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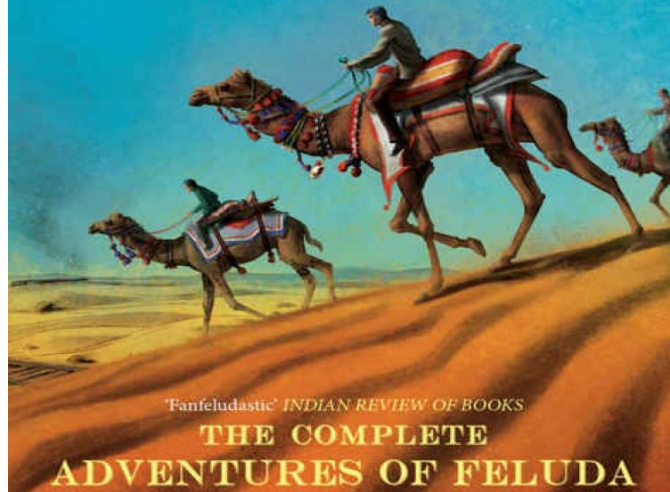
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'Fanfeludastic' *INDIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS*

**THE COMPLETE
ADVENTURES OF FELUDA**

The Royal Bengal Mystery- Part 2

Seven

It was the servant called Kanai who had first noticed that the sword was missing when he went in to dust the room. He informed his master immediately. The room was not locked, since it contained several books and papers which Mahitosh Babu frequently needed to refer to. All the servants were old and trusted. Nothing had been stolen from the house for so many years that people had stopped worrying about theft altogether. What it meant was that anyone in the house could have taken the sword.

Feluda examined the glass case carefully, but did not find a clue. It was just the sword that was missing. Everything else was in place. 'I'd like to see Mr Sengupta's bedroom, and the study where he worked,' Feluda said when he had finished. 'But before I do that, I need to know if you suspect anyone.'

Mahitosh Babu shook his head. 'No, I simply cannot imagine why anyone should want to kill him. He hardly ever saw anyone outside this house. All he did was go on long walks. If that sword was used to kill him, then it has to be someone from this house who did it. No, Mr Mitter, I cannot help you at all.'

We made our way to Mr Sengupta's bedroom. It was as large as ours. Among his personal effects were his clothes, a blue suitcase, a shoulder bag and a shaving kit. On a table were a few magazines and books, a writing pad and a couple of pencils. A smaller bedside table held a flask, a glass, a transistor radio and a packet of cigarettes. The suitcase wasn't locked. Feluda opened it, to find that it was very neatly packed. 'He was obviously all set to leave for Calcutta,' he remarked, closing it again.

Five minutes later, we came out of the bedroom and went into his study. 'What exactly did his duties involve?' Feluda asked Mahitosh Babu.

'Well, he handled all my correspondence. Then he made copies of my manuscripts, since my own handwriting is really quite bad. He used to go to Calcutta and speak to my publishers on my behalf, and correct the proofs. Of late, he had been helping me gather information about my ancestors to write a history of my family. This meant having to go through heaps of old letters and documents, and making a note of relevant details.'

‘Did he use these notebooks to record all the information?’ Feluda asked, pointing at the thick, bound notebooks neatly arranged on a desk. Mahitosh Babu nodded.

‘And are these the proofs for your new book he was correcting?’ Stacks of printed sheets were kept on the desk, next to the notebooks. Feluda picked up a few sheets and began leafing through them.

‘Tell me, was Mr Sengupta a very reliable proof-reader?’ Mahitosh Babu looked quite taken aback by the question. ‘Yes, I think so. Why do you ask?’

‘Look, there’s a mistake in the first paragraph of the first page, which he overlooked. The “a” in the word “roar” is missing; and . . . again, look, the second “e” in “deer” hasn’t been printed. But he didn’t spot it.’

‘How strange!’ Mahitosh Babu glanced absently at the mistakes Feluda pointed out. ‘Had he seemed worried about something recently? Did he have anything on his mind?’ ‘Why, no, I hadn’t noticed anything!’

Feluda bent over the desk, and peered at a writing pad on which Mr Sengupta had doodled and drawn little pictures.

‘Did you know he could draw?’ ‘No. No, he had never told me.’

There was nothing else to see. We stepped out of the room and reached the veranda outside. A deep, familiar voice reached our ears, speaking in a somewhat theatrical fashion: ‘Doomed . . . doomed! Destruction and calamity! The very foundation of truth is being rocked . . . the end is nigh!’

We only heard his voice. Devtosh Babu remained out of sight. His brother sighed and said, ‘Every summer, he gets a little worse. He’ll be all right once the rains start, and it cools down.’

We had reached our room. Feluda said, ‘I was thinking of going back to the forest tomorrow. I need to search . . . find things for myself. What do you say?’

Mahitosh Babu thought for a moment. Then he said, ‘Well, I don’t think the tiger will return to the spot where Torit’s body was found, at least not during the day. That’s what my experience with tigers tells me, anyway. So if you stay relatively close to that area, you’re going to be safe. To tell you the truth, what I find most surprising is that a large tiger is still left in Kalbuni!’

‘May we take Madhavlal with us, and a jeep?’ ‘Certainly.’

Mahitosh Babu left. The police had to be informed about the missing sword.

It was now quite dark outside, although the sky was absolutely clear. Lalmohan Babu switched the fan on and sat down on his bed.

‘Did you think you’d get a murder mystery on a short holiday? It’s a bonus, isn’t it, Felu Babu? You have to thank me for it,’ he laughed.

‘Sure, Lalmohan Babu, I am most thankful,’ Feluda replied, sounding a little preoccupied. He had picked up two things from Torit Sengupta’s room and brought them back with him. One was a book on the history of Coochbehar, and the other was the writing pad. I saw him staring at the little pictures, frowning deeply.

‘These are not just funny doodles,’ he said, almost to himself. ‘I am sure it has a meaning. What could it be? Why do I feel there’s something familiar about these pictures?’

Lalmohan Babu and I went and stood next to him. Mr Sengupta had drawn a tree on the pad. A tree with a solid trunk and several leafy branches. A few leaves were lying loose at the bottom of the tree. Their base was broad, but they tapered off to end on a thin narrow point. I had no problem in recognizing them. They were peepul leaves.

But that was not all. He had drawn footprints, going away from the tree, towards what looked like a couple of hands I peered more closely. Yes, they were two hands—or, rather, two open palms. He had even drawn tiny lines on them, just as they appear on human hands. Behind these was a sun. Not a full round one, but one that had only half-risen. Between the two hands was a tiny cross. Something began stirring in my own mind. This picture was meant to convey a message. Was it a message that perhaps I had heard before? Where? I began to feel quite confused.

Feluda cleared all confusion in less than a minute. ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ he exclaimed softly. ‘Of course! Well done, Mr Sengupta, well done!’ Then he caught me looking expectantly at him. ‘Do you see what this is, Topshe? It’s a picture of the puzzle. Torit Sengupta had cracked it, possibly quite soon after they found it among Adityanarayan’s papers. Let’s have a look.’ He opened his notebook. “Old man hollow”. Now, that’s the only bit that’s not clear. But “pace to follow” means fifty-five paces—those are the footprints—going from the “people’s tree”, which is simply a peepul tree. Adityanarayan called it a people’s tree either because it sounded similar to “peepul”, or because it was for some reason important to people. That rising sun, as I had guessed myself, means the east. So, fifty-five paces to the east of a peepul tree are . . .’

‘. . . Two hands?’ Lalmohan Babu asked hopefully.

‘Yes and no. Look at the picture. They are palms. So there must be two palms—palm trees—near the peepul. And if you dig the ground between these palms, you’ll probably find the treasure.’

'It makes no sense to me,' Lalmohan Babu complained. 'Tell me what the whole message is.'

'But I just did! In the forest somewhere, there is a peepul tree. Fifty-five paces—that would be about fifty-five yards—to the east of this tree are two palms. And . . .'

'OK, between those palms—"below them stands"—so you mean below the ground is the buried treasure, whatever that might be. I get it now. But, Felu Babu, there may be dozens of peepul trees in that forest and scores of palms, all within fifty yards of one another. How many will you look for?'

Feluda was silent, still frowning. 'Yes,' he said at last, 'the first line—"old man hollow"—is probably an indicator. I mean, that's what actually identifies the tree, and tells you which particular peepul tree to look for. But what can it mean? Even this picture doesn't tell us anything, does it? The old man—' he had to stop.

'Who is talking of old men?' asked Devtosh Babu, lifting the curtain and walking into the room. He was still wearing the same purple dressing gown. Didn't he have anything else to wear?

'Oh, please do come in, sir, have a seat,' Feluda invited. Devtosh Babu paid no attention to him. 'Do you know why Yudhisthir 's chariot got stuck to the ground?' he asked. He had said this before. Why was he obsessed with Yudhisthir 's chariot?

'No. Why?' Feluda answered calmly.

'Because he had told a lie. He had to be punished. One single lie . . . and it can finish you.' 'Devtosh Babu,' Feluda said conversationally, 'may I ask you something?'

He looked perfectly amazed. 'Ask me something? Why? No one ever asks me anything.'

'I'd like to, because I know about your knowledge of local history. Can you tell me if there's a tree associated with an old man? I mean, here in the forest? Did an old man sit under a tree?'

It was a shot in the dark. But it made Devtosh Babu's sad and intense face suddenly break into a smile. It transformed his whole appearance.

'No, no. No old man actually sat under the tree. It was in the tree itself.'

What! Was he talking nonsense again? But his eyes and his voice seemed perfectly normal.

‘There was a hollow in the tree trunk,’ he explained quickly, ‘that looked like the face of an old man. You think I’m mad, don’t you? But I swear, that hollow looked exactly as though an old man was gaping with his mouth open. We loved that tree. Grandfather used to call it the tree of the toothless fakir. He used to take us there for picnics.’

‘What kind of a tree was it?’

‘A peepul. Have you seen the temple of the Chopped Goddess? That was Raju’s doing. This tree was behind the temple. In fact, it was from this same tree that Mahi—’

‘Dada! Come back here at once!’ shouted a voice outside the door. Devtosh Babu broke off, for his brother had appeared at the door, looking and sounding extremely cross. Mahitosh Babu stepped into the room. His face was set, his eyes cold.

‘Did you take your pills?’ he asked sternly.

‘What pills? I am fine, there’s nothing wrong with me. Why should I have to take pills?’

Without another word, Mahitosh Babu dragged his brother out of our room. We could hear him scolding him as they moved away, ‘Let the doctor decide how you are. You will kindly continue to take the pills you have been prescribed. Is that understood?’

Their footsteps died away.

‘Pity!’ Lalmohan Babu remarked. ‘He seemed quite normal today, didn’t he?’ Feluda did not appear to have heard him. He was looking preoccupied again.

‘The tree of the toothless fakir,’ he said under his breath. ‘Well, that takes care of both the old man and the hollow. All we need to do now, friends, is find the temple of the Chopped Goddess!’

Eight

Feluda did not go to bed until late that night. Lalmohan Babu and I stayed up with him until eleven, talking about Torit Sengupta's death. None of us could figure out why a young and obviously intelligent man like him had to die such an awful and mysterious death. Even Feluda could not find answers to a lot of questions. He made a list of these:

1. Who, apart from Mr Sengupta, had gone to the forest that night? Was it the murderer? Was it the person who had stolen the sword? Or was it a third person? Who could have a small but powerful torch?
2. We had all heard Mahitosh Sinha-Roy having an argument with someone the same night. Who was he speaking to?
3. Devtosh Babu was about to tell us something concerning the peepul tree and his brother, when the latter interrupted him. What was he going to say?
4. Why did Devtosh Babu mention Yudhisthir's chariot, more than once? Was it simply the raving of a madman, or did it have any significance?
5. Why does Shashanka Sanyal speak so little? Was he quiet and reserved by nature, or was there a specific reason behind his silence?

Lalmohan Babu heard him read out this list, then said, 'Look, Felu Babu, there's one man who continues to make me feel uneasy. Yes, I am talking of Devtosh Babu. He spoke quite normally a few hours ago, but at other times he isn't normal, is he? What if he came upon someone accidentally in the forest, and decided it was Kalapahar, or Raju as he calls him? He might attack this person, mightn't he?'

Feluda stared at Lalmohan Babu for a few seconds before speaking. 'Working with me has clearly improved both your imagination and powers of observation,' he remarked. 'Yes, I agree Devtosh Babu is certainly physically capable of striking someone with a sword. But consider this: whoever took that sword knew Mr Sengupta had gone to the forest. So he deliberately took the weapon, followed him—don't forget it was a stormy night—found him, and then killed him. Could a madman have thought all this out and acted upon it, especially when it meant finding his way in the dark in inclement weather, then holding the torch in one hand and using the sword with the other? No, I don't think so. What is essential now is a return visit to the forest, and seeing if we can pick up a clue. There's no point in speculating here. The only thing I am sure of is that Mr Sengupta had gone into the forest to look for the hidden

treasure. Perhaps he wanted to collect it and take it back to Calcutta. But what still doesn't make sense is why he was so sorely tempted in the first place. He was living here very comfortably, and was clearly very well paid. Did you see his clothes and toiletries? Everything was expensive and of good quality. Even the cigarettes he smoked were imported.'

Lalmohan Babu shook his head, and declared he was now ready for bed. I fell asleep soon after this, but Feluda stayed awake for a long time.

I woke to find the sky overcast once again, and Feluda dressed and ready. Then we heard the sound of a jeep arriving, and a servant came up to say we were wanted in the drawing room.

Inspector Biswas was waiting for us. 'Are you happy now?' he asked Feluda. 'Why should I be happy?'

'You found a mystery, didn't you? The murderer took the weapon from this house and finished his victim with it. Isn't that great news?'

'It is true that a sword is missing. But surely you are not assuming that the same sword was used to kill Mr Sengupta, just because it is no longer here?'

'No, I am not assuming anything at all. But what about you? Didn't the thought cross your mind?'

Both men were speaking politely, but it was obvious that a silent undercurrent of rivalry was flowing between them. This was quite unnecessary. I felt cross with the inspector. It was he who had started it. Feluda lit a cigarette and spoke quietly, 'I haven't yet reached any conclusion. And if you think I am happy about any aspect of this case, you are quite wrong. Murder never makes me happy, particularly when it is the murder of a young and clever man.'

'A clever man?' Mr Biswas jeered openly. 'Why should a clever man leave the comforts of his room and go walking in a dark forest in the middle of the night? What's so clever about that? Can you find a satisfactory answer to this question, Mr Mitter?'

'Yes, I can.'

All the three men present in the room, apart from ourselves, seemed to stiffen at Feluda's words. 'There was a very good reason for Mr Sengupta's visit to the forest that night,' Feluda said clearly, looking at Mahitosh Babu. 'I have worked out the meaning of the puzzle you showed me. But Torit Sengupta had done the same, long before me. That tiger skin should really have gone to him. It is my belief that he was in the forest looking for the treasure.'

Mahitosh Babu opened his mouth to speak, but could not find any words. His eyes nearly popped out. Feluda hurriedly explained about the puzzle and how he had discovered its meaning. But Mahitosh Babu continued to look perplexed.

‘The tree of the toothless fakir?’ he said, surprised. ‘Why, I have never heard of it!’

‘Really? But your brother told us you used to go for picnics with your grandfather when you were both small. He said you sat under that tree? . . .’

‘My brother?’ Mahitosh Babu said a little scornfully, ‘Do you realize how much fact there is in what my brother says, and how much of it is fiction? Don’t forget he isn’t normal.’

Feluda could not say anything in reply. How could he possibly comment on Mahitosh Babu’s brother’s illness? After all, he was only an outsider.

Mahitosh Babu, however, had now started to look openly distressed. ‘This means . . . this means Torit was planning to run away to Calcutta with the treasure! And I had no idea.’ Mr Biswas stood up, curling his right hand into a fist. Then he struck his left palm with it and said, ‘Well, at least we know why he was in the forest. That’s one problem solved. Now we must find his assassin.’

‘It has to be someone from this house. I hope you realize that, Mr Biswas?’ Feluda blew out a smoke ring.

Mr Biswas gave a twisted smile. ‘Sure,’ he replied, narrowing his eyes, ‘but that would have to include you. You had seen the sword, you knew where it was kept. You had every opportunity to remove it, just like the others in this house. We don’t know whether you knew Torit Sengupta before you came here, or whether there was any enmity between the two of you, do we?’

Feluda sent another smoke ring floating in the air. ‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘no one knows anything about that. However, everyone is aware of two things. One, I was invited here. I did not come on my own. Two, I was the one who pointed out that Mr Sengupta had been attacked by a sharp instrument. If I didn’t, people would have assumed a wild animal had killed him, and no further questions would have been asked.’

Mr Biswas laughed unexpectedly. ‘Relax, Mr Mitter,’ he said, ‘why are you taking me so seriously? Don’t worry, we are not interested in you. Someone else concerns us far more.’ I noticed that when he said this, he exchanged a glance with Mahitosh Babu, just for a fleeting second.

'You told me something yesterday, Mr Biswas. Does that still stand?' Feluda asked.

'What did I tell you?'

'Can I continue with my own investigation?'

'Of course. But we must not clash with each other, you know.'

'We won't. I wish to confine myself to working in the forest. You're not interested in that, are you?'

The inspector shrugged. 'As you wish,' he said carelessly. Feluda turned to Mahitosh Babu. 'You mean to say there is absolutely no point in talking to your brother?'

Mahitosh Sinha-Roy seemed to clench his jaw at this question. Was he perhaps beginning to lose his patience? However, when he spoke, he sounded perfectly friendly. 'My brother seems to have taken a turn for the worse,' he explained quietly. 'I really don't think he should be disturbed.'

Feluda stubbed his cigarette out in an ashtray and stood up. 'Well, I can hardly remain here indefinitely as your guest. Tomorrow will be the last day of our visit. May we go to the forest today? If you could please tell Madhavlal, and get us a jeep—'

Mahitosh Babu nodded. It was now eight-thirty. We decided to leave by ten o'clock. Feluda and I had brought hunting boots to walk in the forest. We put these on, although I had a feeling I wouldn't be allowed to climb out of the jeep at all. I had expected Lalmohan Babu to say he had no wish to leave the jeep but, to my surprise, he disappeared into the bathroom and changed into khaki trousers. Then he took out a pair of rather impressive sturdy boots from his suitcase and began to slip them on. Feluda gave him a sidelong glance, but made no comment.

'Felu Babu,' Lalmohan Babu began, marching up and down in his new boots in military style, 'is it true what they say about a tiger's eyes? I mean, the look in its eyes is supposed to be absolutely terrifying, or so I've heard. Could it be true?'

Feluda was staring out of the window, waiting to be told that Madhavlal and the jeep had arrived.

We were all ready to leave.

'Yes, I've heard the same,' he replied. 'But do you know what some famous shikaris have said? Tigers are just as afraid of men. If a man can manage to return a tiger's stare and just stand with a steady eye contact, the tiger would

make an about turn and go away. And if simply a stare doesn't help, then screaming and shouting and waving may produce the same result.'

'But . . . what about a man-eater?' 'That's different.'

'I see. So why are you? . . .'

'Why am I going? I am going because the chances of the tiger coming out during the day are virtually nil. Even if it does appear, we will have a rifle to deal with it. Besides, we'll have the jeep; so we can always make a quick escape, if need be.'

Lalmohan Babu did not say another word until the jeep arrived. When it did, he simply said, 'I can't understand anything about this murder. Nothing makes sense, I am in total darkness.'

'Efforts are being made to make sure we do not see the light, Lalmohan Babu. It should be our job to foil every attempt.'

Nine

We reached the spot where Mr Sengupta's body had been found. The clouds having dispersed, it was much brighter today. Sunlight streamed through the leaves to form little patterns on the ground here and there. There also appeared to be many more birds chirping in the trees. Lalmohan Babu gave a start each time he heard a bird call, thinking it was an alarm call for an approaching tiger.

The body had been removed the same day. Torit Babu's family in Calcutta had been informed, and his brother had arrived to take care of the funeral. There was no sign left of that hideous incident near the bamboo grove. Even so, Feluda began inspecting the ground closely, assisted by Madhavlal. The more I saw Madhavlal, the more I liked him. He seemed a cheerful fellow. He smiled often, which made deep creases appear on both sides of his mouth. Even when he didn't smile, his eyes twinkled. He told us on the way that the news of the man-eater had spread through people in the Forest Department. Apparently, a number of shikaris had offered to kill it. Among them was a Mr Sapru, who had killed many tigers and other animals in the Terai. He was expected to arrive the next day.

Now he stopped to chat with us and began telling us stories of the many expeditions he had been on. At this moment, Feluda called him from the bamboo grove. Madhavlal stopped his tale and went forward quickly, closely followed by Lalmohan Babu and myself. Feluda had raised no objection today to our getting out of the jeep.

We found him kneeling on the ground, bending over a bamboo stem. 'Take a look at this!' he said to Madhavlal.

Madhavlal glanced at it briefly and declared, 'It was hit by a bullet, sir.'

There was a mark on the stem which I now saw. All of us—including Feluda—felt astounded. 'Can you tell me how old that mark might be?' Feluda asked, a little impatiently.

'Not older than a couple of days,' Madhavlal replied.

'What can it mean?' Feluda muttered, half to himself. 'A sword . . . a gun . . . I'm getting all confused. Torit Sengupta was struck by the sword, then someone shot at the tiger but missed, by the looks of things. Or else . . .' he broke off. Madhavlal had found something under the bamboo. I saw what it was only when I got closer. He was clutching what looked like fluff, about two inches in length.

‘Hair from the tiger’s body?’ Feluda asked. ‘Yes, sir. The bullet must have scraped one side.’

‘Is that why the tiger ran away without finishing its meal?’

‘Looks like it.’

Feluda began moving forward without another word. Madhavlal followed him, rifle in hand, his eyes alert. Lalmohan Babu and I placed ourselves between these two men, which struck us as the safest thing to do. Feluda was carrying a loaded revolver, but that wasn’t enough to deal with a man-eater.

The sound of an engine starting told me the driver of our jeep was following us. It meant that he would get closer, although he couldn’t actually be by our side for we had left the road and were now amidst the trees and bushes.

Three minutes later, Feluda appeared to notice something on a thorny bush, and quickly made his way to it, walking diagonally to the right. There was a piece of green cloth stuck to it, which had undoubtedly come from Mr Sengupta’s shirt. The tiger had obviously come this way carrying his body, and the shirt had got stuck on that bush.

When we started walking again, Madhavlal took the lead. He could probably guess which way the man-eater had come from. He moved with extreme caution, partly because we were behind him and partly because the area abounded with briar and other prickly plants. He stopped abruptly under a large tamarind tree, looking closely at the ground. We gathered around him and saw what had caught his attention. I had never seen such a thing before, but knew instantly I was looking at a pug mark. There were several others that seemed to have come from the same direction we were now going in.

Lalmohan Babu whispered, ‘Is th-this a t-two legged tiger?’ Madhavlal laughed. ‘No,’ Feluda explained, ‘that is how a tiger walks. It puts its hind legs exactly where it puts its forelegs. So it seems as if it’s a two-legged animal.’

Madhavlal continued walking. I could no longer hear the jeep. A faint gurgling noise told me there was a nullah somewhere in the vicinity. Lalmohan Babu’s new boots, which had been squeaking rather loudly at first (‘ideal for arousing the man-eater’s curiosity,’ Feluda had remarked) were now silent, being heavily streaked with mud.

We passed a silk-cotton tree, and then Madhavlal stopped again. ‘You have a revolver, sir, don’t you?’ he asked Feluda. His voice was low.

A few yards ahead of us, something was emerging from the long grass, parting it to make its way. ‘Krait,’ Madhavlal said softly. I had read about kraits. They

were extremely poisonous snakes. A second later, it came into view and stopped. It was black, striped with yellow. It had no hood.

I did not see Feluda take out his revolver, but heard the earsplitting noise as he fired it. The head of the snake disappeared, and it was all over. A number of birds cried out, and a group of monkeys grew rather agitated, but the body of the snake lay still. 'Shabaash!' said Madhavlal. Lalmohan Babu made a noise that appeared to be a mixture of laughter, a sneeze and a cough.

We resumed walking. The forest was not thick everywhere. The trees thinned to our left. 'That's where the nullah is,' Madhavlal said, 'and the area is rocky. Tigers often rest there during the day behind rocks and boulders. I suggest we walk straight on.'

We took his advice. Feluda was still looking around everywhere, hoping for more clues. This time, Lalmohan Babu helped him find one, purely by accident. He stumbled against something and kicked it, making it spring up in the air and land a few feet away.

It was a dark brown leather wallet. Feluda picked it up and opened it. There were two hundred- rupee notes, and a few smaller ones. Besides these, in the smaller compartments, were two folded old stamps, cash memos and a prescription. The wallet was wet and dirty, but the money inside it could be used quite easily. Feluda put everything back in the wallet, then put it in his pocket.

We began walking again. The trees had suddenly grown very thick. Almost unconsciously, I began to look for a peepul tree. I knew Feluda was doing the same. I did see a couple of peepuls, but there were no palms near them. Madhavlal had stopped for a minute to cut two small branches from a tree, which he then passed on to Lalmohan Babu and me. We were now using these as walking sticks.

'A pug mark can tell you a lot about the size of the tiger, can't it?' Feluda asked. 'Yes, sir,' Madhavlal replied. 'Our man-eater appears to be a big fellow.'

Feluda asked another question: 'Mahitosh Babu has never killed anything in this forest, has he?' 'No, sir. Many shikaris have superstitions. Mahitosh Babu is no exception. My own father did.'

Once, he happened to brush against a stinging nettle just as he set off from home. He killed a ten-foot tiger that day. From then on, every time he went on shikar, he used to rub his hands on stinging nettle, no matter how much it hurt.'

'Jim Corbett was superstitious, too. If he could see a snake before going off to look for a tiger, that used to make him happy.'

If his grandfather and father had both been killed here, it was entirely understandable why Mahitosh Babu had taken himself off to Assam and Orissa.

Twenty minutes later, Feluda finally found what he was really looking for. Telling Madhavlal to stop, he began peering behind a thick bush, which was laden with small purple flowers. We joined him and saw it. The stone-studded handle of Adityanarayan's sword was visible just outside the bush. The blade was hidden behind it.

Feluda picked it up in one swooping movement. The blade was stained with blood, although the stains had faded to some degree. Feluda turned it over and inspected the handle closely. 'Madhavlalji,' he said, 'the actual spot where the murder took place cannot be far from here. Can we walk on?'

'Sure. But a hundred yards from here, you'll find a temple.'

'A temple?' Feluda asked sharply.

'Yes, sir. The locals call it the temple of the Chopped Goddess. There's nothing left in it. Only the basic structure is still standing somehow.'

None of us said anything. Behind this temple was the tree of the toothless fakir. And fifty-five yards to the east . . .! Without a word, Feluda strode ahead, the sword in his hand, as though he was Sher Shah, out to destroy a tiger.

Madhavlal was right about the temple. It was certainly an ancient building, its walls broken and cracked. Plants had grown out of the cracks. Roots from a banyan tree hung down from all sides, as if they wanted to crush what was left of the roof. What must have been the inner sanctum was still there, but it was so dark inside that I didn't think there was any question of going in.

Feluda, however, was not looking at the temple at all. He was staring behind it. About twenty yards away, just as Devtosh Babu had said, stood a large, old peepul tree. Its branches were dry, shrivelled and bare. There were virtually no leaves left. But what the tree did have, visible even from a distance, was a big hollow, at least five feet up from the ground.

We followed Feluda in breathless anticipation. As we got closer, we saw to our amazement that funny marks and patches on the tree trunk near the hollow, together with its uneven surface, had truly helped create the appearance of an old, toothless man with a gaping mouth. 'Is that the east?' Feluda asked, turning his eyes to the right.

‘Yes, sir,’ Madhavlal replied.

‘Look, the two palms! And I don’t think I need even bother with measuring the distance. It’s got to be fifty-five paces.’

The two palms were clearly visible, fifty-five yards away. We moved towards them, and spotted it almost immediately: the ground between the palms had been dug quite recently. There was a fairly large hole, now filled with water. Any treasure that might have been there had gone.

‘What! Hidden treasure vanished?’ Lalmohan Babu was the first to find his tongue. He forgot to whisper.

Feluda was looking grim again, although what we had just seen could hardly be regarded as a new mystery. Whoever killed Mr Sengupta had obviously removed the treasure. Feluda stared at the hole in the ground for a few seconds, then said, ‘Why don’t you rest for a while? I’d like to make a quick survey.’

My legs were aching after walking stealthily for such a long time. I was quite thankful for this chance to rest, and so was Lalmohan Babu. We found a dry area under the peepul tree, and sat down. Madhavlal put his rifle down, placing it against the tree trunk and began to tell us a story of how he had been attacked by a bear when he was thirteen, and how he had managed to escape. But I couldn’t give him my full attention, for my eyes kept following Feluda. He lit a cigarette, placed it between his lips and began examining the ground around the ancient temple. I saw him pick something up— possibly a cigarette stub—and then drop it again. Then he knelt, and bent low to look closely at the ground, his face almost touching it.

After ten minutes of close scrutiny outside, Feluda went into the dark hall. I could only marvel at his courage, the temple was probably crawling with snakes and other reptiles. When the temple was in use, it was supposed to have had a statue of Durga. Kalapahar chopped off its head and four of its ten arms. Hence its current name.

Feluda emerged a minute later, and made a rather cryptic remark. ‘This is amazing!’ he exclaimed. ‘Who knew one would have to step into darkness in order to see the light?’

‘What, Felu Babu, do you mean the darkness has gone?’ Lalmohan Babu shouted.

‘Partly, yes. You might call it the first night after a moonless one.’

‘Oh. That would mean waiting for a whole fortnight to get a full moon!’

'No, Lalmohan Babu. You are only thinking of the moon. There is such a thing as the sun, remember? It comes out at the end of each dark night, doesn't it?'

'You mean to say tomorrow . . . tomorrow we might see the climax of this story? The end?'

'I am saying nothing of the kind, Lalmohan Babu. All I am prepared to tell you is that, after hours of darkness, I think I am beginning to see a glimmer of light. Come on, Topshe, let's go home.'

Ten

We had left the house at ten o'clock. By the time we got back, it was half past twelve. Feluda wanted to return the sword to Mahitosh Babu, but we discovered on our return that he had gone with Mr Sanyal to visit the Head of the Forest Department in the forest bungalow in Kalbuni. So we went to our room, taking the sword with us.

Before we did this, however, we spent some time on the ground floor. Feluda went to the trophy room. I could not tell what he was thinking, but he began to examine all the guns that were displayed there. He picked up each one, and inspected its barrel, its butt, trigger and safety catch. Lalmohan Babu began to ask him something, but Feluda told him to be quiet.

'This is a time to think, Lalmohan Babu,' he said, 'not to chat.' By this time, Lalmohan Babu had become quite familiar with Feluda's moods, so he promptly shut up.

Feluda finished inspecting the trophy room and turned to go upstairs. We followed silently. He spoke again on reaching the veranda on the first floor. 'What's this?' he asked, stopping suddenly and staring at Devtosh Babu's room. 'Why is the elder brother's room locked?'

There was a padlock on the door. Where could he have gone? Why had he left the room locked?

Feluda said nothing more. We reached our room.

Feluda spent the next few minutes sitting quietly, frowning; then he got up and paced restlessly, stopped short and sat down again. Two minutes later, he was back on his feet. I knew this mood well. He always acted like this as he got closer to unravelling a complex mystery.

'Since there is no one about, and Devtosh Babu's room is locked,' he said suddenly, 'it might not be a bad idea to do a bit of snooping.'

He left the room. I stuck my head out of the door and saw him go into Mahitosh Babu's study. I came back into our room to find Lalmohan Babu stretched on the leopard skin on the floor. He was using its head as a pillow. Clearly, seeing a tiger's pug mark in the forest had gone a long way to boost his courage. After a few seconds of silence, he remarked, 'Thank goodness I thought of dedicating my book to Mahitosh Sinha-Roy! Could we ever have had such a thrilling experience if I hadn't? Just take this morning: a bullet in a bamboo grove, a snake in the grass, pug marks of a Royal Bengal, a ruined old

temple, a famous peepul tree . . . what more could anyone want? All that's left to make the experience complete is an encounter with the man-eater.'

'Do you really want that?' I asked.

'I am not scared any more,' he replied, yawning noisily. 'If you have Madhavlal on one side, and Felu Mitter on the other, no man-eater can do anything to you!'

He closed his eyes, and seemed to go to sleep. I picked up Mahitosh Babu's book and had read a few pages, when Feluda returned. His footsteps made Lalmohan Babu open his eyes and sit up.

'Did you find anything?'

'No. I did not find what I was looking for, but that is what is significant.' After a brief pause, Feluda asked, 'Do you remember why Yudhisthir's chariot got stuck to the ground?'

'Because he told a lie?'

'Exactly. But these days, a liar doesn't always get punished by God. Other men have to catch and punish him.'

I could not ask him what he meant, for a jeep arrived as he finished speaking. Only a few minutes later, a servant turned up to say Mahitosh Babu had returned, and lunch had been served.

Despite all that had happened, we had all enjoyed our meals every day. Mahitosh Babu obviously had a very good cook. Today, the food looked inviting enough, but our host began a conversation on a rather sombre note. 'Mr Mitter,' he said solemnly, 'since you have discovered the meaning of Adityanarayan's message, I don't think I have the right to keep you here any longer. If you like, I can make arrangements for your return. One of my men is going to Jalpaiguri. He can book your tickets for you.'

Feluda did not reply immediately. Then he said slowly, 'I was thinking of going back myself. You have been an excellent host, but naturally we cannot stay here indefinitely. But, if you don't mind, I'd like to stay here tonight and leave tomorrow morning. You see, I am a detective, and there's been a murder. I'm sure you'll appreciate why I want to stay a bit longer to see if any light can be thrown on the case. It is immaterial whether I can discover the truth, or the police do their job. I only want to know what happened, and how it happened.'

Mahitosh Babu stopped eating and looked straight at Feluda. 'There is no one in this house who would plan a murder in cold blood, Mr Mitter,' he said firmly.

Feluda paid no attention. 'Where is your brother?' he asked casually. 'Has he been taken somewhere else? His room was locked.'

Mahitosh Babu replied in the same grave tone, 'My brother is in his room. But since last night, his . . . ailment has become worse. He has to be restrained, or he might cause serious damage to whoever came his way, yourself included. Sometimes, he starts imagining he's seen people who died hundreds of years ago—you know, characters out of a history book. Then he attacks them if he thinks they did anything wrong in the past. Once he mistook Torit for Kalapahar and nearly throttled him to death. One of the servants saw him, luckily, and managed to take him away.'

Feluda continued to eat. 'Did you know,' he said conversationally, 'the death of Mr Sengupta is not the only mystery we are dealing with? Someone ran off with your treasure, possibly the same night.'

'What!' Mahitosh Babu turned into a statue, holding his food a few inches from his mouth. 'You mean you went and checked?'

'Yes, the treasure's gone, but we found the sword, with bloodstains on it.'

Mahitosh Babu opened his mouth to speak, but could only gulp in silence. Feluda dropped the third bombshell. 'When the tiger attacked Mr Sengupta, someone shot at the tiger. The bullet hit a bamboo stem, but it is likely that it grazed the tiger's body, for we found a few strands of hair. So it seems Torit Sengupta was not the only one who had gone to the forest that night. Different people with different purposes in mind . . .'

'Poacher!' Mr Sanyal spoke unexpectedly. 'It must have been a poacher who entered the forest after Torit was killed. It was this poacher who shot at the tiger.'

Feluda nodded slowly. 'That possibility cannot be ruled out. So, for the moment, we need not worry about where the bullet came from. However, we still have the bloodstained sword and the missing treasure to explain.'

'Never mind the sword. The treasure is far more important,' Mahitosh Babu declared. 'Mr Mitter, we've got to find it. The history of the family of Sinha-Roys will remain incomplete unless it is found.'

'Very well,' Feluda suggested, 'if that is the case, why don't we all return to the spot later today? It is very close to the temple of the Chopped Goddess.'

Mahitosh Babu agreed to accompany us back to the forest. However, torrential rain—which began at half past three and continued well after six—forced us to abandon our plan. Feluda had been looking withdrawn; now he looked positively depressed. It was obvious that Mahitosh Babu wanted us to leave. If the weather did not improve the next day, we might well have to go back without solving the mystery surrounding Mr Sengupta's death. How another visit to the temple could make a difference, I could not tell, but I knew Feluda was definitely on to something. The occasional glint in his eyes told me that very clearly.

Unable to sit in our room doing nothing, we came out and stood on the veranda when the grandfather clock struck five. The door to Devtosh Babu's room was still locked.

'There's no one around,' Lalmohan Babu whispered. 'Why don't we try looking through the shutters? What can the man be doing?'

Like many of Lalmohan Babu's other suggestions, Feluda ignored this one.

The sky cleared after seven. When the stars came out, they looked as if someone had polished them before pasting them on an inky-black sky. Feluda sat on his bed, holding the sword. Lalmohan Babu and I were standing at the window, admiring the stars, when suddenly he clutched at my sleeve and said in a low voice, 'A small torch!'

The chowkidar's hut was visible from our window. There was a large tree near it. A man was standing under it. Another man—carrying a torch—was approaching him. His torch was of the kind that can be plugged into an electric socket and recharged. It had a small bulb, and an equally small point, but the light it gave out was very bright.

Feluda switched the light off in our room and joined us at the window.

'Madhavlal!' he murmured. I, too, had recognized the man who had been waiting under the tree as Madhavlal, for I could vaguely see his yellow shirt

even in the dark. But it was impossible to see the other man. It could have been Mahitosh Babu, his brother, Mr Sanyal, or someone else.

The torch was switched off, but the two men were still standing close, talking. After a while, the yellow shirt moved away. The torch light came back on and returned to the house. Feluda waited for a few seconds before switching on our own light.

Lalmohan Babu was probably carrying out an investigation on his own. I saw him slip out to the veranda and return a moment later.

‘What did you see? Is that door still locked?’ Feluda asked. Lalmohan Babu gave an embarrassed laugh. ‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘Did you really think it was Devtosh Babu who was speaking with Madhavlal?’

‘Yes. I told you I did not trust him. A madman must not be trusted. We used to have one where I live. He was often seen standing in the middle of the road, throwing stones at passing trams and buses. Just think how dangerous that was?’

‘What did the locked door prove?’

‘That he didn’t go down just now.’

‘How can you be so sure? Have you heard any noises from that room today? How do you know that room isn’t empty?’

Lalmohan Babu began to look rather crestfallen.

‘Felu Babu, I try so hard to follow your methods and work on the same lines as you, but somehow . . . I get it all wrong!’

‘That is only because you work in reverse gear. You pick your criminal first, then try to dump the crime on him. I try to understand the nature of the crime before looking for the person who might have committed it.’

‘Are you doing the same in this case?’

‘Of course. There is no other way.’

‘But where did you start from?’

‘Kuruksheetra.’

After this, Lalmohan Babu did not dare ask another question. When I went to bed that night, I had no problem in falling asleep, for the mosquito nets had been changed. But, in the middle of the night, a sudden shout woke me. I sat up, startled, to find Feluda standing in the middle of the room, clutching Adityanarayan’s sword. Moonlight poured in through an open window, making the weapon shine brightly. Feluda looked steadily at the metal blade, and

repeated the word he had just spoken very loudly. Only, this time he lowered his voice.

'Eureka! Eureka!' he said.

Thousands of years ago, Archimedes had said the same thing when he had found what he was looking for. There was no way of telling what Feluda had discovered.

Eleven

Mr Sanyal arrived in our room the following morning, just as we finished our bed-tea. What did he want so early in the morning? I looked at him in surprise, but Feluda greeted him warmly. 'We haven't really had the chance to get to know each other, have we?' he said, offering our visitor a seat. 'As Mahitosh Babu's friend, you must have had a lot of interesting experiences yourself.'

Mr Sanyal took a chair opposite the table. 'Yes. I have known Mahitosh for fifty years, since our school days.'

'May I ask you something?' 'About Mahitosh?'

'No, about Torit Sengupta.' 'Yes?'

'What sort of a man was he? I mean, what was your impression?'

'He was a very good man. I found him intelligent, diligent and very patient.'

'How was he at his work?'

'Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.'

'Yes, I got that impression myself.'

Mr Sanyal gave Feluda a level look. 'I have come to make a request, Mr Mitter,' he said simply.

'A request?' Feluda asked, offering him a cigarette. Mr Sanyal accepted it and waited until it had been lit for him. I saw him smoking for the first time. He inhaled deeply before replying. 'Yes. You have seen a lot in the last three days,' he said. 'You are far more clever than ordinary men, so obviously you have drawn your own conclusions from what you've seen. Today is probably the last day of your stay. No one knows what the day has in store. No matter what happens today, Mr Mitter, I'd be very grateful if you could keep it to yourself. I am sure Mahitosh would want the same thing. If you look at the history of any old family in Bengal—particularly the zamindars—I'm sure you'll find a lot of skeletons in their cupboards. The Sinha-Roys are no exception. However, I see no reason why the facts that come to light should be made public. I am making the same appeal to your friend, and to your cousin.'

'Mr Sanyal,' Feluda replied, 'I have enjoyed Mahitosh Babu's hospitality for three days. I am very grateful to him for his generosity. I can never go back to Calcutta and start maligning him. None of us could do that. I give you my word.'

Mr Sanyal nodded silently. Then Feluda asked another question, possibly because he couldn't help himself. 'Devtosh Babu's room is still locked. Can you explain why?'

Mr Sanyal looked a little oddly at Feluda. 'By the end of this day, Mr Mitter, the reason will become clear to you.'

'I take it that the police are still working on this case?'

'No.'

'What! Why not?'

'Well, suspicion has fallen on someone . . . but Mahitosh does not want the police to harass this person at all.'

'You mean Devtosh Babu?'

'Yes, who else could I mean?'

'But even if that's true, even if he did kill, he's not going to be charged or punished in the usual way, is he? I mean, considering his medical condition?'

'Yes, you are probably right. Nevertheless, the news would spread, wouldn't it? Mahitosh doesn't want that to happen.'

'Simply to save the good name of his family?'

'Yes. Yes, that's the reason, Mr Mitter. Let's just leave it at that, shall we?' Mr Sanyal rose, and left.

We left at half past eight. There were two jeeps once again, like the first day. Feluda, Lalmohan Babu and I were in one; in the other were Mahitosh Babu, Mr Sanyal, Madhavlal and a bearer called Parvat Singh. There were three rifles with us today. Madhavlal had his, Mahitosh Babu had another, and the third was with Feluda. He himself had asked for a rifle. Having heard from Madhavlal how he had killed the snake with his revolver, Mahitosh Babu had raised no objection. 'You can choose whatever you like,' he had said. 'The 375 would be suitable for a tiger.'

I did not understand what the number signified, but could see that the rifle was most impressive in size, and probably also in weight.

As a matter of fact, I was the only one who was not armed. Feluda had handed the sword to Lalmohan Babu this morning, saying, 'Hang on to it. This sword has an important role to play today. You'll soon get to see what I mean.'

Lalmohan Babu was therefore clutching it tightly, wearing an air of suppressed excitement.

When we woke this morning, the sky was clear. But now it had started to cloud over again. The road being muddy and slippery, we took longer to reach the forest. Each driver took his jeep half a mile further into the forest than the last time, but then could go no further. 'Never mind,' Madhavlal said, 'I know the way. We have to cross a nullah and walk for fifteen minutes to get to the temple.'

We began our journey amidst the rustle of leaves, a cool breeze and the occasional rumble in the sky. Feluda loaded his gun before getting out of the jeep. Mahitosh Babu's gun was being carried by Parvat Singh. Apparently, he had always accompanied his master on hunting expeditions. A short but well-built man, he clearly did not lack physical strength.

I saw a herd of deer in a few minutes. A sudden surge of joy filled my heart, but then it leapt in fear. Somewhere in this forest—perhaps not very far away—was a man-eater. Normally, a tiger could easily walk more than twenty miles and travel from one forest to another to look for a prey. But if it was injured, it might not be able to walk very far. In any case, the forest here was not all that big. Large areas of woodland had been cleared to make tea estates, and farms. Besides, although tigers didn't usually come out of hiding during the day, they were likely to do so if the day was dark and cloudy. This was something I had learnt from Feluda only this morning. Soon, we came to the nullah. It had probably been quite dry even a day ago, but was now gurgling merrily. A lot of animals had left their footprints on the wet sand by its sides. Madhavlal pointed out the marks left by deer, wild boars and a hyena; but there was no sign of a tiger. We crossed it and continued to walk. I could hear a hoopoe in the distance, a peacock cried out once, and there were crickets in the bushes we passed. The faint rustling noise in the grass told me lizards and other smaller reptiles were quickly moving out of our way to avoid being crushed to death under our feet.

The route we took today was a different one, but it did not take us very long to reach the spot we had visited yesterday. There was the bush with the purple flowers. That was where we had found the sword. Madhavlal moved silently, and each one of us tried to do the same. Actually, it was not all that difficult to muffle the noise our feet made, for the ground was wet and there were no dry leaves.

Piles of broken bricks came into view. We had reached the temple of the Chopped Goddess. No one spoke. Madhavlal stopped in front of the temple. We joined him noiselessly. Since my attention had been wholly taken up the day before by the peepul tree and the two palms, I hadn't noticed the other

big trees in the area. A cool breeze now wafted through their leaves, and the nullah still rippled faintly in the background.

Feluda walked over to the palms. Mahitosh Babu followed him swiftly. The hole in the ground was even more full of water today. After a while, Feluda broke the silence.

‘This is where Adityanarayan had hidden his treasure,’ he said. ‘But. . . where did it go?’ Mahitosh Babu asked hoarsely.

‘It has not gone far, unless someone removed it yesterday after we left.’ Mahitosh Babu’s eyes began gleaming with hope.

‘Do you really think so? Are you sure?’ he asked eagerly. Feluda turned to face him squarely. ‘Mahitosh Babu, can you tell us what that treasure consists of? What exactly was buried under the ground?’

Mahitosh Babu’s face had gone red with excitement. A couple of veins stood out on his forehead.

‘I don’t know, Mr Mitter, but I can guess,’ he spoke with an effort. ‘One of my ancestors—called Yashwant Sinha-Roy—was the chief of the army in the princely state of Coochbehar. The money he had been paid by the Maharaja was kept in our house. There were more than a thousand silver coins, four hundred years old. When Adityanarayan decided to hide these, he had crossed sixty and was beginning to lose his mind. He had started to indulge in childish pranks. No one could find those coins after he died. Now, after all these years, his coded message has told us where they were hidden. I can’t afford to lose them again, Mr Mitter. I have got to find them!’

Feluda turned from Mahitosh Babu and began walking towards the temple. He stopped for a second as he passed me, and said, ‘Here, Topshe, hold my rifle for me. I don’t think I’ll need it inside that hall. A revolver should be good enough.’

My hands started to tremble, but I pulled myself together and took the rifle from him. Then I realized just how heavy it was.

Feluda walked on and entered the dark hall once more. I saw him put his hand into his pocket before he disappeared through its broken door.

In less than five seconds, we heard him fire twice. No one said anything, but I could feel a shiver go down my spine. Then Feluda’s voice spoke from inside the temple: ‘Mahitosh Babu, could you please send your bearer here?’

Parvat Singh handed the rifle to his master, and went into the temple. A couple of seconds later, he emerged with a dirty, muddy brass pitcher in his hands. Feluda followed him. Mahitosh Babu rushed forward towards his bearer.

‘Who knew a cobra would be attracted to silver coins? Feluda said with a smile. ‘I had heard its hiss yesterday. Today, I found it wound around that pitcher, as if it was giving it a tight embrace!

Mahitosh Babu had thrown aside his rifle. I saw him pounce upon the pitcher and put his hand into it. Just as he brought it out, clutching a handful of coins, an animal cried out nearby. It was a barking deer. Monkeys joined it immediately, jumping from branch to branch, making an incessant noise.

A lot of things happened at once. Even now, as I write about it, I feel shaken and confused. To start with, a remarkable change came over Mahitosh Babu. Only a moment ago, he had seemed overjoyed at the sight of his treasure. Now, he dropped the coins, jumped up and took three steps backwards, as if he had received an electric shock. Each one of us turned into a statue. Feluda was the first to speak, but his voice was low. ‘Topshe,’ he whispered, ‘climb that tree. You, too, Lalmohan Babu. Go on, be quick!’

We were standing near the famous peepul tree. I returned the rifle to Feluda, placed a foot in the big hollow and grasped a branch. In about ten seconds, I was a good ten feet from the ground. Lalmohan Babu followed suit, with surprising agility, having passed me the sword. Soon, he was sitting on a branch higher than mine. He told us afterwards that he had had a lot of practice in climbing trees as a child, but I had no idea he could do it even at the age of forty.

I saw what followed from the treetop. Lalmohan Babu saw some of it, then fainted quietly. But his arms and legs were so securely wrapped around a big branch that he did not fall down.

It was obvious to everyone that there was a tiger in the vicinity. That was why Feluda had told us to get out of the way. Mahitosh Babu’s reaction was the most surprising. I could never have imagined he would behave like that. He turned to Feluda and spoke fiercely through clenched teeth, ‘Mr Mitter, if you value your own life, go away at once!’

‘Go away? Where could I go, Mahitosh Babu?’

Both men were holding their rifles. Mahitosh Babu raised his, pointing it at Feluda.

‘Go!’ he said again. ‘The jeep is still waiting, over there. Get out of here. I command you—’ He couldn’t finish. His voice was drowned by the roar of a tiger. It sounded as if not one, but fifty wild animals had cried out together.

Then I saw a flash of yellow—like a moving flame—through the leaves of the trees that stood behind the temple. It moved swiftly through the tall grass and all the undergrowth, and slowly took the shape of a huge, striped animal: a Royal Bengal tiger. It began making its way to the open area where the others were still standing.

Mahitosh Babu lowered his gun. His hands were trembling uncontrollably.

Feluda raised his own rifle. There were three other men—Shashanka Sanyal, Madhavlal and Parvat Singh. Parvat Singh gave a sudden leap and vanished from sight. I could not see what the other two were doing, for my eyes kept moving between Feluda and the tiger. It was now standing beside the temple. It bared its fangs and growled. Never before had it had such a wide choice of prey.

Then I saw it stop, and crouch. It would spring up and attack perhaps in less than a second. I had read about this. Sometimes a tiger could—Bang! Bang!

Shots rang out almost simultaneously from two different rifles. My ears started ringing. Just for a moment, even my vision seemed to blur. But I did not miss seeing what happened to the tiger. It shot up in the air, then seemed to strike against an invisible barrier, which made it take a somersault and drop to the ground. It crashed where the brass pitcher stood, its tail lashing at it, making it turn over noisily, spilling its contents. Then the tiger lay still, surrounded by four-hundred-year-old silver coins.

Feluda slowly put his rifle down.

‘It’s dead, sir,’ Madhavlal announced, sounding pleased.

‘Who killed it? Which of the two bullets did the trick, I wonder?’ Feluda asked.

Mahitosh Babu was in no condition to reply. He was sitting on the ground, clutching his head between his hands. His rifle had been snatched away by his friend, Shashanka Sanyal. It was he who had fired the second shot.

Mr Sanyal walked over to the dead tiger.

‘Come and have a look, Mr Mitter,’ he invited. ‘One of the bullets caught him under the jaw and went through the head; the other hit him near an ear. Either of those could have killed him.’

Twelve

The sound of double shots had brought the local villagers running to the spot. Thrilled to see their enemy killed, they were now making arrangements to tie the tiger to bamboo poles and carry it to their village. There was no doubt that this was the man-eater, for two other bullet marks had been found on its body: one on a hind leg, the other near the jaw. These had clearly made the tiger lose its natural ability to hunt for prey in the wild. Besides, the heavy growth of hair on its jowls indicated it was an old tiger, anyway. Perhaps that was another reason why it had become a man-eater.

Parvat Singh had returned and helped his master to get up and sit on one of the broken steps of the temple. Mahitosh Babu was still looking shaken and was wiping his face frequently. Lalmohan Babu had regained consciousness and climbed down from the tree, with a little assistance from me. Then he had calmly taken the sword back, as though carrying a sword and climbing trees was something he did every day.

After a few minutes' silence, Feluda spoke. 'Mahitosh Babu,' he said, 'you are worrying unnecessarily. I had already promised Mr Sanyal I would not disclose any of your secrets. No one will ever find out that you are not a shikari, and that you cannot even hold a gun steadily. I had my suspicions right from the start. Your signature on Lalmohan Babu's letter made me think you were old. So I began to wonder how you could shoot, if you could not even write with a steady hand. Then I thought perhaps your hands had been affected only recently and all those tales in your books were indeed true. I started to believe this, but something your brother said raised fresh doubts in my mind. Yes, I know most of what he said was irrelevant, but I didn't think he would actually make up a story. On the contrary, what he said often made perfect sense, if one thought about it. He obviously knew you had written books on shikar, and that the whole thing was based on lies. This distressed him very much, which is why he kept talking about Yudhisthir's punishment for telling a lie. He also told me not everyone could be like your grandfather. Not everyone could handle weapons . . .'

'Yes, they could!' Mahitosh Babu interrupted, breathing hard and speaking very fast. 'I killed mynahs and sparrows with my airgun when I was seven, from a distance of fifty yards. But . . .'

he glanced at the peepul tree. 'One day, we came here for a picnic, and I climbed that tree. In fact, I was sitting on the same branch where your cousin was sitting a while ago, when my brother

suddenly said he could see a tiger coming. I jumped down to see the tiger, and—'

'—You broke your arm?'

'Compound fracture,' Mr Sanyal stepped forward. 'It never really healed properly.'

'I see. And yet you wanted to be known as a shikari, just because that was your family tradition? So you moved from here and went to Assam and Orissa where no one knew you? It was Mr Sanyal who killed all those animals, but everyone was convinced you were a worthy successor of your forefathers. Is that right, Mahitosh Babu?'

'Yes,' Mahitosh Babu sighed deeply, 'that's right. What Shashanka did for his friend is unbelievable. He is a much better shikari than anyone in my family.'

'But recently . . . were you two drifting apart?'

Both men were silent. Feluda continued, 'I hadn't heard of Mahitosh Sinha-Roy before his books began to be published. Nor, I am sure, had thousands of others. But when these books came out, Sinha-Roy became a famous name, didn't it? He was praised, admired, even revered. And what was his fame based on? Nothing but lies. No one knew the name of Shashanka Sanyal. No one ever would. You had begun to resent this, Mr Sanyal, hadn't you? You had done a lot for your friend, but perhaps the time had come to draw a line? We heard Mahitosh Babu speak very sternly to someone on our first night. I assume he was speaking to you. You two had started to disagree on most things, hadn't you?'

Neither man made a reply. Feluda stared steadily at Mahitosh Babu for a few moments.

'Very well,' he said, 'I shall take silence for assent. But there is another thing. I suppose silence is the only answer to that, as well.'

Mahitosh Babu cast a nervous glance at Feluda.

'I am now talking of Torit Sengupta,' Feluda went on. 'You never wrote a single line yourself, just as you never killed a single animal. You said something about your manuscript, which made me go and look for it in your study. But I didn't find anything with your handwriting on it. All you ever did was just relate your stories to Mr Sengupta. It was he who wrote them out beautifully. They were his words, his language, his style; yet, everyone thought they were yours, and you earned more praise, also as a gifted writer. Yes, it is true that you paid him well and he lived here in great comfort. But how long could he go on seeing someone else take the credit for his talent, his own hard work? Anyone with

creative abilities wants to see his efforts appreciated. If he continued to work for you, there was no way his own name could ever become well known. Disappointed and frustrated, he was probably thinking of leaving, but suddenly you chanced upon that puzzle left by Adityanarayan, and Mr Sengupta saw it. It could be that he had already found references to those coins among your grandfather's papers; so he knew what the treasure consisted of. He solved the puzzle, and decided to leave with the treasure. He even found it . . . but then things went horribly wrong.'

Mahitosh Babu struggled to his feet, not without difficulty. 'Yes, Mr Mitter, you are quite right in all that you've said,' he remarked. 'It is very painful for me to hear these things, but do tell me this: who killed Torit? He might have resented—even hated—me for what I was doing, but who could have disliked him so intensely? I certainly know of no one. Nor can I imagine who else might have come to the forest that night.'

'Perhaps I can help you there.'

Mahitosh Babu had started to pace. He stopped abruptly at Feluda's words and asked, 'Can you?'

Feluda turned to Mr Sanyal. 'Didn't you pick up a Winchester rifle from the trophy room that night and come here, Mr Sanyal? I noticed traces of mud on its butt.'

Perhaps being a shikari had given him nerves of steel. Mr Sanyal's face remained expressionless. 'What if I did, Mr Mitter?' he asked coolly. 'What exactly are you trying to say?'

Feluda remained just as calm. 'I am not suggesting for a moment that you came looking for the hidden treasure,' he said. 'You were and still are loyal to your friend. You would never have cheated him. But is it not true that you knew Mr Sengupta had solved the puzzle?'

'Yes,' Mr Sanyal replied levelly, 'I did. As a matter of fact, Torit had offered me half of the treasure since he felt we were both being deprived in the same way. But I refused. Moreover, I told him more than once not to go into the forest, because of the man-eater. But that night, when I saw the light from his torch, I had to follow him in here. Yes, I took that rifle from the trophy room. When I got here, I found that he had dug the ground and found that pitcher, but there was no sign of him. Then I looked around closely, and saw blood on the grass, and pug marks. So I quickly put the pitcher away inside the temple, and followed the marks up to the bamboo grove. Then . . . there was a flash of lightning, and I saw the tiger crouched over Torit's body. It was too dark to see

clearly, but I shot at it, and made it run away. I knew I couldn't do anything to help Torit. It was too late. However . . .' He broke off.

'However, that isn't all, is it? Please allow me to finish your story. Correct me if what I say is wrong. I can only guess the details.'

'Very well.'

'You were talking to Madhavlal last night, weren't you?'

Mr Sanyal did not deny this. Feluda asked another question: 'Were you asking him to place a bait for the tiger? See those vultures over that tree? I think they are there because a dead animal is lying under it.'

'A calf,' Mr Sanyal muttered.

'That means you wanted the tiger to come out today, while we were here, so that you could show at least a few people you were the real shikari, not your friend. Is that right?'

Mr Sanyal nodded silently. Before Feluda could say anything else, Mahitosh Babu came forward and placed a hand on Feluda's shoulder.

'Mr Mitter,' he pleaded, 'I'd like to give you something. Please do not refuse.'

'What are you talking about?'

'These coins. This treasure. You are entitled to at least some of it. Please let me—'

Feluda smiled, looking at Mahitosh Babu. 'No, I don't want your silver coins,' he said, 'but there is something I'd like to take back with me.'

'What is it?' 'Adityanarayan's sword.'

Lalmohan Babu walked over to Feluda immediately and handed him the sword.

'What!' Mahitosh Babu sounded amazed. 'You would like that old sword instead of these priceless coins?'

'Yes. In a way, this sword is priceless, too. It is not an ordinary sword, Mahitosh Babu. No, I don't mean just the history attached to it. There is something else.'

'You mean something to do with Torit's murder?'

'No. Mr Sengupta was not murdered.'

'What! You mean he killed himself?'

'No, it was not suicide, either.'

'Then what was it, for heaven's sake? Why are you talking in riddles?'

Mahitosh Babu said impatiently, sounding stern once more.

‘No, no, I am not talking in riddles. Let me explain what happened. We were so busy looking for a murderer that the obvious answer did not occur to anyone. Mr Sengupta had removed the sword himself.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Because he needed something to dig the ground with. He didn’t have time to look for a spade. That sword was handy, so he took it.’

‘And then?’

‘I am coming to that. But before I do, I’d like to show you what’s so special about it.’

Feluda stopped and began moving towards Mr Sanyal with the open sword in his hand. Brave though he was, Mr Sanyal moved restlessly as Feluda got closer. But Feluda did not hurt him. He merely stretched his arm, so that the iron blade could get closer to the point of the gun in Mr Sanyal’s hand. A second later, the two pieces of metal clicked together with a faint noise.

‘Good heavens, what is this? A magnet?’ Mr Sanyal cried.

‘Yes, it is now a magnet. I mean the sword, not your gun. Let me point out that when I saw this sword the first time, it was no different from other swords. There were various pieces of metal lying near it, but they were not sticking to the blade. It was magnetized the same night when Mr Sengupta died.’

‘How did that happen?’ Mahitosh Babu asked. We were all waiting with bated breath to hear Feluda’s explanation.

‘If a person happens to be carrying a piece of metal in his hand when lightning strikes, that piece of metal gets magnetized,’ Feluda went on. ‘Not only that, it may actually attract the lightning. What happened that night, I think, was this: it started raining as soon as Mr Sengupta finished digging the ground. He got the pitcher, but had to leave it there. I think he then ran towards that peepul tree to avoid getting wet. He was still carrying the sword, perhaps without even realizing it. Lightning struck the tree only a few seconds later. Mr Sengupta was lifted off the ground and flung aside under its impact . . . As he fell, the point of the sword pierced his clothes and left a deep wound in his body, purely by accident. No one killed him. It is my belief that he was already dead when he fell. Then the tiger found him.’

Mahitosh Babu was shaking violently. He looked up and stared at the peepul tree.

‘That’s why . . . that explains it!’ he said, his voice sounding choked. ‘I was wondering all this while why that tree had suddenly grown so old!’

We were going back to Calcutta today. The sun was shining brightly, but because of the recent rains, it felt pleasantly cool. We had finished packing, and were sitting in our room. Devtosh Babu's room was now unlocked. I could hear his voice from time to time. Lalmohan Babu had grazed a knee while climbing down from the tree. He was placing a strip of sticking plaster on it, when a servant arrived, carrying a steel trunk on his head. He put it down on the ground and said Mahitosh Babu had sent it. Feluda opened it, and revealed a beautiful tiger skin, very carefully packed. There was a letter, too. It said, 'Dear Mr Mitter, I am giving you this tiger skin as a token of my gratitude. I should be honoured if you accept it. The tiger was killed by my friend, Shashanka Sanyal, in a forest near Sambalpur, in 1957.'

Lalmohan Babu read the letter and said, 'Ah, so you get both the sword and this skin!'

'No, Lalmohan Babu. I am going to present the tiger skin to you.'

'To me? Why?'

'For your remarkable achievement. I have never known anyone who could lose consciousness on the top of a tree, and yet manage to stay put, without crashing to the ground. I would not have thought it possible at all. But you have proved it can be done!'

Lalmohan Babu waved a dismissive hand.

'Did I tell you why I fainted in the first place? It was only because of my very lively imagination, Felu Babu. When you mentioned a tiger, do you know what I saw? I saw a burning torch, its orange flame shooting up to the sky. An awful monster sat in the middle of it, pulling evil faces, and I could hear the roar of engines. An aircraft was about to take off . . . and I knew it was going to land on me! Hey, what else could I do after this, except close my eyes and pass into oblivion?'