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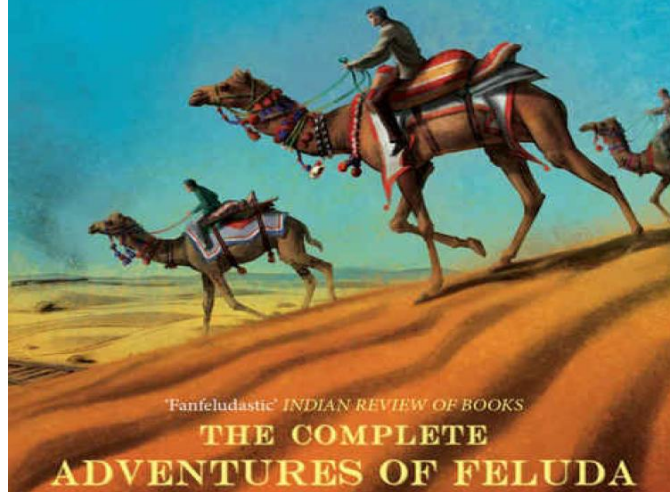
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'Fanfeludastic' *INDIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS*

**THE COMPLETE
ADVENTURES OF FELUDA**

The Mystery of the Elephant God

Seven

It was nearly 2 p.m. The sky had turned grey. There were very few people left at Dashashwamedh Ghat. The three of us were sitting near the water.

It was almost an hour since our horrific experience in Maganlal's house. Two of his men had splashed cold water on Lalmohan Babu's face to help him regain consciousness. Then Maganlal himself had offered him a glass of milk and brandy, and said, 'Uncle, you are a brave man.'

We were allowed to leave shortly after this, but not before Maganlal had made it obvious that Feluda's life was in danger if he insisted on continuing with his investigation. Feluda did not argue, but managed to get a small concession. 'I must go back to Mr Ghoshal's house at least once more,' he said, 'if only to tell him I'm opting out. If I disappear without a word, it's not going to do much good to my image, is it?'

To my surprise, Maganlal agreed. 'Just one more visit,' he said. 'Remember, Mr Mitter, if you step out of line, you do so at your own risk. I don't need to tell you I've got the means to keep an eye on everything you do.'

I felt awful thinking Maganlal had had the last word. Feluda had, so far, never been defeated by an adversary. But then, none had been quite so cruel and powerful as Maganlal.

Lalmohan Babu had said very little after we came away. The only thing he asked was whether all his hair had turned grey, at which both Feluda and I assured him that not a single new grey hair could be seen on his head.

After a few minutes of silence, Feluda said with a sigh, 'The Ganesh hasn't left Mr Ghoshal's house. I am now certain of that. If Maganlal had already got it, he would not offer me money to get off the case. The big question is, where has it gone? Why hasn't Maganlal been able to lay his hands on it? Besides, who took it out, and who in that house is acting for Maganlal?'

By the time we left the ghat, the sky had turned a darker shade of grey. Was it going to rain? I looked up, and saw the red and white kite again. Feluda, too, had seen it.

I recognized the house over which the kite hovered. It was the same red house where Shaitan Singh had had to surrender to Captain Spark. Who was standing on the roof? Wasn't it Shaitan Singh in person? Yes, indeed. It was Ruku's friend, Suraj. Like us, he was staring at the kite.

Whoever was flying the kite now pulled at the thread. It started to come down rapidly. Suraj threw up his right hand into the air, aiming at the kite. We saw a stone fly past and disappear behind the kite. The stone was tied to the end of a long thread. Suraj had captured the red kite. As he pulled at the thread, the kite began to get closer and closer to him.

We decided to pay our last visit to Mr Ghoshal's house the same afternoon. It was about 4 p.m. when we arrived. Trilochan saluted us again and opened the gate.

Once again, we found Vikas Sinha coming out to greet us.

'Any news?' he asked.

'No, I'm afraid not. We just roamed all over the city.' 'Mr Ghoshal and the others have gone out.'

'Where?'

'Sarnath. A few more guests arrived today. Quite a large party went out, only a little while ago.

They won't be back for some time.' 'Has Ruku gone with them?'

'No, one of his uncles took him to see a film, *Tarzan, the Ape Man*.' 'I see.'

'Would you like to sit in my room?'

'Yes, but before that I'd like to go up on the roof once more, if I may.'

'Of course.'

As we went into the house, we found Shashi Babu still engrossed in his work. 'He'll finish tomorrow, won't he?' Feluda asked.

'Yes, the poor man's still got a high temperature, but he hasn't stopped working for a moment.'

We climbed the steps to the roof. Here was Ruku's room. I had guessed that it was really this room that Feluda wanted to see. Would he search it thoroughly? Since Ruku was away, this appeared to be just the right time to

look for . . . Then I remembered Maganlal's warning. Feluda must not spend too long in this house.

As it turned out, he found what he was looking for practically immediately. The red and white kite was lying on the floor. We had seen Suraj take it only a couple of hours ago. It was clear that it was damaged in many places. This kite would never fly again.

Feluda picked it up. Now we saw something none of us had noticed before. There was a message written on the kite. No, there were, in fact, two messages written in different places. One said, 'I have been imprisoned. But all is well, ha ha. Again in the evening. Yours, Capt. Spark.'

The other was more brief: 'Going to see Tarzan. Tomorrow morning. Capt. Spark.' 'Good heavens!' exclaimed Lalmohan Babu. 'What are these boys up to?'

Feluda replaced the kite just as he had found it, and said, 'This is a clear example of what books from your adventure series can do to a young mind.'

We returned to Vikas Babu's room. Bharadwaj, the old bearer, came in with the tea. It was a fairly large room. The bed was on one side, and opposite it, a table and a chair. Besides these was a sofa for visitors. Feluda took the chair, Lalmohan Babu and I chose the sofa. Vikas Babu sat on the bed.

'How is Mr Ghoshal's business doing?' Feluda asked, sipping his tea.

'Reasonably well, I should imagine,' Vikas Babu replied. If he was surprised by the question, he did not show it. 'The workers do occasionally go on strike, but that happens everywhere, in every business, doesn't it?'

'Hm.' Feluda stood up suddenly and said, 'Can I see the living room?' 'Yes, certainly. This way, please.'

We put our cups down and followed Vikas Babu. The living room was across a veranda. 'Can you show me where Umanath Babu and Maganlal had sat the day Maganlal came visiting?' Feluda asked.

Vikas Babu pointed at two chairs facing each other.

'I see. And where do those doors lead to? More rooms? Or is there another veranda?'

‘No, those are rooms’. One of them used to be old Mr Ghoshal’s office. The other was a waiting room for his clients.’

We examined them briefly before going back to Vikas Babu’s room.

‘Where was the Ganesh normally kept?’ Feluda now asked. ‘Was it always here in Varanasi, or did anyone ever take it to Calcutta?’

‘No, it always stayed with Ambika Babu, right here in this house. It is the old man who is much more upset by its loss than his son, though he may not show it. In fact, Umanath Babu hired you mainly to reassure his father, you see.’

Feluda nodded absently. He had picked up the transistor radio that stood on the table, and was turning a knob. Nothing happened until he turned it in the opposite direction. It gave a sudden click, which brought a frown to his face. ‘That’s funny,’ he muttered, ‘your radio had been left on!’

‘Oh, r-r-r-eally?’ Vikas Babu stammered, suddenly looking rather ill at ease. Feluda took out the batteries. ‘These batteries have leaked,’ he observed, ‘which means that your radio stopped working some time ago.’

Vikas Babu remained silent.

‘You are fond of listening to the radio, but you haven’t done so in the last few days. Can you tell me why?’

Still Vikas Babu said nothing. ‘Very well,’ said Feluda, ‘if you won’t speak, I must do all the talking.’ A familiar note of authority and confidence had crept into his voice. ‘You were unable to resist the temptation to eavesdrop when Maganlal came to visit Umanath Babu, isn’t that right? You turned down the volume of your radio and crept up to the door of the living room that opens on the veranda. You heard every word. You knew about Maganlal’s offer of thirty thousand rupees. You heard him threaten Mr Ghoshal.’

Vikas Babu was looking down at the floor. He nodded in silence. ‘Now please be good enough to answer this question, and I want the truth,’ said Feluda, throwing the batteries away into a waste-paper basket. ‘What were you doing between 7.30 and 8.30 p.m. the day the Ganesh was stolen? You could not have been listening to your radio, for it had stopped functioning five days—’

‘Yes!’ Vikas Sinha raised his head, and spoke quickly, almost desperately. ‘I’ll tell you everything. Please try and believe me.’ He took a deep breath and continued, ‘I did hear Maganlal’s threat, and was deeply worried. Every day, I

wanted to open the chest in Ambika Babu's room simply to make sure the Ganesh was still there. But I got the chance to do this only when Mr Ghoshal went with his family to see Machchli Baba. I waited for only ten minutes after they left. Then I went into Ambika Babu's room, took the key out of the drawer and opened the chest.'

'What happened next?' Vikas Sinha did not reply.

'Tell me, Mr Sinha, what did you see when you opened the chest?' This time, Vikas Babu raised a white face and spoke in a whisper. 'I saw . . . I saw that the Ganesh had gone!'

'Gone?' Feluda's frown deepened.

'Yes. I know you find it difficult to believe this, but I swear the Ganesh had been stolen before I opened the chest. You must realize why I did not mention this before, either to you or the police. To tell you the truth, I cannot begin to describe the state of mind I've been in ever since that day!'

Feluda picked up his cup of tea. 'How often was that chest opened?'

'Almost never. As far as I know, it was opened once the day after Umanath Babu arrived from Calcutta. He took out some old documents related to their property and had a chat with his father about those. That was all.'

Feluda sat silently. Vikas Babu looked at him, eyes pleading. After about two minutes, he couldn't contain himself any longer and blurted out, 'Do you find it impossible to believe me, Mr Mitter?'

When Feluda spoke his voice sounded rough.

'I am sorry, Mr Sinha, but if someone doesn't tell the truth in the first instance, it is rather difficult to eliminate him from the list of suspects.'

Eight

I woke the next morning to find the sky overcast. It was drizzling softly and, judging by the puddles on the road, it had rained fairly heavily during the night.

Feluda was already up, sitting on the balcony, his feet resting on the railing. His famous blue notebook lay open on his lap. He was turning its pages with great concentration, quite oblivious of the fact that his feet were getting wet. A

number of people were making their way to the ghat, undaunted by the rain. But I knew that the noise from the street below would do nothing to disturb Feluda.

Lalmohan Babu rose a little later. 'I had such a strange dream, Tapeshe,' he said. 'There I was, with knives and daggers sticking out from virtually every inch of my body. And I was standing before my publisher, asking for the proofs of my novel. Do you know what he said to me? He said, "Lalmohan Babu, why don't you change your pseudonym? Drop Jatayu. Porcupine would be more apt—and your books will sell much better." Ho!'

Feluda came back into the room a few minutes later, as Lalmohan Babu and I sat sipping our first cup of tea.

'Tell me, Mr Jatayu,' he said, 'do any of your books mention sending messages through a kite?' 'No, I'm afraid not,' Lalmohan Babu shook his head regretfully. 'I rather wish I had thought of that.'

As far as I can see, Ruku got the idea from a book by another writer.'

'Perhaps I should not have laughed at your adventure series. Considering the impact it's had on Ruku's mind, it deserves to be taken a bit more seriously. Oh, by the way, can you tell me a number between one and ten?'

'Seven.'

'Did you know that seventy per cent of people would say "seven" if asked the same question?' 'Really?'

'Yes. And they'd say "three" if you asked them to choose a number between one and five. Try asking them to name a flower, and they'd say "rose".'

We went down to breakfast at eight. About half-an-hour later, one of the waiters came looking for Feluda. 'There is a phone call for you,' he said, 'in the manager's room.'

Phone call for Feluda? Who would be ringing him so early in the morning? But there was nothing for me to do, except wait patiently until he came back and explained. He reappeared only a few minutes later.

'That was Tiwari,' he said. 'Neither Prayag nor Haridwar could confirm that anyone by the name of Machchli Baba had been seen or heard of in recent times.'

‘How interesting! Does that mean the man here is a fraud?’

‘He might be, but that does not bother me. I mean, there are scores of people who claim to have magical powers. What we have to establish is that there is no sinister motive behind Machchli Baba’s little deception.’

‘Didn’t Mr Tiwari say anything else?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Feluda replied. ‘Three weeks ago, a man escaped from the Rai Bareli jail. He was serving a sentence for deception and fraud. His description fits Machchli Baba somewhat, although he is reported to be clean-shaven and not quite so dark.’

‘He might have used make-up,’ Lalmohan Babu remarked. ‘Why don’t we go and have a good look at him in broad daylight? We could wait for him at the ghat. Surely he’d go to Dashashwamedh, or perhaps Kedar?’

‘Not a chance. He receives visitors only in the evening. His days are spent behind a closed door. I believe he doesn’t step out of his room at all. No one but Abhay Chakravarty is allowed to go in. His meals are served in his room. He doesn’t even bother with having a bath.’

What! A supposedly great sadhu like him went without a bath every day? ‘Did Mr Tiwari tell you all this?’

Feluda turned his head to give me a cold look. Then he shook his head sadly and said, ‘Failed. You have just failed in an observation test. Didn’t you notice my wet clothes hanging on the line on the balcony upstairs? If you did, didn’t that tell you anything? Have you ever heard of anyone getting drenched without stepping out?’

I couldn’t say a word. Feluda was right, of course. I should have been more observant. But why had he gone out anyway?

He explained. ‘I got up at four this morning and went to Kedar Ghat to wait for Abhay Chakravarty. He turned up at 4.30. It wasn’t difficult to start a conversation with him. He’s a very good, kind, simple man, just as Niranjan Babu had said. I learnt about the Baba’s habits from him. When he mentioned the Baba didn’t have a bath, I must have wrinkled my nose or something, for he said, “Does it matter, son, when his mind is clean and pure? After all, it’s just a matter of ten days. He rose from the water, didn’t he, and he will go back to it.” I didn’t dare ask if he smelt! I believe a man comes in every morning with a basket full of fish scales. These are distributed in the evening. I

stayed on at the ghat after Abhay Chakravarty left, and spoke to a panda called Lokenath, who also comes to the ghat every day. Lokenath said he had actually witnessed the first meeting between Mr Chakravarty and Machchli Baba, though by the time he arrived, the Baba was fully conscious. Apparently, he called Lokenath by his name and told him a few startling things. Even if he is a crook, he must have a very clever and efficient manager.'

'Could that perhaps be Abhay Chakravarty himself?' Lalmohan Babu asked.

'No. Mr Chakravarty is undoubtedly sincere. I asked him if he didn't find it difficult to believe that a man could swim all the way from Prayag. To this he replied, "Nothing is impossible, my dear, if your dedication and faith is strong enough." It is people like Abhaycharan Chakravarty who have kept the spirit of Kashi alive. Their belief in ancient values will never change. No, Lalmohan Babu, he cannot be an accomplice.'

The rain stopped around half past four in the evening. We left at five. Feluda was a full-fledged tourist today. A camera hung from his shoulder. 'Let's go and have some *rabri*,' he said. Lalmohan Babu and I readily agreed.

Kachauri Gali wasn't far from the temple of Vishwanath. Feluda found the right shop easily enough. We sat on a bench, and were handed the most delicious *rabri* in small earthen pots. Lalmohan Babu had just stuffed a spoonful into his mouth, remarking, 'The discovery of this heavenly stuff is no less important than the discovery of the telephone, don't you think?' when I saw the same man who had been following us the day before. He was standing with his back to us, talking to someone.

I had been trying all day to forget about Maganlal and what he had said. But the sight of this man brought back all the horror of that meeting vividly. However, I forced myself to concentrate on eating and not dwell upon unpleasant thoughts.

'Let's go,' said Feluda. I gave my spoon one last lick and came out with him and Lalmohan Babu.

From Kachauri Gali, we made our way to Godhulia. In the last couple of days, these streets had become quite familiar to me. We walked slowly, with Feluda stopping occasionally to take a picture. I kept looking over my shoulder to see if the man was still following us, but he appeared to have vanished. Feluda saw

what I was doing and said, 'Where did you get the idea that Maganlal appointed just that one man to cover our movements?'

I kept my eyes straight ahead after this.

There was the hardware shop I had seen before. Abhay Chakravarty's house was only a few steps from here.

'Mr Mitter! Pradosh Babu!' called a voice from behind us. All of us wheeled around. Two Bengali gentlemen stood before us, smiling politely. We had not met them before. 'We went to your hotel to look for you,' said one of them.

'Is anything the matter?' asked Feluda.

'We are from the Bengali Club. My name is Sanjay Roy, and this is Gokul Chatterjee. We came to invite you to our play, the day after tomorrow.'

'Kabuliwala?'

'You knew?' Both men sounded pleased and surprised. 'Didn't you invite Mr Ghoshal a few days ago?'

'My God, you seem to know everything!' said Sanjay Roy. 'That's not surprising, is it?' Gokul Chatterjee laughed. Feluda's reputation as a sleuth was obviously not unknown to the members of the Bengali Club.

'We left the card with Niranjana Babu. You must all come. We'll expect you.'

'Thank you very much. We'll be there, if I don't get involved in anything important, that is.' 'Involved in something important? Why, are you . . . I mean, *here?*'

I looked at Feluda. His lips had parted in that mysterious smile which, I knew, he reserved for situations like this. It could mean 'yes', or it could mean 'no'; it could even mean 'maybe'. Neither Mr Roy nor Mr Chatterjee wanted to look foolish. So both nodded vigorously, indicating that they had fully grasped his meaning, and took their leave.

We resumed walking. It was getting dark. The streetlights had come on. The sky had started to change from royal blue to blue-black, and a transistor had been turned on at full blast in a shop. The voice of Lata Mangeshkar began to compete with the blare of rickshaw horns. At this point, Feluda announced that his heart was suddenly awash with a wave of *bhakti*, and he couldn't possibly go back without another look at Machchli Baba.

We arrived at Abhay Chakravarty's house to find a larger crowd, possibly because the Baba was going to leave in five days. 'Stand still,' said Feluda to me, placing his camera on my shoulder. Then he took a photograph of Machchli Baba using his telephoto lens. I couldn't see Maganlal anywhere. Maybe he didn't come every day. We left in five minutes.

A right turn took us into a new lane. A large cow stood blocking the way. Lalmohan Babu gave a small cough and stopped. 'What's the matter?' asked Feluda.

'Er. . . what do you suppose its height is?' 'Why?'

'I was once quite good at high jump. I even had a record in school. But, a few years ago, an attack of dengue . . . I mean, my knees are no longer . . .'

'Come with me.' Feluda went forward and patted the cow gently on its back. It moved to one side obligingly, allowing us to pass.

'Where are we going now?' Lalmohan Babu asked five minutes later. 'I don't know.'

Lalmohan Babu and I exchanged glances. The light from a street lamp shone directly on Lalmohan Babu's face. He was looking decidedly perplexed.

'Walking aimlessly often helps clear the mind,' Feluda explained. 'What we need now is a clear mind, clear thoughts.'

'And is your mind showing signs of clearing?'

Feluda started to reply, but something happened at this moment to distract all of us.

The winding lanes we had passed through in the last few minutes had brought us to an alley that was very quiet. No one spoke here, or played the radio. I couldn't even hear a child cry. All that could be heard was the faint sound of bells from a temple in the far distance. But, as we made our way down the lane, another rhythmic noise reached our ears: dhup, dhup, dhup, dhup, dhup . . .

Lalmohan Babu was walking between Feluda and me. The noise made him slow down and clutch at our sleeves. 'Highly suspicious!' he whispered.

Feluda disengaged himself. 'There's nothing suspicious about that. Someone's using a hand grinder, that's all. What I would call suspicious is over there. Look!'

A man had entered the lane from the other side. He stopped upon seeing us, standing with his back to a street light. The lamp cast a long shadow that almost touched our feet. The shadow was swaying strangely. Was the man drunk?

Feluda peered through the telephoto lens of his camera.

‘Shashi Babu!’ he exclaimed and rushed forward. Lalmohan Babu and I followed quickly.

Shashi Babu had fallen on the ground. His eyes were open wide, and between gasps, he was trying to speak.

‘What is it?’ Feluda bent over him. ‘The . . . the . . .’

‘Yes? What happened, Shashi Babu? What are you trying to say?’ ‘L-I-li . . . lie . . . lie . . .’

Shashi Babu’s body gave a sudden jerk and was still. The street light fell on his back. It was soaked with blood.

Comprehension

Question 1: What time was it when the group was sitting near the water at Dashashwamedh Ghat?

Question 2: What did Maganlal offer Lalmohan Babu after he regained consciousness?

Question 3: What condition did Feluda set for visiting Mr Ghoshal’s house one more time?

Question 4: What did Feluda notice about the Ganesh statue in relation to Maganlal’s behaviour?

Question 5: What was written on the red and white kite found in Ruku’s room?

Question 6: What did Vikas Sinha admit to doing when he overheard Maganlal’s conversation with Umanath Babu?

Question 7: What did Vikas Sinha discover when he opened the chest in Ambika Babu’s room?

Question 8: What did Feluda observe about Vikas Sinha’s transistor radio?

Question 9: What was the weather like the morning after the group's visit to Mr Ghoshal's house?

Question 10: What did Feluda learn about Machchli Baba's habits from Abhay Chakravarty?

Answers

Answer 1: It was nearly 2 p.m.

Answer 2: Maganlal offered Lalmohan Babu a glass of milk and brandy.

Answer 3: Feluda said he needed to visit Mr Ghoshal's house once more to tell him he was opting out of the investigation.

Answer 4: Feluda noticed that if Maganlal had the Ganesh statue, he would not have offered money to get Feluda off the case, indicating the statue was still in Mr Ghoshal's house.

Answer 5: The kite had two messages: "I have been imprisoned. But all is well, ha ha. Again in the evening. Yours, Capt. Spark" and "Going to see Tarzan. Tomorrow morning. Capt. Spark."

Answer 6: Vikas Sinha admitted to turning down the volume of his radio and eavesdropping on Maganlal's conversation with Umanath Babu from the veranda.

Answer 7: Vikas Sinha discovered that the Ganesh statue was already gone when he opened the chest.

Answer 8: Feluda observed that the radio had been left on, but its batteries had leaked, indicating it had not been working for some time.

Answer 9: The morning after the visit, the sky was overcast, it was drizzling softly, and there were puddles on the road from heavier rain during the night.

Answer 10: Feluda learned that Machchli Baba did not step out of his room during the day, received visitors only in the evening, had meals served in his room, and did not bathe.