

Humphrey

Humphrey was a gift from the government of the United States of America to the Hi-Tech City. He was to adorn the new state-of-the-art Gandhi Children's Park there, which would offer the most up-to-date entertainment solutions to the children of the IT community. Hordes of American architects, designers, artists, construction engineers, and suppliers of ferries wheels, roundabouts, and other mechanical devices that throw their riders up into the air, revolve them, shoot them through tunnels, or otherwise leave them begging for their lives, were all assembled in the park. But Humphrey was special. He would be the one living component of the pleasure system.

Though he was received by the local government with much fanfare, and media photo ops, the bureaucracy was most uncertain about this gift, for Humphrey was a full-grown lion. However, even the most timid of bureaucrats learnt swiftly that there was no danger to be apprehended. He was as gentle as a puppy, he would turn over on his back for his belly to be rubbed at the least excuse, he would let his ears be pulled, and his tail to be held as he ran around; he even let children ride him like a pony. Of course all this wasn't discovered in a day. The authorities after ceremoniously accepting him as a gift, had ordered the menials in the park to keep him shut in a cage, but these servants had found out on the first day itself that no danger was to be apprehended; they had grown careless, and left the cage door open. Humphrey had strolled out and been greeted by ecstatic children before anyone could stop him or them. Of course, parents had been timorous as they always are wont to be, but their irresistible children had dragged them to Humphrey, forced them to touch him, to see that he was the best playmate they ever had, and to stop fussing. Hordes of children are uncontrollable in any country, especially in the presence of a playful lion. A compromise was reached. A middle-aged *ayah* from the crèche was appointed to be with Humphrey all the time to ensure that no untoward incident ever occurred.

Mr PR Sharma, Principal Secretary, Culture and Tourism, took personal charge of all issues related to the Gandhi Children's Park, and the government and the public heaved a joint sigh of relief. Humphrey was no ordinary pet, he came with the American Secretary of State's personal signature on his collar. He was a living symbol of the special relationship that was developing between the world's two great democracies. The media's spot-light was almost constantly on him, that is, when media was not screaming about some real or imagined atrocity. Humphrey was a natural. He loved the camera; he loved to play with children, and television watchers throughout the globe were treated endlessly to his antics. So, Mr Sharma didn't really have much to worry about, but he did worry. That was his job and he had a special knack of spotting a problem before it even occurred in anybody else's head. It was whispered in the select administrators club that God or the Devil had sent him into the world as an agent, so acute were his senses for any trouble that might affect government. He had almost single-handedly stopped many a project, proposal, or legislation that would have done somebody some good, but at some expense to government. He was the government's watchdog, and with him in personal charge of the Gandhi Children's Park, the government felt secure.

Mr Sharma had not gained his enviable reputation by allowing matters to take their course. His strong nose for the possibly harmful was sharpened by diligent inquiry, by going into corners that no one else might have spotted, by entertaining thoughts that others might have dismissed as the aftermath of a night of riotous living. Though no lover of animals, he played with Humphrey himself in all possible situations, till he was absolutely satisfied about the animal's tame and affectionate nature. He was gratified to observe that Humphrey was a vegetarian, needing a special diet to keep his strength up. The lion loved most of all to be with sheep and goats, in fact he would often be seen lying down in the shade with lambs. Humphrey was a little wary of the long horns of buffaloes, and this natural timidity spoke well to Mr Sharma's confidence in the animal.

However, there were many other aspects of the park that needed personal attention. One day, Mr Sharma spotted a distant secluded clump of trees that could easily hide a stray jackal. A sudden fear that a child could get bitten by a rabid animal clutched his meticulous heart, and he hastened to inspect the area with Humphrey gamboling away at his heels. Yes, it was as he had feared. That untidy neglected spot could easily harbour some unwelcome creature. Picking up a stick, he thrashed his way through the undergrowth, clucking to himself at the carelessness of the staff, for which he was sure someone would have to pay. When he was in the midst of the clump, he heard a low growl behind him from Humphrey. He turned expecting the lion to have spotted a rodent he had missed, but Humphrey was looking straight at him, and he growled again, a low significant growl. Mr Sharma shook his head clear of any fear, he knew the animal too well to think that it was growling at him. He turned back to his search through the trees. Humphrey growled again, much louder, and more aggressively, Mr Sharma turning his head asked the lion to shut up, a little petulantly. He had taken two steps forward when he heard a quick rustle behind him, and the next moment the lion had reared up and placed giant paws on his shoulders. Even as he tried to turn, Humphrey gripped Mr Sharma's neck firmly between his jaws. Mr. Sharma's whole life did not flash through his mind at that moment, but he had an irrational fleeting thought that he should have doubled his insurance cover. The lion pushed him into the soft earth. At any moment Mr Sharma thought to feel the sharp bite of teeth into his back, but instead with a practiced flick of his paw, Humphrey pulled Mr Sharma's trousers and briefs down to his knees. Then the lion straddled him. Mr Sharma was numb to all feeling. The lion was soon done, and seeing a group of whooping children coming down a side road, he raced off to play with them. Mr Sharma lay still for some time, then slowly got up, buttoned his trousers and brushed the grass off his knees. He spotted a woman sweeper looking at him, holding her sari end over her mouth to smother her laughter. She quickly turned away and started sweeping rather vigorously a clean patch of the grounds. Mr Sharma walked away with what dignity he could muster.

The matter could not be left to rest there. Mr Sharma was nothing if not thorough, even if the task caused great personal unpleasantness. He called the sweeper woman he had seen and the *ayah* in charge of Humphrey to his office, and with some slight hesitation asked directly if they had seen the lion *misbehave with anyone in any way*. The sweeper woman looked at her feet, but the *ayah* laughed easily.

'Oh, yes, Sir, he was an American lion, and did American things to men.'

What exactly did she mean?

‘Well, Sir, he likes men – well, we all know there are men like that, why her own aunt’s eldest son, poor fellow he died of AIDS, it’s an American disease they say, but Humphrey has no disease, he is just like other Americans.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Mr Sharma shortly, ‘it has nothing to do with America or Americans. Did the lion, ah, molest women in any way?’

‘Oh, no, Sir, he has no interest in women,’ and both the women sniggered.

‘What about the children?’ asked Mr Sharma anxiously.

‘Oh, no, Sir, the lion would not touch them, only the men.’

‘All the men?’

‘No, Sir, only those he favours, that is, whoever is with him in a secluded spot, the lion is that careful to avoid a scandal.’

After dismissing them, Mr Sharma thought long and hard. A solution to the problem had to be found, that was for sure. The children could not be exposed, even accidentally, to any precocious spectacle. But the lion, despite his predilections, was a gift, a significant gift, from the American government, so could not be taken out and shot, even if the Wildlife Protection Act could permit such an extreme step. No, he must be removed, and removed quickly to where he could not come in – er – personal contact with another man. The obvious and only place was the zoo. Mr Sharma called the conservator of the zoo to his office. He said he had noticed certain traits in the animal, nothing very dangerous for now, mind you, but certain traits that made him think it was better off in the zoo. The conservator was doubtful. He could certainly not allow the animal to run around among the thousands of visitors, who knew what might happen? Even if the animal was a peaceful one, the people were not, they continuously teased all animals, enough for even a Buddha to turn violent. The lions’ cage would be equally unsuitable. The American lion was tame, the others were not. They would kill him on the spot.

Mr Sharma provided the solution with his usual unsurpassed abilities. Humphrey should be put in along with the herbivores, he liked to be with sheep and goats as companions, he was harmless. The conservator said he didn’t know, he was doubtful if it could be done. Mr Sharma knew the man was always pessimistic, so using his charm backed by steel authority, he made the conservator observe Humphrey for a whole day lying down literally with lambs. Finally the conservator reluctantly agreed, he would try keeping Humphrey in the goats’ enclosure, if he killed them it wouldn’t matter for they were meant to be butchered in any case for the carnivores.

Humphrey had been removed to the zoo and Mr Sharma had almost, but not quite, forgotten about him when he received the following letter from the conservator on the old yellowing letterhead of the forest department. It read:

Sub: Lion in Herbivores enclosure – regarding

Sir, I submit as per government’s instructions, the American lion was first put in the goats enclosure, and later after observing his behaviour he was transferred to the larger herbivores enclosure of the Nehru Zoological gardens. He is fed along with the herbivores on the special diet supplied by government. Yours truly

Mr Sharma looked at the letter with some satisfaction. But that very same day he received another from the American Consul-General, that rotund and jocund individual having returned from his summer vacation. It read:

Hi, Just heard that Humphrey has been transferred to the zoo. Please do let us know if there was a problem, and if we can do anything. Best regards

Mr Sharma rose to the occasion. He called up the American personally and glibly assured him that there was no problem, there never had been any, but government felt that many more Indians would be able to see how peaceful Humphrey the American Lion was, in keeping with our peaceful strategic alliance. Before any doubt could be raised he added persuasively that this was especially important in view of the two-nation's agreement on the peaceful use of atomic weapons, and would the Consul-General like to visit the zoo to see for himself?

The visit went off like a charm. They both draped themselves over the railings of the enclosure, to laugh with the crowd of rustics gathered round at the sight of Humphrey being surrounded by an escort of small deer and antelopes. As they were finally turning away, Mr Sharma spotted Humphrey casting a hurried and hassled look over his shoulder before slinking away between the legs of the tall bison. Mr Sharma then saw with some personal satisfaction that the lion was being followed rather intently by a large bull elephant.