

LESSON 3



THE BOY WITH A CATAPULT

In life, you come across many interesting characters. Some make you laugh, others make you cry. Can you remember any remarkable characters or persons, you have met ? What makes them so memorable ? Read on this story, and you will discover a very remarkable, unforgettable character ...

Our class had an odd assortment of boys. There was Harbans Lal who, when asked a difficult question, would take a sip out of his inkpot because he believed it sharpened his wits. If the teacher boxed his ears he would yell, “Help! Murder!” so loudly that teachers and boys from other classes would come running to see what had happened. This caused much embarrassment to the teacher. If the teacher tried to cane him, he would put his arms round him and implore, “Forgive me, Your Majesty! You are like Akbar, the Great. You are Emperor Ashoka. You are my father, my grandfather, my great grandfather.”

This made the boys giggle and put the teacher out of countenance. Harbans Lal would catch frogs and tell us, “If you smear your hands with frog fat you will not feel the teacher’s cane.”

But the oddest fellow in the class was Bodh Raj. We were all afraid of him. If he pinched anyone’s arm, the arm would swell up as if from a snake-bite. He was utterly callous. He would catch a

wasp with his bare fingers, pull out its sting, tie a thread round it and fly it like a kite. He would pounce on a butterfly sitting on a flower and crush it between his fingers; or else stick a pin through it and put it in his notebook.

It was said that if a scorpion stung Bodh Raj the scorpion would fall dead. Bodh Raj's blood was believed to be so full of venom that even snake-bite had no effect on him. He always had a catapult in his hand and was an excellent shot. His favourite targets were birds. He would stand under a tree, take aim and the next moment bird cries would rend the air and the fluff of feathers float down. Or else he would climb up a tree, take away the eggs and completely destroy the nest.

He was vindictive and took pleasure in hurting others. All the boys were scared of him. Even his mother called him a *rakshasa*. His pockets bulged with strange things, a live parrot, an assortment of eggs, or a prickly hedgehog.

If Bodh Raj quarrelled with anyone, he would charge at him headon like a bull, or viciously kick and bite him. After school, we would return home, but Bodh Raj would be off on his wanderings.

He always had a fund of strange tales to tell. One day he said, "There is a *goh* living in our house. Do you know what a *goh* is ?"

"No. What is a *goh* ?"

"It's a kind of reptile, about a foot long. It has many feet and claws."

We shuddered.

“We have a *goh* living under our staircase at home,” he continued. “Once it catches hold of anything, it won’t loosen its grip come what may.”

We shuddered again.

“Thieves keep *gohs*. They use them to scale high walls. They tie a rope on the *goh*’s hind legs and fling it up. As soon as the *goh* touches the wall, it clamps firmly on it, so firmly that even ten men cannot dislodge it. The thieves then pull themselves up the wall with the help of the rope.”



“When does the *goh* loosen its hold ?”

“After the thieves have climbed over they give it some milk. It immediately relaxes its hold.”

Such were the stories Bodh Raj would relate.



My father was given a promotion in his job and we moved into a large bungalow. It was an old style bungalow on the outskirts of the city. It had brick floors, high walls, a slanting roof and a garden full of trees and shrubs. Though comfortable it seemed rather empty and big, and it being far from the city my friends seldom came to visit me.

The only exception was Bodh Raj. He found it a good hunting ground. The trees had many nests, monkeys roamed about, and under the bushes lived a pair of mongooses. Behind the house there was a big room, where my mother stored our extra luggage. This room had become a haunt of pigeons. You could hear their cooing all day. Near the broken glass of the ventilator there was also a myna's nest. The floor of the room was littered with feathers, bird droppings, broken eggs, and bits of straw from the nests.

Once, Bodh Raj brought a hedgehog with him. The sight of the black mouth and sharp bristles gave me quite a turn. My mother did not approve of my friendship with Bodh Raj, but she realised that I was lonely and needed company. My mother called him a devil and often told him not to torment birds.

One day my mother said to me, "If your friend is so fond of destroying nests tell him to clean our store-room. The birds have made it very filthy."

I protested, "You said it's cruel to destroy nests."

"I didn't suggest he should kill the birds. He can remove the nests without harming them."

The next time Bodh Raj came I took him to the godown. It was dark and smelly as though we had entered an animal's lair.

I confess I was somewhat apprehensive. What if Bodh Raj acted true to form and destroyed the nests, pulled out the birds' feathers and broke their eggs? I couldn't understand why my mother who discouraged our friendship should have asked me to get Bodh Raj to clear the godown.

"The myna's little ones are up there," said Bodh Raj aiming with his catapult.

I noticed two tiny yellow beaks peeping out of the nest.

"Look!" Bodh Raj exclaimed, "This is a Ganga myna. It isn't usually found in these areas. The parents must have got separated from their flock and come here."

"Where are the parents?" I asked.

"Must have gone in search of food. They should be back soon." Bodh Raj raised his catapult.

I wanted to stop him but before I could open my mouth there was a whizzing sound, and then a loud clang as the pebble hit the corrugated iron-sheet on the roof. The tiny beaks vanished. The cooing and tittering ceased. It seemed as if all the birds had been frightened into silence.

Bodh Raj let fly another pebble. This time it struck the rafter. Bodh Raj was proud of his aim; he had missed his target twice and was very angry with himself. When the chicks peeped over the rim of the nest Bodh Raj had a third try. This time the pebble hit the side of the nest, a few straws and bits of cottonwool fell, but the nest was not dislodged.

Bodh Raj lifted his catapult again. Suddenly a large shadow flitted across the room, blocking the light from the ventilator. Startled we looked up. Gazing down at us menacingly was a large kite with its wings outstretched.

“This must be the kite’s nest,” I said.

“No, how can a kite have its nest here ? A kite always makes its nest in a tree. This is a myna’s nest.”

The chicks began fluttering their wings and shrieking loudly. We held our breath. What would the kite do ?

The kite left the ventilator and perched on the rafter. It had folded back its wings. It shook its scraggy neck, and peered to the right, and the left.

The birds’ frightened cries filled the air.

“The kite has been coming here every day,” said Bodh Raj. I realised why broken wings, straw and bits of bird flesh littered the floor. The kite must have ravaged the nest often.

Bodh Raj had not taken his eyes off the kite which was slowly edging its way towards the nest. The cries rose to a crescendo.

I was a bundle of nerves. What difference did it make whether the kite or Bodh Raj killed the myna's young ? If the kite had not come Bodh Raj would certainly have made short work of the nest.

Bodh Raj raised his catapult and aimed at the kite.

"Don't hit the kite. It will attack you," I shouted. But Bodh Raj paid no attention. The pebble missed the kite and hit the ceiling. The kite spread its wings wide and peered down.

"Let's get out of here," I said, frightened.

"The kite will eat up the little ones." This sounded rather strange coming from him.

Bodh Raj aimed again. The kite left the rafter and spreading its wings, flew in a semi-circle and alighted on the beam. The chicks continued to scream.

Bodh Raj handed me the catapult and some pebbles from his pocket.

"Aim at the kite. Go on hitting it. Don't let it sit down," he instructed. Then he ran and pulled up a table standing against the wall to the middle of the room.

I didn't know how to use the catapult. I tried once, but the kite had left the beam and flown to another.

Bodh Raj brought the table right under the myna's nest. Then he picked up a broken chair and placed it on the table. He climbed on the chair, gently lifted the nest and slowly stepped down.

"Let's get out of here," he said, and ran towards the door. I followed.

We went into the garage. It had only one door and a small window in the back wall. A beam ran across its width.

"The kite can't get in here," he said, and climbing on to a box, placed the nest on the beam.

The myna's young had quietened down. Standing on the box Bodh Raj had his first peep into the nest. I thought that he would pick them both up and put them in his pocket, as he usually did. But after looking at them for a long time he said, "Bring some water, the chicks are thirsty. We'll put it, drop by drop, into their mouths."

I brought a glass of water. Both the chicks, beaks open, were panting. Bodh Raj fed them with drops of water. He told me not to touch them, nor did he touch them himself.

"How will their parents know they are here ?" I asked.

"They will look for them."

We stayed in the garage for a long time. Bodh Raj discussed plans to close the ventilator, so that the kite would not be able to enter the godown again. That evening he talked of nothing else.

When Bodh Raj came the next day, he had neither catapult nor pebbles. He carried a bag of seeds. We fed the myna's young and spent hours watching their antics.

— *Translated from a Hindi story by Bhisham Sahni*

Glossary

assortment	– diverse group or mixture
sharpened	– made or become quick to understand
boxed	– slapped with the hand especially in the ears
embarrassment	– feeling of awkwardness or shame
giggle	– laugh in a suppressed spasms in an affected or silly manner
countenance	– composure
pinched	– gripped tightly especially between finger and thumb
callous	– unfeeling, insensitive

wasp	– stinging insect with black and yellow stripes and a very thin waist
rend	– tear or wrench forcibly
vindictive	– tending to seek revenge, spiteful
hedgehog	– small nocturnal insect eating mammal having a piglike snout and a coat of spines/ porcupine
viciously	– cruelly, wickedly, ferociously
shuddered	– trembled violently especially with horror
fling	– throw or let go off forcefully
clamps	– places or hold firmly to fasten
bristles	– short stiff hair
apprehensive	– uneasily fearful, dreading
menacingly	– threateningly
perched	– settled
scraggy	– thin, bony
panting	– gasping for breath
ravaged	– taken by force, robbed
crescendo	– gradual increase of loudness
alighted	– got down, landed, settled

COMPREHENSION

1. *Answer the following questions :*

- (i) 'Our class had an odd assortment of boys.'

Describe the different types of boys found in the class.

- (ii) Why was it believed that if a scorpion stung Bodh Raj, the scorpion would fall dead ?

- (iii) What were the strange things that filled up Bodh Raj's pocket ?

- (iv) What is a 'goh' according to Bodh Raj ?

- (v) Why did Bodh Raj come to the Author's bungalow often ?

- (vi) Why did the author take Bodh Raj's to the godown ?

- (vii) 'The Kite has been coming here every day' What made Bodh Raj say these words ?

- (viii) What did Bodh Raj feed the chicks ?

2. EXERCISE IN LANGUAGE

Look at these pairs of words

Pretty - beautiful

end - finish

These pairs have almost similar meanings. They are called
Synonyms.

From the box below, pick out the synonyms of the words given

right	assist	begin	banish
false	shout	freedom	haste

wrong	correct
help	cry
exile	commence
liberty.....	hurry

3. DISCUSSION

In the beginning of the story, Bodh Raj is described as callous. By the end of the story, he was feeding the small chicks with drops of water. What, do you think, brought a change in the attitude of Bodh Raj ?

Make groups of 5 or 6 students and discuss it. Share it with the class.