

Satyajit Ray

BIG BILL

Tulsi Babu is not easily surprised. In fact the only thing that never ceases to surprise him is the excellence of the mutton *kebab* at Mansur's. The one person who is aware of this is Tulsi Babu's friend and colleague, Prodyot Chanda.

Thus Tulsi Babu was not particularly surprised to find an unusually large egg while looking for medicinal plants in the forests of Dandakaranya. He worked as an upper division clerk in Arbuthnot & Co, but had always dabbled in herbal medicine.

It was when he was looking for a herb to treat high blood pressure that he found the egg. The herb was referred to as *chakraparna*, which is the Sanskrit for 'round leaves'. Himself and Prodyot Babu had been given directions by a holy man, and found the plant in a ravine next to a *neem* tree scorched by lightning.

Tulsi Babu had just put the bag down on the ground and stooped towards the shrub when a sharp query from Prodyot Babu interrupted him.

'What on earth is that?'

Tulsi Babu had seen the egg too, but was not bothered by it. 'Must be some sort of egg,' he said. The egg was yellow, with brown stripes flecked with blue.

'What could such a large egg belong to?' said Prodyot Babu 'A python?'

Tulsi Babu didn't answer. He was too busy plucking branches off the shrub and putting them in his bag. It was at this very moment that the egg chose to hatch. Prodyot Babu had jumped back at the sound of the cracking shell, but now he took courage to take a few steps towards it.

The head was already out of the shell. Not a snake, nor a croc or a turtle, but a bird. Soon the whole creature was out. It stood on spindly legs and looked around. It was quite large; about the size of a hen. Its purple plumes were unique, as was its alert behaviour so soon after birth.

'Very surprising,' said Prodyot Babu, 'There seems to be no sign of its parents, at least not in the vicinity.'

'I think that's enough surprise for a day,' said Tulsi Babu, hoisting his bag on his shoulder. 'It's almost four. We must be out of the forest before it gets dark.'

Somewhat against his wish, Prodyot Babu turned away from the chick and started walking but a pattering of feet made Prodyot Babu stop and turn round. The chick was following them.

'I say –' called out Prodyot Babu.

Tulsi Babu now stopped and turned. The chick was looking straight at him. Then it padded across and stopped in front of Tulsi Babu where it opened its unusually large beak and gripped the edge of Tulsi Babu's dhoti.

Prodyot Babu was so surprised that he didn't know what to say, until he saw Tulsi Babu pick up the chick and shove it into his bag. 'What d'you think you're doing?' he cried in consternation. 'You put that nameless chick in your bag?'

'I've always wanted to keep a pet,' said Tulsi Babu, resuming his walk. 'Even mongrels are kept as pets. What's wrong with a nameless chick?'

Prodyot Babu saw the chick sticking its neck out of the swinging bag and glancing around with wide-open eyes.

Two months had passed since Tulsi Babu's return from the holy man's cave. He had found a Sanskrit name for the chick: *Brihat-Chanchu*, or Big Bill; soon the Big was dropped and now it was just Bill. Bill had been put in a cage which Tulsi Babu had specially ordered several

sizes too large at two and a half feet from the ground, but only yesterday Tulsī Babu had noticed that when Bill stood straight its head nearly touched the roof.

Having tried to feed the chick grain and failed, Tulsī Babu had guessed, and rightly so, that it was probably a meat eater and began by feeding it insects. But of late the bird's appetite seemed to have grown, and Tulsī Babu has been obliged to feed it meat bought from the market.

Although its looks didn't bother Tulsī Babu, they certainly worried Prodyot Babu. The two met rarely outside office hours, except once a week for a meal of *kebab* and *paratba* at Mansur's, but Prodyot Babu had started to drop in at Tulsī Babu's in the evenings. The bird's astonishing rate of growth and the change in its appearance were a constant source of surprise to Prodyot Babu. The bird's beak had grown as well as its body; shiny black in colour, it resembled an eagle's beak but was much larger in relation to the rest of the body.

One Sunday Prodyot Babu came to Tulsī Babu with a camera borrowed from a nephew. There wasn't enough light in the cage, so he had come armed with a flashgun. The scream of protest from the bird as the flash went off sent Prodyot Babu reeling back a full yard. Something rankled in Prodyot Babu's mind; he hadn't yet mentioned it to Tulsī Babu but somewhere in a book or a magazine he had seen a picture of a bird which greatly resembled this pet of Tulsī Babu's. If he came across the picture again, he would compare it with the photograph.

When the two friends were having tea, Tulsī Babu came out with a new piece of information. Ever since Bill had arrived, crows and sparrows had stopped coming to the flat. He said it was a blessing because the sparrows would build nests in the most unlikely places, while the crows would make off with food from the kitchen. All that had stopped.

'Is that so?' asked Prodyot Babu, surprised as usual.

Tulsī Babu sipped his tea and nodded 'By the way,' he said 'What was the idea behind taking the photograph?'

Prodyot Babu didn't mention the real reason. He said, 'When it's no more, it'll remind you of it.'

Prodyot Babu had the photograph developed and printed the following day. He also had two enlargements made. One he gave to Tulsī Babu and the other he took to the ornithologist. The ornithologist knew of no bird that resembled the photograph. He had seen nothing like it in all of his experience.

Tulsī Babu noted the date in his diary: February the fourteenth, 1980. Big Bill, who had been transferred from a three and-a-half-foot cage to a four-and-a-half-foot one only last month, had been guilty of a misdeed last night.

Tulsī Babu had been awakened by a suspicious sound in the middle of the night. A series of hard, metallic twangs. But the sound had soon stopped and had been followed by total silence. He put on his slippers, took the electric torch from the table, and came out on to the veranda.

In the beam of the torch he saw that the meshing on the cage had been ripped apart and a hole large enough for the bird to escape from had been made. The cage was now empty but Tulsī Babu's torch revealed nothing on this side of the veranda. At the opposite end, the veranda turned right towards his next-door neighbour's flat. Tulsī Babu reached the corner in a flash and swung his torch to the right.

It was just as he feared.

The next-door neighbour's cat was now a helpless captive in Bill's beak. The cat was still alive and thrashing its legs about.

Tulsī Babu now cried out 'Bill!' and the bird promptly dropped the cat from its beak.

Then it advanced with long strides, turned the corner, and went quietly back to its

cage.

Tulsi Babu heaved a sigh of relief, but the rest of the night he couldn't sleep.

On one of his trips to get medicinal herbs from the forest, Tulsi Babu found a large chick. The chick is of a peculiar nature; very big with purple feathers and a malevolent stare. But despite his friend Prodyot Babu's protestations, Tulsi Babu insisted on keeping it as a pet and naming it Big Bill. It has carried on growing and developed a taste for other smaller birds and most recently the neighbour's cat. After this last 'cat' incident, Tulsi Babu decided he would have to do something about Big Bill.

The next day Tulsi Babu had to absent himself from work for an hour or so while he went to the railway booking office. Prodyot Babu had asked after the bird and Tulsi Babu had replied he was fine. Then he had added after a brief reflection – 'I'm thinking of framing the photo you took of it.'

On the twenty-fourth of February, Tulsi Babu arrived in Jagdalpur, the nearest station to the forests where he had originally found the bird. A packing case with Bill in it arrived in the luggage van in the same train. The case was provided with a hole for ventilation.

From Jagdalpur, Tulsi Babu set off in a luggage caravan with two coolies and the case, for the precise spot in the forest where he had found the bird. At a certain milepost on the main road, Tulsi Babu got off the vehicle and, with the coolies carrying the packing case. It took nearly an hour to reach the spot. The coolies put the case down and began to open the packing case. This was done, and Tulsi Babu was relieved to see that Bill was in fine fettle. The coolies, of course, bolted screaming at the sight of the bird, but that didn't worry Tulsi Babu. His purpose had been served. Bill was looking at him with a fixed stare. The sooner the parting took place the better.

'Good-bye, Bill,' Tulsi Babu said and started his journey back to the Tempo.

About a fortnight later, on a visit to Tulsi Babu's place, Prodyot Babu was surprised to see the cage empty. He asked about the bird. 'It's gone,' said Tulsi Babu.

Prodyot Babu naturally assumed that the bird was dead. He felt a twinge of remorse. He hadn't meant it seriously when he had said that the photo would remind Tulsi Babu of his pet when it was no more; he had no idea the bird would die so soon. The photograph he had taken had been framed and was hanging on the wall of the bedroom. Tulsi Babu seemed out of sorts; altogether the atmosphere was gloomy. To relieve the gloom, Prodyot Babu made a suggestion. 'We haven't been to Mansur's in long while. What about going tonight for a meal of *kebab* and *paratha*?'

'I'm afraid I have quite lost my taste for them.'

Prodyot Babu couldn't believe his ears. 'Lost your taste for *kebabs*? What's the matter? Aren't you well? Have you tried the herb you found in the jungle?'

Tulsi Babu said that his blood pressure had come down to normal. What he didn't bother to mention was that he had forgotten all about herbal medicines as long as Bill had been with him, and that he had gone back to them only a week ago.

'By the way,' remarked Prodyot Babu, 'the mention of the herb reminds me - did you read in the papers today about the forest of Dandakaranya?'

'What did the papers say?'

The paper was near at hand. Prodyot Babu pointed out the news to him. The headline said 'The Terror of Dandakaranya'.

The news described a sudden and unexpected threat to the domestic animals and poultry in the villages around the forests. Some unknown species of animal had started to devour them. No tigers are known to exist in that area, and proof has been found that

something other than a feline species had been causing the havoc. Tigers usually drag their prey to their lairs; this particular beast doesn't..

Tulsi Babu read the news, folded the paper, and put it back on the table.

'Don't tell me you don't find anything exceptional in the story?' said Prodyot Babu.

Tulsi Babu shook his head. In other words, he didn't.

Three days later a strange thing happened to Prodyot Babu.

At breakfast, his wife opened a tin of Digestive biscuits and served them to her husband with his tea.

The next moment Prodyot Babu had left the dining table and rushed out of the house. The digestive biscuits had triggered a memory.

By the time he reached his friend's flat in Ekdalia Road, he was trembling with excitement. He snatched the newspaper away from his friend's hands, threw it aside and said panting: 'Where d'you keep your copies of *Readers' Digest*? Quick - it's most important!'

His friend went to a bookcase and dragged out some dozen issues of the magazine from the bottom shelf. Prodyot Babu took the whole bunch, flipped through the pages issue after issue, and finally found what he was looking for.

'Yes - this is the bird. No doubt about it.'

His fingers rested on a picture of a conjectural model of a bird kept in the Chicago Museum of Natural History. It showed an attendant cleaning the model with a brush. '*Andalgalornis*,' said Prodyot Babu, reading out the name. The name meant terror-bird. A huge prehistoric species, carnivorous, faster than a horse, and extremely ferocious.

Prodyot Babu didn't mention the bird, but the next morning Tulsi Babu came to him and said that he had to go to Dandakaranya once again, and would Prodyot Babu like to join him and bring his gun with him.

Prodyot Babu agreed at once.

When they arrived in Jagdalpur, permission to shoot the creature was obtained from the conservator of forests. But he warned that Tulsi Babu and Prodyot Babu would have to go on their own as nobody could be persuaded to go into the forest any more.

'So far four shikaris have attempted to kill the beast,' the conservator said 'Three of them had no success. The fourth never returned.'

Prodyot Babu was shaken, but his friend's nonchalance brought back his courage. 'I think we will go,' he said.

As usual, Tulsi Babu was carrying his shoulder bag. Prodyot Babu knew there was a packet in it, but he didn't know what it contained. Prodyot Babu himself was carrying his rifle and bullets.

It being springtime now, the forest wore a different look from the previous trips. As the undergrowth was thinner they could see farther into the forest. That is why the two friends were able to see from a distance the body of a man lying spread-eagled on the ground behind a jackfruit tree. Tulsi Babu seemed only vaguely interested in the matter. Prodyot Babu went halfway, and then turned back.

'You look as if you've seen a ghost,' said Tulsi Babu when his friend rejoined him. 'Isn't that the missing shikari?'

'It must be,' said Prodyot Babu hoarsely. 'But it won't be easy to identify the corpse. The head's missing.'

The rest of the way they didn't speak at all.

It took one hour to reach the place they had first found Bill, which meant they must have walked at least three miles. Prodyot Babu noticed that the medicinal shrub had grown fresh leaves and was back to its old shape.

'Bill! Billie!'

There was something faintly comic about the call, and Prodyot Babu couldn't help smiling. But the next moment Prodyot Babu saw something stirring in the depths of the forest. It was coming towards them, and at such a speed that it seemed to grow bigger and bigger every second.

It was the monster bird.

The gun in Prodyot Babu's hand suddenly felt very heavy. He wondered if he would be able to use it at all.

The bird slowed down and approached them stealthily through the vegetation. *Andalgalornis*. Prodyot Babu would never forget the name. A bird as tall as a man, which meant it had grown a foot and a half in just about a month. The colour of its plumes had changed too. There were blotches of black on the purple.

There was no knowing what the bird would do. Thinking its stillness to be a prelude to an attack, Prodyot Babu had made an attempt to raise the gun with his shaking hands. But the moment he did so, the bird turned its gaze at him, its feathers puffing out to give it an even more terrifying appearance.

'Lower the gun,' hissed Tulsi Babu in a tone of admonition. Prodyot Babu obeyed. Now the bird lowered its feathers too and transferred its gaze to its master.

'I don't know if you are still hungry,' said Tulsi Babu, 'but I hope you will eat this because I am giving it to you.'

Tulsi Babu had already brought out the packet from the bag. He now unwrapped it and tossed the contents towards the bird. It was a large chunk of meat.

'You've been the cause of my shame. I hope you will behave yourself from now on.' Prodyot Babu saw that the bird picked up the chunk with its huge beak, and proceeded to masticate it.

'This time it really is good-bye.'

Tulsi Babu turned. Prodyot Babu was afraid to turn his back on the bird, and for a while walked backwards with his eyes on the bird. When he found that the bird was making no attempt to follow him or attack him, he too turned round and joined his friend.

A week later the news came out in the papers of the end of the terror in Dandakaranya. Prodyot Babu had not mentioned anything to Tulsi Babu about *Andalgalornis*, and the fact that the bird had been extinct for three million years. But the news in the papers today obliged him to come to his friend. 'I'm at a loss to know how it happened,' he said. 'Perhaps you may throw some light on it.'

'There's no mystery at all,' said Tulsi Babu. 'I only mixed some of my herbal medicine with the meat I gave him.'

'Medicine?'

'It turns one into a vegetarian. Just as it has done me.'