

Simon Says

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This occurred in the spring of 1950, in a fruit plantation that existed behind our bungalow, in Bangalore India.

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It wasn't brightly coloured. In the half-light of dawn the slim shape could have been mistaken for a thickish bootlace. Emerging from a hole in a pile of leaves that made up its nest, the hatchling King Cobra was slightly longer. With tongue tasting the air, it moved quietly about the business of surviving its first day.

On his forays into the Indian countryside, Mike often passed through the five-acre fruit plantation that backed onto his parents' Indian government bungalow. Today he picked a ripe mango as he travelled. Carefully he cut it in half with the jackknife that he'd 'borrowed' from his father, removed the large oval stone, then, putting the knife back into his shorts' pocket, he enjoyed the sticky sweetness of the fruit.

As he went through the plantation he always kept a watchful eye out for the huge turbaned Sikh, who guarded this garden of tropical fruit. With a hooked nose above wide bushy moustaches and a beard, he had a fierce look about his face. The huge curved scimitar he carried at his waist, made him all the more terrifying. Mike had named the huge warrior after the word "Shahbash", that the swarthy easterner roared out whenever he saw him. Mike thought it meant 'Enough!' in his own dialect, and the word was always enough to make Mike run for home.

Despite the fact that he sometimes 'discovered' the boy close enough to collar him, the Shahbash never did. The youth didn't know it, but the Sikh dared not apprehend the young trespasser. It simply wouldn't do to apprehend a young English sahib, whose father could possibly see that the Shahbash lost his job; although it was always expected that he be seen to do something to scare away any thieves, be they monkey or human. So the scimitar would come hissing from its scabbard; the thunderous 'Shahbash!' would go up and, heart pounding; Mike would race to and scramble over the surrounding mud wall into the safety of the bungalow grounds.

On this morning the Shahbash seemed to be having a day off; but with his sight restricted because of the denseness of the bushes and trees, the huge Sikh could be only feet away and still be invisible.

Mike preferred these very early trips, it was relatively cool and there were no people about; although the birds were up, calling out to all and sundry. 'This is my territory, keep away or there'll be trouble,' they seemed to be saying. It was early spring; time for mating and the males were showing off their gaudy plumage, singing their song to attract the females as well as guarding their territory.

Sitting on a sawn off tree-trunk, he enjoyed the mango, watching the birds for a few minutes as they danced from branch to branch, fascinated by their antics.

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Finishing the fruit he threw the empty rind of the fruit into the undergrowth, wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, which he then stuffed into his shorts pocket and set off, towards a part of the plantation he hadn't visited before.

Although the plantation was laid out in an orderly fashion, with paths between the sections, there were some areas that had been cleared for new plantings. Wandering across one of these patches; initially distracted by a cacophony of birdcalls above his head, his eyes were attracted to a sudden stopping of movement ahead of him. Looking forward Mike stopped dead in his tracks, with one foot still behind the other.

There was another reason why birds call out, besides a territorial warning, and that's as an alarm. Not twenty feet from where Mike stood, a King cobra was flicking his tongue and eyeing the young lad. The snake had been moving left to right across the youth's path and was some eight-foot in length, deadly to a grown-up; never mind a slender young boy of eleven years. Mike had been told what to do when confronted by a snake and he put these lessons to good use now.

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Make no sudden movements. Never raise your hand. Don't look directly at the reptile, but keep it within your vision. Above all; be patient. Wait for it to make the first move. Snakes are normally more afraid of you than you are of them. Mike didn't really believe that last saying of this particular monster.

Those small glittering gemstones that were the snake's eyes seemed to be looking into his heart, mind and soul and finding them all wanting. Especially his heart. That organ was pounding fit to burst. Adrenaline said flee, common sense said wait. Mike waited for what seemed an age, half blinded by the sweat dripping into his eyes, the calf muscles in his trailing leg aching, his whole body shaking.

The wanting to be somewhere else, now, grew by the second. Suddenly he blinked his eyes and realised the snake had gone. But which way? Downward into a hole? Possibly. Travelling in the same direction as before? More than likely. Either way Mike didn't fancy staying around to come across the snake again. He was afraid of the deadly creatures, but more than anything, respected them and their power. As he was about to bring his trailing leg forward, to enable him to turn around and go back, he became aware that the birds were still giving out their warning calls. Nothing in front worried him. Moving his head slowly to left and right; still nothing. Keeping his feet still, Mike twisted his body around and started sweating again. A lot. Directly behind him, coming from a hole in a mound of leaves, eighteen inches from his back foot, came a small stream of shapes that Mike recognised at once as the young of a King cobra. Small they may be, but deadly to him. How many were there? He knew the female laid up to forty eggs. Were most of them hatched and gone? Were these the last remnants of her brood? More importantly, where was the female snake that normally stayed in the nest looking after her eggs? Had she gone with the hatching of her young?

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Mike knew he couldn't hold this impossible position for more than a few more moments, but one false move could be his last.

Slowly, oh so very slowly, he started to bring the trailing leg forward, meaning to drag his foot toward the other. As he made the change from inertia to movement one of the small serpents stopped and made as if to investigate the motion. Mike froze. Looking straight at the youth, the young snake flicked its forked tongue. Surely the deadly reptile must see his heart beating against his shirt and thinking it a threat, decide to stop it moving? Twice more it tasted the air, then moved off. Waiting for a few seconds, Mike continued the recovery of his left leg. When his feet were almost together, the number of cobras coming from the nest seemed to lessen. Still the birds called out their warnings! What now!

More snakes? Looking around slowly he saw a wondrous sight. Ten feet from the far edge of the clearing, no more than thirty feet from him was that same King cobra he'd seen before, rearing up and waiting for the right moment to strike. Just out of range of those venomous fangs danced a brown and black blur of light. The mongoose, deadly enemy of all snakes, tempted and teased. Small brown eyes judged distances to the finest degree. Any mistake could mean the death of the brindled animal. Almost coming within range, it chattered and chattered. Alternating between fear and fury, the snake wanted to escape, but if not, to be rid of this infernal, capering, sharp-toothed carnivore. The dance of death between these two implacable enemies has existed from time immemorial.

The outcome has nearly always favoured the furry hot-blooded mammal over the smooth skinned reptile. After striking several times, with no result, the snake became slower in its recovery to the ready position and might have escaped, had it been given the chance. Once more the mongoose taunted. Again the cobra struck, this time shooting a fraction of an inch past its easy recoil distance. Overextended, the cobra became vulnerable to the lightning reflexes and teeth of the mongoose. Striking hard into the back of the snake, behind the head; using the reptiles desperate writhing as it tried to shake free from, or strike into, this devil incarnate, the mongoose's teeth worked themselves into the snake's spine to reach the cord and sever it.

For a few moments after death, the mongoose continued to worry the snake, then disdainfully scratching the earth over its prey, like a cat after finishing its toilet, it looked around for more fun. Seeing Mike and assessing that there was no threat and, worst of all for the boy, not seeing the snakes around his feet, it undulated into the surrounding fruit trees, leaving the boy with his problems. Hopefully the snake the mongoose had just killed was the one from the nest so close to his foot.

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If only he could have communicated with the furry fiend, his troubles could have been over. One thing was certain. Mike would never again wander into this den of venom! â Shaabashâ sâ fruit were safe from 'scrumping' as far as he was concerned.

Carefully turning his head he saw no more miniature serpents coming out of the nest. Looking very carefully at where his feet were to go, and with his heart still thump thumping, Mike carefully started back towards the wall.

As he left the clearing there came an almighty roar in his ears.

â Shahbashâ ! The Sikh was closer than he had ever been. More adrenaline shot into the youth's system. Coupled with his terror of the snakes, fear of capture gave his feet wings. Itâ s doubtful if â Shahbashâ could have caught Mike that day, even had he wanted to. Mike couldnâ t remember going over the wall at all!

He continued running all the way into his motherâ s arms and collapsed, crying his young heart out and sobbing that he wouldnâ t go there again, ever, and ever. Honest!

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