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Adapted and modified by

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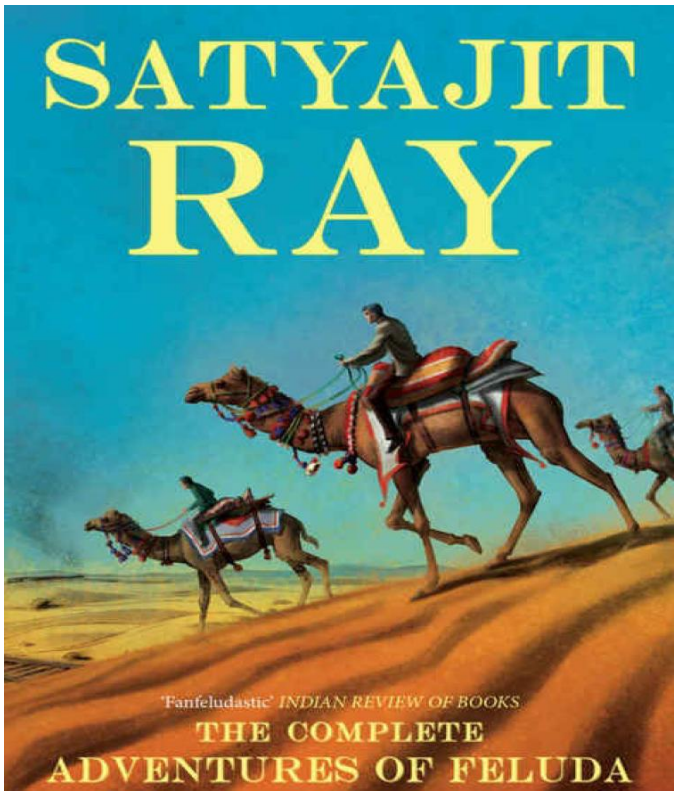
SATYAJIT
RAY
'Fanfeludastic' INDIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS
THE COMPLETE
ADVENTURES OF FELUDA

The Locked Chest

Village Ghurghutia

P.O. Plassey Dist. Nadia

3 November 1974

To:

Mr Pradosh C. Mitter

Dear Mr Mitter,

I am writing to invite you to my house. I have heard a lot about your work and wish to meet you in person. There is, of course, a special reason for asking you to come at this particular time. You will get to know the details on arrival. If you feel you are able to accept this invitation from a seventy-three-year-old man, please confirm your acceptance in writing immediately. In order to reach Ghurghutia, you need to disembark at Plassey, and travel further south for another five-and-a-half-miles. There are several trains from Sealdah, out of which the Up Lalgola Passenger leaves at 1.58 p.m. and reaches Plassey at 6.11. I will arrange for you to be met at the station and brought here. You can spend the night at my house, and catch the same train at 10.30 a.m. the following morning to Calcutta. I look forward to hearing from you.

With good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Kalikinkar Majumdar

I handed the letter back to Feluda, and asked, 'Is it the same Plassey where that famous battle was fought?'

'Yes. There is no other Plassey in Bengal, dear boy. But if you think the place has got any evidence left of that historic battle, you are sadly mistaken. There is absolutely no sign left, not even the palash trees in the woods that stood in Siraj-ud-daula's time. The name "Plassey" came from these trees. Did you know that?'

I nodded. 'Will you go, Feluda?'

Feluda stared at the letter for a few seconds.

‘I wonder why an old man wants to see me,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘It doesn’t seem right to refuse. To be honest, I am quite curious. Besides, have you ever been to a village in the winter? Have you seen how the mist gathers in open fields at dawn and dusk? All that remains visible are tree trunks and a little area over one’s head. Darkness falls suddenly, and it can get really cold . . . I haven’t seen all this for years. Go on, get me a postcard, Topshe.’

Mr Majumdar was told to expect us on 12 November. Feluda chose this date, keeping in mind that a letter from Calcutta would take at least three days to reach him.

We took the 365 Up Lalgola Passenger and reached Plassey at 6.30 p.m. I saw from the train what Feluda had meant by darkness falling quickly. The last lingering rays of the setting sun disappeared from the rice fields almost before I knew it. By the time we left the station after handing over our tickets to the collector at the gate, all lights had been switched on, although the sky still held a faint reddish glow. The car that was parked outside had to be Mr Majumdar’s. I had never seen a car like that. Feluda said he might have seen one or two when he was a child. All he knew was that it was an American car. Its colour must have been dark red once, but now the paint had peeled off in many places. The hood, too, bore patches here and there and showed signs of age. In spite of all this, there was something rather impressive about the car. I couldn’t help feeling a certain amount of awe.

A car like that ought to have had a chauffeur in uniform. The man who was leaning against it, smoking a cigarette, was dressed in a dhoti and a shirt. He threw away his cigarette when he saw us and straightened himself. ‘To see Mr Majumdar?’ he asked.

‘Yes, to Ghurghutia.’

‘Very well, sir. This way, please.’

The driver opened a door for us, and we climbed into the forty-year-old car. He then walked over to the front of the car to crank the handle, which made the engine come to life. He got behind the wheel, and began driving. We settled ourselves comfortably, but the road being full of potholes and the springs in the seat being old, our comfort did not last for very long. However, once we had passed through the main town of Plassey and were actually out in the country, the scenery became so beautiful that I ceased to feel any discomfort. It wasn’t yet totally dark, and I could see tiny villages across large rice fields, surrounded by trees. In their midst, the mist rose from the ground and spread like a smoky blanket a few feet above the ground. ‘Pretty as a picture’ was the phrase that came to mind.

An old, sprawling mansion in a place like this came as a total surprise. Ten minutes after we started, I realized that we were passing through private land, for the trees were now mango, jamun and jackfruit. The road then turned right. We passed a broken and abandoned temple, and suddenly found ourselves facing a huge white, moss-covered gate, on the top of which was a naubatkhana (a music room). The driver sounded his horn three times before passing through the gate. The mansion came into view immediately.

The last traces of red had disappeared from the sky, leaving a deep purple hue. The dark house stood against the sky, like a towering cliff. We got out and followed the driver. As we got closer, I realized the whole house could be kept in a museum. Its walls were all damp, plaster had peeled off in several places, and small plants had grown out of cracks in the exposed bricks. We stopped before the front door.

'No one in this area has electricity, I take it?' Feluda asked.

'No, sir. For nearly three years, all we've heard are promises. But nothing's happened yet,' the driver replied.

I glanced up. From where I was standing, a lot of windows on the first floor were visible. But each room was in darkness. On our right, through a couple of bushes, a light flickered in a tiny hut. Perhaps that was where a mali or chowkidar lived. I shivered silently. What sort of a place was this? Perhaps Feluda should have made more enquiries before agreeing to come.

Light from a lantern fell in the doorway. Then an old servant appeared at the door. The driver had gone, possibly to put the car away. The servant glanced at us with a slight frown, then said, 'Please come in.' We stepped in behind him.

There was no doubt that the house sprawled over a large area. But everything inside it seemed surprisingly small. The doors were not high, the windows were half the size of windows in any house in Calcutta, and it was almost possible to touch the ceiling if I raised my arm. 'This house clearly belonged to a zamindar.' Feluda remarked. 'All the houses built by zamindars in the villages in Bengal about two hundred years ago were built like this.'

We crossed a long passage, then turned right to go up a flight of stairs. A strange contraption met my eyes as we got to the first floor. 'This is called a "covered door". It's like a trapdoor, really,' Feluda told me. 'These were built to stop burglars and dacoits from getting in. If you shut it, it would cease standing upright. Then it would fold automatically and lie flat, stretching diagonally across, to from a kind of ceiling over out heads. So anyone trying to climb up would be shut out. See those holes in the door? Spears used to be slipped out of those holes to fight intruders.'

Luckily, the door was now standing wide open. We began crossing another long corridor. An oil lamp burnt in a niche in the wall where it ended. The servant opened a door next to this niche, and ushered us in.

The room we stepped into was quite large. It might have seemed even larger had it not been stuffed with so much furniture. Nearly half of it had been taken up by a massive bed. To the left of this bed was a table and a chest. Besides these, there were three chairs, a wardrobe, and bookshelves that went right up to the ceiling. Each shelf was crammed with books. An old man was lying on the bed, a blanket drawn upto his chin. In the flickering light of a candle I saw that through a salt-and-pepper beard and moustache, he was smiling at us.

'Please sit down,' he invited.

'Thank you. This is my cousin, Tapesh. I wrote to you about him,' Feluda said. Mr Majumdar smiled again and nodded. I noticed that he did not fold his hands in reply to my 'namaskar'.

We took the chairs nearest to the bed.

'My letter must have made you curious,' Mr Majumdar observed lightly. 'Yes, it certainly did. Or I'd never have travelled this distance.'

'Good.' Mr Majumdar looked genuinely pleased. 'If you hadn't come, I would have felt very disappointed, and thought you to be arrogant; and you would have missed out on something. But perhaps you have read these books already?' Mr Majumdar's eyes turned towards the table. Four bound volumes were arranged in a pile next to a candle. Feluda got up and picked them up. 'Good heavens!' he exclaimed. 'These are all extremely rare, and they are all to do with my profession. Did you ever . . .?'

'No, no,' Mr Majumdar laughed, 'I never tried to become a detective myself. It has always been a hobby. You see, fifty-two years ago, someone in our family was murdered. An English investigator called Malcolm caught the killer. After speaking to Malcolm and learning something about his work, I became interested in criminology. That was when I bought those books. I was also very fond of reading detective novels. Have you heard of Emile Gaboriau?'

'Yes, yes,' Feluda replied with enthusiasm, 'wasn't he a French writer? He wrote the first detective novel, I think.'

‘That’s right,’ Mr Majumdar nodded. ‘I’ve got all his books. And, of course, books by writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle. I bought all these forty years ago. Of late, I believe, there has been a lot of progress, and now there are many scientific and technical ways to catch a criminal. But from what little I know of your work, you strike me as one who depends more on old-fashioned methods, and uses his brain more than anything else, very successfully. Am I right?’

‘I do not know how successful I’ve been, but you’re certainly right about my methods.’ ‘That is why I asked you to visit me.’

Mr Majumdar paused. Feluda returned to his chair. After a while, Mr Majumdar resumed speaking, staring straight at the flame of the candle. ‘I am not only old—I crossed seventy some years ago—but also ailing. God knows what’s going to happen to my books when I die. So I thought if I could give you a few, they’d be appreciated and looked after.’

Feluda looked at the books in the shelves in surprise. ‘Are all of those your own?’ he asked.

‘Yes. I was the only one in my family with an interest in books. Criminology wasn’t the only subject that held my interest, as you can see.’

‘Yes, of course. I can see books on archaeology, painting, gardening, history, biographies, travelogues . . . even drama and the theatre! Some of them appear to be new. Do you still buy books?’

‘Oh yes. I have a manager called Rajen. He goes to Calcutta two or three times every month. I make him a list of books, and he goes and gets them from College Street.’

Feluda looked once more at the books kept on the table. ‘I don’t know how to thank you.’

‘You don’t have to. It would have given me a lot of pleasure if I could actually hand them over to you myself, but both my hands are useless.’

Startled, we stared at him. His hands were hidden under the blanket, but I would never have thought that that had a special significance.

‘Arthritis,’ Mr Majumdar explained, ‘has affected all my fingers. My son happens to be visiting me at the moment, so he’s looking after me now. Usually, it is my servant Gokul who feeds me every day.’

‘Did you get your son to write the letter to me?’

‘No, Rajen wrote it. He takes care of everything. If I need to see a doctor, he fetches one from Behrampore. Plassey doesn’t have good doctors.’

I had noticed Feluda casting frequent glances at the chest kept near the bed while he was talking to Mr Majumdar. ‘That chest appears to be different from most,’ he now said. ‘I can’t see any provision for a key. Does it have a combination lock?’

‘Correct,’ Mr Majumdar smiled. ‘All it has is a knob, with numbers written around it. The chest opens only if you move the knob to rest against some specific numbers. These areas were once notorious for armed burglars. You knew that, didn’t you? In fact, my ancestors became wealthy enough to buy masses of land chiefly by looting others. Years later, we ourselves were attacked by dacoits, more than once. So I thought a chest with a combination lock might be safer than any other.’

Mr Majumdar stopped speaking, and frowned for a second. Then he called, ‘Gokul!’

The old servant appeared almost instantly. ‘Bring that bird over here,’ his master commanded. ‘I’d like these people to see it.’

Gokul disappeared and came back a minute later with a parrot in a cage. Mr Majumdar turned to it and said softly, ‘Go on, sweetie. Say it. Shut the door . . . say it!’

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, suddenly, the parrot spoke in an amazingly clear voice. ‘Shut the door!’ it said. I gave a start. I had never heard a bird speak so distinctly. But that wasn’t all. ‘O big fat hen!’ the bird added. This time, I saw Feluda turn his head sharply. Before anyone could say anything, the parrot said both things together, very rapidly: ‘Shut the door, O big fat hen!’

‘What does it mean?’ Feluda asked after a moment’s pause. Mr Majumdar burst out laughing. ‘I am not going to tell you. All I can say is that what you just heard was a code, and it has to do with that locked chest over there. You have twelve hours to work it out.’

‘I see. May I ask why the bird has been taught to say it?’

‘You may indeed, and I am going to tell you why. Age does strange things to one’s memory. About three years ago, one day, I suddenly discovered that I couldn’t remember the combination that would open the chest. Can you believe that? After using the same numbers for years, almost every day, it had simply vanished from my mind, just like that. All day, I tried to remember the numbers. Then, finally, it came back in a flash, in the middle of the night. I could have written it down, but didn’t want to, in case it fell into the wrong hands. It was far better to keep it in my head, but now I realized I could no longer depend on my memory.

So the next morning, I made up that code and taught my parrot to say it. Now it says it every now and then, just as other parrots say, “Radhey Shyam” or “how are you?”’

Feluda was still staring at the chest. I saw him frown suddenly and get up to peer at it closely. Then he picked up the candle and began examining its lid.

‘What is it?’ Mr Majumdar asked anxiously. ‘What have you found? Do your trained eyes tell you anything?’

‘I think, Mr Majumdar, someone tried to force this chest open.’ ‘Are you sure?’ Mr Majumdar had stopped smiling.

Feluda put the candle back on the table. ‘There are some marks on it,’ he said. ‘Ordinary dusting and cleaning couldn’t have left marks like those. But is there anyone who’d want to open it?’

Mr Majumdar thought for a moment. Then he said slowly, ‘Not many people live here, Mr Mitter. Apart from myself, there’s Gokul, Rajen, my driver Monilal, a cook and a mali. Vishwanath—that’s my son—arrived five days ago. He lives in Calcutta and visits me rarely. He’s here now because of my illness. You see, last Monday I had been sitting in the garden. When I tried to get up, everything suddenly went dark and I fell down on the bench. Rajen rang Vishwanath from Plassey, and he came the next day with a doctor from Calcutta. It appears to have been a mild stroke. In any case, I know I haven’t got long to live. But . . . don’t tell me I have to spend my last few days in doubt and anxiety? Always afraid that a thief might get into my room and force open that chest?’

‘No, no. There is no need to jump to conclusions. I may be quite wrong,’ Feluda said reassuringly. ‘Those marks may have appeared when the chest was first installed in that corner. I can’t see very clearly in the light from one candle, so I cannot tell whether those marks are old or new. I’ll have another look in the morning. Is your servant trustworthy?’

‘Absolutely, He’s been with me for thirty years.’ ‘And Rajen?’

‘Rajen has also spent a good many years here. But then, where’s the guarantee that someone who has honoured my trust until today won’t betray it tomorrow?’

Feluda nodded in agreement. ‘No, there’s no guarantee at all, unfortunately. Anyway, tell Gokul to keep an eye on things. I don’t really think there’s any immediate danger.’

‘Oh. Good.’ Mr Majumdar appeared relieved. We rose.

‘Gokul will show you your room,’ he said. ‘You’ll find blankets and quilts and mosquito nets. Vishwanath has gone to Behrampore, he should be getting back soon. You must have your dinner as soon as he returns. Tomorrow morning, if you like, you can go for a ride in my car, though there isn’t much to see in this area.’

Feluda picked up the books from the table and thanked him again. Before saying good night, Mr Majumdar reminded him about the code. ‘If you can crack it, Mr Mitter, I will give you the whole set by Gaboriau.’

Gokul came back with a lantern and took us to our room. It was smaller than Mr Majumdar’s but with less furniture, which made it easier to move about. Two beds had been made with considerable care. A lantern burnt in a corner. Feluda sat down on the spotless sheet that covered his bed, and said, ‘Can you remember the code?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very well. Here’s my notebook and a pen. Write it down. I would love to get those books by Gaboriau.’

I wrote the words down. None of it made any sense. How on earth was Feluda going to find its meaning?

‘I simply cannot see how the numbers for a combination lock can be hidden in this strange message!’ I complained. ‘I mean, this is pure nonsense, isn’t it? How can a hen shut a door?’

‘That’s where the challenge lies, don’t you see? Nobody’s actually asking a hen to shut a door. That much is obvious. Each word has a separate meaning. I have to figure it out somehow by tomorrow morning.’

Feluda got up and opened a window. The moon had risen by this time, and everything was bathed in moonlight. I went and stood by his side. Our room overlooked the rear portion of the house. ‘There’s probably a pond over there on the right,’ Feluda remarked, pointing. Through a thick growth of plants and shrubs, I could see the shimmering surface of water. The only noise that could be heard was that of jackals calling in the distance, and crickets chirping in the bushes. Never before had I visited a place so totally isolated and remote.

Feluda shut the window again to keep out the cold night air. In the same instant, we heard a car arrive. It was obviously a different car, not the American one we had travelled in.

‘That’s probably Vishwanath Majumdar,’ Feluda remarked. Good, I thought. This might mean we’d soon be called in to dinner. To tell the truth, I was feeling quite hungry. We had left after an early lunch, since our train was at two o’clock. We did get ourselves a cup of tea and some sweets at Ranaghat, but even that was a long time ago. Ordinarily, I would probably not be thinking of food at eight in the evening, but since there was nothing else to do in a place like this, I quite liked the idea of dinner and an early night.

Looking around in the room, my eyes suddenly fell upon something I hadn’t noticed before. It was the portrait of a man that took up most of the opposite wall. There could be no doubt that he was one of Mr Majumdar’s ancestors. He was sitting in a chair, looking rather grim. His torso was bare, which showed to perfection his very broad shoulders. His eyes were large, and his moustache thick, its edges turning upwards. His hair rippled down to his shoulders.

‘I bet he used to wrestle, and use heavy clubs regularly,’ Feluda whispered. ‘Perhaps he was the first bandit who became a zamindar.’

There were footsteps outside. Both of us looked at the door. Gokul had left a lantern on the veranda. A shadow blocked out its light for a second, then fell on the threshold. It was followed by the figure of a man. Could this be Vishwanath Majumdar? Surely not? This man was wearing a short dhoti and a grey kurta, had a bushy moustache and glasses with thick lenses. He was peering into the room, trying to find us.

‘What is it, Rajen Babu?’ Feluda asked.

Rajen Babu finally found what he was looking for. His eyes came to rest upon Feluda.

‘Chhoto Babu has just returned,’ he said in a gruff voice that suggested he might have a cold. ‘I have asked Gokul to serve dinner. He’ll come and call you in a few minutes.’

He left. ‘What is that smell, Feluda?’ I asked as soon as he had gone.

‘Naphthalene. I think he just took that woollen kurta out of a suitcase and put it on.’

Silence fell once more as the sound of footsteps faded away. Had Feluda not been with me, I could never have spent even five minutes in such an eerie atmosphere. How did Mr Majumdar and the others manage to live here day after day? Suddenly, I remembered someone had been murdered in this house. God knew in which room it had taken place.

Feluda, in the meantime, had dragged the table with the lantern on it closer to his bed and opened his notebook to look at the code. I heard him mutter, ‘Shut the door . . . shut the door . . .’ a couple of times. Thoroughly bored, I decided to step out of the room and stand on the veranda outside.

Oh God, what was that? My heart nearly jumped into my mouth. Something was moving in the distance, where the faint light from the lantern gave way to complete darkness. I forced myself to stay silent and stared at the moving object. A couple of seconds later, I realized it was only a cat, not black or white, but one with stripes on its body like a tiger. It returned my stare sombrely, then gave a yawn before walking lazily back into the darkness. A few moments later, the parrot gave a raucous cry, and then all was silent once more. I wondered where Vishwanath Majumdar’s room was. Was it on the ground floor? Where did Rajen Babu live? Why had we been given a room from which it was impossible to hear noises in other parts of the house?

I came back to the room. Feluda was sitting crosslegged on the bed, his notebook in his lap. ‘Why are they taking so long?’ I couldn’t help sounding cross. Feluda looked at his watch. ‘You’re right, Topshe. Rajen Babu left at least fifteen minutes ago.’ He then went back to staring at his notebook.

I began going through the books Feluda had been given. One was on analysing fingerprints, one was simply called *Criminology*, and the third was called *Crime and its Detection*. I picked up the fourth, but could not understand what its name meant. It was full of pictures, chiefly of firearms. Had Feluda brought his revolver?

No, why should he? After all, he hadn’t come here to solve a crime. There was no reason for him to have brought his revolver. I put the books in our suitcase and was about to sit down, when the sound of an unfamiliar voice startled me again. Another man was standing at the door. This time, there was no problem in recognizing him. He wasn’t Gokul, or Rajen Babu, or the driver Mondal. He had to be Kalikinkar’s son, Vishwanath.

‘Sorry to have kept you waiting,’ he said, folding his hands and looking at Feluda. ‘My name is Vishwanath Majumdar.’

Now I could see that he resembled his father to a great degree. He had the same eyes and the same nose. He was probably in his mid-forties. His hair was still black, he was clean-shaven and had very thin lips. I took an instant dislike to him, though I couldn't find a proper reason for it. It was perhaps simply because he had made us wait a long time, and I was tired. Or it could be that—but this could just be my imagination—when he smiled, his eyes remained cold and aloof. He seemed as though he wasn't really pleased to see us. Perhaps it was only our departure that would make him happy.

Feluda and I went with him down to the ground floor to the dining room. I had half expected to be asked to sit down on the floor for a traditional meal, but found to my surprise that there was a dining table. Silver plates and bowls and glasses were placed on it.

When we were all seated, Vishwanath Majumdar said, 'I like having a bath twice a day, be it summer or winter. That's what took so long, I'm afraid.'

He was still reeking of perfumed soap and, possibly, an expensive cologne. Clad in grey trousers, a white silk shirt and a dark green sleeveless pullover, he was clearly a man fond of the good things in life.

We began eating. Several little bowls were placed in a semicircle around our plates, each containing a different dish. There were three different vegetables, daal and fish curry.

'Have you spoken to my father?' Vishwanath Majumdar asked. 'Yes. I am rather embarrassed by what he did.'

'You mean the books he gave you?'

'Yes. Even if those books were still available, they would have cost at least a thousand rupees.'

Vishwanath Majumdar laughed. 'When he told me he had asked you to come here, I was at first quite annoyed with him,' he told us. 'I didn't think it was fair to invite people from the city to a place like this.'

'Why not?' Feluda protested. 'Why should you have objected to that? I have lost nothing by coming here. On the contrary, I have gained such a lot!'

Vishwanath Majumdar did not pay much attention to these words. 'Speaking for myself,' he declared, 'I'd be perfectly happy to go back tomorrow. The last four days have been quite enough for me, thank you. I have no idea how my father can live here permanently.'

'Doesn't he go out at all?'

‘No. He spends most of his time in that dark room. He used to go out and sit in the garden a couple of times every day. But now the doctor has forbidden all movement.’

‘Did you say you were returning tomorrow?’

‘Yes. Father is not in any immediate danger. Will you be catching the train at half past ten?’ ‘Yes.’

‘I see. That means I shall leave soon after you get to the station.’ Feluda poured daal over his rice. ‘Your father is interested in so many different subjects. Are you interested in anything other than your business?’

‘No, sir. I simply don’t have the time for anything else once my day’s work is done. I am entirely happy being a businessman, and no more.’

By the time we said good night to Vishwanath Majumdar and returned to our room, it was half past nine. It didn’t really matter what time my watch showed, for time seemed to have very little significance here. Seven o’clock had seemed like midnight.

‘Do you mind if I keep my pillow on the other side?’ I asked Feluda. ‘No, but why do you want to do that?’

‘I have no wish to see that grim face on the wall the minute I open my eyes in the morning.’

Feluda laughed. ‘All right. I think I’ll do the same,’ he said. ‘I must say I don’t like the look in his eyes, either.’

Just before going to bed, Feluda picked up the lantern and turned its light down. The room seemed to shrink in size. In just a few minutes, I could feel my eyes growing heavy with sleep. But, just as I was about to drop off, I heard Feluda muttering, which made me open them at once.

‘Shut the door . . . and open the gate . . . no, that’s wrong. Pick up sticks. Yes, that comes first.’ ‘Feluda!’ I cried, slightly alarmed. ‘Wake up, Feluda! You are talking in your sleep. What’s the matter with you?’

‘No, no,’ I heard him chuckle in the darkness. ‘I am fully awake, and no, I haven’t gone mad, I assure you. What has just happened, Topshe, is that I think I’ve won that set by Gaboriau.’

‘What! You’ve cracked the code?’

‘Yes, I think so. It was actually ridiculously simple. I should have spotted it at once.’ ‘It still makes no sense to me.’

‘That’s only because you aren’t thinking. How were you taught to count when you were a child?’ ‘Very simply. One, two, three, four . . . that was all.’

‘Was it? Think, dear boy, think. Did no one try to make it easier for you? Weren’t you taught a rhyme?’

‘A rhyme to go with numbers? You mean something that began with one, two . . . no, I don’t think . .. hey, wait a minute! Feluda, Feluda, I know what you mean! Yes, I’ve got it.’ I sat up in excitement. I could dimly see Feluda turn his head to look at me. He was grinning.

‘Very well. Let’s have it, then.’

Softly, I began to chant a rhyme I had been taught in nursery school:

‘One, two

Buckle my shoe.

Three, four

Shut the door.

Five, six

Pick up sticks.

Seven, eight

Open the gate.

Nine, ten

A big fat hen.

Eleven, twelve

Dig and delve . . .’

‘That’ll do. Now what do you think the full message means?’

‘Shut the door . . . that would mean three and four. Big fat hen would mean nine and ten. Right?’ ‘Right. But there’s an “O” before “big fat hen”. That means the whole number is 340910. Simple, isn’t it? Now, go to sleep.’

I lay down again, marvelling at Feluda’s cleverness. But just as I began to close my eyes once more, footsteps sounded on the veranda. It was Rajen Babu again. What did he want at this time of night?

‘Yes, Rajen Babu?’ Feluda called.

‘Chhoto Babu told me to find out if you needed anything.’ ‘No, no. We’re fine, thank you.’

Rajen Babu disappeared silently. This time, sleep came very quickly. All I was aware of as I closed my eyes was that the moonlight that had seeped through closed shutters had suddenly gone pale. I thought I heard distant thunder, and the cat meeaowed a couple of times. Then I fell asleep.

When I woke in the morning, Feluda was opening the windows. 'It rained last night,' he said. 'Did you hear it?'

I hadn't. But now I could see through the window that the clouds had gone. The sun shone brightly on the leaves I could see from my bed.

Gokul appeared with two cups of tea half an hour later. Looking at him in daylight, I was considerably surprised. Not only did he seem old, but his face held an expression of deep distress.

'Has Kalikinkar Babu woken up?' Feluda asked. Perhaps Gokul was hard of hearing. He did not answer Feluda's question at first. All he did was stare at him vacantly. Feluda had to raise his voice and ask again before he nodded and left the room quickly.

We made our way to old Mr Majumdar's room at a round seven-thirty, and found him exactly as we'd left him the night before. He was still lying in his bed, a blanket covering most of his body including his arms. The window next to his bed was shut, possibly to avoid direct sunlight. The only light that came into the room was through the open door. I noticed a photograph on the wall over his bed. It must have been taken many years ago, for it showed a much younger Kalikinkar Majumdar. His hair and beard were both jet black.

He greeted us with a smile.

'I got Rajen to take out the books by Gaboriau. I knew you could do it,' he said. 'Well, it is for you to decide whether I've got the right number. 340910. Is that it?'

'Well done!' Mr Majumdar's voice held both pleasure and admiration. 'Go on, take those books and put them in your bag. And please take another look at those marks on the chest. I had a look myself. They didn't strike me as anything to worry about.'

'Well then, that settles it. If you're not worried about it, nothing else matters.'

Feluda thanked him once more before collecting the four books written by the first writer of detective fiction.

'Have you had tea?' Mr Majumdar asked. 'Yes, sir.'

'I told the driver to bring the car out. Vishwanath left very early this morning. He said he wanted to reach Calcutta by ten. Rajen has gone to the local

market. Gokul will help you with your luggage. Would you like to go for a drive before you catch your train?'

'I was actually thinking of going by an earlier train. We don't really have to wait until ten-thirty. If we left immediately, perhaps we could catch the 372 Down.'

'Very well. I have no wish to keep anyone from the city in this small village any longer than is necessary. But I'm really pleased that you could come. I mean that.'

Soon, we were on our way to the railway station. The road went through rice fields, which glistened in the early morning sun after a rainy night. I was looking at these with admiration, when I heard Feluda ask a question. 'Is there any other way to get to the station?'

'No, sir, this is the only way,' Monilal replied.

Feluda was suddenly looking rather grave. I wanted to ask him if he had noticed anything suspicious, but didn't dare open my mouth.

The road being wet and muddy, it took us longer to reach the station. Feluda took the luggage out of the car and thanked the driver, who then drove off. But Feluda made no attempt to go to the ticket counter to buy tickets for our return journey. He found the stationmaster's room instead and left our luggage with him. Then he came out once more and approached one of the cycle-rickshaws that were waiting outside.

'Do you know where the local police station is?' 'Yes, sir.'

'Can you take us there? We're in a hurry.'

We climbed into the rickshaw quickly. The driver began pedalling fast, honking as loudly as he could, weaving his way through the milling crowds, narrowly avoiding collisions more than once. We reached the police station in five minutes. The officer left in charge was Sub-inspector Sarkar. It turned out that he knew Feluda's name. 'We have heard a lot about you, sir,' he said. 'What brings you here?'

'What can you tell me about Kalikinkar Majumdar of Ghurghutia?'

'Kalikinkar Majumdar? As far as I know, he is a perfect gentleman, who keeps himself to himself. Why, I've never heard anything nasty said about him!'

'What about his son, Vishwanath? Does he live here?'

'No. I think he lives in Calcutta. Whatever's the matter, Mr Mitter?'

'Can you take your jeep and come with me? There's something seriously wrong.'

Mr Sarkar did not waste another minute. We began bumping our way back to Ghurghutia in a police jeep, splashing mud everywhere. Feluda's face held a look of suppressed excitement, but he opened his mouth only once. I was the only one who could hear his words:

'Arthritis, those marks on the chest, the late dinner, the hoarseness in Rajen Babu's voice, the naphthalene . . . every little piece has fallen into place, Topshe. I tend to forget sometimes that there are other people just as clever as Felu Mitter.'

The first thing that I noticed with considerable surprise on reaching the old mansion was a black Ambassador standing outside the main gate. It obviously belonged to Vishwanath Majumdar. 'Look at its wheels,' Feluda said as we got out of the jeep. 'There is no trace of mud anywhere. This car has only just come out of a garage.'

A man—possibly its driver, whom I hadn't seen before—was standing near the car. He turned visibly pale and frightened at the sight of our jeep.

'Are you the driver of this car?' Feluda asked him. 'Y-yes, s-sir.'

'Is Vishwanath Majumdar at home?'

The man hesitated. Feluda ignored him and walked straight into the house, followed closely by the inspector, me and a constable.

Together, we ran up the stairs, and down the long passage that led to Kalikinkar's room. It was empty. The blanket lay on the bed, all the furniture was in place, but its occupant had vanished.

'Oh no!' Feluda exclaimed. I found him staring at the chest. It was open. Judging by its gaping emptiness, nearly all of its contents had been removed.

Gokul came and stood outside the door. He was trembling violently. There were tears in his eyes.

He looked as though he might collapse any minute. Feluda caught him by his shoulders. 'Gokul, where is Vishwanath Majumdar?'

'He . . . he ran out of the back door!' 'Mr Sarkar!'

The inspector left with the constable without a word.

'Listen,' Feluda shook Gokul gently, 'if you tell me a single lie, you will go to prison. Do you understand? Where is your master?'

Gokul's eyes widened in fear, looking as though they would soon pop out of their sockets. 'He . . . he has been murdered!' he gasped.

'Who killed him?' 'Chhoto Babu.'

‘When?’

‘The day he arrived, that same night. He had an argument with his father, and asked for the numbers to open the chest. The master said, “I am not going to give it to you. Ask my parrot.” Then . . . a while later . . . Chhoto Babu and his driver . . . they got together . . .’ Gokul choked. He uttered the next few words with great difficulty: ‘The two of them dropped the dead body into the lake behind the house. They . . . they tied a stone round its neck. And Chhoto Babu said if I breathed a word to anyone, he’d k-kill me, too!’

‘I see,’ Feluda helped him sit down. ‘Now tell me, am I right in thinking there is no one called Rajen Babu at all?’

‘Yes, sir. We did once have a manager by that name, but he died two years ago.’

Feluda and I leapt out of the room, and began running down the stairs. There was a door to the left where the stairs ended, which led to the rear of the house. We heard Mr Sarkar’s voice as we emerged through this door.

‘It’s no use trying to escape, Mr Majumdar. I have a gun in my hand!’ he shouted.

This was followed immediately by a loud splash and the sound of a revolver going off.

We continued running, jumping over small bushes and crashing through thick foliage. Eventually, we found Mr Sarkar standing under a large tamarind tree, with a revolver in his hand. Behind the tree was the lake we had glimpsed last night through our window. Its surface was covered almost totally with weed and algae.

‘He jumped before I could fire,’ Mr Sarkar said, ‘but he cannot swim. Girish, see if you can drag him out.’

Vishwanath Majumdar was fished out in a few minutes by the constable, and transferred behind bars, very much like his father’s parrot. The money and the jewellery he had stolen from the chest were recovered by the police. It appeared that although he ran a successful business, he used to gamble rather heavily, and was up to his neck in debt.

Feluda explained how he had arrived at the truth. ‘Rajen Babu came to our room twenty minutes after we left Kalikinkar; and we saw Vishwanath Majumdar half an hour after Rajen Babu’s departure.

Then Rajen Babu came back briefly after dinner. Not once did we see father and son and their manager together. This made me wonder whether there

were indeed three different people, or whether one single person was playing different roles. Then I remembered the books on drama and acting. Perhaps those books belonged to Vishwanath Majumdar? Maybe he was interested in acting and was good at putting on make-up? If so, it wouldn't have been difficult for him to wear a false beard and different wigs and change his voice, to fool a couple of visitors in a dark house. He had to hide his hands, though, for presumably his knowledge of make-up wasn't adequate to turn his own hands into those of a seventy-three-year-old man. But my suspicions were confirmed when I noticed this morning that although he was supposed to have left quite early, there were no tyre marks on the ground.'

'But who had actually written to you, asking you to come here?' I put in.

'Oh, that letter was written by Kalikinkar himself, I am sure. His son knew about it. So he did nothing to stop our arrival, for he knew he could use me to find out the combination numbers.'

In the end we got so delayed that we couldn't catch a train before half past ten. Before we left, Feluda took out the eight books he had been given and handed them to me. 'I have no wish to accept gifts from a murderer,' he said. 'Topshe, go and put these back.'

I replaced the books, filling each gap in the shelves and came out quietly. The parrot's cage was still hanging outside in the veranda.

'Shut the door!' it said to me. 'Shut the door . . . O big fat hen!'