

A Few Poems by Sukumar Ray

Translated from the original Bengali By his son, Satyajit Ray





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Baburam The Snake Charmer

Hullo, there Baburam – what have you got in there?
Snakes? Aha – and do you think there’s one that you could spare
You know, I’d love to have one, but let me tell you this–
The ones that bite aren’t right for me – nor the ones that hiss.

I’d also skip the ones that butt
As well the ones that whistle
Or the ones that slink about
Or show their fangs, or bristle.

As for eating habits, I think it would be nice
To go for ones that only take a meal of milk and rice.
I’m sure you know the kind of snake that want from what I’ve said,
Do let me have one, Baburam, so I could bash its head.

The Sons of Ramgaroo

To the sons of Ramgaroo
Laughter is taboo
A funny tale will make them wail:
“We're not amused, boo — hoo!”

They live in constant fear
Of chuckles far and near
And start and bound at every sound
That brings a breath of cheer.

Their peace of mind forfeiting
They sit and keep repeating:
'We believe in only grieving;
Happiness is fleeting.'

They shun the summer breeze
That whispers through the trees
For fear the stir of leaf and bur
Their funny bones should tease.

They keep a wary eye
On the autumn sky
For signs of mirth above the earth
In foaming cumuli.

The darkness of the night
Brings them no respite
As fireflies extemporise
Their dances of delight.

Those of you who are jolly
And feel to woe is folly
Must not refuse the Ramgaroos
Their right to melancholy.

The Ramgaroosian lair
Bereft of sun and air
Is doomed to be a monastery
Of permanent despair.

Khichuri

Was a duck, porcupine (to grammar I bow not)
Became Duckupine, but how I know not.

Stork tells turtle, "Indeed it's a delight-
Our Stortle shape is exactly right! "

Parrot-Head Lizard feels decidedly silly:
Must he spurn all bugs for a raw green chili?

The goat now hatches a plan to wed-
Mounts scorpion's neck-body unites with head!

The giraffe's reluctant to wander nearby
With his grasshopper wings, he longs to fly.

Says the cow, "What disease has entered the pen
That my rear belongs to a rascally hen? "

Observe the Whalephant: whale wants the sea;
Elephant says, "It's the jungle for you and me."

The lion has no horns, that's his woe-
He joins with a deer; and now antlers grow!

The King of Bombaria

In the land of Bombaria
The customs are peculiar.
The king, for instance, advocates
Gilded frames for chocolates.
The queen, who seldom goes to bed
Straps a pillow round her head.
The courtiers— or so I'm told—
Turn cartwheels when they have a cold:

... The King's old aunt— an autocrat—
Hits pumpkins with her cricket bat
While Uncle loves to dance Mazurkas
Wearing garlands strung with hookaha.
All of this, though mighty queer,
Is natural in Bombaria.

The Suitable Groom

Heard your daughter's getting married,
From Posta, the news I carried.
Gangaram, the groom you chose,
I wish to describe, the quality he owes.
Now listen, listen, Hark, Hark!
His complexion is awfully dark.
His facial cutting, is somewhat round,
Rather an owl, just to sound.
Education? Oh, just wait!
Not so bright under any rate.
Nineteen times he had to pluck,
Till he left for his rotten luck.
Financial career? Poor indeed,
Somehow makes both ends meet.
And his brothers who are there,
Rather inhuman, know you dear.
One is stubborn, the other insane,
Quite a troupe of hollow men.
Oh, I missed the other two
Real gems are they, not to rue.
One was smart, but now in prison,
Forged bank notes, (So petty a reason!)
The youngest one in profession grand
Earns five bucks from a rustic band.
And Gangaram - is real meek,
Weak, feeble, and always sick.
But they are royal, Is that clear?
Tell you, they are King Kansha's heirs.
And Shyam Lahiri of Banagram,
Is somehow kin to Gangaram.
Overall the groom is not so bad,
Cheer up, cheer up, don't be sad.

Old Tickler

Go East or West, go North or south, by land sea or air,
But before you go, make sure the old Tickler isn't there.
Tickler is a terror, and I'll tell you what he's after –
He'll have you stuffing tickle chops until you choke with laughter.

It's hard to tell where he lives, and harder to restrict him,
He's always round the corner looking for a victim.
His method is quite simple ; he'll grab you by your sleeve
And tell you anecdotes which he insists you must believe.

He thinks they're very funny, while others find them grim,
(They have to keep on laughing though, so as to humour him).
One wouldn't mind the stories if they were all one had to bear,
He also uses tickle – feathers, which is most unfair,

And so he goes on cackling, “Oh, but don't you think it's funny –
Aunt Kitty selling pigeons' eggs and figs and cloves and honey
The eggs are long and conical, the cloves are all convoluted
The figs have arabesques on them nicely executed,
From dawn till dusk Aunt Kitty sings a string of motley airs
All mew and barks and brays and neighs (Aunt Kitty calls them Prayers).”
Saying so, he brings his hand behind your back to pinch you,
At which you have to laugh unless you want that he should lynch you

The Missing Whiskers

They always knew the Boss babu
To be a gentle fellow
What happens if he in a jiffy
Turns all blue and yellow?

He was seated in his chair
Relaxed and free from care,
Indulging in his post-meridian nap,
When without a warning,
In the middle of his yawning,
Something right inside him seemed to snap.

With muffled cries he rolled his eyes
And threw his arms about,
'Alas I'm sick. Come save me quick'
Was what he sputtered out.

They heard him and they all began
To cluster round the stricken man
And pondered on the safest plan.
To bring him to his senses.'
Call the police 'No — the Vet'
His partner said, 'He seems upset'
'But careful he might bite yet'
Said his amanuensis.

But Boss Babu — his face all red and swollen -
Now declared, 'My moustache has bean stolen'.

'Stolen whiskers?' they all cried,
'The Babu must be pacified'
And so they held a mirror to his face.
'There sir', they said 'You see

Your whiskers where they used to be
Who would dare to put you in disgrace? '
Babu now began to scream
'You dunder heads, I would not dream
Of ever wearing whiskers so outrageous.
They make me look a shaggy butcher
Know this — in the near future
I ought to — no, I must reduce your wages.
This he did. And then at random
He composed a memorandum
Herewith quoted (minus appendages) .

If you think your employees
Deserve your love — correction please:
They don't. They're fools. No commonsense.
They're full of crass incompetence.
The ones in my establishment
Deserve the highest punishment.
They show their cheek in not believing
Whiskers lend themselves to thieving
Their moustaches, I predict,
Will soon be mercilessly picked;
And when that happens they will know
What Man is to Moustachio:
Man is slave, Moustache is master,
Losing which Man meets disaster!

Uncle's Invention

Chandidas's uncle has invented a device
Which is causing everyone to praise it to the skies.
When Uncle was a year old, or maybe even younger,
He came out with a lusty yell that sounded just like 'Goonga.'
At such an age most other tots just manage 'Glug' and 'Mum,'
So "Goonga" like a thunderbolt, struck everybody dumb.
And all who heard, said 'Here's a boy – provided he survives—
Will one day surely bring about a change in human lives.'
It seems the day is here at last, and victory is won
With what will make a five miles walk seem like only one.
I've seen the contrivance myself, and say with confidence
Never had invention had such greater significance.
Let me tell you how it strikes the eyes of a beholder:
First of ail, one notes that you must strap it to yours houlder.
An arm extends, and from its end one notes there hangs a hook
To which you bait some food – stuff which you either buy or cook.
Naturally the choice depends upon you predilections
(It's wiser to restrict yourself to hookable confections).
The sight of morsel dangling close provokes the urge to eat
Which, transcribed to your motive force, soon propels the feet.
Before you know you're on the go, your mind, intent on feeding,
But since the food is travelling too you never stop your speeding
The outcome, I need hardly add, will change our whole existence
Because we'll walk for nourishment, and never mind the distance.
No wonder's there's a move afoot, to honour, Uncle soon
For bestowing on humanity an everlasting boon.

Stew Much

A duck once met a porcupine ; they formed a corporation
Which called itself a Porcuduck (a beastly conjugation !).
A stork to a turtle said, 'Let's put my head upon your torso ;
We who are so pretty now, as Stortle would be more so !'
The lizard with the parrot's head thought : taking to the chilli
After years of eating worms is absolutely silly.
A prancing goat - one wonders why - was driven by a need
To bequeath its upper portion ta a crawling centipede.
The giraffe with grasshopper's limbs reflected : Why should I
Go for walks in grassy fields, now that I can fly ?
The nice contented cow will doubtless get a frightful shock
On finding that its lower lombs belong to a fighting cock.
It's obvious the Whalephant is not a happy notion :
The head goes for the jungle, while the tail turns to the ocean,
The lion's lack of horns distressed him greatly, so
He teamed up with a dear - now watch his antlers grow !