

What Happened to the Reptiles

9

- *Pambupatti is a peaceful village, inhabited by a variety of people.*
- *Prem, the narrator of the story, flees his village under unfortunate conditions to reach Pambupatti by chance.*
- *An old resident of the village looks after him and tells him an interesting story.*

You may not believe this story. But I can tell you it is true, because I have been to Pambupatti, a village on the edge of the jungle. It is on a cliff, and the vast forest stretches below like a mossy green carpet. There are many kinds of people in the village — dark, fair, tall, short. They speak many languages. Some eat meat, some don't. Some pray in a small temple at the edge of the forest. Others pray in a mosque some miles away.

My name is Prem and I live many hundred miles away from Pambupatti. I had heard about the village, but I'd never been there. Then last year, something terrible happened. The people of my own village went mad. Far, far away in a place they have never even been to, a temple or mosque had been burnt down, and they went mad. They started fighting with one another. Some had to run away in the middle of the night. And at three in the morning, as I lay in my house, half awake to the sounds of hate and violence, there was a fire. Many houses were burnt down in the fire. One of them was mine.

I managed to grab a few clothes, some coins, my little Ganesh statue, and I ran! I ran for a day and a night, resting whenever my legs would not carry me any further. I jumped on to a train, then on a bus. No tickets. Never mind, everyone



seemed to be running. Finally, I found myself in Pambupatti, and I saw some villagers gathered near a well. I ran to them, and before I could say a thing, I fainted.

When I opened my eyes, I saw an old man with white hair, white beard and shining black eyes bending over me. For the next few days, he looked after me, putting food in my mouth and bringing me sweet, cool water from the stream. He rubbed my feet gently and made the pain go away. Neighbours, strangers — everyone came to visit me.

“Tell me, Grandfather,” I said to him one day. “I have never seen people like the villagers here! In my village, people fight with those who pray to another god. But here ... this seems a very strange place!”

“Prem,” replied the old man, “I will tell you the story of Pambupatti. You can take this story back to your village. Maybe it will heal some of its wounds, and dry some of its sores.”

“Oh, Grandfather,” I said anxiously, “don’t say that. What I have seen in my village makes me burn with shame. I never, never want to go back there.”

“But that’s exactly why you must go back,” he said, in a soft voice. I kept quiet. I didn’t want to argue with him, and I wanted to hear his story.

- *Very, very long ago, there were no animals in Pambupatti, only reptiles.*
- *They had a meeting every month. Their leader, Makara, would chair the meeting.*
- *Misusing his power, Makara ordered the tortoises and snakes to leave the forest.*

It happened a long, long time ago, he began. So long ago that there were no schools and no teachers. Children lived in caves with their parents and helped them to collect fruit and berries from the forest. At that time, there were no tigers or panthers or elephants in Pambupatti forest. There were only reptiles, many kinds of reptiles. Now you know what reptiles are. Snakes, crocodiles, turtles, lizards. And you know that a reptile has scales on its body and it lays eggs. Every month, the reptiles of Pambupatti had a big meeting. Everyone came — the pretty excited snakes, the slow thoughtful tortoises, the clever quick lizards,





and the moody crocodiles, grumpy because they were out of water. The president of these meetings was Makara, the biggest crocodile of the forest.

All the animals thought he was very important. When someone is strong and powerful, you know, it is difficult not to go along with what he says or does.



Now, one day, a strange thing happened. It was a week before one of the monthly meetings. Makara sent a letter to



the tortoises, asking them not to come to the meeting. Ahistay, the big old star tortoise with black and yellow pictures on his shell, was very angry.

“What does this mean?” he shouted. “How dare they!” But not one of the tortoises had the courage to attend the meeting—they were so few, the others so many!

Before the meeting, the giant Makara polished his teeth with the red flowers of the tree by the river till they sparkled. Everyone was waiting for him at the meeting place.

“Brothers and sisters,” he began. All the reptiles, even the beautiful king cobras, stopped talking. Makara continued his speech. “I have decided that we don’t need the tortoises! I have told them not to come today. Brothers and sisters, can you tell me why we don’t like the tortoises?”

The reptiles looked this way and that. They felt very uncomfortable. The snakes hissed anxiously, the lizards wriggled their tails, the crocodiles opened their jaws even wider.

“But...” said one little lizard.

“No BUTS!” shouted Makara. There was silence.

“I think ...” said a baby crocodile.

“No I THINKS!” screamed Makara, so loudly that the fruit in the tree above him rained down. After that, no one had the courage to speak.

Makara cleared his throat and showed a few more teeth. “Well,” he said, “I will tell you why we don’t like the tortoises. They are so slow! So stupid! They even carry their houses on their backs. Whoever heard of such a stupid thing? Now you lizards, you live in trees. Would you ever carry a TREE on your back? Would you?”

Small, frightened voices answered together, “No, we wouldn’t. But...”

“No BUTS! Now, listen. I have told the tortoises that they will have to move out of Pambupatti. When they go, we will have more of everything. More food, more water, more space. I want them out by tomorrow. But because they are such slowcoaches, I have given them one week. By next Tuesday we won't have a single tortoise left in this jungle!”

And by the following Tuesday, they were all gone. At first the animals were sad, but then they realised that what Makara had said was true. There was more food, more water, and more space for them! But soon, a strange smell began to fill the forest. It was the smell of rot — rotting fruit on the ground, rotting animals in the river. This was what the tortoises used to eat. And even Makara had to go about holding his nose with his big claws.

A month passed by, and then the same thing happened all over again. But this time, it was the snakes. Makara wrote them one of his letters. They were to leave the forest and, since they could move fast, they had to go in a day!

Naga, the head of the snakes, pleaded for more time, but Makara would not give in. At the meeting, he silenced the others — the lizards and crocodiles — with even louder shouts

and threats. “Snakes are slimy,” he said, “and they make funny noises. Who wants such weird creatures around?” Again, no one dared to disagree with Makara, and so the snakes left.

For a while, the animals of the forest were happy because they had been a little afraid of the



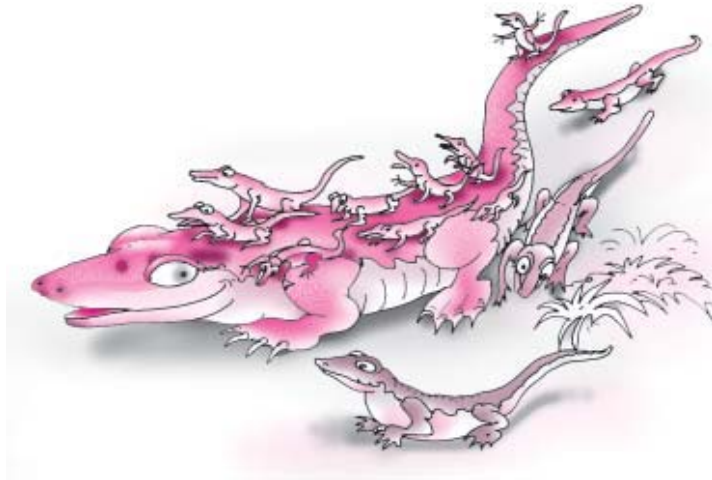
snakes. You never knew when one of them might lose his temper and spit some venom at you! And it took only a little poison to kill you, after all.

- *The lizards were also ordered to leave, and the whole forest now belonged to Makara and his group.*
- *The crocodiles faced unforeseen problems in the absence of their fellow reptiles.*
- *They soon realised that their happiness lay in their fellow creatures' happiness and homecoming.*



A few weeks passed and the animals of the forest looked tired and fed up. The RATS! Now that there were no snakes to eat them, the rats had taken over the forest. And they were having a wonderful time. They were everywhere, on the trees, in the grass, in the bushes, on the ground. They ate up the eggs of the lizards and crocodiles. There would be no babies that year. Makara's own nest of eggs had been chewed up.

Then Makara had a great idea. He called a meeting of the crocodiles and said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we, the



crocodiles, could have the **WHOLE** jungle for ourselves? No one but us? These lizards, now, just look at them! They have the strangest habits, and some of them even change colour! How can we trust someone who is green one minute, red the next? Let's get rid of them."

By now, the crocodiles were really scared of Makara. So they clapped and cheered. Makara was pleased. The lizards left the forest, some with their babies on their backs.

But now, when life should have been wonderful for the crocodiles of Pambupatti, all kinds of awful things began to happen. To begin with, the rats grew bolder by the day. They became so fearless that they jumped and turned somersaults on the crocodiles' backs! And there were too many frogs. They seemed to be growing larger, and there was no one to eat them but the crocodiles. These huge frogs began to eat the baby crocodiles. And the insects! Now that the lizards were gone, there were millions of them, growing bigger and nastier by the day.

It was a terrible time for the crocodiles. They couldn't understand what had happened to their happy forest home.

Then one day, a squeaky little voice piped up at one of their meetings, “We know why the forest has gone crazy, don’t we?”

Suddenly everyone was silent. They looked at Makara fearfully, but to their surprise, he looked nervous. He shook a rat off his tail and asked the small crocodile. “Why, little fellow?”

“It all began with the tort—”

“Okay, okay”, said Makara. “There’s no need to talk so much.” Makara didn’t want to admit he was wrong, but it didn’t matter. All the crocodiles knew now that he was not all that strong or powerful. Or always right. They sent urgent messages all over the place for the tortoises, snakes and lizards to come back to Pambupatti. And what a great day it was when these creatures came back, family after family, with their little ones on their backs or straggling behind, shouting at their parents to wait for them!



In two months, the forest was back to normal. The rats disappeared, and the insects, and the smell, and the world finally went back to its familiar old self.

“Well, Prem,” said the old man, “have you fallen asleep? Did my story send you off to dreamland?”

I shook my head. “No, Grandfather, I was just thinking. Maybe it’s time I went back to my own village, because I have a story to tell them. But what if they don’t listen to me?”

“We can only keep at it, my son — tell these stories again and again, to more and more people. Some of them may laugh at you or say your stories are not true. But they may remember them one day, and understand that each of us has a place in this strange, funny world of ours.”

ZAI WHITAKER

Questions

1. In what way is Pambupatti different from any other village?
2. Why is Prem determined not to return to his village?
3. Why did Makara dislike tortoises, snakes and lizards? Write a line about each.
4. What went wrong when the tortoises, snakes and lizards left the forest?
5. Why do you think Prem wants to tell the story of the reptiles to the people of his village?
6. Do you agree that it is difficult not to go along with someone who is very strong and powerful? Express your views frankly and clearly.
7. If you were a baby crocodile, would you tell Makara that he was wrong? What would you say to convince him?