

1  
**A Snake in the Grass** by R K Narayan.

One sunny afternoon, when the inmates of the bungalow were at their siesta, a cyclist rang his bell at the gate and shouted: "A big cobra has got into your compound. It crossed my wheel." He pointed to its track under the gate and rode away fast.

The family, consisting of a mother and her four sons, assembled in great agitation. Their old servant, Dasa, was sleeping in the shed. They shook him awake and announced the arrival of the cobra.

"There is no cobra!" he replied, and went back to sleep.

They swore at him, shook him and forced him to take an interest.

"The thing is here somewhere. If it is not found by evening we will dismiss you! Your neglect of the garden and the lawns is responsible for all these dreadful things coming in," said the Mother.

"I have been asking for a grass-cutter for months," Dasa said.

With one voice they ordered him to manage with available things and not to make demands. He obstinately persisted. They began to speculate how much a grass-cutter would cost.

At this point the eldest son, who went to college, butted in with "I read in an American paper that 30,000 people die of snake bite every year."

Mother and the others threw up their arms in horror and berated Dasa.

The eldest son elaborated. "That is 83 a day. That means every twenty minutes someone is dying of cobra bite. As we have been talking here at least one person has lost his life somewhere."

Mother screamed on hearing this. The compound looked sinister.

The boys collected bamboo sticks and pressed one into Dasa's hands. They tucked up their dhoties and began to hack the garden. Creepers, bushes and grass were laid low. When there was nothing more to be done Dasa asked, triumphantly, "So! Well? Where is the snake?"

An old beggar woman cried for alms at the gate. They told her not to pester when they were engaged in a snake hunt. The old woman became happy. "You are fortunate," she said. "It is the God Subramanya who has come to visit you. Don't kill it whatever you do!"

"You are right!" said Mother. She gave a coin to the beggar who promised to send them a snake-charmer from the village.

Presently an old man appeared. He spoke to them of his life and his power over snakes. They asked admiringly, "How do you catch them?"

"Thus!" he said, pouncing upon a hypothetical snake on the ground.

They pointed in the direction the cobra had gone and asked him to go ahead. He looked helplessly around and said: "Oh, no. If you show me the snake, I'll at once catch it. If it's not here, what can I do? The moment you see it again, send for me. I live nearby."

He gave them his name and address and departed.

At five in the afternoon they threw away their sticks and retired to the verandah to rest. They were loudly discussing the measures they would take to protect themselves against reptiles in the future when Dasa appeared carrying a large water pot whose mouth was sealed with a heavy slab of stone.

He put the pot down with ceremony and said, "I have caught him in this. I saw him peeping out of it. I saw him before he could see me." He then explained, at great length, the clever and dangerous strategy he had employed to catch the snake and seal it up.

They stood at a safe distance and gazed at the pot. Dasa had the glow of a champion on his face.

2

“From now on,” he said, “don’t call me an idler!”

He picked up the pot cautiously and walked off saying he would leave it and its contents with the snake charmer. He became the hero of the day. They watched him with great admiration and decided to reward him generously.

Five minutes after he had left the youngest son cried out: “Look over there!” Out of a hole in the compound wall a cobra emerged. It glided towards the gate and paused for a moment to look at the gathering on the verandah, its hood half open. It turned away, crawled under the gate and disappeared along a drain.

There was a long silence.

When they recovered from the shock Mother asked: “Does this mean, do you think, that there were two snakes here?”

The eldest son murmured. “That Dasa! I wish I had taken the risk and knocked the water pot out of his hands. We might have known then what it contained!”