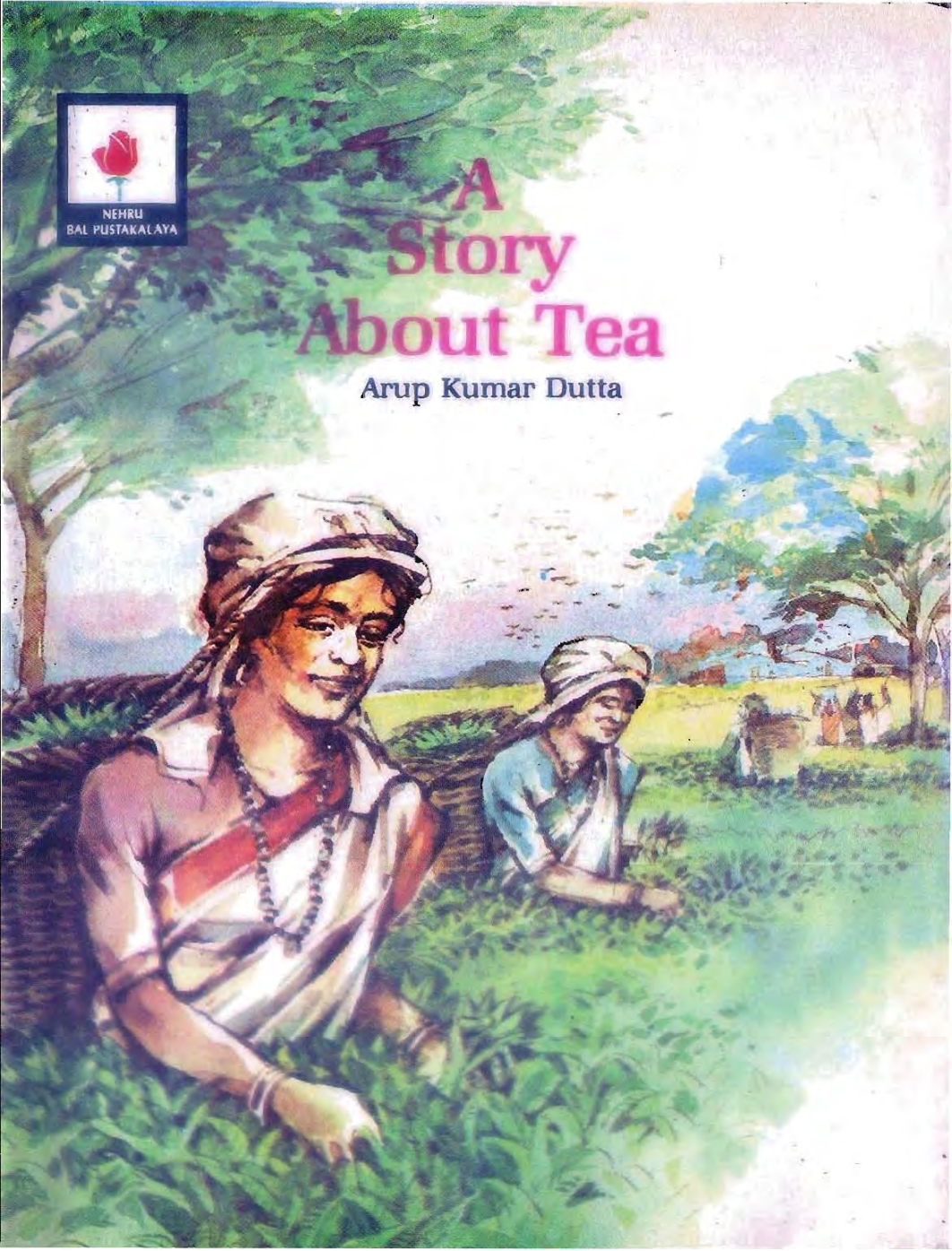




# A Story About Tea

Arup Kumar Dutta







*Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*

# A Story About Tea

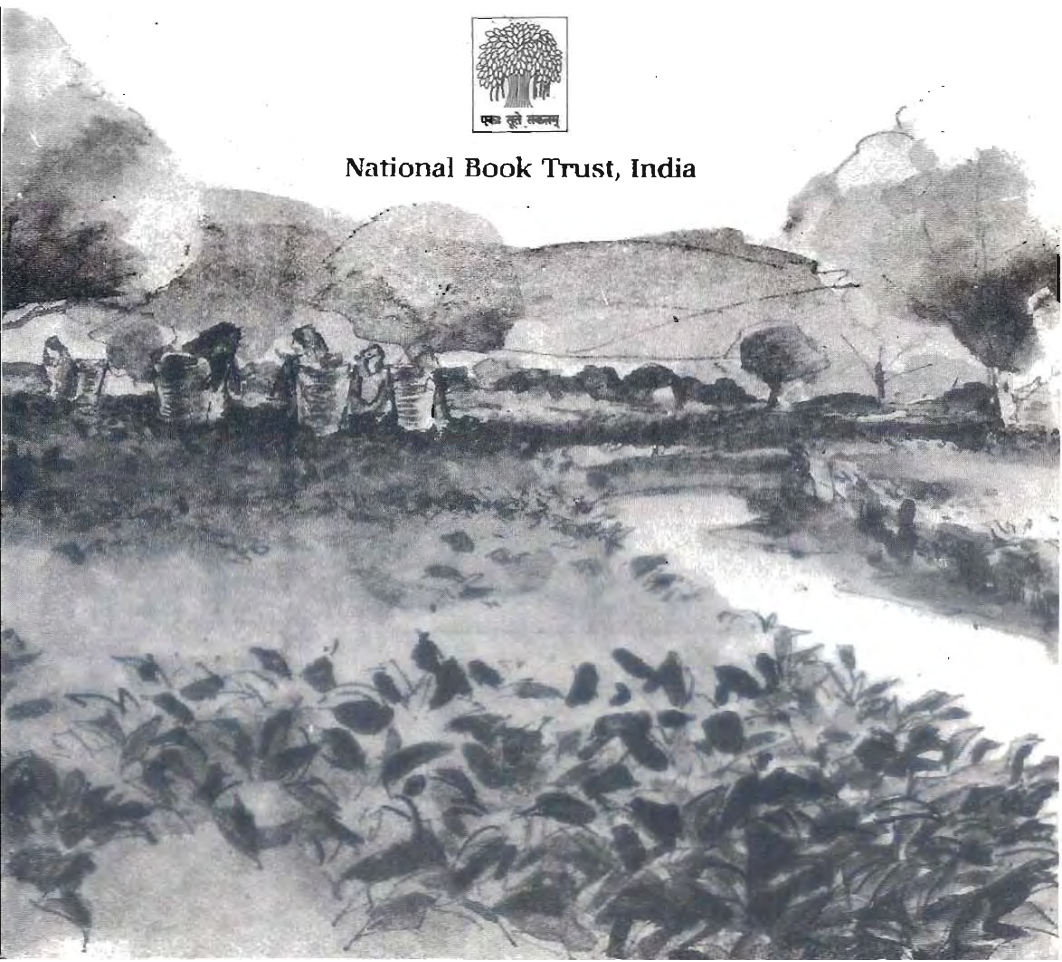
Arup Kumar Dutta

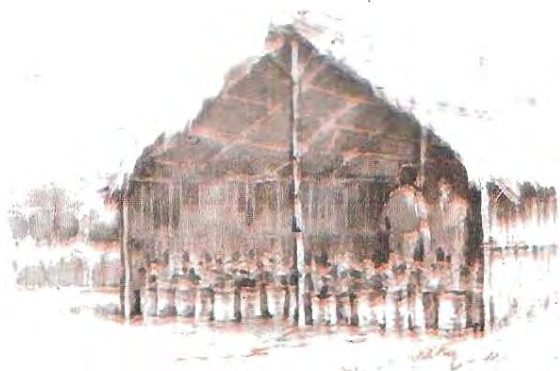
*Illustrator*

Mrinal Mitra



National Book Trust, India





ISBN 81-237-0169-1

---

First Edition 1985

Fifth Reprint 1998 (*Saka* 1919 )

© Arup Kumar Dutta, 1985

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India,

---



## CHAPTER I

The long metre-gauge train pulled into a wayside station. The jolt as the driver applied the brakes awoke Rajvir Singh, a Sikh boy, aged thirteen. His friend, Pranjol, was sitting near the window, absorbed in a detective story.

Pranjol, a youngster from Assam, was Rajvir's classmate in school, in Delhi. Pranjol's father was the manager of a tea-garden in Upper Assam and Pranjol had invited Rajvir to visit his home during the summer vacations. Rajvir had promptly accepted.

The journey from Delhi to Assam was a long one. They had spent two days and nights on the train, seeing a variety of landscapes. Now they were almost at their destination.

"Wake up, sleepy-head," Pranjol called out cheerfully. "We get down at Mariani, the next station. You better have a cup of tea. That should wake you up. You know tea contains caffeine."

"I'll be ready in a jiffy," Rajvir replied as he swung out of bed and began packing his things. A quick wash, a change of clothes, and he was sitting opposite his friend.

"Chai-garam...garam-chai," a vendor called out in a high-pitched voice.

He came up to their window and asked, "Chai, sa'ab?"



"Give us two cups," Pranjol said.

They sipped the steaming hot liquid. Almost everyone in their compartment was drinking tea too.

"Do you know that over 800,000,000 cups of tea are drunk every day throughout the world?" Rajvir asked.



"Whew!" exclaimed Pranjol. "Tea really is very popular."

The train pulled out of the station. Pranjol buried his nose in his detective book again. Rajvir too was an ardent fan of detective stories, but at the moment he was keener on looking at the beautiful scenery.

It was green, green everywhere. Rajvir had never seen so much greenery before. Then the soft green paddy fields gave way to tea-bushes.

It was a magnificent view. Against the backdrop of densely wooded hills a sea of tea-bushes stretched as far as the eye could

see. Dwarfing the tiny tea plants were tall sturdy shade-trees and amidst the orderly rows of bushes busily moved doll-like figures. In the distance was an ugly building with smoke billowing out of tall chimneys.

"Hey, a tea-garden!" Rajvir cried excitedly.

Pranjol, who had been born and brought up on a plantation, didn't share Rajvir's excitement.

"Oh, this is tea-country now," he said. "Assam has the largest concentration of plantations in the world. You will see enough gardens to last you a lifetime!"

"I have been reading as much as I could about tea," Rajvir said. "No one really knows who discovered tea but there are many legends."

"What legends?"







"Well, there's the one about the Chinese emperor who always boiled water before drinking it. One day a few leaves of the twigs burning under the pot fell into the water giving it a delicious flavour. It is said they were tea-leaves."

"Tell me another!" scoffed Pranjol.

"We have an Indian legend too. Bodhidharma, an ancient Buddhist ascetic, cut off his eyelids because he felt sleepy during meditations. Ten tea plants grew out of the eyelids. The leaves of these plants when put in hot water and drunk banished sleep."

"Tea was first drunk in China," Rajvir added, "as far back as 2700 B.C.! In fact words such as tea, *chai* and *chini* are from Chinese. Tea came to Europe only in the sixteenth century and was drunk more as medicine than a beverage."

The train clattered into Mariani junction. The boys collected their luggage and pushed their way to the crowded platform.

Pranjol's parents were waiting for them. So was Pranjol's sister, Alka, and their pet Alsatian, Taffy.

Soon they were driving towards Dhekiabari, the tea-garden managed by Pranjol's father.

An hour later the car veered sharply off the main road. They crossed a cattle-bridge and entered Dhekiabari Tea Estate.

On both sides of the gravel-road were acre upon acre of tea-bushes, all neatly pruned to the same height. Groups of women pluckers, with bamboo baskets on their backs, wearing plastic aprons, were plucking the newly sprouted leaves.

Pranjol's father slowed down to allow a tractor, pulling a trailer-load of tea-leaves, to pass.

"This is the second-flush or sprouting period, isn't it, Mr. Barua?" Rajvir asked. "It lasts from May to July and yields the best tea."

"You seem to have done your homework before coming," Pranjol's father said in surprise.

"Yes, Mr. Barua," Rajvir admitted. "But I hope to learn much more while I'm here."

"Call me uncle. I'll take you around the garden this afternoon to show you how tea is grown."

They drove through the gate to the manager's bungalow. It was a sprawling, double-storeyed building, built over fifty years ago by a British planter. A hedge of dwarf-bamboo, evenly trimmed, surrounded the spacious compound. The front lawn was a carpet of green while the garden was a riot of red, blue, yellow flowers in full bloom.

A dusky youngster with an impish face, in shorts and shirt sat on the verandah stairs. The boy's teeth flashed in a smile as he saw Pranjol.

"Hello Mongla," Pranjol shouted. "Come, meet my pal, Rajvir."

Mongla came running up, grinning and shook hands with Rajvir.

"He is the son of Birchi, the factory chowkidar," Pranjol said. "We have great fun together, Mongla and I. He's a wizard with a catapult. And what he doesn't know about fishing isn't worth knowing."

"I must rush," Mongla said. "I am with a spraying-group. Just came to say hello. The Sirdar would eat me if he knew."

Mongla waved cheerily and disappeared.





## CHAPTER II

In the afternoon Mr. Barua took Rajvir on a tour of the tea-garden. Pranjol, Alka and Taffy accompanied them. Dhekiabari was a big garden of over 800 acres. So they had to go in Mr. Barua's jeep.

"We'd better start with the clone-nursery where the tea saplings are," Mr. Barua suggested.

As they drove along Mr. Barua explained, "Tea plants need a lot of care. Fertilizers such as nitrogen, potash and phosphate have to be added regularly to the soil to keep the tea plants strong and healthy.

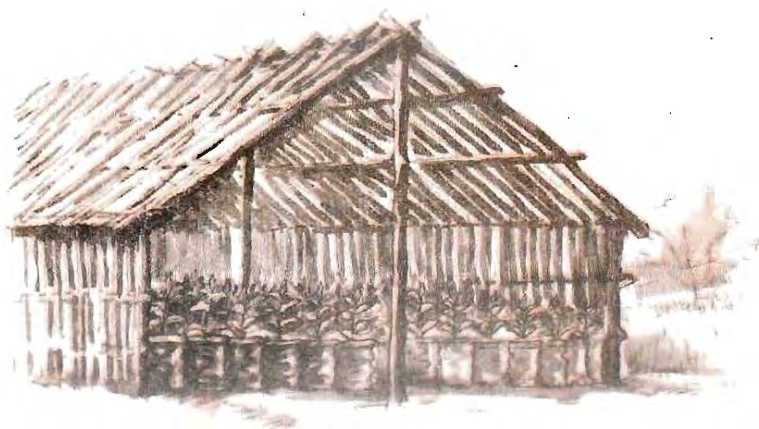
"Of these nitrogen is the most important. With tea, unlike other plants, not the fruit but the leaves are plucked. Leaves being the kitchens of plants, a constant supply of nitrogen is necessary for the plant to grow."

"They fall ill too, sometimes, you know," he added, "with diseases such as red-rust, blister-blight and black-rot. Then we have to act as doctors, diagnose the disease, and prescribe appropriate medicines."

The clone-nursery was a wide, low structure with bamboo walls and a roof of thinly-spread thatch. One section contained small earthen beds while another housed thousands of

polythene bags, each containing a tea sapling.

A clone cutting consisted of a single leaf with its node, attached to a one-inch stem, taken from the mother bush specially reared for cloning. The cuttings were planted in earthen beds or polythene bags filled with virgin soil. They took



root within ten weeks and a year later the saplings were transferred to the planting site.

"There are seed nurseries too," Mr. Barua said. "But planters nowadays prefer cloning. In cloning, purity of breed is

maintained because no cross-pollination takes place. Every tea-bush reared through cloning will have the characteristics of the mother bush."

"Then why use seeds at all?" Rajvir asked.

"Seeds are needed to produce better quality hybrids through controlled cross-pollination. Besides seeds are cheaper and need less tending than clones."

"Uncle, how long does it take for a sapling to grow into a mature tea plant?"

"Plucking can be done from the first year. But a bush is really mature at five years or so. The life of a tea plant is similar to a human being's—about sixty years."

They all piled back into the jeep. Mr. Barua drove them along





the narrow garden paths. In one area a group were spraying chemicals. Mongla, who was among them, waved out.

"Come, we'll get down here," Mr. Barua said stopping the jeep.

To get to the tea-bushes they had to cross a deep ditch. The narrow trunk of a betel nut tree acted as a bridge. While the others had no problem in crossing over, Rajvir got into difficulties. He took a few hesitant steps, faltered in the middle, and began to sway from side to side, like a tightrope walker. But, just when he seemed about to fall, he straightened himself and scrambled across.

A burst of applause greeted his effort. Even Taffy showed his appreciation by barking furiously.

"These ditches!" Rajvir exclaimed. "There seem to be so many of them. Why, the entire garden is crisscrossed with a web of ditches!"

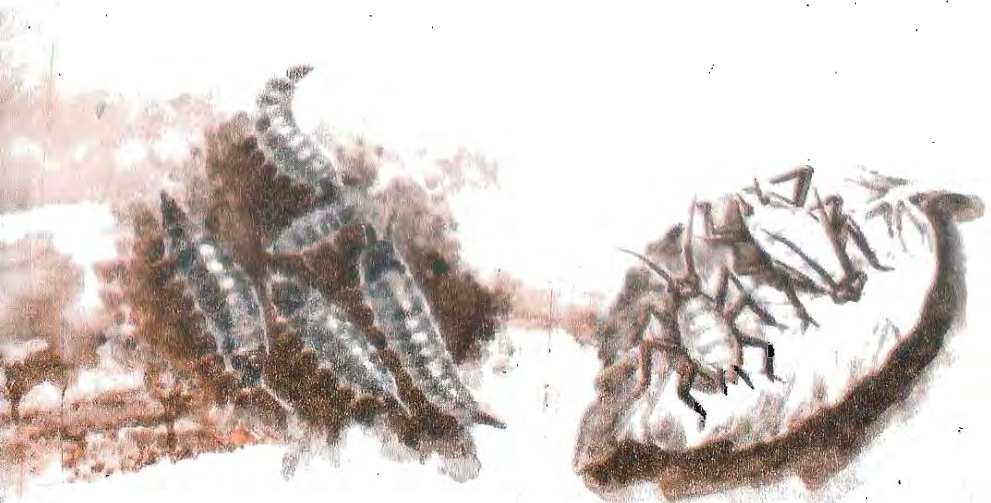
"They are a part of the garden's drainage system," Mr. Barua explained. "Tea grows best in a hot, moist climate with moderate to heavy rainfall. But if rainwater is allowed to accumulate the roots will rot and the plants will wither. These ditches prevent waterlogging."

They approached the spray-group. Each member carried a backpack sprayer. They pumped the sprayer-levers up and down, directing the chemical jet on to the ground.

"They're spraying weedicide," Mr. Barua said. "Had it been pesticide they would have sprayed the bushes. Weeds, like the mikania, thatch-grass, and bagracote, choke a tea plant and slow down growth."

"You spoke of pesticide. Do pests also attack tea plants?" Rajvir asked.





"Oh yes! Loopers, greenflies, thrips and nettlegrubs, can cause great damage."

Mongla hurried up to them, with his familiar toothy grin.

"We are going swimming tomorrow in the river," Pranjol told Mongla. "Like to come along?"

"Yes," said Mongla. "When?"

"In the afternoon. Daddy is taking Rajvir to the factory in the morning."

"O.K.," Mongla said. "After that maybe we can catch some fish. I have laid a few fish-traps that need checking."

A flight of red-beaked parrots squawked protestingly overhead and settled noisily on a shade-tree. A pair of kites glided in circles in the clear blue sky, and in the distance a white egret could be seen winging its way homeward.



### CHAPTER III

They said goodbye to Mongla and returned to the jeep. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun, filtering through the tall shade-trees, created a fascinating pattern of light and shade on the tea-bushes. Rajvir commented on the majestic beauty of the shade-trees.

"They are very useful too," Mr. Barua said. "They regulate the sunlight and keep the leaf temperature of the tea plants at the right level—25 to 35 degrees celsius. If the plants were directly exposed to the hot summer sun, the leaf temperature would exceed 40 degrees and the leaves would burn and turn black."

"But Uncle, isn't sunlight vital for the growth of plants?" Rajvir protested.

"True, but too much of it can be fatal. Shade-trees are planted in rows in a north-south direction. When the sun rises in the east the bushes west of the trees get shade. In the afternoon, the bushes to the east are in the shade. So the sunlight is distributed equally. The trees also provide shade to the workers."

"But what about winter?" Rajvir queried. "Don't these trees deprive the tea plants of scarce sunlight?"

"Not really. We select our shade-trees carefully. These, for

instance, are the *albizzia odoratissima*. They shed their leaves around October, when the winter season starts. Then around March, the trees grow new leaves which give shade during the hot summer."

Rajvir, however, was not satisfied. "But don't they reduce the fertility of the soil?" he asked. "They are so big."

"On the contrary they increase it by supplying nitrogen. The leaves they shed also fertilize the soil when they decompose. Everything in a tea-garden is functional, nothing is done without a purpose. But enough questions for today. Let's go home for a cup of well-earned "

"Tea, what else!" Pranjol said and they all burst out laughing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, as night descended, the children sat on the first floor verandah. Hundreds of fireflies flickered in the darkness, a night-owl hooted from the trees and a soft breeze carried to them the rhythmic chant of a Jhumur song from the nearby *busti*.

Suddenly Rajvir noticed a strange glow in the distance. The glow seemed to be playing a game of hide-and-seek, now coming very close, now receding.

"Hey, what's that?" Rajvir cried out startled.

"A-will-o'-the-wisp!" exclaimed Pranjol

"Will-o'-the-wisps are the ghosts of miserly old men guarding buried gold," Alka explained solemnly.

"Ghosts?" Rajvir asked nervously.

"Pooh!" Pranjol scoffed, but without much conviction, "Will-o'-the-wisps are balls of fire fed by marsh gases."

"Don't be silly," Alka said. "Old Jaleshwari told me she had





seen one of those things turn into an old man right in front of her eyes!"

The silence that followed was broken by the arrival of Pranjol's parents.

"Tea-garden life must be very quiet and uneventful," Rajvir commented to them.

"Oh, there are hazards, all right," Mr. Barua said. "Poisonous snakes like the cobra, for instance. The British, as you know, first discovered wild tea plants in Assam in the middle of the



nineteenth century and established plantations. Those days they had to contend with cholera and plague epidemics as well as wild animals and natural hazards. Things have improved, but we too have our share of excitement."

"Tell them about the leopard," Mrs. Barua prompted.

"A leopard, Uncle?" Rajvir said excitedly.

"Sometimes wild animals stray from the nearby jungles," Mr. Barua said, "and create terror in the plantations. Two years ago I shot a Royal Bengal Tiger which had turned man-eater. Wild elephants too cause havoc occasionally.

"For the past fortnight a leopard has been terrorizing our garden workers. A Sirdar named Sawana told me that the leopard had prowled around his house at night and lifted a bull."

"What or rather who is a Sirdar?" Rajvir asked.

"A plantation," Mr. Barua explained, "covers a wide area and employs thousands of workers. So for convenience it is divided into sections, in which groups of workers are given specific chores. The leader of each group is called a Sirdar. He is the captain of the team, as it were."

"Haven't you tried to trap the leopard, Daddy?" Franjol asked.

"Oh yes. I kept watch in the garden for three nights, but didn't see it. I set up a goat as bait, but the leopard refused to be tempted. He is an extremely cunning animal, and hasn't left a single pug-mark. Our workers are so frightened that they refuse to venture out at night."

Rajvir wanted to hear more, but just then dinner was announced.

## CHAPTER IV

The next morning they sat down to an early breakfast.

"Would you like more milk in your tea, Rajvir?" Mrs. Barua asked.

"No thank you, Aunty. I like tea strong."

"Your uncle doesn't take any milk at all," Mrs. Barua commented.

"True," agreed Mr. Barua. "Taste in tea differs not only amongst individuals, but also amongst nations. We brew tea with milk and sugar. But the Chinese and Japanese don't. They drink green tea."

"What's that?" Rajvir enquired.

"There are basically three types of finished tea—Orthodox, C.T.C. and Green tea. In the case of Green tea, the leaves are exposed to steam to kill all enzymes, and then dried. There is no fermentation, so the original components of the leaves endure.

"The Chinese and Japanese brew Green tea and drink it without milk or sugar. Sometimes jasmine buds are added for flavour. The Japanese have made the drinking of tea into an elaborate ritual, which has greatly influenced their life and culture."



"There's instant tea too, isn't there, Daddy?" Alka asked.

"Yes, just like instant coffee. You simply dip a tea-bag into a cup of hot water. Tea scientists have also developed carbonated tea in bottles. Soon you'll be able to drink a bottle of cold tea just as you would any soft drink."

"Whatever will they think of next?" Pranjol wondered.

"Something new is being invented every day," Mr. Barua observed. "But come, we must leave for the factory."

Just at that moment, a man came running, shouting, "Burra Sa'ab, Burra Sa'ab," at the top of his voice.

"It's Birchi, Mongla's father," Pranjol informed Rajvir.

"Burra Sa'ab, there's been a theft at the warehouse," said Birchi breathlessly. "Someone has stolen the tea-chests."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Barua. "How many chests were there?"

"I don't know, Burra Sa'ab. The dispatch clerk, Deka Babu, sent me to fetch you."

Mr. Barua rang up the police-station to report the theft. Then, he and the children drove to the warehouse.

The sprawling factory compound was enclosed by a barbed wire fence. The warehouse was in one corner, some distance from the main factory building.

A crowd had already collected in front of the warehouse. The three assistant-managers of the garden were there too. Deka, the dispatch clerk, ran up to Mr. Barua.

"Sir, forty tea-chests are missing," he said.

"Give me the details," Mr. Barua said curtly.

"Sir, the tea-chests were to be dispatched this morning. Last evening I locked the front door myself, the only entrance to the warehouse. When I opened it in the morning the warehouse was

empty. The strange thing is that the locks haven't been tampered with."

"What capacity chests?"

"Fifty kgs each, sir."

"That adds up to 2000 kgs. Since it was high quality tea, the loss would be about Rs. 50,000."

"Why 'about', Uncle?" Rajvir interrupted. "Aren't the prices fixed?"

Mr. Barua answered hurriedly, but patiently, "You see, Rajvir, tea isn't sold at the garden. We send it to brokers at auction centres in Guwahati or Calcutta. Tea tasters there sample the tea and fix the price. With that as the base price, the tea is then sold to the highest bidder."

Mr. Barua then abruptly summoned Birchi, the factory chowkidar. "Did you see anything unusual last night?"

"No Burra Sa'ab. Not a soul went near the warehouse."

"Are you sure you weren't dozing?"

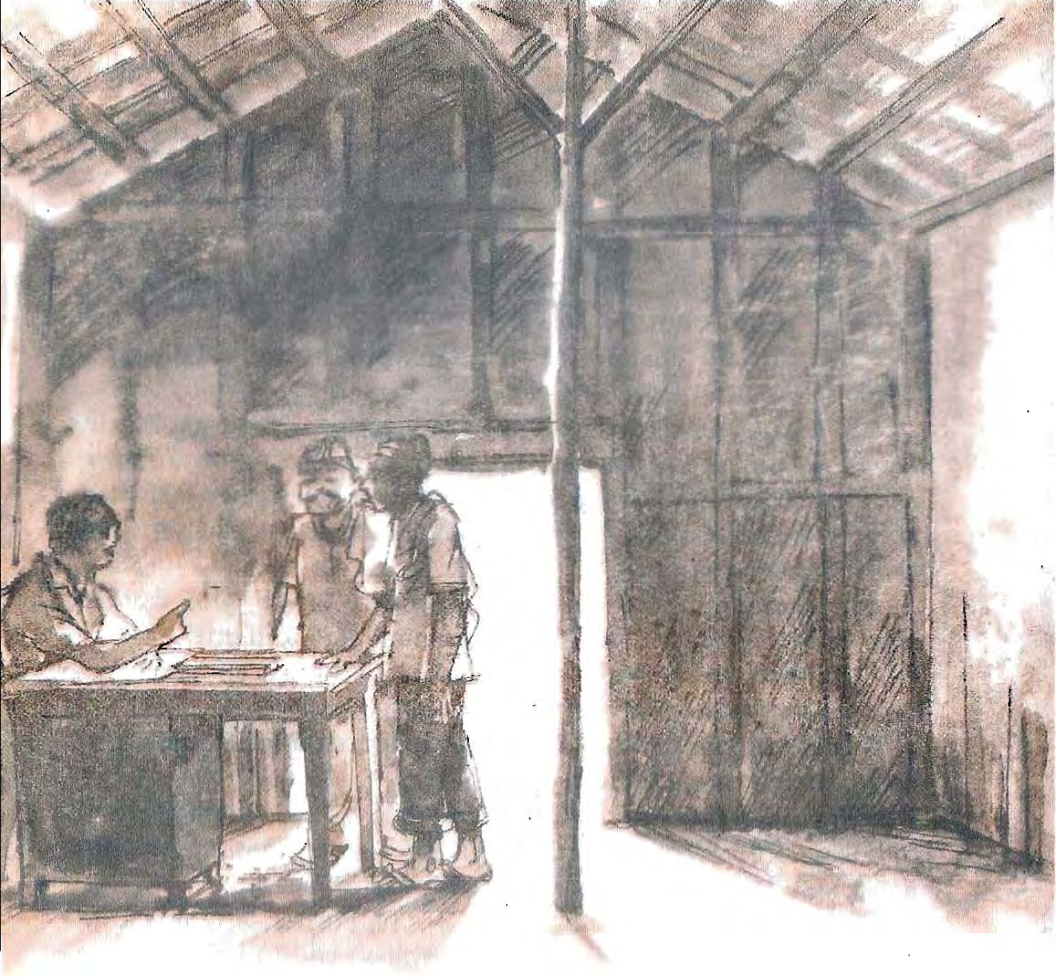
"How can you say that, Sa'ab! The leopard which Sawana saw keeps me extra alert these nights!"

They entered the warehouse. It was a single-roomed building. The floor was of polished wood. There were no windows. The ventilator shafts were heavily barred.

The dispatch clerk's table was in one corner. A table-cloth, one end trailing the ground, covered it. Otherwise the warehouse was empty.

Rajvir and Pranjol exchanged excited glances. Here was a chance to put their knowledge, gleaned from dozens of detective books, to practical use!

While Mr. Barua and the others were engrossed in earnest discussions, the children went around the warehouse,



searching for clues.

Pranjol, examining the floor on all fours, suddenly called out.  
"Rajvir, Alka, come here!"

On the floor were a couple of smudged footprints.

"Alka, when did it rain here last?" Pranjol enquired.

"Almost a week ago."

"Most mysterious," Pranjol said. "It hasn't rained for a week.



the ground outside is hard as stone, yet here are these muddy footprints because wet mud has stuck to someone's soles!"

"Could be an important clue," Rajvir admitted.

They searched fruitlessly for a while, then Rajvir discovered a blob of yellow clay. They took it to Mr. Barua.

"Uncle, what kind of soil is there in the garden?"

"Sandy-loamy and acidic," Mr. Barua replied slightly puzzled. But he again patiently explained, "Loamy soil contains



an equal ratio of sand and clay. Sandy-loamy is soil in which the percentage of sand is higher than clay. This is the ideal soil for tea because it allows water to filter through."

"Then what is this yellow blob of clay doing on the floor of the warehouse?"

Mr. Barua examined the clay; it definitely was not garden soil. He was pondering over this mystery when the police arrived.

He returned the piece to Rajvir and turned to greet Mr. Kotoki, the Officer-in-Charge of the police-station. Rajvir carefully wrapped the clay in a piece of paper and thrust it into his pocket.

Kotoki, the police OC, was very puzzled about how the thieves had got in without opening the front door.

"I will look around and investigate this," he told Mr. Barua.

"We have already found some clues," Rajvir said breathlessly. "Would you like to see them?"

"Daddy, can we help in the investigation?" Pranjol asked.

Kotoki's face screwed into a scowl of exasperation. "Mr. Barua," he said irritably. "Catching criminals is not child's play. Kindly ask these children to keep out of my way."

"He's right," Mr. Barua said. "Children, you mustn't interfere in the official investigation. Why don't you go swimming as you had planned. I can't show you the factory today, anyway."

Alka and the boys trooped out, angry and upset by the snub.



## CHAPTER V

As they had nothing to do, they decided to go to the river for a swim. They met Mongla outside and took him along. On the way to the bungalow they told Mongla about the clues they had found. They informed Mrs. Barua about their change of plan and collecting Taffy, set off towards the river that flowed along the southern boundary of the Dhekiabari garden.

The sensational theft had not affected work. Among the tea-bushes pluckers were busy.

"Your pluckers are so slow," Rajvir remarked. "I could pluck twice as many leaves in half the time."

Mongla was very amused. His features almost disappeared behind his toothy grin.

"Ho, ho, so you think! Come, there's Sukhumoni, my father's sister. Let's see who can pluck faster, you or she."

"Sukhuphuphu (aunt), Rajvir here wants to pick some leaves. Let him try, will you."

They entered the tea-bushes. The elderly tea plucker flashed them a welcoming smile.

Rajvir took up the challenge. Grabbing two fistfuls of leaves he broke them quickly.





"Not like that, Chota Sa'ab," Sukhumoni said. "You don't tear off every leaf you can grab. You only pick two leaves and a bud, breaking the stem between the second and third leaf. See, like this."

With deft fingers she snipped off a stem with two leaves and a bud and handed it to Rajvir. The leaves, because they were fresh sprouts, were tender and pliant. The bud was not really a bud but a new leaf which had not yet unfurled.

"Every year during the rainy season new leaves sprout," Sukhumoni explained. "These, and not the old leaves, are used



to make tea. If you pluck more than two leaves and a bud the quality of the tea will suffer."

"That's why the tea-bushes are pruned," added Mongla. "A tea plant would grow very tall if not controlled by pruning. Pruning keeps the plants bushy, so that there are more branches and thus more plucking points."

"That's right," agreed Sukhumoni. "Bushes are also kept waist high so that we can pluck easily and efficiently."

"Next time I'll keep my mouth shut," Rajvir promised, as they moved on.

Near the edge of the tea-garden, the path wound through land on which there were no tea-bushes. Here grew plants with wide, petal-shaped leaves.

"That's the guatemala," Pranjol pointed out. "It's a green-crop used to prepare the soil. The tea saplings you saw at the clone-nursery will be planted here. Green-crops such as the guatemala, mimosa and citronella build up micro-organisms needed for the soil's fertility, and revive overused soil."

"Citronella? Isn't that a grass from which oil is extracted?"

"Yes, the citronella has a lovely, lemon smell and is used in soaps and scents. Many gardens nowadays grow it for commercial use."

Soon they reached the wire-fencing marking the boundary of the tea-garden. They climbed over an iron gate, crossed a patch of marshy land, and arrived at the river.

A high, earth embankment ran along the banks of the river to protect the adjacent areas from floods. The children clambered up it. When he reached the top Rajvir gasped with surprise and bent down to examine the earth.

He brought out the bit of clay, he had found in the warehouse,





from his pocket. There was no doubt about it. Both were of the same, yellow clayish variety.

"The thieves came here," Rajvir said excitedly.

"The earth is hard," Pranjol commented. "Unless the clay was wet, it wouldn't stick to the shoes."

"That can only mean one thing," Alka put in. "The thieves must have been in the river for a while."

The boys made a mental note of the new clue for the future and dived into the water. Alka and Taffy wandered about on the embankment.

Suddenly Alka's foot hit a jutting rock and she stumbled and fell. She shrieked as she slithered down the embankment and almost toppled into the river.

But, at the last moment, her desperate hands caught at a shrub growing at the end of the slope. She clutched it and hung on, poised just above the water.

Alka's shriek and Taffy's barks brought the boys rushing out of the river.

"Hold on, Alka," Pranjol shouted. "We're coming."

But before they could reach Alka the shrub, unable to take her weight any longer, gave way and she tumbled into the river.

The horrified boys waited for the splash, but there was only a thud. Moments later Alka stood up, pale but unhurt.

The boys stared at her in disbelief. Her feet were knee-deep in shrubs. She seemed to be standing on the water.

When they reached her the mystery was solved. A wooden boat was tied to the bank, carefully concealed by clumps of shrub. Alka had fallen straight into it.

"Thank God you're okay!"

"What a fright you gave us!"







"This looks highly suspicious to me!" Mongla exclaimed.

"Why?" asked Pranjol. "What is so suspicious about a boat tied to the river-bank? There must be dozens of them around here."

"True," replied Mongla. "But nobody hides a boat, as they have this one."

"I think I'm beginning to understand," Rajvir said. "We better leave this place quickly."

They hurriedly rearranged the shrubs to cover the boat and set off for home. As they drew near the bungalow they could make out that something important had happened.

The tea pluckers had abandoned work and stood in groups, talking and gesticulating excitedly.

Sukhumoni came running up to Mongla. She was extremely upset.

"Mongla, the police have arrested your father and Deka Babu. They think that the two of them stole the tea-chests."

Mongla looked thunderstruck. Tears sprang to his eyes. Pranjol put an arm across his shoulders and pulled him to one side.

"Come to the tool-shed behind our bungalow at 3 o'clock," he whispered. "We'll hold a council of war."



## CHAPTER VI

"I am sure Deka and Birchi are innocent," Mr. Barua said over lunch. "Both have worked in this garden for over twenty years."

"Why then have the police arrested them?" Pranjol asked.

"The police OC has come to the conclusion that since no one could enter the warehouse without opening the front door, the door must have been opened and then relocked after the chests had been removed. So he has arrested Deka, who had the keys and Birchi, the chowkidar."

Pranjol was about to say something when a warning sign from Rajvir silenced him.

Later in the afternoon the children gathered in the tool-shed in their backyard. Mongla looked very unhappy.

"Let's weigh the facts and then draw our conclusions," Rajvir urged.

"Assuming Deka is innocent," Pranjol said, "the thieves could have opened the locks with a duplicate set of keys."

"But my father would have seen them and raised the alarm," Mongla pointed out.

"So we conclude that the thieves didn't enter through the front door," Pranjol said. The others nodded in agreement.

"But there is no other way to get in," Alka said. "Of course they could have broken in through the roof or a sidewall, which certainly wasn't done in this case."

"There's one other way. They could have burrowed through the earth and entered from under the floor," Rajvir suggested.

"That must be it!" Pranjol exclaimed excitedly. "Remember those smudged footprints. There had been no rain for a week, yet the footprints were wet and muddy."

"Yes," agreed Mongla. "The earth inside a tunnel would be wet and muddy. That would also explain why Father didn't see anything."

"But we searched the warehouse," Alka said. "There was nothing remotely resembling an underground tunnel."

"We weren't looking for one then," Rajvir asserted. "We will be, now. Mongla, can we get into the warehouse again?"

"The door is open. No one has locked it because the warehouse is empty."

They all trooped out. When they reached the warehouse they were relieved to find the front door open.

They surveyed the interior carefully. Rajvir's face broke into a smile of delight.

"Ah ha!" he exclaimed. "Elementary, my dear Pranjol. Look under the dispatch-table."

They had searched the floor in the morning but had not thought of removing the dispatch-table and looking underneath it. They did so now.

They saw it immediately—a thin, square cut, so fine that they would probably have missed it had they not been looking for it.

Mongla took out a penknife and inserted the blade in the cut. He chipped away at the wood till he had enough space for his



fingers. Gripping the edge firmly, he pulled the entire portion up.

"Ooh!" Alka cried out in excitement as the wide dark mouth of a tunnel was revealed beneath the floor.

The thieves had sawn through the wooden planks, making a kind of trap-door, which they must have pushed up while entering. After the tea-chests had been removed, they had replaced the dispatch-table to conceal the makeshift trap-door. The thief last entering the tunnel had closed it behind him.

Mongla replaced the trap-door. "So that's that," he said.

"The piece of clay and the hidden boat fit in perfectly," Rajvir said. "The thieves built a tunnel to the warehouse, and carried the chests to the river. The boat was used to ferry the loot across to the opposite bank. A truck must have been waiting there to take the chests away."

"We have to find the other opening of the tunnel," Mongla said.



"Why not go through the tunnel?" suggested Rajvir.

"We might run straight into the thieves. That wouldn't be safe," Mongla said.

"How else can we discover it?" asked Alka.

Pranjol picked up a piece of paper and a pencil from the dispatch-table.

"Look," he said, drawing a crude sketch. "It's quite natural that the thieves would begin the tunnel from the south, in the direction of the river. The tunnel can't be too long not more than a hundred metres at most. So if we draw a straight line from the warehouse to the boat, and search the area fifty to a hundred metres from the warehouse, we might discover the other opening."

They emerged cautiously from the warehouse and moved towards the direction indicated. It was past working hours, so there was no one among the tea-bushes. They pretended to walk nonchalantly, but their eyes were alert. Then Mongla saw it.

The opening was on the upper side of a deep ditch. A bamboo frame, plastered with mud, covered it. Small shrubs were stuck to the frame to make the camouflage more effective.

Mongla dropped into the ditch, pulled away the cover, nodded to the boys and then replaced it. "Let's get out of here," he said urgently, "before someone sees us."

They half-walked, half-ran, back to the tool-shed.

"We must inform Daddy at once," whispered Pranjol. "He can tell the police and get Deka and Mongla's father released."

"Not yet," Rajvir murmured. "The thieves must remain under the impression that they are safe."

"That's right," Mongla said quietly. "We must collect more evidence."





"But where do we begin?" asked Pranjol.

"The tea that was stolen was of the finest quality," Mongla observed sagely. "How did the thieves know that?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Simply this: the thieves must have an accomplice among the tea-garden workers."

"Digging a tunnel takes a long time," Alka pointed out. "The earth has to be removed from the tunnel and taken elsewhere. Strange that nobody saw the diggers at work."

"Obviously they worked at night," Rajvir said with excitement.

Something clicked in Mongla's mind.

"Aare baba!" he almost shouted, despite their attempts at hushed tones. "It must be him!"

"Shush!" the others worriedly uttered simultaneously.

"The Sirdar called Sawana. He must be the accomplice."

"The one whose bull the leopard lifted?" Pranjol queried.

"Oh, so you've heard of the leopard? It was Sawana who spread the leopard story that frightened the garden workers into remaining at home at night. No one else has seen the leopard so far."

"Yes, that's what Daddy said. Not even a pug-mark to show its presence."

"Maybe," Mongla suggested, "there was no leopard. Sawana spread the story so that the thieves could dig their tunnel without interference."

They were all silent, lost in thought.

"Also," added Mongla, clinching his argument, "Sawana works at the packaging machine in the factory. He would know what quality of tea is packed when."

## CHAPTER VII

Mr. Barua took Rajvir and the others to the factory the following morning.

"It seems like a miracle," Rajvir observed as they drove along, "that this green leaf becomes the dark or golden-brown tea we brew."

"All that is really done is to completely remove the moisture from a green leaf and, at the same time, bring out its colour and smell. No chemicals are added. Machinery is used to hasten the process, to control the quality and for mass production. Actually you can make tea at home."

"At home? How?" asked Rajvir.

"Why not? In a crude way, of course, just as they did in the old days."

"Uncle, all this applies to Green tea. But what about the other two kinds of tea you mentioned, C.T.C. and Orthodox. Are they different?"

"Of course. Orthodox has a better flavour, C.T.C. yields more liquid. Orthodox is boiled while brewing, C.T.C. is strained. As for the differences in their manufacture, I shall show them to you in the factory."

The *durwan* at the factory-gate welcomed them with a smart salaam. Mr. Barua stopped the jeep next to a long-roofed structure without walls. Inside it were half a dozen tiered platforms.

"These are called 'changs'. The green leaves plucked in the garden are weighed here and spread out on these 'changs'. Within a few hours the leaves begin to wither. They lose around 30 to 40 per cent of their moisture here. This is called Natural Withering."

Nearby was a similar shed. But instead of hessian-covered platforms there were concrete troughs with thick wire-meshing on which leaves were spread. Powerful electric fans rotated rapidly at the end of each trough.

"This is called Controlled Withering," Mr. Barua explained. "Natural Withering takes too long, especially in a humid climate. So heated air at a controlled temperature is passed through these troughs."

The children followed Mr. Barua into the factory. The interior resounded with the clickety-clack of dozens of machines. They had to raise their voices to make themselves audible. The strong odour of crushed tea-leaves hit their nostrils.

Mr. Barua pointed to a three-legged machine. "That's a rolling table where the withered leaves are crushed and twisted. The sap, which is squeezed out, is thus evenly spread."

To strain the rolled leaves they were next fed into meshed, pipe-like machines that constantly rotated.

"And this is a sifter," Mr. Barua continued. "It separates the finely rolled tea. At this point the technique for C.T.C. and Orthodox differ. To make Orthodox tea, the sifted leaves are taken straight to the fermenting room. For C.T.C. they are first fed

into another machine."

"What does C.T.C. stand for, Uncle?"

"Curling, tearing and crushing. That's exactly what the C.T.C. machine does." A finely cut, pulpy mass oozed out of the machine outlet and fell in heaps on aluminium trays.





"As you can see in C.T.C. manufacture the leaves are completely shredded, and the juice squeezed out and evenly mixed. So the colour is brought out. In Orthodox, where there is no cutting, the juice is brought out slowly, so the flavour remains."

They moved to the fermenting room, where the leaves were spread over troughs. Fermentation was done naturally. Before Rajvir's astonished eyes the leaves lost their greenish colour and became brown.

"It takes about an hour for complete fermentation," Mr. Barua continued like a good guide. "The miracle you mentioned takes place here. The green hue disappears due to oxidation. The oxygen in the atmosphere reacts with chemicals in the leaves to cause a change of colour and smell."

Next they entered the Drying-Room. It contained huge drying-machines. Air at very high temperature, from coal or tea-drier oil furnaces is passed through the fermented leaves.

"The hot air removes the remaining moisture from the leaves and makes the finished product crisp and dry. Here, smell this." Mr. Barua picked up a fistful of tea and handed some to Rajvir. The leaves were warm and had a pleasant smell.

"Now all that is left to be done," Mr. Barua continued, "is to sort the tea into various grades such as Orange Pekoe, Pekoe Fannings, Broken Orange Pekoe etc, and pack them. Sorting is done in these meshed, funnel-like machines with tapering ends. Meshes of different shapes and sizes are used to sort out different grades."

Finally they entered the room in which the tea was being packed. A brawny man with ugly, pock-marked features was shovelling tea into chests that were on the Vibrating Machine.

The children recognized him from Mongla's description. It was Sawana. Indeed the Sirdar was in the best position to know what quality of tea was being packed at the factory.

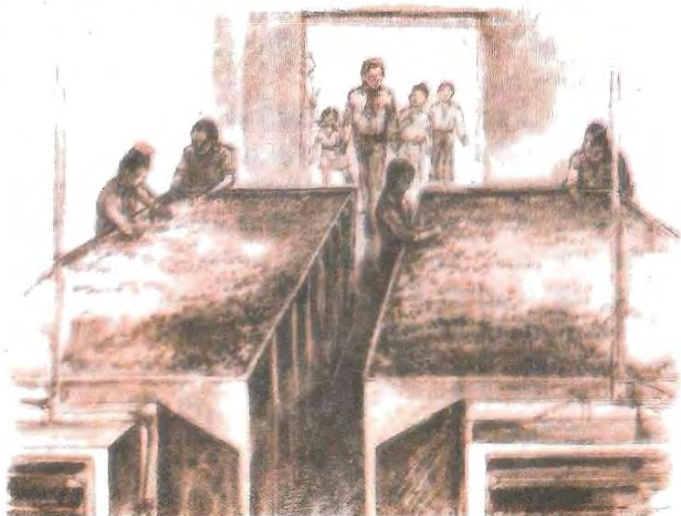
"Moisture is the tea's worst enemy," Mr. Barua continued, unaware that the children's attention had wandered. "This packing machine, which vibrates constantly, ensures that the tea is tightly packed and that there are no pockets of air in the chests. The tea-chests are also lined inside with aluminium foil to prevent moisture from seeping in."

As soon as a chest was full, a worker fitted a lid on it and nailed it down. Then on the chest was stencilled its grade, quality, and name of the garden.

"To ensure quality production we take samples of the manufactured tea every day, and taste it at the factory," added Mr. Barua. "From just a little sip, I can tell whether it is good or was over-fermented or under-fired."

Because they had grown accustomed to the constant noise of the machinery, the silence outside as they emerged from the factory seemed strange.

The factory-siren, announcing the morning break, screamed behind them as they drove away.



## CHAPTER VIII

Work for the garden workers ended at 4 p.m. At 5 p.m. the children accompanied by Mongla, left for the *busti* where the workers lived.

Long rows of thatched huts, each with a small compound, stretched before them. At intervals were community tube-wells where groups of women stood gossiping and washing while toddlers and small children romped and played. Pariah-dogs lazed upon the dusty road, and a litter of pigs wallowed in a muddy patch.

In the field next to the labour-club some young men had started a game of football. From many huts could be heard the strains of radio music.

"We enjoy music and dancing, and we make merry whenever we get the chance," Mongla told the others.

The children noticed hectic activity at a particular hut and stopped. The entrance was gaily decorated with coloured paper-flowers. Men, women and children sat in a semicircle on the ground, singing a song. Half a dozen female dancers, hands clasped around each other's waists, swayed rhythmically to the lilting melody, their feet weaving an intricate pattern.

"They are dancing the Jhumur," Mongla said.

"We have a number of festivals, in which the Jhumur is sung and danced. Tushupuja and Karampuja are our own festivals, but we also celebrate the Assamese Bihu as well as Holi and Kalipuja."

"Why are they dancing now?" Rajvir enquired.

"Oh, someone is getting married in a week and they've already started celebrating!"

Sawana's hut was at the end of the *busti*. As pre-planned Mongla remained outside at a distance while Pranjol, Rajvir and Alka entered.

Sawana came forward to receive them. *Murrahs* were brought and they all sat down.

"We want to hear about the leopard who lifted your bull," Pranjol said.

Sawana seemed very ill at ease. He screwed up his features as if trying to recollect what he had seen.

"Oh, it was almost a fortnight ago. A dark and rainy night, I remember. Around midnight I heard frantic lowing from the cowshed in the backyard. I keep two bulls there. I came out with my *dao*—a broad-bladed knife—in my hand. What do you think I saw? A huge leopard! It had caught a bull by the throat and was dragging it away."

"You had a light with you?" Rajvir asked.

"No. The small kerosene lamps, which we use at home, would have been no good in that kind of weather."

"Are you sure it was a leopard?" Pranjol enquired. "It could have been a Royal Bengal Tiger."

"No, a leopard. I saw the spots clearly."

"What did you do then?"







"What could I do? Hyenas I can shoo away, but I don't tangle with leopards, Chota Sa'ab. So I started shouting, banged a tin and made a great deal of noise."

"Did you find the bull's carcass?"

"No, never made an attempt to find it. What was the point? It was dead, anyway!"

"Did you examine the pug-marks?" Rajvir asked.

"There were none. The rain water had washed them away."

They moved to the cowshed at the back of the hut. The children looked carefully all around them.

"What a pity!" Rajvir exclaimed. "I hoped for an exciting tale of how you grappled with a leopard, but all you did was frighten it away. Thank you, anyway, and goodbye."

"Chota Sa'ab," Sawana said, addressing Pranjol, "the theft at the factory—has your father said anything about it?"

"Oh yes," Pranjol replied with a straight face. "He received a phone call from the police this morning. Both Deka and Birchi have confessed to stealing the tea."

"Confessed!" Sawana said with surprise.

"Yes. The police have declared the case closed. My father intends to use the warehouse again from tomorrow now that the thieves have been caught. The tea-chests piling up in the factory are going to be transferred to the warehouse."

They left behind them a delighted Sawana, grinning from ear to ear.

Mongla rejoined them a little later. "Any results?" he asked.

"Sawana is definitely bluffing," Rajvir answered. "It was a dark and rainy night, he had no light, the rain washed away the pug-marks yet he is certain that it was a leopard. He even claims he could see the spots!"



"We examined the backyard," Pranjol added. "The bamboo fencing that surrounds the house is quite old, but it was undamaged. A full-grown bull is a heavy animal and the leopard couldn't very well have jumped over the fence with it. So the fence would have been broken if there really had been a leopard."

"He looks too cheerful to have lost a bull," Alka observed. "A bull costs money and garden workers are poor."

"Just as I thought," Mongla said. "Sawana needs to be watched."

"That's what we plan to do," Pranjol said. "I have fed him some false information. We'll return here tonight and see if he acts on it."





## CHAPTER IX

Around 11 o'clock Pranjol and Rajvir slipped out of bed and tiptoed down the staircase. As they left the bungalow and went towards the tool-shed, Taffy who was left unchained at night, joined them. Pranjol flashed his torch twice and from the shadows Mongla whispered urgently, "Come, there's no time to lose."

The trio moved at a fast trot. It was pitch dark. The sky was overcast with slate-black clouds. An occasional streak of lightning in the distance heralded the advent of a storm.

The garden paths all looked alike at night. If it had not been for Mongla, the boys would have lost their way. Mongla unerringly led them to the *busti* and to Sawana's hut.

The other huts were in total darkness, but a small light flickered in Sawana's. Moving silently near to the wall, the boys peered through the bamboo-framed window.

Sawana was inside, preparing to go somewhere. He picked up a broad-bladed knife, his *dao*, and blew out the lamp. Then, unlatching the door noiselessly, he stepped out of the hut.

The boys pressed themselves deeper into the shadows. For one tense moment Sawana paused, and peered around him as if



to ensure that his departure was undetected. Then he set off at a fast pace.

The boys followed, at a safe distance.

Suddenly Rajvir's heart gave a violent lurch. Without warning, long-drawn, high-pitched yells rose all around them.

"What's that?" Rajvir's voice had a note of fear.

"Jackals," whispered Mongla. "If one of them starts howling, the whole pack joins in the chorus."

Pranjol's stomach knotted with fear and excitement. The dark, oppressive atmosphere, the rustle of the breeze through clumps of bamboo, the furious howling of the jackals, all contributed to the tension. He wondered uneasily whether a leopard might not be around.

Sawana led them out of the garden on to the national highway. Here a small weekly market was held every Sunday. There was a short row of small, concrete buildings, used as shops-cum-residences by businessmen. Sawana went to one of these and hammered on the door.

There was a short exchange. Then the door was unbolted and someone let Sawana in. After he had entered, the door was again closed and bolted.

A narrow gap consisting mainly of a shallow smelly drain separated the shop from its neighbour. The boys crossed over, their noses wrinkling at the foul smell. They tiptoed single file till they reached a half-open window. Mongla peered cautiously in and then moved sideways to allow Pranjol and Rajvir a glimpse.

Five men sat cross-legged on a bed, playing cards. Sawana sat on a wooden stool.

The five men had unpleasant, vicious faces. Sawana was talking to a large-built, powerful-looking man, who seemed to be

the leader.

"So the coast is clear," Sawana was saying. "Deka and Birchi have confessed, though God knows why!"

"That's an easy guess," the powerful man said. "Fear of police pressure has made them confess. Once in court they will recant."

"The manager plans to start using the warehouse from tomorrow. Tea is piling up in the factory and needs to be shifted.





He has no idea, of course, that the police have arrested the wrong people."

"What quality tea would that be?" the gang-leader asked.

"The finest our garden produces. It will fetch a high price in the market."

The leader's face flushed with pleasure. "Then we make another raid tomorrow night."

There was a gasp of surprise. The others were quick to protest.

"Let's not try our luck too far," said one.

"A second raid so soon is too risky," commented another.

"Not at all," reassured the leader. "We have a foolproof system. We'll also have the advantage of surprise. No one expects another raid, because the thieves are believed to have been caught. We have simply to repeat what we had done so successfully the first time."

"But the police will immediately realize that Deka and Birchi are not the real culprits," Sawana pointed out.

"So what. They are bound to discover that sooner or later. Another raid will mean a sizeable sum for all of us."

Greed was now writ large on the faces of the men. It was no longer difficult to persuade them.

The boys listened for a while longer and then retraced their steps.

"I know the leader," Mongla said. "He is the owner of the shop. The other men are strangers to me."

"We have done all we can," Pranjol said. "Now it's up to the police."

Mongla saw them safely into the bungalow, then, bidding them a hasty goodbye, he disappeared into the darkness.

## CHAPTER X

A pair of quarrelling magpies woke the boys early the next morning. They did not waste time in changing out of their pajamas but raced straight to Mr. Barua.

Mr. Barua listened gravely while they told him about the tunnel, the boat in the river and Sawana's involvement with the shopkeeper and his gang of thieves.

He rang up the police-station. Kotoki arrived almost immediately. As the boys began their tale again, Kotoki first tried to brush them aside but as their story unfolded his face reddened with embarrassment.

Ultimately he was forced to apologize for his former high-handedness. "You children have done a marvellous job," he admitted. "Now we must catch the gang. When they make their attempt tonight, we'll lay a trap."

Mr. Barua brought out a map of the garden. The focal points for planning an ambush obviously were the mouths of the tunnel and the boat.

"We will place a large number of policemen at these points. They will hide among the tea-bushes. I will personally direct operations inside the warehouse," Kotoki said.

"Those chests are heavy," Mr. Barua observed. "It is quite a long distance to the river. I can't imagine them carrying the chests all the way."

"That's logical," Kotōki agreed. "So they must have some transport. It wouldn't be a motor-vehicle, but something that doesn't make a noise."

"Should I get some of the garden workers to help your policemen?" Mr. Barua asked.

"That wouldn't be wise," Kotōki replied. "Too many people at night might confuse things. My policemen are trained. They'll be armed too. I shall, of course, see that they aren't in uniform."

"Is that necessary?" Rajvir queried. "After all, it'll be too dark for anyone to see what they are wearing."

"For the plan I have in mind, they must be in plain clothes. You see, we must not forget the truck waiting on the other bank, nor the tea-chests stolen previously. Now this is what we do..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The night was dark and sultry. An overcast sky blocked out the moon and stars. Deep within the shadows armed policemen waited silently, their faces tense.

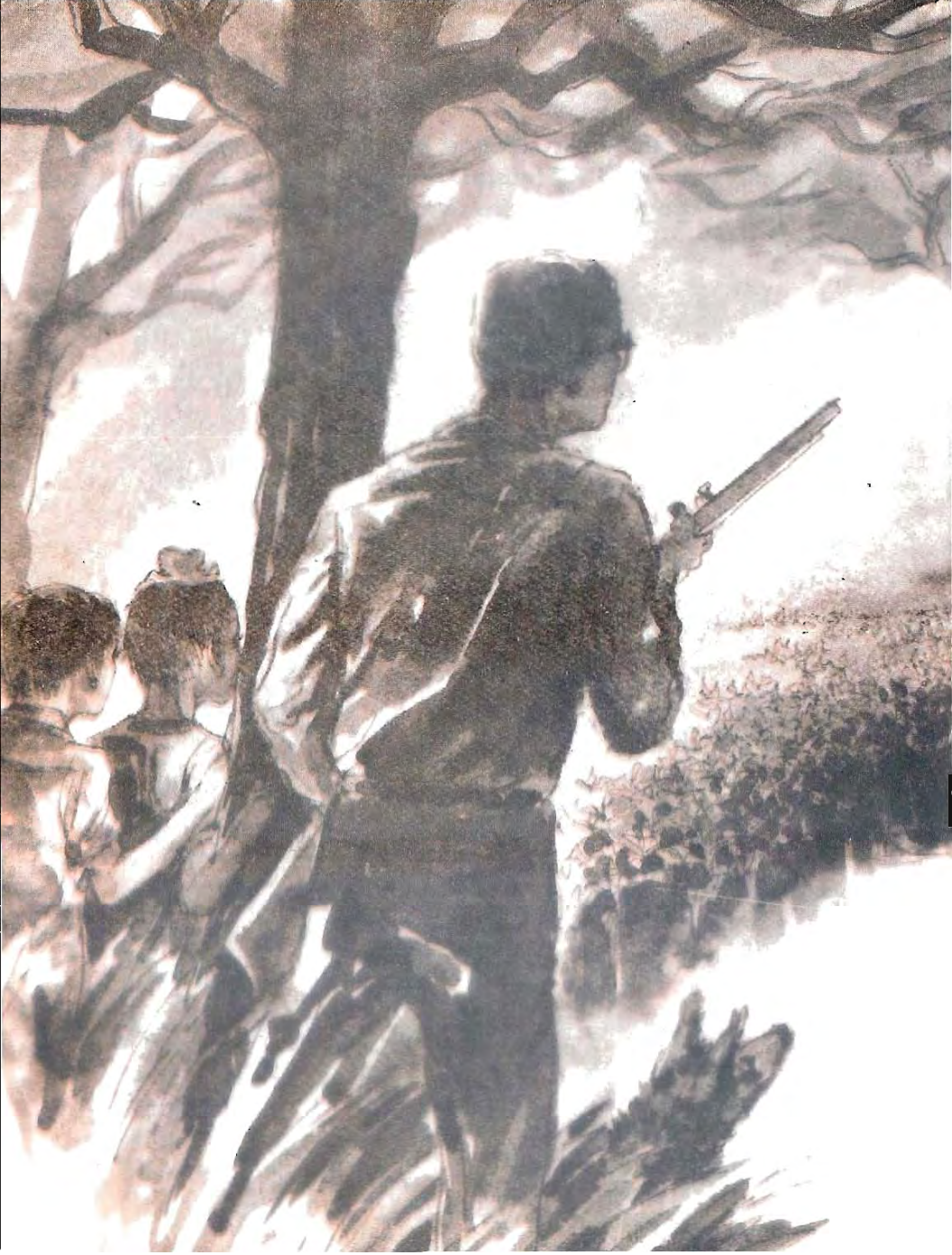
Inside the warehouse Kotōki and three others crouched behind the stacks of tea-chests. They had loaded revolvers in their hands.

Mr. Barua had a rifle. He stood besides a shade-tree, a little away from the entrance to the tunnel. Rajvir, Pranjol, Alka and Mongla huddled near him, hearts thudding with excitement, ears alert for the slightest sound. Taffy sat at their heels, silent as a shadow.

They had rubbed a solution of salt and citronella oil on themselves to ward off mosquitoes and leeches. A swarm of mosquitoes droned angrily around their heads. Otherwise there was absolute silence.









Suddenly Taffy tensed and uttered a low, deep-throated growl.

Everyone jerked to attention, their eyes straining to pierce the darkness. They heard the creaking before seeing the shape of the bullock-cart as it lumbered forward.

"Sawana's bull!" Mongla whispered derisively. "The one that the leopard lifted!"

The bullock-cart stopped near the entrance to the tunnel. Four figures jumped down and hastily lifted off the bamboo



cover. Three of the men crawled inside the tunnel while the fourth waited outside.

A match flared into life in the bullock-cart. The driver lit his *bidi*. The flame illuminated an ugly, pock-marked face. It was Sawana.

Twenty minutes later the first tea-chest appeared at the mouth of the tunnel. It was passed to the man outside, who with Sawana's help loaded it on to the bullock-cart.

One of the policemen, crouching among the bushes, hissed, "Now", and from all sides policemen surged silently forward, rifles levelled. Sawana and the other man gaped with amazement when they suddenly found themselves surrounded. Handcuffs were clicked on.

In the warehouse, Kotoki and his men sprang from their hiding-place just as the thief was lifting another tea-chest. It was the leader of the gang. The man had lightning reflexes. He dropped the chest and dived to the ground, his hand groping for the revolver at his waist. Kotoki's gun spoke once. The man jerked in agony as the bullet hit him just below his right shoulder.

Alarmed by the sound of the gunshot, the two inside the tunnel crawled frantically towards the other opening, only to fall into the hands of the waiting police.

The four prisoners near the bullock-cart were taken to the warehouse. Mr. Barua and the children followed on the escorting policemen's heels.

"A lovely haul, Mr. Barua," said a smiling Kotoki. "Their colleague in the boat should be here any moment now."

The prisoners, sullen-faced and unrepentant, glared at him. Mr. Barua summoned the garden doctor to treat the injured

gang-leader. The bullet had passed clean through without damaging any vital organ. As the doctor was dressing the wound, the boatman was pushed into the warehouse by a grim-faced policeman.

"Almost got away, sir," he reported. "Had to drag him out of the river. Slippery as an eel, he is, sir!"

\* \* \* \* \*

From then on the plan they had formulated was carried out with smooth precision. After marking time for two hours so as not to arouse the suspicions of the thieves, a boat-load of





policemen, led by Kotoki and guided by the boatman and the gang-leader, left for the opposite bank.

The three men waiting with a truck received the shock of their lives, when, instead of the tea-chests they were expecting, a boatful of policemen in civilian clothes turned up. The men surrendered without a fight.

Later that night the police, acting on information provided by the gang, raided a warehouse in the nearby township and recovered all the tea-chests that had been previously stolen.

By dawn the next day the Case of the Missing Tea-Chests had finally been solved.







ISBN 81-237-0169-1

National Book Trust, India