. Tapan's face grew red with humiliation and shame. He wished the ground would swallow him up.

The function started. After the welcome of the president the secretary's report was read. This was followed by a programme of songs, dances and recitations by the students. Then the president delivered his speech and a few others also spoke. Next came the distribution of prizes. The awardees

glowed with pleasure and pride. Then came the time for the announcement of the special prize. Everyone waited expectantly. Addressing the assembly the headmaster announced, "Honourable President and respected ladies and gentlemen, it has been decided to give the special prize for the student with the best character to Shriman Tapan Hazarika of Class V."

The teachers and students were dumbfounded. The faces of Naren and Bhabesh were a sight to see. Tapan could not believe his ears. He could not muster the courage to get up to go to receive the prize. The headmaster repeated, "Tapan Kumar Hazarika, Class V." His head reeled. Could it be true that he, known as the bad boy of the school, was being called to receive the best-character prize? Tapan stood up, went to the president, did ***namaskar*** and received the prize.

The headmaster then narrated how Tapan had helped the old beggar woman and nursed the injured ox. He also gave Tapan five rupees from his own pocket. The hall resounded with applause.

Tapan's eyes glistened with tears of joy.

- Anant Dev Sharma

Translated from Assamese by Birendra Nath Dutta

GLOSSARY

| | | |
|--------------|---|--|
| thrashed | : | beat |
| apprehensive | : | having fear of something bad happening in future |
| provocation | : | act of making someone angry |
| effrontery | : | shameless |
| dal | : | pulses |
| stampede | : | sudden rush in fear |
| stroll | : | walk |

COMPREHENSION

I. *Answer the following questions:*

1. Why did the headmaster want to thrash Tapan?
2. Why was Tapan popular and respected by his companions?
3. Who complained against Tapan?
4. Why did Tapan throw stones at a shop?
5. What did the headmaster do regarding this incident?
6. What did Tapan do with the ox?
7. What did the ox do?
8. Who lodged a complaint against Tapan on the incident?
9. How much money did Tapan pay as fine?
10. What did Tapan do with the injured leg of the ox?
11. What was the special prize meant for?
12. Who got the special prize?
13. What happened to the teachers and students?
14. Write a paragraph on how Tapan won the special prize.

II. *Read the following passage :*

Chetan reached a town. There he came across many manual labourers - barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, cobblers, rickshaw-pullers, sweepers, tailors, vendors of clothes, fish and vegetables, etc. Their arms and legs stretched everywhere. He murmured to himself, "Everybody works. Everybody is busy. Everybody is proud of it. Every work is for the good of all. The town is unthinkable without them. It would have rotten or rotting without the sweepers. No work is higher nor lower than another work. What really counts is how well one does it. Everybody should respect all labours."

Now, answer the following questions in one sentence each:

i) Where did Chetan reach ?

Ans.

ii) Whom did he come across there ?

Ans.

iii) What is every work for ?

Ans.