Learn English Through Stories

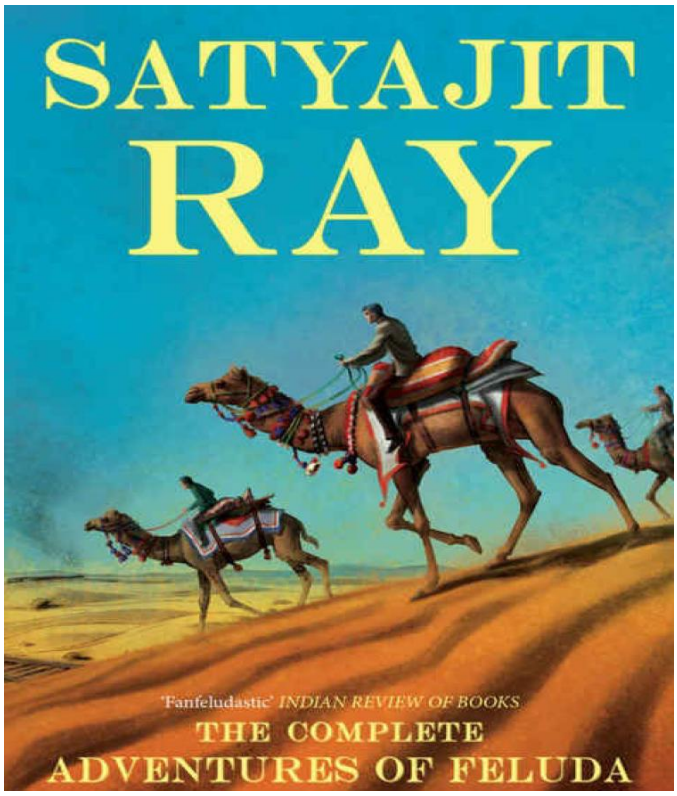
H Series

H38

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

https://learn-by-reading.co.uk


SATYAJIT
RAY
'Fanfeludastic' INDIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS
THE COMPLETE
ADVENTURES OF FELUDA

The Royal Bengal Mystery- Part 1

One

Old Man hollow, pace to follow, people's tree.

Half ten, half again century.

Rising sun, whence it's done, can't you see?

Between hands, below them stands, yours, it be.

Feluda said to me, 'When you write about our adventure in the forest, you must start with this puzzle.' 'Why? We didn't get to know of the puzzle until we actually got there!'

'I know. But this is just a technique, to tickle the fancy of the reader.'

I wasn't happy with this answer. Feluda realized it, so a couple of minutes later, he added, 'Anyone who reads that puzzle at the outset will get the chance to use his own intelligence, you see.'

So I agreed to start my story with it. I should, however, point out at once that it's no use trying to work out what it means. It's not easy at all. In fact, it took even Feluda quite a long time to discover its meaning, although when he eventually explained it to me, it seemed simple enough.

In talking about our past experiences, I have so far used real names and real places. This time, I have been specifically asked not to do so. I had to turn to Feluda for advice on fictitious names I might use. 'You can mention the place was near the border of Bhutan, there's no harm in that,' Feluda said, 'but you can change its name to Laxmanbari. The chief character might be called Mr Sinha-Roy. Many old zamindar families used to have that name. In fact, some of them originally came from Rajputana. They came to Bengal and joined the army of Todar Mal to fight the Pathans. Then they simply stayed on, and their descendants became Bengalis.'

I am doing what Feluda told me to do. The names of places and people are fictitious, but not the events. I shall try to relate everything exactly as I saw or heard it.

The story began in Calcutta. It was Sunday, 27 May. The time was 9.30 a.m. My summer holidays had started. Of late, the maximum temperature had hit 100°F, so I was keeping myself indoors, pasting stamps from Bhutan into my

stamp album. Feluda had recently finished solving a murder case (catching the culprit by using a common pin as a clue), which had made him quite famous. He had also been paid a fat fee. At this moment he was resting at home, stretched out on a divan, reading Thor Heyerdahl's *Aku-Aku*. A minute later, Jatayu turned up.

Lalmohan Ganguli—alias Jatayu—the writer of immensely popular crime thrillers, had started visiting us at least twice a month. The popularity of his novels meant that he was pretty well off. As a matter of fact, he was once rather proud of his writing prowess. But when Feluda pointed out dozens of factual errors in his books, Lalmohan Babu began to look upon him with a mixture of respect and admiration. Now, he got his manuscripts corrected by Feluda before passing them on to his publisher. Today, however, he was not carrying a sheaf of papers under his arm, which clearly meant that there was a different reason for his visit. He sat down on a sofa, took out a green face towel from his pocket, wiped his face with it, and said without looking at Feluda, 'Would you like to see a forest,

Felu Babu?'

Feluda raised himself a little, leaning on his elbow. 'What is your definition of a forest?' 'The same as yours, Felu Babu. Cluster of trees. Dense foliage. That sort of thing.'

'In West Bengal?' 'Yes, sir.'

'Where? I can't think of any place other than the Sunderbans, or Terai. Everything else has been wiped clean.'

'Have you heard of Mahitosh Sinha-Roy?'

The question was accompanied by a rather smug smile. I had heard of him, too. He was a well- known shikari and a writer. Feluda had one of his books. I hadn't read it, but Feluda had told me it was most interesting.

'Doesn't he live in Orissa, or is it Assam?' Feluda asked.

'No, sir,' Lalmohan Babu replied, taking out an envelope from his pocket with a flourish, 'he lives in the Dooars Forest, near the border of Bhutan. I dedicated my latest book to him. We have exchanged letters.'

'Oh? You mean you dedicate your books even to the living?' Perhaps I should explain here the business of Lalmohan Babu's dedications. Nearly all of them are made to famous people who are now dead. *The Antarctic Anthropophagi* was dedicated to the memory of Robert Scott; *The Gorilla's Grasp* said, 'In the memory of David Livingstone', and *The Atomic Demon* (which Feluda said was the most nonsensical stuff he had ever read) had been dedicated to Einstein.

Then, when he wrote *The Himalayan Hemlock*, he dedicated it to the memory of Sir Edmund Hillary. Feluda was furious at this.

'Why, Lalmohan Babu, why did you have to kill a man who is very much alive?'

'What! Hillary is alive?' Lalmohan Babu asked, looking both apologetic and embarrassed, 'I didn't know. I mean . . . he hasn't been in the news for a long time, and he does go about climbing mountains, doesn't he? So I thought perhaps he had slipped and . . . well, you know . . .' His voice trailed away.

The mistake was rectified when the second edition of the book came out.

Mahitosh Sinha-Roy might be a well-known shikari, but was he really as famous as all these other people? Why was the last book dedicated to him?

'Well, you see,' Lalmohan Babu explained, 'I had to consult his book *The Tiger and the Gun* quite a few times when I was writing my own. In fact,' he added with a smile, 'I used a whole episode. So I felt I had to please him in some way.'

'Did you succeed?'

Lalmohan Babu took out the letter from its envelope. 'Yes. He wouldn't send an invitation otherwise, would he?'

'Well, he may have invited you, but surely he didn't include me?' Lalmohan Babu looked faintly annoyed. 'Look, Felu Babu,' he said, frowning, 'I know you would never go anywhere unless you were invited. You are well known yourself, and you have your prestige. I am well aware of that. What happened was that I told him that the book had seen four editions in four months. And I also told him

—only a hint, that is—that I knew you. So he sent me this letter. Read it yourself. We've both been invited.'

The last few lines of Mahitosh Sinha-Roy's letter said, 'I believe your friend Pradosh Mitter is a very clever detective. If you can bring him with you, he might be able to help me out in a certain matter. Please let me know if he agrees to come.'

Feluda stared at the letter for a few moments. Then he said, 'Is he an old man?' 'What do you mean by old?' Lalmohan Babu asked, his eyes half-closed.

'Say, around seventy?'

'No, sir. Mr Sinha-Roy is much younger than that.' 'His writing is like an old man's.'

'How can you say that? This writing is absolutely beautiful.'

‘I agree. But look at the signature. I think the letter was written by his secretary.’

It was decided that we would leave for Laxmanbari the following Wednesday. We could go up to New Jalpaiguri by train. After that we’d have to go by car to Laxmanbari, which was forty-six miles away. Mahitosh Babu had already offered to send his own car to collect us at the New Jalpaiguri station.

It came as no surprise to me that Feluda agreed to visit a forest so readily. My own heart was jumping with joy. The fact was that one of our uncles was a shikari as well. Our ancestral home was in the village of Shonadeeghi, near Dhaka. My father was the youngest of three brothers. The oldest worked as the manager of an estate in Mymansinh. He was renowned in the area for having killed wild deer, boars and even tigers in the Madhupur forest to the north of Mymansinh. The second brother— Feluda’s father—used to teach mathematics and Sanskrit in a school. However, that did not stop him from being terrific at sports, including swimming, wrestling and shooting. Unfortunately, he died very young after only a brief spell of illness. Feluda was nine years old at the time. Naturally, his father’s death came as an enormous shock to everyone. Feluda was brought to our house and raised by my parents. My own father has never shown any interest in anything that calls for great physical strength, but I do know that his will power and mental strength is much stronger than most people’s.

Feluda himself has always been fascinated by tales of shikar. He has read every book written by Corbett and Kenneth Anderson. Although he’s never been on a shikar, he did learn to shoot and is now a crack shot. There is no doubt in my mind that he could easily kill a tiger, should he be required to do so. He has often told me that the mind of an animal is a lot less complex than that of humans. Even the simplest of men would have a more complex mind than a ferocious tiger. Catching a criminal was, therefore, no less difficult than killing a tiger.

Feluda was trying to explain this to Lalmohan Babu in the train. Lalmohan Babu was carrying the first book Mahitosh Sinha-Roy had written. The front page had a photograph of the writer, which showed him standing with one foot on a dead Royal Bengal tiger, a rifle in his hand. His face wasn’t clear, but it was easy to spot the set of his jaws, his broad shoulders and an impressive moustache under a sharp, long nose.

Lalmohan Babu stared at the photo for a few seconds and said, ‘Thank goodness you are going with me, Felu Babu. In front of such a personality, I’d have looked like a . . . a worm!’ Jatayu’s height was five foot four inches, and at first glance his appearance suggested that he might be a comedian on the

stage or in films. Anyone even slightly taller and better built than him made him look like a worm. Certainly, when he stood next to Feluda, the description seemed apt enough.

'What is strange,' he continued, 'is that although this is his first book—and he began writing at the age of fifty—it reads as though it's been written by an experienced writer. He has a wonderful style.'

'He probably turned to writing when hunting as a sport was banned by the Indian government,' Feluda remarked. 'Many other shikaris have proved to be skilful writers. Corbett's language is wonderful. Perhaps it's something to do with being close to nature. Think of the sages who wrote the scriptures. Didn't they live in jungles?'

I had noticed lightning ripping the sky soon after we left Calcutta. By the time we reached the New Farakka station, it was past midnight. I woke when the train stopped to find that it was pouring outside, and there was frequent thunder. However, when we alighted at New Jalpaiguri in the morning, there was no evidence of rain, although the sky was overcast.

The man who had been sent to meet us turned out to be Mahitosh Babu's secretary, Torit Sengupta. He was under thirty, thin, fair, wore glasses with thick black frames, and his hair was dishevelled. He greeted us politely, but without any excessive show of warmth. I told myself hurriedly that it might not necessarily mean he was displeased to see us. Feluda had warned me often enough not to jump to conclusions or judge people simply by their outward behaviour. But Mr Sengupta was clearly an intelligent man, for he didn't have to be told who amongst us was Lalmohan Ganguli, and who was Pradosh Mitter.

We stopped for ten minutes to have toast and omelettes. Then we climbed into the jeep waiting outside. Our luggage consisted only of two suitcases and a shoulder-bag. There was plenty of room in the jeep to sit comfortably. 'Mr Sinha-Roy sent his apologies for not being able to receive you himself,' Mr Sengupta said before we started. 'His brother has not been keeping well. So he had to stay home because the doctor was expected.'

This was news to us. None of us knew Mahitosh Babu had a brother.

'I hope it's nothing serious?' Feluda asked. I could tell he wasn't happy about staying in a house where someone was ill. Our visit might well turn into an imposition on our host.

'No, no,' Mr Sengupta replied, 'Devtosh Babu—that's his brother—doesn't have a physical problem. His problems are mental, and he's been . . . well, not quite normal . . . for many years. But don't get me wrong. He isn't mad. In fact,

he seems fine most of the time. But occasionally he gets very restless. So the doctor has to put him on sedatives.'

'How old is he?'

'Sixty-four. He's older by five years. He was once a very learned man. He had . . . has . . . an extensive knowledge of history.'

I looked out of the jeep. To the north were the Himalayas. Somewhere in that direction lay Darjeeling. I had been there three times, but never to Laxmanbari. It wasn't very warm as there was no sun. The scenery changed as soon as we left the town. We passed a few tea estates. Now I could see mountains even to the east.

'Bhutan,' Mr Sengupta said briefly, pointing at these. The tea estates gave way to forests soon after we crossed the river Teesta. At one point, we saw a herd of goats emerging from a wood. Lalmohan Babu got very excited, and shouted, 'Look, deer, deer!'

'At least he didn't say tigers. Thank heaven for that!' Feluda muttered under his breath.

'There is a forest called Kalbuni within a mile of where we live,' Mr Sengupta informed us. 'It was once full of tigers, many of which were killed by the Sinha-Roys. Now, I'm not sure if any Royal Bengals are left, but about three months ago there were rumours of a man-eater in Kalbuni.'

'Rumours? How do you mean?'

'Well, the body of an adivasi boy was found in the jungle. There were scratches on it that suggested it had been attacked by a tiger.'

'Just scratches? Didn't the tiger eat the flesh?'

'Yes, the flesh was partially eaten. But a hyena or a jackal may have been responsible for that.' 'What did Mahitosh Babu have to say?'

'He wasn't here at the time. He had gone to visit his tea estate near Hasimara. The officers of the Forest Department thought it might be a tiger, but when Mr Sinha-Roy got back, he said that couldn't be. A lot has been done in these few months to find that tiger, without success whatsoever.'

'I see. No one else was attacked after that one incident?' 'No.'

The very mention of a man-eater gave me goose pimples. But Mahitosh Babu must have been right.

Lalmohan Babu said, 'Highly interesting!' and began staring at the trees, a frown across his brows.

We crossed a small river, went past a village and another forest, and turned left. The road was unpaved here, so our ride became noticeably bumpy. It did not last for very long, however. Only five minutes later, I saw the top of a building, towering over the trees. The rest of it came into view in a few moments. The trees thinned out to reveal a large mansion that stood behind tall iron gates. Once it must have been white, but now there were black marks all over its walls, making the whole house look as if it had been attacked and left badly bruised. Only the window panes glowed with colour. Not a single one from the colours of a rainbow was missing.

The gates were open. Our jeep passed through them and stopped at the portico. I noticed a marble slab on the gate that said: ‘The Sinha-Roy Palace’.

Two

Mahitosh Sinha-Roy turned out to be a little different from his photograph. The photo had not done justice to his complexion. He was remarkably fair. His height seemed nearly the same as Feluda's, and he had put on a little weight since the photo had been taken. His voice was deep and strong. Enough to frighten a tiger if he simply spoke to it, I thought.

He met us at the front door and ushered us into a huge drawing room.

'Please sit down,' he invited warmly. Feluda mentioned his writing as soon as we had all been introduced. 'The events you describe are amazing enough. But even apart from those, your language and style are so good that from the literary point of view as well, I think you have made a remarkable contribution.'

A bearer had come in and placed glasses of mango sherbet on a low table. Mahitosh Babu gestured at these and said, 'Please help yourselves.' Then he smiled and added, 'You are very kind, Mr Mitter. It may be that writing was in my blood, but I didn't know it until four years ago when I first started to write. My grandfather and father were both writers. Mind you, I don't think their forefathers had anything to do with literature. We were originally Kshatriyas from Rajputana. Oh, you knew that, did you? So, once we were in the business of fighting with other men. Then we left the men and turned to animals. Now I've been more or less forced to abandon my gun and pick up a pen.'

'Is that your grandfather?' Feluda asked, looking at an oil painting on the wall.

'Yes. That is Adityanarayan Sinha-Roy.'

It was an impressive figure. His eyes glinted, in his left hand was a rifle, and the right one was placed lightly on a table. He looked directly at us, holding himself erect, his head tilted proudly. His beard and moustache reminded me of King George V.

'My grandfather exchanged letters with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. He was in college at the time *Devi Chowdhurani* was published. He wrote to Bankim after reading the book.'

'The novel was set in these parts, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' Mahitosh Babu replied with enthusiasm, 'The Teesta you crossed today was the Trisrota river described in the book. Devi's barge used to float on this river. But the jungles Bankim described have now become tea estates.'

‘When did your grandfather become a shikari?’ Lalmohan Babu asked suddenly.

Mahitosh Babu smiled. ‘Oh, that’s quite a story,’ he replied, ‘My grandfather was very fond of dogs. He used to go and buy pups from all over this region. There was a time when there must have been at least fifty dogs in this house, of all possible lineages, shapes, sizes and temperament. Among these, his favourite was a Bhutanese dog. There is a Shiva temple near here called the temple of Jalpeshwar. The local people hold a big fair every year during Shivaratri. A lot of people from Bhutan come down for that fair, bringing dogs and pups for sale. My grandfather bought one of these —a large, hairy animal, very cuddly—and brought it home. When the dog was three and a half years old, he was attacked and killed by a cheetah. Grandfather was then a young man. He decided he would settle scores by killing all the cheetahs and any other big cats he could find. He got himself rifles and guns, learnt to shoot and then . . . that was it. He must have killed around one hundred and fifty tigers in twenty-two years. I couldn’t tell you how many other animals he killed—they were endless.’

‘And you?’

‘I?’ Mahitosh Babu grinned, then turned to his right. ‘Go on, Shashanka, tell them.’

I noticed with a start that while we were all listening to Mahitosh Babu’s story, another gentleman had quietly entered the room and taken the chair to our left.

‘Tigers? Why, you have written so many books, you tell them!’ Shashanka Babu replied with a smile.

Mahitosh Babu turned back to us. ‘I haven’t been able to reach three figures, I must admit. I killed seventy-one tigers and over fifty leopards. Meet my friend, Shashanka Sanyal. We’ve known each other since we were small children. He looks after my timber business.’

There seemed to be a world of difference between Mahitosh Babu and his friend. The latter was barely five feet eight inches tall, his complexion was dark, his voice quiet, and he spoke very gently. Yet, there had to be some common interest to hold them together as friends.

‘Mr Sengupta mentioned something about a man-eater. Has there been any further news?’ Feluda asked.

Mahitosh Babu moved in his chair. ‘A tiger doesn’t become a man-eater just because a few people choose to call it so. I would have known, if I had been

here and could have seen the body. However, the good news is that whatever animal attacked that poor boy has not yet shown further interest in human flesh.'

Feluda smiled. 'If indeed it was a man-eater, I am sure you would have dropped your pen and picked up your gun, at least temporarily,' he remarked.

'Oh yes. If a tiger went about eating men in my own area, most certainly I would consider it my duty to destroy it.'

We had finished our drinks. Mahitosh Babu said, 'You must be tired after your journey. Why don't you go to your room and have a little rest? I'll get someone in the evening to take you around in my jeep. A road goes through the forest. You may see deer, or even elephants, if you are lucky. Torit, please show them the trophy room and then take them to their own.'

The trophy room turned out to be a hall stashed with the heads of tigers, bears, wild buffalo and deer. Crocodile skins hung on a wall. There was hardly enough room for us all. I felt somewhat uncomfortable to find dozens of dead animals staring at me through their glassy eyes. But that wasn't all. The weapons that had been used to kill these animals were also displayed on a huge rack. None of us had ever seen so many guns: single-barrelled, double-barrelled, guns to kill birds with, guns for tigers, and even some for elephants. There seemed to be no end to them.

'Have you ever been on a shikar?' Feluda asked Torit Sengupta, looking at the various weapons. Mr Sengupta laughed and shook his head. 'No, no, not me. You are a detective. Can't you tell by looking at me I have nothing to do with killing animals?'

'One doesn't have to be physically very large and hefty to be a shikari. It's all to do with a steady nerve, isn't it? You do not strike me as someone who might lack it.'

'No, my nerve is steady enough. But I come from an ordinary middle-class family in Calcutta. Shikar is something I've never even thought of.'

We left the trophy room and began climbing a staircase. 'What is a man from a city doing in a place like this?' Feluda asked.

'He is simply doing a job, Mr Mitter. I couldn't find one in the city, when I finished college. Then I saw the advertisement Mr Sinha-Roy had put in for a secretary. I applied, came here for an interview and got it.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Five years.'

‘You like walking in the forest, don’t you? I mean, even if you’re not a shikari?’

Mr Sengupta looked at Feluda in surprise. ‘Why, what do you mean?’

‘There are scratch marks on your right hand. Bramble?’

Mr Sengupta smiled again. ‘Yes, you’re right. You are remarkably observant, I must say. I got these marks only yesterday. Walking in the forest has become something like an addiction for me.’

‘Even if you’re unarmed?’

‘Yes. Normally, there’s nothing to be afraid of,’ Mr Sengupta replied quietly. ‘The only things I have to watch out for are snakes and mad elephants.’

‘And man-eaters?’ Lalmohan Babu whispered.

‘If a man-eater’s existence is proved one day, I suppose I shall have to give up my walks.’

There was a door at the top of the stairs, beyond which lay a long veranda. There were several rooms running down one side. The first of these was Mahitosh Babu’s study. Mr Sengupta worked in it during the day. The veranda curved to the left a little later, taking us to the west wing of the building. Our rooms were among the ones that lined this section of the veranda.

‘Are all these in use? Who stays in these rooms?’ asked Feluda.

‘No one. Most of these stay locked. Mr Sinha-Roy and his brother live in the eastern side. Shashanka Sanyal and I are in the southern wing. Two rooms in our side of the house are always kept ready for Mr Sinha-Roy’s sons. He has two sons. Both work in Calcutta. They come here occasionally.’

Now I noticed another figure standing on the opposite veranda: a man wearing a purple dressing gown, leaning against the railing and staring straight at us. ‘Is that Mahitosh Babu’s brother?’ Feluda asked. Before Mr Sengupta could reply, the man spoke. His voice was as deep as his brother’s.

‘Have you seen Raju? Where is he?’

The question was clearly meant for us. He moved closer quickly. There were visible resemblances between the two brothers, specially around the jaw. Mr Sengupta answered on our behalf, ‘No, they haven’t seen him.’

‘No? What about Hussain? Have they seen Hussain?’

His eyes were odd, unfocussed. His hair was much thinner than his brother’s, and almost totally white. He might have been just as tall, but he stooped and so appeared shorter.

‘No, they haven’t seen Hussain, either,’ said Mr Sengupta and motioned us to go inside our room. ‘They know nothing,’ he added firmly, ‘they are only visiting for a few days.’

Devtosh Babu looked openly disappointed. We slipped into our room quickly.

‘Who are Raju and Hussain?’ Feluda wanted to know. Mr Sengupta laughed.

‘Raju is another name for Kalapahar. And Hussain is Hussain Khan, who used to be the Sultan of Gaur. Both of them destroyed several Hindu temples in Bengal. The head of the statue in the temple of Jalpeshwar here was broken by Hussain Khan.’

‘Were you a student of history?’

‘No, literature. But Mr Sinha-Roy is writing the history of his family. So, as his secretary, I am having to pick up a few details here and there about past events in this area.’

Mr Sengupta left. For the first time since our arrival, we were left by ourselves. I could now relax completely. The room was large and comfortable. There were two deer heads fixed over the door. Spread on the floor was a leopard skin, including the head. Perhaps it had not been possible to accommodate it anywhere else. There were two proper beds, and a smaller wooden cot, which had clearly been added because there were three of us. All three beds had been carefully made, with thick mattresses, embroidered bedsheets and pillowcases. Mosquito nets hung around each bed. Feluda looked at the cot and said, ‘This one was probably once used as a machaan. Look, there are marks where it must have been tied with ropes. Topshe, you can sleep on it.’

Lalmohan Babu seemed quite satisfied with what he saw. He sat down on his bed and said, ‘I think we are going to enjoy the next three days. But I hope Devtosh Babu won’t come back to ask about his friend Raju. Frankly speaking, I feel very uncomfortable in the presence of anyone mentally disturbed.’

The same thought had occurred to me. But Feluda did not appear concerned at all. He began unpacking, stopping only for a moment to frown and say, ‘We still don’t know what kind of help Mahitosh Babu is expecting from me.’

Three

Mr Sengupta could not go with us in the evening as he had some important work to see to. Mahitosh Babu's friend, Shashanka Sanyal, came with us instead. Having lived in these parts for many years, he, too, seemed to have learnt a lot of about the local flora and fauna. He kept pointing out trees and plants to us, although it was quickly getting dark and not very easy to see from the back of the jeep. He had lived here for thirty years, he said. Before that, he was in Calcutta. Mahitosh Babu and he had attended the same school and college.

Our jeep stopped by the side of a small river. The sun was just about to set.

'Let's get down for a while,' Mr Sanyal said. 'You'll never get the feel, the real atmosphere in a forest from a moving jeep.'

I realized the minute we stepped out how dense and quiet the forest was. There was no noise except the gently rippling river and the birds going back to roost. Had there not been a man carrying a rifle, I would certainly have felt uneasy. This man was called Madhavlal. He was a professional shikari. When shikaris from abroad used to come here, it was always Madhavlal who used to act as their guide. Apparently, he knew everything about where a machaan should be set up, where a tiger was likely to be spotted, what might it mean if an animal cried out. He was about fifty, tall and well built without even a trace of fat on his body. I was very glad he had been sent with us.

We walked slowly over to the sandy bank and stood on the pebbles that were spread on the ground like a carpet. After chatting with Mr Sanyal for a few minutes, Feluda suddenly asked, 'What is the matter with Devtosh Babu? How did he happen to . . .?'

'Heredity. There is a history of madness in their family. Mahitosh's grandfather went mad in his old age.'

'Really? Did he have to stop hunting?'

'Oh yes. Every firearm was removed out of sight. But, one day, he found an old sword hanging on the wall in the drawing room. He grabbed it and went into the jungle to kill yet another tiger. Rumour has it that he wanted to do what Sher Shah had done. You must have been told in your history lessons in school how Sher Shah got his title: "In his later years, he is said to have beheaded a tiger with one stroke of his sword, which earned him the title of Sher Shah". In a fit of madness, Adityanarayan wanted to do the same.'

'And then?' Lalmohan Babu asked, his eyes round and his voice hushed.

‘He never returned. This time, the tiger won. There was virtually nothing left, except his sword.’

An animal called loudly from behind a bush. Lalmohan Babu nearly jumped out of his skin. Mr Sanyal laughed. ‘Mr Ganguli, you are a writer of adventure stories. You shouldn’t get frightened so easily. That was only a fox.’

Lalmohan Babu pulled himself together. ‘Er . . . you see, it is because I am a writer that my imagination is livelier than others. We were talking about tigers, weren’t we, and then I heard that animal. So I thought I could actually see a flash of yellow behind that bush.’

‘Well . . . something yellow and striped may well start moving behind bushes if we hang around,’ Mr Sanyal remarked, suddenly lowering his voice.

‘What!’

‘Was that a barking deer?’ Feluda whispered.

A different animal had started to call. It sounded like the barking of a dog. Feluda had told me once that if a tiger was spotted close by, barking deer often called out to warn other animals. Mr Sanyal nodded in silence and motioned us to get back into the jeep. We crept back and took our places in absolute silence. It was now appreciably darker. My heart started thumping loudly. Madhavlal, too, had moved closer to the jeep, clutching his rifle tightly. Lalmohan Babu touched my hand briefly. His palm felt icy.

We waited in breathless anticipation until six o’clock; but no animal came into view. We had to return disappointed.

It was totally dark by the time we reached our room. To our surprise, we realized that in this short time, large thick clouds had gathered in the western sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and lightning spread its roots everywhere in the sky, dazzling our eyes. We were all staring out of the window, watching this spectacle, when someone knocked at the door. It had been left open. We turned around to find Mahitosh Sinha-Roy standing there.

‘How was your trip to the forest?’ he asked in his deep voice. ‘We almost saw a tiger!’ Lalmohan Babu shouted, excited like a child.

‘If you had come here even ten years ago, you would certainly have seen one,’ said our host. ‘If you failed to see one today, I must admit I—and other shikaris like me—are to blame, for shikar was considered to be a sport. Even in ancient times, kings used to go on hunting expeditions which they called *mrigaya*. So did Mughal badshahs, and in modern times, our British masters. It became a tradition, which we followed blindly. Can you imagine how many animals have

been killed in these two thousand years? But that isn't all, is it? Just think of the number of animals that are caught every year for zoos and circuses!'

None of us knew what to say. Was a famous shikari now sorry for what he had done? Feluda offered him a chair, but he declined. 'No, thank you,' he said, 'I didn't come here to stay. I came only to show you something. Let's go to my grandfather's room. I think you'll find it interesting.'

Adityanarayan's room was in the northern wing. 'We heard how he had lost his mind in his old age,' Feluda said as we began moving in that direction.

Mahitosh Babu smiled. 'Yes, but until that happened, till he was about sixty, there were few men with his intelligence and sharpness.'

'Do you still have the sword he had taken to kill a tiger?' 'Yes, it's kept in his room. Come, I'll show you.'

Bookshelves occupied three sides of Adityanarayan's room. Each of them was packed with books, papers, manuscripts and stacks of old newspapers. The fourth side had two chests and a glass case. It is impossible to make a list of its contents that ranged from tigers' nails and a rhino's horn to metal statues and jewellery from Bhutan. The collar that his favourite dog had worn was also there. It was studded with stones, like all the Bhutanese jewellery. Apart from these, there was a silver pen and ink- well, binoculars from Mughal times and two human skulls. All these things occupied the top two shelves. The bottom two contained only weapons: a three hundred year old carved pistol, eight daggers and kukris, and the famous sword. Only a madman could think it would be enough to kill a tiger, for it was neither very big nor heavy. The swords I had seen in Bikaner fort that had once belonged to Rajput rulers were much more impressive.

While we were examining these objects, Mahitosh Babu had opened one of the chests and brought out a small ivory box. Now he took out a folded piece of paper from it and said, 'Detectives, I believe, have a special gift to unravel puzzles and riddles. See what you make of this one, Mr Mitter.'

'A riddle? I was once interested in things of that sort, but. . .' Mahitosh Babu passed the piece of paper to Feluda. 'You said you wanted to spend three days here. If you cannot figure it out in that time, I am prepared to give you another three days; but no more than that.'

His tone changed as he spoke the last few words, as did the look in his eyes. I realized with a shock that our genial host had a streak of cold sternness—perhaps even ruthlessness—in him. Obviously, there were times when this side to his character was exposed. Feluda asked quickly, even before Mahitosh Babu's eyes could lose their cold, remote look: 'And what if I succeed?' His own

tone was light, and there was a hint of a smile around his lips. But it was clear that Feluda didn't lack the ability to deal with Mahitosh Babu, no matter how stern he might be.

Mahitosh Sinha-Roy laughed, his good humour restored. 'If you succeed, Mr Mitter, I will give you a whole tiger skin, taken from one of the biggest tigers I have killed.'

This was quite generous, I had to admit. The value of a whole tiger skin today was not to be laughed at.

Feluda now looked at the piece of paper and read aloud the riddle:

Old man hollow, pace to follow, people's tree.

Half ten, half again, century.

Rising sun, whence it's done, can't you see?

Between hands, below them stands, yours, it be.

'Hidden treasure,' Feluda murmured.

'You think so?'

'Yes, that's what the last line seems to indicate. I mean, "yours, it be" could only mean finding something after solving that riddle and being rewarded for it. It has to be money. But what we must consider is whether your grandfather was the kind of man who'd hide his wealth and then leave a coded message for its recovery. Not many people would think of doing such a thing.'

'My grandfather would. He was very different from ordinary men, I have told you that. He loved practical jokes, and having a laugh at the expense of others. When he was a child, I believe one day, he was cross with all the grown-ups for some reason. So he stole their shoes in the middle of the night and hung them in bundles from the highest branches of a tree. Yes, I can well believe—what is it, Torit?'

None of us had noticed Torit Sengupta come into the room. He was standing near the door. 'I came to return a dictionary I had taken from that shelf,' he replied quietly.

'Very well, put it back. And . . . have you finished with those proofs?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then you must take them with you tomorrow. And ask them why there were so many errors even in the second proof. Don't let them get away with it!'

Mr Sengupta slipped the book he was carrying into an empty space on a shelf, and left.

‘Torit is going to Calcutta tomorrow for a week. His mother is ill,’ Mahitosh Babu explained.

Feluda was still staring at the rhyme.

‘Who else knows about this riddle?’ he asked.

Mahitosh Babu switched the light off and began moving towards the door. ‘We found it only ten days ago. I was going through old papers and correspondence as I want to start writing the history of our family. Many of my grandfather’s personal papers were found in an old steel trunk. That ivory box was hidden under a pile of letters. Only three people know about it: Shashanka, Torit and myself. But none of us have the required skill to decipher the message. One needs to know about words—one single word can have different meanings, can’t it? Do you think you can crack it, Mr Mitter?’

Feluda returned the piece of paper of Mahitosh Babu.

‘What! Are you giving up already?’ he cried in dismay.

‘No, no,’ Feluda smiled, ‘I can remember all the words. I’ll go and write them down in my notebook. That paper belongs to you and your family. It should stay with you.’

Four

‘You will get a tiger skin, Felu Babu, but what about me?’ Lalmohan Babu asked, sounding disappointed.

We had finished dinner an hour ago. Our host had regaled us after dinner with exciting stories about his experiences in the wild. We had only just wished him a good night and returned from the drawing room.

‘Why do you say that, Lalmohan Babu? Whoever solves this code will get that skin. At least, he should. So why don’t you give it a go yourself, eh? You are a writer, you have a good command over your language, and you have imagination. So come on!’

‘Pooh! My command over language would never get me through all that hollow-follow and hands- stands and what have you. You’re the one who is going to get the reward. Do you think he might give you this one?’ He looked at the skin that lay sprawling on the floor.

‘No, I don’t think so. Didn’t he mention a big tiger? I have no interest in leopards.’

Feluda had already written down the few lines that made up the puzzle and was now staring at his notebook.

‘Is it making any sense at all?’ Lalmohan Babu persisted.

‘No, not really, except that I am positive it involves hidden treasure,’ Feluda replied without looking up.

‘How can you tell? What’s all that about following a hollow old man?’

‘I don’t know yet, but I think the word “follow” is important, and so is “pace”. Perhaps it’s simply telling you where you should go—take paces to something, or from something. Nothing else is clear. So we must—’ Feluda couldn’t finish speaking. Someone had walked in through the open door. It was Devtosh Babu.

He was still wearing the purple dressing gown. His eyes held the same wild look, as though he suspected everyone he met of having committed a crime. He looked straight at Lalmohan Babu and said, ‘Did the Bhot Raja send you?’

‘Bh-bhot?’ Lalmohan Babu gulped. ‘Do you mean vote? El-elections?’

‘No, I think he is talking of the Raja of Bhutan,’ Feluda said softly. Devtosh Babu turned his eyes immediately on Feluda, thereby releasing Lalmohan Babu from an extremely awkward situation.

‘Are the Bhots coming back?’ he wanted to know.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Feluda replied, his voice absolutely normal, ‘but it is possible now to travel to Bhutan quite easily.’

‘Really?’ Devtosh Babu sounded as though this was the first time he’d heard the news. ‘Good,’ he said, ‘That’s good. They had once been very helpful. It was only because of them that the soldiers of the Nawab couldn’t do anything. They know how to fight. But not everyone knows that, do they?’ He sighed deeply, then added, ‘Not everyone can handle weapons. No, not everyone can be like Adityanarayan.’

He turned abruptly and began walking to the door. Then he stopped, turned back, looked at the leopard skin on the floor and said something perfectly weird.

‘Do you know about the wheels of Yudhisthir ’s chariot? They never touched the ground. Yet . . . in the end, they did. They had to.’ Then he quickly left the room.

We sat in silence after he had gone. After a few minutes, I heard Feluda mutter: ‘He was wearing clogs. The soles were lined with rubber to muffle the noise.’

Our first night turned out to be quite eventful. I shall try to describe what happened in the right order. A grandfather clock on the top of the stairs helped me to keep track of time.

The first thing we realized within ten minutes of going to bed was that although we had been given thick mattresses and beautiful linen, no one had thought of checking the mosquito nets. There were holes in all three, which simply meant an open invitation to all the mosquitoes in the region. Thank goodness Feluda always carried a tube of Odomos with him. Each of us had to use it before going back to bed. When I did, suitably embalmed, I could hear the clock outside strike eleven. The clouds had dispersed to make way for the moon. I could see a patch of moonlight on the floor and was looking at it when, suddenly, someone spoke on the veranda.

‘I am warning you for the last time. This is not going to do you any good!’

It was Mahitosh Sinha-Roy. He sounded furious. There was no reply from the other person. On my right, Lalmohan Babu had started to snore. I turned to my left and whispered, ‘Feluda, did you hear that?’

‘Yes,’ Feluda whispered back, ‘go to sleep.’

I said nothing more. I must have fallen asleep almost immediately, but woke again a little later. The moon was still there, but the thunder was back, rolling in the distance. I lay quietly listening to it, but as the last rumble died away, it was replaced by another noise: khut-khut, khut-khut, khut-khut! It did not continue at a regular pace, but stopped abruptly. Then it started again. Now it became clear that it was coming from inside our room. It got drowned occasionally by the thunder outside, but it did not stay silent for long. I could hear Feluda breathing deeply and regularly. He was obviously fast asleep.

But why had Lalmohan Babu stopped snoring? I glanced at his bed, but could see nothing through the nets. Then I became aware of another noise, a faint, chattering noise which I recognized instantly. A few years ago, during a visit to Simla, Lalmohan Babu had slipped and fallen on the snow as a bullet came and hit the ground near his feet. He had made the same noise then. It was simply the sound of his teeth chattering uncontrollably.

Khut-khut, khut-khut, khut!

There it was again. I raised my head to look at the floor. The mosquito net rustled with this slight movement, which told Lalmohan Babu that I was awake.

'T-t-t-tapesh!' he cried in a strange, hoarse voice. 'The l-l-l-eopard!'

I sat up to look properly at the leopard skin. What I saw froze my blood. Moonlight was still streaming in through a window to shine directly on the head of the leopard. It was rising and turning every now and then, first to the left and then to the right, making that strange noise. 'Feluda!' I called, unable to stop myself. I knew Feluda would wake instantly and be totally alert, no matter how deeply he had been sleeping.

'What is it? Why are you shouting?' he asked. I tried to tell him, but discovered that, like Lalmohan Babu, my throat had gone completely dry. All I could manage was, 'Look . . . floor!'

Feluda climbed out of his bed and stood staring at the moving head of the leopard. Then he stepped forward coolly and placed a finger under its chin, tilting it up. A large beetle crawled out. With unruffled calm, he picked it up and threw it out of the window. 'Didn't you know about the demonic strength of a beetle? If you place a heavy brass bowl over it, it will drag it about all over the house!' Feluda said.

I could feel myself go limp with relief. From the way Lalmohan Babu sighed, I could tell he was feeling the same. But why was Feluda still standing at the window? What was there to see in the dead of night?

‘Topshe, come and have a look,’ he invited. Lalmohan Babu and I joined him. Our room, which was in the rear portion of the house, overlooked the Kalbuni forest. In the last couple of minutes, thick clouds had once again obliterated the moon. There was lightning and the sound of thunder appeared closer. But what surprised me was that, in addition to the lightning, another light flashed in the distance. It kept moving about among the trees in the forest. Someone with a torch was out there. There was no doubt about that.

‘Highly suspicious!’ Lalmohan Babu muttered.

Then the torch was switched off. In the same instant, there was a blinding flash, followed by an ear- splitting noise. Almost immediately, it began to pour in great torrents. We had to pull the shutters down quickly.

‘It’s past one o’clock,’ Feluda said. ‘Let’s try and get some sleep. We’re supposed to go to the temple of Jalpeshwar in the morning, remember?’

The three of us got back into bed, behind the mosquito nets. I stared at the windows. Although they were shut, their multicoloured panes shone brightly each time there was a flash of lightning, flooding the room with all the hues of a rainbow.

I couldn’t tell when this colourful display stopped, and when I fell asleep.

Five

The next morning, I woke at seven o'clock. Feluda was already up, and had finished doing his yoga, bathing and shaving. Mr Sengupta was supposed to collect us at eight, and take us to the temple. One of the three bearers, called Kanai, brought us our morning tea at half past seven. Feluda picked up his cup, then went back to staring at the notebook lying open in his lap. 'Bravo, Adityanarayan!' I heard him murmur. 'What a brain you had!'

Lalmohan Babu slurped his tea noisily, and said, 'Very good tea, I must say. Why, Felu Babu, have you made any progress?'

Feluda continued to mutter, '"Half ten". That's five. "Half again, century". Century would mean a hundred, so half of that is fifty. Five and fifty, that's fifty-five. OK, he probably means fifty-five paces. But what does it relate to? The tree? What is a people's tree? I must think . . .'

My heart lifted suddenly. He had started to solve the riddle. I felt sure he'd be able to get the entire meaning before we left—with the tiger skin, of course.

The clock outside struck eight. Mr Sengupta should be here soon, I thought. A few minutes passed, but there was no sign of him. Feluda didn't seem to be aware of the delay. He was still engrossed in the puzzle.

'Rising sun?' I heard him say. 'Could it mean the east? Yes. Fifty-five paces to the east of something. What can it mean? The tree . . . the tree . . .'

Someone knocked on the door. It was Shashanka Sanyal, not Mr Sengupta.

'Er . . . haven't you finished your tea? Oh, I'm sorry,' he said. Feluda put his notebook away and got to his feet. Mr Sanyal was looking visibly upset.

'What is it? What is the matter?' Feluda asked quickly. Mr Sanyal cleared his throat, then spoke somewhat absently, 'There's some bad news, Mr Mitter. Torit Sengupta . . . Mahitosh's secretary . . . died last night.'

'Wha-at! How?' Feluda asked. Lalmohan Babu and I simply stared speechlessly.

'It seems he went into the forest last night. No one knows why. His body was found only a little while ago, by a woodcutter.'

'But how did he die? What happened?'

'Apparently, his body has been partially eaten by some animal. Quite possibly, a tiger.'

The man-eater! My hands suddenly felt cold and clammy. Lalmohan Babu had been standing in the middle of the room. He now took three steps backwards

to grab the corner of a table and lean against it. Feluda stood still, looking extremely grim.

'I am sorry,' Mr Sanyal said again. 'You only came yesterday for a holiday and now this has happened. I'm afraid we are going to be rather busy . . . I mean, we have to go and see the body for ourselves, naturally.'

'Can we go with you?'

At this question, Mr Sanyal glanced swiftly at us and said, 'You may be used to gory deaths, Mr Mitter, but the others . . . ?'

'They will stay in the jeep. I will not let them see anything unpleasant.'

Mr Sanyal agreed. 'Very well. We have two jeeps. You three can travel in one.'

'Are we going to carry a gun?'

This question came from Lalmohan Babu. At any other time, Mr Sanyal would have laughed at the idea. But now he said seriously, 'Yes. There's nothing to be afraid of during the day, but we are going to be armed.'

None of us spoke in the jeep. I hadn't yet got over the shock. Only last evening, he was alive. He had spoken with us. And now he was dead . . . killed by a man-eater. What was he doing in the forest in the middle of the night? The light we saw moving among the trees . . . was it coming from Mr Sengupta's torch?

There was another jeep in front of ours. In it were Mahitosh Babu, Mr Sanyal, a man called Mr Datta from the Forest Department, the shikari Madhavlal, and the woodcutter who had found the body and come running to the house. Mahitosh Babu, who had told us so many exciting stories only the previous night, seemed to have aged considerably in the last couple of hours. What I couldn't figure out was whether it was because of the tragic death of his secretary, or because of the implications of having a man-eater running loose in the area.

We did not have to go very far into the forest. Only five minutes after taking the road that ran through the forest, the jeep in front of us slowed down, and then stopped. The road was lined with large trees. I recognized teak, silk-cotton and neem. There was a huge jackfruit tree and a number of bamboo groves. Evidence of last night's rain lay everywhere. Every little hole and hollow in the ground was full of water.

'Look!' Feluda said as our jeep stopped. I looked in the direction he pointed and noticed, after a few seconds, a light green object on a bush. It was a torn piece of the shirt Mr Sengupta had worn the night before, I had no problem in recognizing it.

Our jeep stood at least fifty yards away from where Mr Sengupta's body lay—hidden out of sight, thankfully. Everyone from the other jeep climbed out. The woodcutter began walking. Feluda, too, got out and said, 'You two wait here. It must be a horrible sight.'

The others disappeared behind a bamboo grove. Although we were at some distance from them, I could hear what they said, possibly because the forest was totally silent. The first person to speak was Mahitosh Babu. 'My God!' he exclaimed, slapping his forehead with his palm.

'It's useless now to look for pug marks—the rain would have washed them away—but it does look like an attack by a tiger, doesn't it?' asked Mr Datta.

'Yes, undoubtedly,' Mahitosh Babu replied.

'It stopped raining after two o'clock last night. From the way the blood's been washed away, it seems he was killed before it started to rain.'

Feluda spoke next: 'But does a man-eater always start eating its prey on the same spot where it kills it? Doesn't it often carry its dead prey from one place to another?'

'Yes, that's true,' Mahitosh Babu replied, 'but don't think we can find traces of the body being dragged on the ground. No mark would have stayed for very long in all that rain. In any case, a tiger is quite capable of carrying the body of a man in such a way that it wouldn't touch the ground at all. So I don't think we'll ever find out where exactly Torit was attacked.'

'If we could find his glasses, maybe that would . . .' Feluda's voice trailed away.

This was followed by a few minutes' silence. Through the leaves, I saw Mr Sanyal move. Perhaps he was trying to look for pug marks.

'Madhavlal!' called Mahitosh Babu, but could get no further, for Feluda interrupted him. 'Can a tiger use just one single nail to leave a deep wound?' he asked.

'Why? What makes you say that?'

'Perhaps you didn't notice—there's a wound on his chest. Something narrow and very sharp pierced through his clothes and went into his body. If you come this way, sir, I'll show you what I mean.'

Everyone gathered round the body once more. Then I heard Mahitosh Babu cry, 'Oh God! Dear God in heaven, this is murder! That kind of injury couldn't possibly have been caused by an animal. Someone killed him before the tiger found him. Oh, what a terrible disaster!'

‘Murder . . . or it may be attempted murder,’ Feluda spoke slowly ‘He was stabbed, that much is clear. But maybe his assassin left him injured and ran away. When the tiger came along, an injured prey must have made his job that much easier. If only we could find the weapon!’

‘Shashanka, please inform the police at once,’ Mahitosh Babu said.

Everyone then returned to the jeep, leaving only Madhavlal with his gun to guard the body. When Feluda joined us, I was shocked to see how grim he looked. He didn’t speak another word on the way back; neither were we in the mood to talk. We passed a herd of deer a few moments later, but even that did not bring me any joy. We had faced danger many times in the past, and had had to deal with unforeseen complexities, but this seemed utterly bizarre. Not only was there a mysterious death, a possible murderer to be found and arrested, but—to top it all—a man-eater!

I stole a glance at Lalmohan Babu. Never before had I seen him look so ashen.

Six

We were back in our room. It was now 5 p.m. Shashanka Sanyal had informed the police, who had started their investigation. At this moment, there was really nothing for us to do. We had just had tea. Despite all my mental turmoil, I couldn't help noticing just how good the tea was. It was from Mahitosh Babu's own estate, we were told. Feluda was pacing, frowning and cracking his knuckles, stopping occasionally to light a Charminar, then stubbing it into a brass ashtray after just a couple of puffs. I sat staring out of the window. The sky today was quite clear. Lalmohan Babu kept lifting up the head of the leopard on our floor and inspecting its teeth. I saw him do this at least three times.

'If only I had had the chance to get to know him better!' Feluda muttered. This was truly unfortunate. Mr Sengupta had died before we could learn anything about him. How could Feluda get anywhere unless he knew what kind of a man he had been, who would want to kill him, whether he had had any enemies?

A few minutes after the clock on the veranda struck five, a servant came up to inform us that Mahitosh Babu wanted to see us. We rose at once and went to the drawing room. Besides our host and Mr Sanyal, there was a third man in the room, wearing a police uniform.

'This is Inspector Biswas,' Mahitosh Babu said. 'When I told him you were the first one to suspect murder, he said he'd like to meet you.'

'Namaskar,' said Feluda and took a chair opposite the inspector. We found a settee for ourselves.

Mr Biswas was very dark and quite bald, although he could not have been more than forty. He sported a thin moustache, one side of which was longer than the other. Perhaps he hadn't been paying attention while trimming it. He cast a sharp glance at Feluda and said, 'I believe you are an amateur detective?'

Feluda smiled and nodded.

'Do you know the difference between your lot and mine? There's usually a murder when you visit a place; we visit a place after there's been a murder.' Mr Biswas laughed loudly at his own joke.

Feluda went straight to the point. 'Has the murder weapon been found?'

Mr Biswas stopped laughing and shook his head. 'No, but we're still looking for it. You can imagine how difficult it is to find something in a forest, especially

when there's a man-eater lurking in it. Even the police are men, aren't they? I mean, which man wants to get eaten? Ha ha ha ha!'

Feluda forced a smile since the inspector was laughing so much, but grew serious immediately.

'Is it true that he died because he was stabbed?' he asked. 'That's impossible to tell, from what's left of the body. The tiger finished nearly half of it. There will be a post-mortem, naturally, but I don't think that's going to be of any use. There is no doubt that he was stabbed. We have to catch whoever did it. Now, whether he died as a result of stabbing, or whether it was because of the tiger's attack, we do not know. In any case, what the tiger did is not our concern. That's for Mr Sinha-Roy to sort out.'

Mahitosh Babu was staring at the carpet. 'Already,' he said grimly, 'there is pretty widespread panic among the villagers. Some of my own men who work as woodcutters come from local villages. They have to work for another couple of months, after which the monsoon will start, so their work will have to stop. But they're not willing to risk their lives right now. I . . . I simply do not know what to do. Before I do anything at all, I must learn who killed Torit, why did he have to die? If I cannot hunt the tiger down, the Forest Department must find someone. After all, I am not the only shikari in this area.'

Mr Biswas cleared this throat. 'There is only one question in my mind,' he said. 'Why did your secretary go to the forest in the middle of the night? The motive for killing, I think, is relatively simple. We didn't find a wallet or any money or any other valuables on his person. So whoever killed him simply wanted those, I think. Plain robbery, there's your motive.'

'If that was the case,' Feluda said quietly, lighting a cigarette, 'he could simply have been knocked unconscious with a rod, or even a heavy walking stick. He did not have to be killed.' Mr Biswas laughed again, a little dryly this time. 'No,' he said, 'but if you rule out robbery, can you think of a suitable motive, Mr Mitter? Torit Sengupta worked for Mr Sinha-Roy, his world consisted of books and papers, he arrived here five years ago, didn't go out much and didn't know anyone except those in this house. Who would wish to kill a man like that, unless he—or they—came upon him by chance and decided to rob him of what possessions he had?'

Feluda frowned in silence.

'Yes, I know an amateur detective wouldn't appreciate the idea of a simple robbery,' Mr Biswas mocked. 'You like complications, don't you? You like mysteries? Well then, here's a first class mystery for you, Mr Mitter: why did

Mr Sengupta go into the forest in the first place? What was he doing there? Try and solve that one!'

No one made a reply. Mr Sanyal was sitting next to his friend in absolute silence. Mahitosh Babu was still looking pale and exhausted. He kept shaking his head and muttering under his breath, 'I don't understand . . . nothing makes sense . . .!'

There didn't seem to be anything else to say. We rose a minute later. To my surprise, Mr Biswas spoke quite kindly before we left. 'You may carry on with your own investigation, Mr Mitter,' he said, 'we don't mind that in the least. After all, you were the first person to notice the stab wound.'

We left the drawing room, but did not return to our own. Feluda went out of the front door, through the portico and turned right to go behind the house, past the old stables, and possibly where elephants used to be kept.

I glanced up once we were at the back of the house, and saw a row of windows on the first floor. Some were shut, others open. Through one of the open windows, I could see Lalmohan Babu's towel hanging on his bedpost. Had it not been there, it would have been impossible to identify our own room. There was a door on the ground floor, directly below our window. Perhaps this acted as the back door. Mr Sengupta might have slipped out of it to go to the forest last night.

About fifty yards away, there was a tiny hut with a thatched roof. A group of men were huddled before it. I recognized one of them. It was Mahitosh Babu's chowkidar. Perhaps the hut belonged to him. Feluda strode forward in that direction, closely followed by Lalmohan Babu and me. The forest Kalbuni stretched in the background, behind which lay a range of bluish-grey mountains.

The chowkidar gave us a salute as we got closer. ‘What is your name?’ Feluda asked him.

‘Chandan Mishir, huzoor.’ He was an old man, with close-cropped hair and wrinkles around his eyes. From the way he spoke, it was obvious that he chewed tobacco. Feluda started chatting with him. From what he told us, it appeared that the local people were far more worried about the man-eater than about Mr Sengupta’s death. Chandan—who had spent fifty years working for the Sinha-Roys— had seen or heard of mad elephants in the jungle which came out at times, but there hadn’t been a man-eater for at least thirty years.

It was Chandan’s belief that the tiger had been injured by a poacher, which now hampered its ability to find prey in the forest. This could well be true. Or maybe the tiger was old. Sometimes tigers became man-eaters when their teeth became worn and weak. I had even read that trying to eat a porcupine might injure a tiger to such an extent that it would then be forced to kill humans, which is easier than hunting other animals in the wild.

‘Do the locals want Mahitosh Babu to kill this tiger?’ Feluda asked.

Chandan scratched his head. ‘Yes, of course. But our babu has never been on a shikar in these parts.

He’s been to the jungles in Assam and Orissa, but not here,’ he said.

This came as a big surprise to us all. ‘Why? Why hasn’t he ever hunted here?’

‘Babu’s grandfather and father were both killed by tigers, you see. So Mahitosh Babu went away from here.’

We had no idea his father had also been killed by a tiger. Chandan told us what had happened. Apparently, Mahitosh Babu’s father had shot a tiger from a machaan. The tiger fell and lay so still that everyone thought it had died. Ten minutes later, when he climbed down from the machaan and went closer to the tiger, it sprang up and attacked him viciously. Although he was taken to a hospital, his wounds turned septic and he died in a few days.

Feluda stood frowning when Chandan finished his tale. Then he pointed at the hut and said, ‘Is that where you live?’

‘Ji, huzoor.’

‘When do you go to sleep?’

Chandan looked profoundly startled by this question. Feluda stopped beating about the bush. ‘The man who was killed last night—’

‘Torit Babu?’

‘Yes. He left the house quite late at night and went into the forest. Did you see him go?’

‘No, not last night. But I saw him go in there the day before yesterday, and a few days before that.

He went there more than once, often in the evening. Last night . . .’ ‘Yes?’

‘I saw not Torit Babu, but someone else.

The expression on Feluda’s face changed instantly. ‘Who did you see?’ he asked urgently.

‘I don’t know, huzoor. The torch Torit Babu used to carry was a large one—an old one with three cells. This man had a smaller torch, but its light was just as strong.’

‘Is that all you saw? Just the light from a torch? Nothing else?’

‘No, huzoor. I didn’t see who it was.’

Feluda started to ask something else, but had to stop. One of the servants from the house was running towards us.

‘Please come back to the house, sir!’ he called. ‘Babu wants to see you at once.’

We quickly went back to the front of the house. Mahitosh Babu was waiting for us near the portico. ‘You were right,’ he said as soon as he saw Feluda, ‘Torit was not killed by a passing hooligan in the forest.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘The murder weapon was taken from our house. Remember the sword I showed you yesterday? It is missing from my grandfather’s room!’