

## The German Herpetologist

Graf Ludwig Immanuel von Scharnhorst had long since established his fame as a herpetologist. His work on the golden lance-heads of the Ilha de Queimada had been the referred to classic for two decades and more. He regularly contributed to *Nature*, his observations on little known natural poisons advancing research in this arcane scientific area as no one else had done before or since. His first visit to India was accidental, the flight crews of Lufthansa calling a flash strike even as his plane touched down in Delhi en route to Australia. Stuck for a week or so in this country, he tried to while away his time by studying the capacity of the *naja naja* for domestication. While discussing some intriguing speculations over dinner at the Imperial hotel, he heard in passing that what was desperately lacking in India was a sufficient quantity of antivenin serum to counter the bite of the King Cobra. Scharnhorst had done little research with the genus *Ophiophagus* and his accidental stay in India seemed to suggest an opportunity. Canceling his proposed visit to Australia, he went down to Kerala to be better acquainted with the snake.

The state held various fascinations for the German; the people, the backwaters, the snakes, all held a peculiar charm. His visit lengthened into a year. He loved the food cooked in coconut oil, the *meen moily*, the *appams*, *avail* and *puttoo*. It was all distinctly superior to sauerkraut and bratwurst. The supply of an antidote to snake poison could only be solved, he advised government, by permitting him to run a snake park which could regularly supply the rare poison. The Minister for Public Health had a daughter

who had applied for internship at the Max Planck Institute, so the politician readily agreed under the belief that a German connection might help her in future.

Graf Ludwig Immanuel von Scharnhorst went about the business of establishing a King Cobra park with German thoroughness. A few of the first snakes were captured by himself, the process being used to train a few Indians desperate for money who were willing to risk learning the trade. He gave every snake he captured a name out of Teutonic mythology, the alpha male being christened Siegfried, and the alpha female Brunhilda. Freya, Wotan, Thor, and Grimhild followed in quick succession. The supply of serum from his park was copious, and his work received open and handsome appreciation from the government, which at that time was also negotiating a deal for a nuclear plant with Siemens.

Even as the German was celebrating the first anniversary of the establishment of this unique park, the Indian government went through one of its periodic crises in New Delhi. A group of ambitious politicians had not so secretly conspired to topple the government and join forces with the opposition in exchange for lucrative ministries. The Prime Minister came to know of this evil design, and acting with unusual agility, he winkled out a group of young turks – in reality rather portly middle-aged men – and sent them off to a remote hideaway in Kerala, where they could not be reached by the hard-core rebels within his ranks. He then went about decimating the rebel stronghold through a wise mixture of bribery, threat, and exposure to the media, which enabled him to regain control of his party.

The young turks in the meantime were having a great vacation in their luxurious hideaway. The best cooks from several five-star hotels had been commandeered to keep them happy. The government sparing no expense had even procured a famous holy man, the Vishwamitrانanda of Hardwar, to teach them meditation and harangue them with spiritual lectures on the importance of duty, and allegiance to the ruler. So, a great time was being had by all.

It so happened that this resort was within a short walk of the German's snake park, in which the first female snake, appropriately named Hannah, had hatched her first brood. Raju, the trusted right hand of Scharnhorst, called his boss over the cellphone to convey the wonderful news. After solicitous enquires about the health of the little ones, the German who was away in Chennai was so excited that he ordered Raju to bring him a few of the babies to see. They were after all slim little strings of blue and white, and quite a few could be put into a little box and slipped into Raju's pocket for the short flight to Chennai. Raju had no qualms about this, since he was quite used to being with the snakes, even the fifteen-foot mother. But before going down to Kochi to catch the flight, he decided to visit the resort of the young turks to teach his brother Kumar how to make the best string hoppers. Raju had been a respected cook in the region before he took to snake breeding.

Raju made a set of string hoppers in the resort kitchen, and then asked his brother to repeat the process to find out if Kumar had really learned the right technique. Kumar's batch came out thicker and the hoppers stuck together in a mess. Raju was annoyed.

‘This won’t do at all. Kumar, the strings of the hoppers must be really slim, or they will stick together. Look, they must be as slim as these baby snakes.’

With that, Raju opened the box of baby snakes to show Kumar, who shrieked when he saw them wriggling, and leaping back somehow knocked a large saucepan off a shelf, which fell on Raju’s hand and sent the box spinning into the grass outside the kitchen door. With a curse, Raju ran after his wards and picked up a few, but many had wriggled away. They could not be found in a hurry, if at all, and he was already late if he had to catch the flight from Kochi to Chennai. The brothers decided to share the news with no one. It was the German’s policy to release the bulk of the snakes back into the wild since they would not last in a closed environment for long. So, Raju consoled himself that no harm had been done in any case.

Swami Vishwamitrانanda insisted that the day of prayers must begin with a *suryanamaskar*, and there was no better place than the lush lawns of the resort. He led his disciples there every morning. The morning after the incident just mentioned was no different. The bulky politicians had dined very well the previous night and were loath to kneel in the grass, but they were superstitious as well, and dared not disobey their guru. So, they did their best to do a *suryanamaskar*, though no one would have called their efforts anything but a travesty. Huffing and puffing on the grass, they hardly felt the pinpricks. If any saw the blue and white worms, they took no notice of them, for unlike

the Graf Ludwig Immanuel von Scharnhorst they were unaware that even newly born king cobras carried enough venom to kill an adult.

Getting back to the resort building, they felt a trifle drowsy, and put it down to their exertions. They went to bed to take a little rest, but none woke up.

This inexplicable mass death of so many politicians caused quite a stir for months. Brief hurried autopsies performed by ill-trained doctors revealed nothing. Food poisoning was first suspected and all the cooks were arrested. But even under rigorous tests the food revealed nothing. Mysteriously, all the big-wigs had died simultaneously of heart attack! The Swamiji started a rumour which captured the popular imagination. He had dreamt the previous night that Shiva had visited them, and had shaken his Trishul over the building in anger at the politicians who planned to betray the leadership of the party. The high command in Delhi did nothing to dissuade people from taking this view. The families of the dead politicians spent millions visiting all the holy places to placate Lord Shiva. The Swamiji gained great popularity for bringing Shiva himself to earth, and all the NRI communities in America, Britain and Australia flooded his office with requests for his holy presence in their cities. The sons of the dead men came into wealth and power all of a sudden so they really had no complaints. Even the beautiful widows, who had been so carefully chosen by the rich families they were married into, found consolation with their young male cousins, who wiped away their tears and their fears with gentle hands. Till their widowhood, the women had hated the very thought of sex, crushed under the weight of their panting aged husbands, who had waited impatiently for magic to be worked by

viagra, rhino horn, or tiger balls, but were disappointed most of the times. With their tender new friends, the women discovered the amazing difference between the pleasurable vigour of Nature and the ministrations of pharmaceuticals. Since several by-elections had to be held, the people of their constituencies were feted once again, with generous offers of free TV sets, LPG gas cylinders, saris, one-rupee rice, and of course an unlimited supply of liquor. So, no one was unhappy. Only the German suspected the truth, and after pleading ill-health closed the park, and returned to his native Bremen, sauerkraut, and bratwurst.