

Peter de Rast will be remembered for his gripping short story "The King of Calcutta" in the last of the Panthology books. He writes sensitively and vigorously of life in contemporary India where politics are a passion, crime an institution which winds its way from the lowest to the highest circles of Indian society. In "Timber Thieves" the married man and woman who took on and devastated the criminal gangs of Calcutta with a frightening arsenal of rifles, machine guns and grenades are back at their ashram in Bengal and fighting to preserve the last of the state's forest reserves—aided, of course, by some of the ashram's more gifted, and loving, students.

Timber Thieves

by Peter de Rast

SHEKHAR WAS A strongly-built young lad of thirteen when all this happened. He was well-muscled, with a wasp waist and plump hips and thighs. Shape was melded with upholstery to make his bum the most delicious to be seen in my ashram. There is only one word to describe the boy: voluptuous. He would glance at you sideways, long-lashed brown eyes ogling you, sensual mouth partly open with that slight outward curl of the lips that betrays rampant boy-lust. Then he would make a subtle movement of the hips, barely a wiggle, to call attention to his gorgeous arse—as if he ever needed to! Talk about body language: I never met a boy who could say more with less words. He was hopelessly spoiled, of course. His pretty young widowed mother doted on him to distraction and did not know the meaning of discipline. He lived at home, and came in during the daytime to do his training as an apprentice in our Engineering Works.

Strangely enough, he was always a masochist. From the very beginning he liked it when we played spanking, and he loved me to tie him to the bed with a rope and pretend to rape him. I had an ebony paper knife, not really very sharp, but with your eyes closed it could almost feel as if it was. He liked me to pretend I was stabbing him and cutting him with that knife, forcing him to comply with my sexual demands. All this was only play. I never really hurt him. That is, not until I was forced to do so. But that's a long story.

It started with the night Reggie came to me for help. Reginald Arthur Lakra was one of my ex-orphans, brought up in the ashram. He was an aboriginal tribal, that is Adhivasi. The Indian Government reserves a certain number of

jobs for Adhivasis in the various branches of the civil service, and Reggie had got a good one in the Forest Department, Government of West Bengal State, where the ashram is. Perhaps I should explain how I started it. My father was a British tea planter of Dutch extraction, who married a Kasi girl from the northeastern part of India. Being an Anglo-Indian born in India (at Shillong), I had no difficulty in getting an Indian passport, but I have also managed, by hook and by crook, to get a British passport and hold onto it: quite a difficult feat these days. After picking up a good education in England, I landed a job in I.C.I., and did a stint in Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Delhi and Bangalore for a few years. Then a very wealthy great-uncle died in America. He was a childless widower, and, for some reason I can't fathom, because I only met him once and was not aware of having made a good impression, he left me almost all his money.

My first reaction to sudden wealth was to get drunk at the Gymkhana Club and go up to the Board of Directors, who were having a formal party, and tell them exactly what I thought of them. Needless to say, I was slung out. It was Nancy who made up our minds to do something useful with the money. I'd met Nancy during my last year at Cambridge. She was my psychiatrist's secretary, actually. She knew all about my 'problem': she was keeping the file. But for some reason neither of us understands she fell for me. She felt all I needed was the love of a good woman to put me right. I warned her it wouldn't work, and I was right. But she took me without any conditions, so she can't blame me if I find it impossible, as I always said it would be, to give up boys. Luckily she is the most sweet-natured and tolerant woman alive, and we are very happy together.

Reggie was twenty-three at that time, tall for an Indian, with a lythe, athletic figure. I called him "chocolate boy", because his skin was about that colour. Besides, when he was a boy, he looked good enough to eat—for anyone with a

sweet tooth.

It was late September, almost the end of the monsoon. The evening air was heavy with the scent of lillies, jasmine, gandhraj, and the second-flush violet blooms of a Jarul tree beside the verandah where I sat sipping a Scotch and soda. The rains had paused for a few hours. The glutted, sodden earth trembled with a billion frogs engaged in some operatic extravaganza that only frogs understand.

My eldest son Rob, then aged eleven, was sitting at a nearby table playing a card game called "Bray Master" with three of our orphan boys including his lover Madan, aged twelve. Their constant patter rivalled the frog music. Whatever else India is, it is never, never a silent place.

It was then that Reggie glided silently out of the shadows beyond the moth-speckled pools of light. His teeth flashed in a charming smile as I waved him to the chair beside me.

"Help yourself," I said, indicating the bottle. He took a chhota peg, with only a dash of water, and gulped it back quickly.

Something was wrong. It was unusual for him to drink that fast.

"Trouble, baba, trouble," he said. "Another forest officer has been shot."

Trouble indeed. That would make four this year in the Terai area alone. "Where was it this time."

"Near Naxalbari. Fellow called Bhattacharjee."

"Bad place," I said. It was only ten miles from Reggie's bungalow.

"Yeah. Next time it could be me."

"Can't the government do anything?"

Reggie gave a facetious snigger at the word 'government' and poured himself a double. "The Forest Minister himself is collecting crores of rupees from the gangs who strip the timber."

A crore is ten million rupees, the best part of a million dollars American. That was a lot of money.

"The thieves get fifteen thousand rupees for one truck-load of sal wood," Reggie explained, "and their expenses are maybe around three thousand. The rest is net profit, except that they have to pay a big whack out of it to the politicians, government officials and police."

That was tax-free income, I reflected. No wonder they could afford to buy sten guns and high-powered automatic rifles with telescopic sights. They were much better armed than the police!

"Last month Bhattacharjee blew the whistle on one gang," Reggie went on, "and the police arrested five of them. They were just the small fry, and their friends got them out on bail anyway. They have been gunning for Bhattacharjee ever since."

Reggie sighed deeply and looked at me out of the corner of his eye as he continued, "There's something else. I had a hand in that arrest."

I waited in silence for him to continue, my heart sinking all the while.

"There is nothing we can do," he said thoughtfully. "If any of us try to interfere from now on we will simply get killed. We will just draw our salaries and, if anything happens, look the other way."

"Can't blame you," I muttered. I felt a bit ashamed to say that to one of my old boys. But it was right. Even morality is an art of the possible.

A jackal's insane shriek rent the air from somewhere out in the threatening darkness. It was answered by others further off. One of my bull terriers gave tongue, and soon the rest of the pack joined in. Thank God for the bull terriers, and the Dobermans. They could catch a mad dog or a rabid jackal by the throat before he could get in a nip; and they never let go. The Dobermans were faster on their legs, but for a serious fight the bull terriers were still the champs. It was the speed and power of their neck and shoulder muscles that did it.

I wiped the sweat off my nose and poured more Scotch and soda for Reggie and me. Just then my beautiful Nancy came onto the verandah, with little Roy, my younger son, at that time aged nine. Nancy had taken him to the dentist in Siliguri in the Land Rover. Roy proudly displayed a gaping wound in his mouth. I lifted him onto my lap and kissed his rosy cheek. Then I let him have a gulp of my Scotch and soda.

"For heaven's sake, Peter!" said Nancy, interrupting a discussion with Reggie.

"It's medicine," I said, "antiseptic, analgesic and tonic."

"And I like it," said Roy defiantly.

I kissed him full on the mouth, running my fingers through his blond hair. Except for certain refinements here and there, he was the spitting image of Nancy—and she looked something like Twiggy used to, with blond hair and blue eyes. It was sinful for a boy to look as pretty as Roy. I felt a hard coming on, pushing up towards his little rump. This was altogether too incestuous, so, as he scampered down to play with the other boys, I contented myself with a pat on his backside and went back to my drink.

Reggie was telling Nancy all about the murders in the forest, and she was suitably horrified.

"You must phone us if you are in any danger, dear," she told him. "Peter can go and help you."

"Thank you very much," I said, in a less than grunted tone of voice.

"Of course you will, darling. You know you love pottering around with guns and things."

Nancy isn't really that naive; she just likes to downplay the heroics—and has more confidence in my competence than the latter deserves, I'm afraid. Anyhow, I was elected to play the part of Jim Corbett.

"I'll go with you, baba," said a husky boy's voice. "I'll take one of the twelve-bores."

I swivelled round and there stood my thirteen-year-old

delight, Shekhar. He was good with a twelve-bore. Fired by pure direction, both eyes open, which is the right way. Foxes, jackals, cobras, kraits, vipers had all succumbed to his martial skills at various times.

"Look, Nancy," I said, "these timber thieves are better armed than the police itself, and they have high political backing. We'd need the Indian Army to tackle them."

"I only want you to save Reggie, dear, not the whole forest."

There was no more argument, but it was still a tall order. And not very satisfying to me, because I really did wish I could save the forest. The Chipko Movement was trying to do just that, by non-violent means. They embraced trees to stop the woodsmen from laying their axe into them. But the movement had made no headway in Bengal. Bengalis usually preferred terrorism to non-violence.

At the moment the balance of terror was heavily weighted in favour of the timber thieves, who were cutting the trees so fast there would be none left in ten years time. This was happening in many states of India, especially Himachel Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, as well as in nearby countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Bangla Desh.

The loss of the trees upset the ecological balance and, to some extent, the climatic condition, too. Where the roots of the trees had formerly gripped the grass and shrubs and top-soil and held the rain water in pools which filtered it down into underground storage, letting the water run off gradually, it now sluiced off in torrents, taking the top-soil with it. Good farmland was diminishing in area and the frequent flooding created chaos all along the banks of the Ganga, Jamuna, Gandak, Mahanadi, Bramaputra, Teesta and so many others. They became wild rampaging rivers which lashed back and forth like bloated snakes across the torrid alluvial plains, stripping away their fragile sheath of toil-bought black earth. One day the soil would be gone, and

North India might be almost as arid as Saudi Arabia, part desert, part swamp, and all totally sterile. It was a sickening thought, so I poured myself a double whisky to soothe it away.

"It's not like you to drink yourself silly, dear," said Nancy. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing really. Just depressed about what Reggie told us."

"Well, I don't like him being all alone out there at night, Peter."

"If we had any spare room we might put him up with us, and he could go out to work every day on his motor-cycle from here. But we are full right up."

"What about building another hut? It would give our carpenter boys something to do."

"All right, I'll look into it tomorrow. What do you think, Reggie?"

He smiled shyly and blushed a deeper shade of chocolate, with reddened ears. "I have someone with me, baba," he said.

"Bring her along too," said Nancy.

"It's a boy, Ma. A lovely Bengali boy called Munna. He's fourteen."

"Will he stay with you?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know really. He is still going to school there, and he has his parents. They might have something to say about it. I'll ask him tonight. Anyway, I'd better be getting along now...."

As Reggie roared off on his motor-cycle, I got up and rubbed my hand over my face. "I better check the guns," I said. There could be trouble any time, now, and not only for Reggie. Law and order were breaking down all over India. Some people thought we were heading for civil war. It only needed someone to take a pot-shot at Rajiv Gandhi and all hell would break loose...

"Can I come with you, baba?" Shekhar asked at my

elbow. One glance at his bewitching eyes told me what he wanted. The guns were stored in a large steel almirah—in my bedroom.

We locked the door behind us. The little rascal immediately slipped his hand into my pocket, and my prick went up like a Jack-in-the-box. It stayed that way throughout my inspection. There were two DBBL twelve-bore shotguns in front, with two belts loaded with cartridges, and a .45 magnum hunting rifle with telescopic sight. All these were licensed. I had cleaned and oiled them last Sunday. But the false back of the almirah opened at the touch of a lever to reveal my unlicensed guns and ammunition and infra red sniper scope hidden away neatly in a space only six inches deep. I picked up a neat little Walther P38, weighing it in my hand, and checked over the action and the loaded clip.

By this time Shekhar had my flies open and had fastened his hungry little mouth over the end of my cock. He chewed it wetly, his teeth titillating me with what was almost a bite and his lashing tongue working like the diaphragm of a pump. I didn't want it all to end just yet, so I caught him round the back of the neck with my fingers and squeezed gently until the small leech-boy let me go, his mouth gasping and twisted with lust. Then I lifted him up, with one hand holding the neck and the other between his legs where they joined at his hot little rear end, and laid him face-down on the bed with a pillow under his groin. He thrust his rump up into the air, making purring noises and glancing back seductively over his shoulder. Lying down on top of his legs, I kissed his neat little arse, sniffing the gamey scent of his tight brown corduroy shorts. With one hand I felt around the front where his balls were squeezed inside the crotch folds as if in a pouch, and his hard cock rose up magnificently almost as far as his belt. I took one of his hands and put it down his front, making him feel his own cock and balls. Spontaneously he brought his other hand down as well, squeezing himself, now, with both hands and thrusting back and forth

against the pillow.

As he continued with this gentle movement, I took out my own cock and laid it beside the hot cushioned cleft of his buttocks which, with his thrusting against his hands, rubbed up and down against my penis. The most delightful sensations coursed through my body. There is nothing in life, absolutely nothing, to match the pleasure one can get in having sex with a young boy who is really enjoying it, as Shekhar was at that moment.

We must have been in there for about an hour when the phone rang. It was Kuldeep, another of my old boys who worked in Posts and Telegraphs.

"Hello, baba," he said. "Reggie's line's been cut."

"When?"

"Don't know. Maybe recently. Etwa wanted to phone him to invite him to his wedding and we couldn't get through."

"Okay, thanks for telling me, Kuldeep. I'll go over and take a look..."

I slapped Shekhar on the backside and started to get ready.

"Let me come too, baba," he pleaded.

"All right, but remember I'm in charge, and don't fire without an order."

"Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir."

I let that go. It's a good thing for him I like cheeky boys.

I slipped the Walther P38 into the inside pocket of my leather jacket, put on a belt loaded with twelve-bore cartridges and took one shotgun and a torch. Shekhar put on the other cartridge belt and took the other shotgun and torch. On the way down to the Land Rover we picked up three big boys for our possee: Biren, Mahendra and Ranjit. Mahendra took along Sarah, one of the Dobermann Pinschers, on her chain. Time could be an important factor so I didn't delay looking for any more vigilantes. We would have to manage with the scratch crew we had. I let Ranjit drive so I could

keep ready with the gun.

"Take care, darling," Nancy called, blowing me a kiss, "and try not to kill anyone."

Swinging out onto the road, our headlights caught the baleful gleaming eyes of some dozen ghostly jackals staring motionless in the fields opposite. As we roared away they started screaming their heads off. It was like taunting laughter at our plunging toward what could be a devil-baited trap. Fat rats scuttled across the road ahead, intent on gobbling up their full share of the nation's food supply.

Reggie's bungalow was only about eight miles away on the Naxalbari road. The last five miles were dirt, and Ranjit had to use four wheel drive. Still the wheels spun a bit and kicked up a lot of mud. A few hundred yards short of the bungalow there was a tea stall, and in the glare of a Petromax lantern I could see someone had set up a road block, using a fallen tree trunk with a few big stones at the ends. A few Bengali yokels were sitting around on benches outside the tea stall smoking bidis. I got out and asked them in Bengali what the road block was for. In the same language one of them replied, "Don't know, babuji."

"Did you see anyone put it there?" I asked.

"Not us," said another with a raucous laugh. "We never see nothing, do we, brothers?"

They thought that was a great joke and squeezed the last drop of merriment out of it.

"How long has it been here, then?" I asked.

"We don't know anything, Saheb," said a third man. "We don't see anything either. It ain't healthy to see anything that goes on around these parts."

"Well, then, if I move it away you won't see that either, will you?"

That gave them another good laugh. A toothless old man cackled, "Not us. Blind as bats we are, every last one of us."

And so I made sure of not offending them by removing the road block. I felt we had some chance of fighting a gang of

criminals on our own, but it wouldn't do to arouse the whole countryside against us; that could be far more dangerous in the long haul.

The boys helped me move the tree and most of the stones, and soon we were on our way to Reggie's bungalow. It was one of six Forest Department houses, small wooden structures raised up on sal-wood stilts to evade the snakes and leopards and elephants of the neighbourhood. The houses were clustered around a central field. A few lanterns were burning, but all was deathly quiet, as if deserted. That made me suspicious, so I told Ranjit to stay in the driver's seat with the engine running and the Land Rover's nose pointed back towards home, and Shekhar to lie down in a firing position under the verandah floor, covering the vehicle. Mahendra brought Sarah along on her chain, and Biren followed us carrying a cricket bat to cover our rear.

As soon as we went up the steps onto Reggie's verandah Sarah gave tongue and pointed her nose towards a bamboo chair. A piece of cloth was lying on it, perhaps a strip torn off a shirt, with fresh bloodstains on it. There were a few drops of blood on the chair and the floor. The nearby door leading into a bed-sitting room had been broken open, splintering its glass panels, and there were a few drops of blood among the broken glass shards. The amount of bleeding had not been heavy; probably whoever it was had suffered only a flesh wound.

Then I saw the cause of it. Away in a dark corner of the verandah there was an arrow sticking into the floor at a sharp angle. It was the kind tribals use for hunting wild boar: basically an iron bar with razor-sharp flanges along the first few inches. It must have struck someone a glancing blow and then gone careening over to bury itself in the wood of the floor. Whoever got cut by it was lucky not to have been completely skewered. Most probably it was Reggie himself. A shiver of fear ran through me as I felt the exposure of my own backbone to the dark surrounding jungle. But I was

also beginning to get angry, so I put Sarah's nose to the spoor and told her, "Follow, girl, follow."

She headed straight into the bedroom and through it into the bathroom where there was a small window just large enough for a thin man to squeeze through. We doubled back round to the outside of the house, and started again at the foot of the bathroom window amid a tangle of trampled bougainvillea. Our Dobermann, Sarah, that beautiful, deadly aristocrat, soon picked up the scent again and was away like a rocket, Mahendra in tow. I jogged along behind them with the torch and gun, and Biren followed.

Sarah crossed the field and headed down a narrow jungle trail. The undergrowth brushed against us on each side. After about a quarter of a mile we came to a rapid-flowing stream, about twenty feet wide and a foot deep. Sarah lost the scent and began casting for it along both banks. I shone my torch around and was rewarded with a lot of jabbering and thrashing about by a colony of monkeys high up in the trees.

It became evident that our quarry had walked either up or down the stream. Fifteen minutes later Sarah had still not picked up the scent, so I gave the word to go back and we jogged all the way to the Land Rover.

As we approached the bungalow I heard the screech of a nearby peacock, which was answered by one further off. Still further away an owl hooted. Strange: a peacock hardly ever screeches after dark unless it is disturbed by some predatory animal.

"I saw them," Shekhar said excitedly, crawling out from under the verandah.

"How many?" I asked.

"Only two. One of them had a kukri and looked like a Nepali. The other had a bow and arrow. He was very dark, maybe an Adhivasi. I switched on the torch as they came down the road and they shouted at me 'Light mat maro,' (Don't hit with the light.). So then I yelled out 'Idher ao,

Saheb, bandook lijiye,' (This way, boss, bring the gun), and then they ran back up the road real fast. I think they've gone to get help."

This news cheered me up a lot. These were probably the same people who had attacked Reggie's bungalow, and if they were still hanging about there was a good chance Reggie had got clean away along the stream and they were still trying to trace him.

"Pile in, lads. Take her away, Ranjit," I shouted, and quickly explained my reasoning. The best we could do was go home and wait.

"What about Reggie's motor-cycle?" Shekhar asked, and then suggested with great eagerness, "I could take it back for him."

"Not now," I said. "It can be picked up tomorrow in broad daylight. Too dangerous at night. We'd best stick together."

Three hundred yards up the road we came upon, from the other side, the same road block as before, rebuilt with the tree trunk and the stones in exactly the same places. Very unimaginative sods, whoever they were. In the pool of light from the Petromax the same group of men were nattering away by the tea stall, staring at the road block as though they were watching a programme on the idiot box.

I got down and said, "I suppose none of you saw anyone rebuild this thing, brothers?"

"That's right," cackled the old man cheerfully. "We never see nothing, Saheb. It were a lot better in the old days when all the Sahebs were here. People didn't use to make so many road blocks in them days."

He roared with toothless laughter, and the others tittered respectfully. Laconically we again removed the tree trunk and a few of the stones and drove away with a cheerful exchange of 'pranams' (greetings).

I was watching the road intently, and about half a mile further on I gripped Ranjit by the arm and signalled him to

stop. There was a tiny red glow in the blackness ahead. It was difficult to judge the distance but it seemed to be about a hundred yards away, perhaps ten feet off the ground, around a bend in the road but still visible through the foliage.

I got Ranjit to come around to my place and slipped into the driver's seat. I switched off all lights and started moving forward cautiously in four wheel drive, third gear, relying upon my memory of the road. I was only going about ten miles an hour, but in third gear I could pick up speed quickly if I had to by slipping the clutch.

The red glow, probably a bidi cheroot, went out. But where it had been I could just make out, as a rectangle of black against the lighter black of the sky, the shape of a lorry parked slap in the middle of the road around the next sharp bend.

Without slowing down I flashed my headlights on to get a last clear picture of the terrain. The motionless lorry was facing us thirty yards ahead festooned with armed men. On our left was an impassible bamboo thicket and on our right a soggy open field of ripening paddy.

I accelerated, going straight for the lorry head-on, dazzling the gang with my headlights. I yelled "Hold tight!" to the boys. At the last possible second I switched off all lights and threw the vehicle straight off the road into the paddy, the accelerator flat on the deck. The Land Rover bounced and swivelled and churned, skidding and throwing up mud in all directions. For a moment I thought we were going to turn over.

But the old girl took hold quick enough and lurched away through the field under erratic control. The men in the lorry, now behind us, shouted, and fired a ragged volley of shots, but I zig-zagged wildly into dead ground behind a clump of bushes and took a wide circle back towards the road. Here it was bordered all along by banana fronds; I hit one head on and bull-dozed through. It scrunched under the differential,

but the fibre was too soft to do any damage. Once on the road we had no more trouble, and soon enough we were home.

The first thing I saw as I walked onto our verandah was Reggie sitting there in a cane chair nursing a Scotch and soda. I thought for a moment that I had got into a time warp and gone back to the beginning of the story.

"What happened to you?" asked Nancy, coming out of the dining room. "Reggie got here just half an hour after you left."

"Nothing much, dear," I said, and to Reggie, "Any injuries?"

"Nothing on me, baba, but little Munna got a nasty scratch on his thigh from an arrow. We put him in your bed."

"That's okay," I said. "I hope he won't mind if I sleep with him, then."

"I'm sure he won't," said Nancy. "He's a real man's boy."

I asked Reggie exactly what had happened.

"Munna heard a rumour from the local people that the gang who shot Bhattacharjee had also condemned me to death in a kangaroo court. He came to warn me soon after I got home. They must have been lying in wait because they took a shot at him with an arrow just as he came onto the verandah. But he heard something and twisted around at the last second, so the arrow only caught him a glancing blow on the thigh. It must have been aimed to go straight up his little rump from behind."

"The dirty, cruel bastards!" I muttered.

"I ran out onto the verandah, tore a piece off my shirt to staunch the blood and carried Munna into the bedroom.

Then I went back and locked the door. But there were two armed men coming up the steps so I took Munna though into the bathroom, locked the door behind us, and we both slipped through the window and ran off into the jungle as fast as we could. Luckily Munna was not too badly hurt to

walk fast. We went up the stream to the tea garden road and thumbed a lift on a tea garden tractor with trailer which was taking some of the labourers in to the cinema. So we got back here soon after you left, but on a different road to the one you took."

"You'll have to stay here now," I said, "with Munna."

"Tik hai, baba, but they are quite likely to come looking for me."

"Let 'em come. We'll give them a warm enough welcome."

After a hearty supper I took a stroll up the road to see Police Inspector Prem Chhetry, the Officer in Charge. He had gone off duty but I located him in the bungalow next door to the police station with his pretty wife and children. I explained the situation while helping to demolish a couple of bottles of beer. I was glad to have found him at home, because at the station there were always one or two Communist Party men hanging around, ready and waiting to report to the Party Office, which really ruled the neighbourhood. Those rascals probably wouldn't be too willing to help me, especially since their own Forest Minister was mixed up with the timber thieves himself.

Returning home, I doubled the sentries and alerted a reserve squad of big boys armed with catapults, bows and arrows and iron bars, who could be woken up quickly if anything happened. Then I went off to a rest I thought I really deserved.

Munna was sleeping on my bed, and Reggie was asleep on a bedding roll on the carpet. I went over to peek at Munna. He was one of the most gorgeous fourteen-year-olds I had ever seen, sleekly and sexily seductive in the most disturbing way. His lips were full and sensuous, his slightly chubby cheeks making playful dimples around the broad, expressive mouth, as though enjoying a pleasant dream, and his eyelashes were so long and droopy they cast shadows upon his ruddy brown skin.

He was lying on top of the bed clothes, wearing only a pouch, and I could see that every part of his well-muscled but otherwise slender body was as attractive as his divinely beautiful face. A slightly stained bandage covered the wound on his thigh. Just as I was bending over to plant a kiss on his cheek, Shekhar came in. I continued with the kiss, and followed it up with a taste of Munna's lips, to which, although unconscious, he responded valiantly, as though I were part of his dream.

"I suppose you don't want me tonight," said Shekhar sadly. Poor little fellow, after all the adventure we had shared.

"Of course I want you, bachhu, but there is hardly room on this bed for three."

"But I need it real bad, baba!"

"Okay, then. Right now all I want is a good night's kip. So why don't you sleep with Munna and have a bit of fun. An elderdown on the floor will do for me."

Shekhar's face crinkled up into a delighted smile as he danced over to the bed and lay down beside Munna, clasping the sleeping boy fondly in his arms.

"He's lovely, baba, isn't he?"

"You both are," I said.

I was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. Much later I woke up to see an action-packed thriller going on in the moonlight which streamed into the room. The two boys on the bed were indulging themselves in a fantastic exhibition of primitive instincts allowed free rein. I watched them writhe and moan in ecstasy, twining themselves together in incredible contortions while they explored each and every crevice of their bodies with lip and tongue and probing penis. I suppose they were both a bit young to ever have the kind of ejaculation that ended it all (I knew Shekhar was), and so their desires drove them on and on and on.

It was interesting to watch the way they related. Although Shekhar was the youngest of the two, he seemed less effemi-

nate than Munna, who was evidently and superbly narcissistic. So finally it was Shekhar who dominated, and Munna who submitted. The younger boy rode him firmly, forcing his tireless penis into him from behind and thrusting mercilessly until the older boy whimpered with pain. But when Shekhar pulled back slightly, Munna told him, "Go on, go on. Do it. It hurts lovely."

For a full half hour Shekhar ground away hard, as if trying to push his balls in after his penis if he could. At last I could stand it no longer. I went over to the bed and swivelled them round until Munna's head was over the edge of it, and then I knelt and felt soft lips seeking me and coming snugly around my erection, the young tongue working, driving me to a quick and shuddering climax.

Afterwards I took to kissing Munna all over, starting with his sperm-flecked lips. I rolled the two boys onto their sides and while Shekhar continued to grind into him from the rear I took Munna's penis in my mouth. It was of medium size for his age, and delightfully flavoured, sweet as the scent of fir cones, sticky as it was with the overflow of his immature seminal fluid, the sap of life. Eventually, after what seemed an eternity of dark bliss, all three of us went back to sleep.

Nancy brought a tray of tea in at eight o'clock. She pulled a sheet over the entwined boys before waking them up.

"My poor pet," she said to Munna, stroking his wavy hair. "What have these cruel boys been doing to you?"

"You should worry about what he's been doing to us," I said from my eiderdown. "He's a young leopard."

"How sweet!" Nancy purred.

After breakfast I went on my rounds, visiting each department of our ashram. First I visited the carpenter's shed and fixed up the plan for another hut to be made for Reggie and Munna. Then I went to see the weavers about the new school uniforms for the girls. Next door to that was the engineering workshop where some of the lads were checking over the Land Rover after last night's hard use. The rest were making

tubular steel chairs for sale in Siliguri.

But Shekhar was absent. I asked Lucky where he had gone. Lucky was Shekhar's lover-boy, a sexy-looking lad of fifteen with a sensuous mouth, droopy eyelids and tobacco-stained teeth. Shekhar, it seemed, had got a lift out to Reggie's bungalow on a tea garden tractor-trailer in order to bring back the motor-cycle.

"The little tyke!" I exclaimed. "He should have asked me first." I would have sent one of the big boys with him, at least. But then he wouldn't have had the thrill of driving the bike all by himself. He knew that perfectly well.

When I returned to my office I found a tall, imposing Bengali waiting to see me. He was Satyan Bose, the local Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which ruled in West Bengal State at the time.

"Kamon achhe (How are you), Mr. Peter? I hope you are keeping well."

We exchanged the usual greetings and I called to the cook to send in two cups of coffee. Nancy had gone to take her classes in our school. Bose chatted on for several minutes about inequals. I wondered when he would come to the point. Be sure there was a point. Party Secretaries do not go out on social calls without one.

"Mr Peter," he said at last, "since I am really your very good friend and well-wisher, perhaps you will allow me to give you some good advice."

"Go ahead, if you feel like it."

"I would not want you to come to any harm. These days the forest is very dangerous. I would not advise you to go there, especially at night."

"Oh, but I never do that," I said.

For about five seconds he looked at me with an expression of sheer astonishment. And then covered it up. This told me a lot. That he knew all about last night for a start.

"Quite so," he said politely. "I am sure you never go into the forest at night—unless, perhaps, you lose your way on

the road. Anyhow, I must warn you to be careful."

"Is that a threat?"

His face flushed, eyes like daggers.

"Mr. Peter, how could I threaten you? You are my good friend, and the good friend of all the poor people hereabouts. You are like our guardian angel. No, no, Mr. Peter, I could never think of threatening you. You must be joking."

"That's right."

"What?"

"I am joking."

"Oh, yes, a joke. Ha, ha. Yes, very funny. It is your English sense of humour. I read *Punch* myself, many times. It is so funny my eyes water."

"There is sometimes a thin borderline between laughing and crying."

"Oh, you are so philosophical. That is very good. I also read much philosophy—Marx, Lenin, Mao and so many others. But, Mr. Peter, you should be very careful. I know that Mr. Reginald Lakra is one of your old boys. But sometimes there are political implications you may not understand. There is the question of the solidarity of the working class for instance."

"Like in Poland."

He flapped his hands in embarrassment.

"No, no, not that Solidarity. That is reformist."

"It won't help the workers much if all the trees are cut down."

"You are quite right. Absolutely right. We in the Party are very much concerned with this problem. But we need funds to bring about the Revolution. After the Revolution, we will replant all the forests."

"How will you bring back the top-soil which is getting washed away into the Bay of Bengal? How will you bring back the people who will starve to death when farm production is ruined?"

He laughed politely, as if dealing with an imbecile.

"Oh, you are such a fine man, Mr. Peter. So compassionate. You care about everyone. Sometimes I truly wish you were one of us. I will do my level best to save your boy Lakra, but I hope you will not involve yourself in any matters concerning the forest, because this is a most delicate situation. Be happy here with your little boys. You deserve it. And now, allow me to thank you for giving up so much of your valuable time."

He rose to his full six foot, with proffered hand. In fact, he was dismissing me, and I ruddy well knew it. After he had gone I stood there transfixed for fully five minutes, my stomach like lead. This man was as dangerous as a cobra. And he had threatened me in about as plain language as you will ever get from a Bengali Brahmin. I knew I was in deep trouble, and so was Reggie. At last I came to a decision and rushed off to find him. He was sitting on the verandah browsing through some magazines.

"Reggie," I said, "pack one of my suitcases and get out of here fast. Go away to one of the big cities, and lose yourself for a few weeks. And listen—don't tell anyone where you are going, not even me."

"Why not, baba?"

"Because they could get it out of me, dope. Look, here's four thousand rupees. Phone me after a couple of weeks from a public call box and I'll tell you if the coast is clear."

"Tik hai, baba. You know best."

"I'll fix it up to get you medical leave from the Forest Department."

I kissed him full on the mouth.

"Take care of yourself, chocolate boy," I murmured.

"You too, baba."

Shekhar never came back that day, and by nightfall I was getting really worried. But I was too busy to do much about it. The following morning, about eleven, the postman came with a registered package. The sender's address was the local post office and his name was 'Etwa Oraon', which is as

common around here as 'John Smith' is in London Town. I opened the package carefully and took out a note wrapped around a small polythene bag. Inside the bag was something that turned my stomach. At first it looked like a piece of uncooked gizzard, but, on closer inspection, I could see it was the top joint of a little finger, smeared with blood. In a state of shock I opened the attached note and had to concentrate hard to stop the scribbled letters from swimming in front of my eyes. In Bengali script was written this message:

Your Boy, Shekhar, is at Reginald Lakra's bungalow. Come there without any gun. Do not tell the police. Come there without telling anyone. Otherwise Shekhar will be killed.

Sick with disgust and fear, I stood rooted to the spot for several minutes, my mind thrashing out all the alternatives of what I could do. Finally I decided I would go alone. But I would take the pack.

I ran out to the stables and saddled up one of the horses. Then I opened the kennels and released some of the bigger dogs: the huge Monster, half bull terrier and half great dane, his brindled coat making him look like a young tiger, Mistress, a white pure-bred bull terrier, and her two-year-old son Devil, who had been sired by Monster. Also Sarah and Tommy.

The pack were in a joyful mood, sensing somehow that there was work to be done. They gambolled around my horse as we trotted out of the gate and took a rough cart track across the fields. By this short cut, the distance to Reggie's bungalow was barely five miles.

We came to the stream by which Reggie had escaped, and plodded carefully along it. We found the path that led to Reggie's bungalow and followed it until we were about fifty yards from the edge of the thick forest cover, at the edge of the field behind the bungalow. I tethered the horse off the

path and also tied up the dogs, each with a thin cow rope. It was enough to hold them until they got really excited. Then I took the P-38 out from under my belt and stowed it in the saddle bag. It might prove useful on the way home, if I could first get hold of Shekhar.

I gave a fond pat to each of my animal friends and walked off alone down the track to the bungalow. But I didn't *feel* alone: dangling around my neck on a piece of string was a whistle pitched above the range of the human ear. One blast on that and Monster would break the rope in a jiffy and come like the clappers of doom. It wouldn't take much longer for Tommy and Sarah and Mistress and Devil to do the same.

A group of armed men were guarding the bungalow. None of them were watching the rear. What could you expect? They were not soldiers.

"Hello, brothers," I said quietly in Bengali, "how are you?"

They nearly jumped out of their skins.

"Heck, Saheb, are you a ghost or what?" asked one of them.

Seeing me alone, unarmed and in a mild and inoffensive mood, they offered me no violence, just crowded round to study me curiously, while one of them ran off up to road to call whoever was in charge. Soon enough he came, an arrogant, swarthy man with a bushy beard, swinging hairy arms truculently. He was in his early forties, and looked like an upper-caste Bengali in his spotless white kurta (with gold studs) and dhoti.

"You are Peter de Rast," he shouted at me accusingly in a deep rasping voice.

"I have that privilege," I said calmly.

He treated me to a resounding lecture:

"You are sheltering an anti-social, an enemy of the people. You are waging war against the people. Also you are corrupting the youth of our country with your decadent

Western ways, imperilling the race, and sowing seeds of destabilisation.”

He ranted on like that for fifteen minutes. Obviously he liked the sound of his own voice, so I let him carry on without interruption. Finally he led me up the steps onto the verandah and into the bungalow living room. What I saw there made me sick with disgust—and so angry it was all I could do not to attack that arrogant ape with my own bare hands.

Shekhar was hanging up stark naked from a pulley fixed to the ceiling. He was covered in cuts and welts. Obviously they had been torturing him for some time. Underneath him was a bamboo stake, positioned so that if they let him down an inch or two on the ropes, which were tied over his chest and shoulders, the long bamboo stake, with its sharpened top, would start entering his anus. One man was holding the free end of the rope, ready to slack it off, and another was holding Shekhar's thighs to position his anus exactly right for penetration. There was no doubt that if the rope were released, or, more likely, slowly slackened, Shekhar would suffer death by impalement, the ancient Indian punishment which some of the Rajas of olden times had meted out with such enthusiasm to their captives in times of war. There were occasions, according to the history books, when the streets of some cities were lined with fine young soldiers done to death in this gruesome way.

When he saw me Shekhar lifted his head and managed a smile. I gave him a quick wink to let him know all was not hopeless.

“Unless you tell us where Lakra is,” said the bearded Bengali leader, “and he is safely in our hands, this boy will be let down onto *that!*” And he kicked the stake so it vibrated for a moment on its own firm anchor.

“I shouldn't do that if I were you,” I said. “It's not advisable.”

“Why not?”

"There would be serious repercussions. I could not hold myself responsible for all that would inevitably ensue."

Shekhar looked at me with something like hope on his battered face.

"You are trying to threaten me?" the Bengali leader scoffed. But my ice-cold ferocity seemed to be having some effect. Did he suspect what I knew, that, quite unarmed, I was capable of crushing the spark of life out of his brain before the others put me out of action?

He backed off slightly, trying not to reveal his fear. "Give the boy a rest now," he said. Then, to me, "Why are you shielding Lakra? Will you give him up?"

They had done what I wanted, which was to move Shekhar over and put him down on his feet next to the stake. I didn't wish him to get impaled by accident if the fellow holding the rope somehow let go.

"All right, then," I said, "I'll give up Lakra if you let me and the boy go."

"No, baba," Shekhar said, "you can't!" Tears of disillusionment sprang out of his eyes. Oh, my brave boy! How I would love him after this!

I took out a handkerchief to mop my face, and under cover of that movement put the whistle to my mouth and blew three short blasts on it.

Back there at the edge of the woods, I knew, five dogs were bursting free of their ropes. As I kept up the meaningless patter to keep our captors off guard, and Shekhar looked at me with huge hurt eyes, the dogs were devouring the field in huge hungry bounds. Sarah the Dobermann appeared within seconds. She was just a black blurr as she tore into the room, until she came to rest beside me, sitting on her haunches. Never an aggressive lady, she contented herself with barking at the surrounding gang, who fell back, looking at her with astonishment. They were so jammed in that small room that it was impossible for them to use their guns without injuring one of their own number.

Then the bearded leader made a serious mistake. His last. He lifted a cane to strike Sarah, and just as it came down on her flank, Monster came barrelling into the room. Normally Monster would not bite people. He had been trained not to. But his dim canine brain could cope with only one item of data at a time, and the item now happened to be a strange man hitting his friend Sarah with a cane.

Without pausing in his stride, Monster leapt straight for the man's throat, tore it out, and bounced off the opposite wall.

The man fell, spouting arterial blood all over the place.

The rest of the gang panicked and ran for it. They dropped their guns, tripped all over each other in the doorway, fell down the steps, jumped over the verandah railing in one big jumble of thieves and dogs. Now Tommy, Devil and Mistress came up and Monster and Sarah joined them in the chase, snapping at fleeing heels with great gusto.

"Oh, baba!" said Shekhar, his tears of disillusionment giving way to tears of relief and restored respect. I unbound him and he scampered into his clothes. We started gathering the loot: two sten guns and an unclipped spare magazine, full of bullets, and a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver, which Shekhar claimed and stuck under his belt.

"I don't know you've got that," I said.

"And I'm not going to tell you," said he.

Meanwhile, I'd called off the pack. We strolled back to the horse, alone and worried, poor fellow, since the dogs had left him. I put Shekhar up on the horse's neck and swung onto the saddle behind him.

And so it was that I came home at sunset with Shekhar, our great pack gambolling around our hooves and boasting to all the local dogs of our victory.

Nancy and I gave Shekhar a good bath when he got home, and a good feed, and dressed all his wounds. In the morning he would have to go to Siliguri for an anti-tet and more serious medical attention.

And so I took him to bed. With me. To love with me. So I could give him the kind of tender care a young boy needs after bravely going through such a horrifying experience.

I EXPECTED TO HEAR from the timber thieves or the party people the next morning, but I woke late, with Shekhar still in my arms and whimpering from time to time over the stump of his little finger, which was now beginning to throb. But through the whole day life in our ashram proceeded peacefully, and so it did the next, and the next. Then on the fourth day my friend Inspector Chhetry phoned from the police station.

"By the way, Peter, you were at home all last Tuesday, weren't you?"

"Well..."

"Except for a short ride on your horse for a couple of miles, right?"

"Ahem..."

"And you were followed by a few stray dogs, weren't you? They could not have been your dogs, which are usually kennelled when the sun is up and let out only at night."

"If you say so."

"Oh, I do, I do. I thought perhaps you might be interested to know that, on that very Tuesday afternoon, there was a major fight between two rival gangs of timber thieves, and, strangely enough, one prominent gang leader got killed."

"How?"

"According to the inquest, by a wild animal, believed to have been a tiger. Though why a wild animal would take part in a timber gang-fight I can't imagine."

The power of superstitious dread is a wonderful thing—if it works in your favour. It seemed that among my adversaries I had suddenly acquired strange supernatural powers to control the great predators of the night: Monster had become a fully-fledged tiger, me a sort of cross between the Phantom and a member of the Adams Family.

“Well, I don’t know. After all, it’s their habitat that’s at stake, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that must be the reason. But, Peter, do me a favour, will you?”

“What is it?”

“Just make sure Monster gets his anti-rabies vaccination at the proper time, that’s all.”