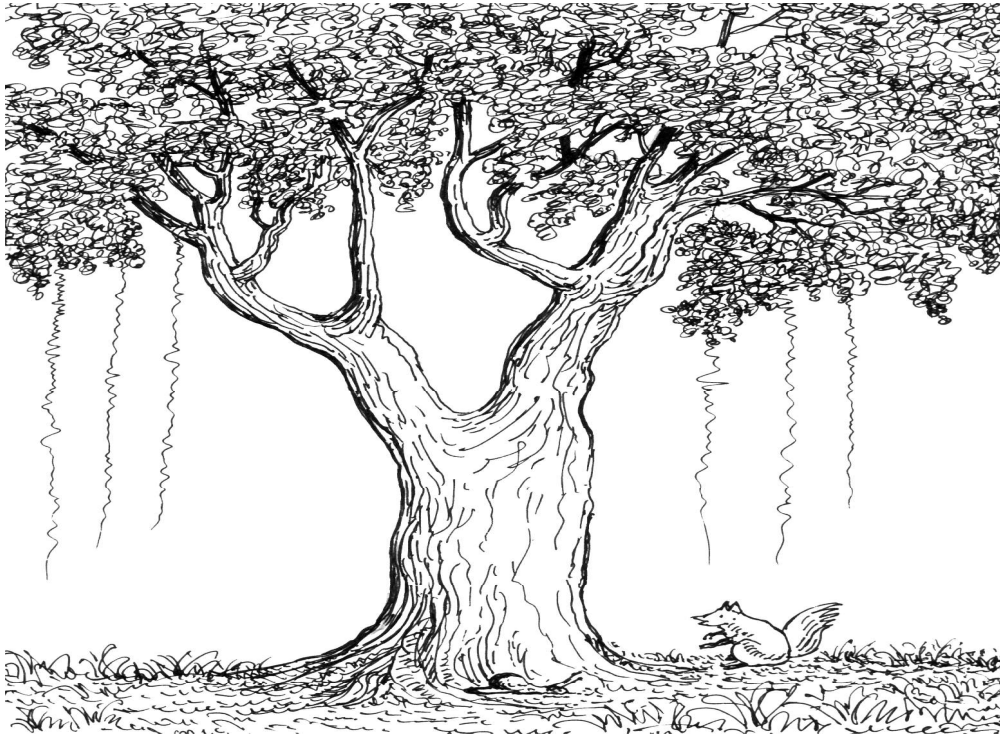




3

The Banyan Tree

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

It was to be a battle of champions.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ruskin Bond

GLOSSARY

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

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

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

COMPREHENSION

I. Answer the following questions:

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

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

II. Read the following passage :

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

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

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

- (i) What is the meaning of hippopotamus ?

Ans.

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

Ans.

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

Ans.

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

Ans.