

The Thief's Story



I was still a thief when I met Anil and though I was only fifteen, I was an experienced and fairly successful hand.

Anil was watching a wrestling match when I approached him. He was about twenty-five -- a tall, lean fellow -- and he looked easy-going, kind and simple enough for my purpose. I was sure I would be able to win the young man's confidence.

"You look a bit of a wrestler yourself," I said. A little flattery helps in making friends.

"So do you," he replied, which put me off for a moment because at that time I was rather thin.

"Well", I said modestly, "I do wrestle a bit."

"What's your name?"

"Hari Singh," I lied. I took a new name every month. That kept me ahead of the police and my former employers.

After this introduction, Anil talked about the well-oiled wrestlers who were grunting, lifting and throwing each other about. I didn't have much to say. Anil walked away. I followed casually.

"Hello again," he said.

I gave him my most appealing smile. "I want to work for you," I said. "But I can't pay you."

I thought that over for a minute. Perhaps I had misjudged my man. I asked, "Can you feed me?"

"Can you cook?"

"I can cook," I lied again.

"If you can cook, then may be I can feed you."

He took me to his room over the Sweet Shop and told me I could sleep on the balcony. But the meal I cooked that night must have been terrible because Anil gave it to a stray dog and told me to be off. But I just hung around, smiling in my most appealing way and he couldn't help laughing.

Later, he patted me on the head and said, never mind, he'd teach me to cook. He also taught me to write my name and said, he would soon teach me to write whole sentences and to add numbers. I was grateful. I knew that once I could write like an educated man there would be no limit to what I could achieve.

It was quite pleasant working for Anil. I made the tea in the morning and then would take my time buying the day's supplies, usually making a profit of about a rupee a day. I think he knew I made a little money this way but he did not seem to mind.

Anil made money by fits and starts. He would borrow one week, lend the next. He kept worrying about his next cheque, but as soon as it arrived he would go out and celebrate. It seems he wrote for magazines -- a queer way to make a living !

One evening he came home with a small bundle of notes, saying he had just sold a book to a publisher. At night, I saw him tuck the money under the mattress.

I had been working for Anil for almost a month and apart from cheating on the shopping, had not done anything in my line of work. I had every opportunity for doing so. Anil had given me a key to the door and I could come and go as I pleased. He was the most trusting person I had ever met.

And that is why it was so difficult to rob him. It's easy to rob a greedy man because he can afford to be robbed; but it's difficult to rob a careless man -- sometimes he doesn't even notice he's been robbed and that takes all the pleasure out of the work.

Well, it's time I did some real work. I told myself; I'm out of practice. And if I don't take the money, he'll only waste it on his friends. After all, he doesn't even pay me.

Anil was asleep. A beam of moonlight stepped over the balcony and fell on the bed. I sat up on the floor, considering the situation. If I took the money, I could catch the 10.30 Express to Lucknow. Slipping out of the blanket, I crept up to the bed. Anil was sleeping peacefully. His face was clear and unlined; even I had more marks on my face, though mine were mostly scars.

My hand slid under the mattress, searching for the notes. When I found them, I drew them out without a sound. Anil sighed in his sleep and turned on his side towards me. I was startled and quickly crawled out of the room.

When I was on the road, I began to run. I had the notes at my waist, held there by the string of my pyjamas. I slowed down to a walk and counted the notes : 600 rupees in fifties ! I could live like an oil-rich Arab for a week or two.

When I reached the station I did not stop at the ticket office (I had never bought a ticket in my life) but dashed straight to the platform. The Lucknow Express was just moving out. The train had still to pick up speed and I should have been able to jump into one of the carriages, but I hesitated - for some reason I can't explain - and I lost the chance to get away.

When the train had gone, I found myself standing alone on the deserted platform. I had no idea where to spend the night. I had no friends, believing that friends were more trouble than help, and I did not want to make anyone curious by staying at one of the

small hotels near the station. The only person I knew really well was the man I had robbed. Leaving the station, I walked slowly through the bazaar.

In my short career as a thief, I had made a study of men's faces when they had lost their goods. The greedy man showed fear; the rich man showed anger; the poor man showed acceptance. But I knew that Anil's face, when he discovered the theft, would show only a touch of sadness. Not for the loss of money but for the loss of trust.

I found myself in the *maidan* and sat down on a bench. The night was chilly -- it was early November -- and a light drizzle added to my discomfort. Soon it was raining quite heavily. My shirt and pyjamas stuck to my skin and a cold wind blew the rain across my face.

I went back to the bazaar and sat down in the shelter of the clock tower. The clock showed midnight. I felt for the notes. They were damp from the rain.

Anil's money. In the morning he would probably have given me two or three rupees to go to the cinema, but now I had it all. I couldn't cook his meals, run to the bazaar or learn to write whole sentences any more.

I had forgotten about them in the excitement of the theft. Whole sentences, I knew, could one day bring me more than a few hundred rupees. It was a simple matter to steal - and sometimes just as simple to be caught. But to be a really big man, a clever and respected man, was something else. I should go back to Anil, I told myself, if only to learn to read and write.

I hurried back to the room feeling very nervous, for it is much easier to steal something than to return it undetected, I opened the door quietly, then stood in the doorway, in clouded moonlight. Anil was still asleep. I crept to the head of the bed, and my hand came up with the notes. I felt his breath on my hand. I remained still for a minute. Then my hand found the edge of the mattress and slipped under it with the notes.

I awoke late next morning to find that Anil had already made the tea. He stretched out his hand towards me. There was a fifty-rupee note between his fingers. My heart sank. I thought I had been discovered.

"I made some money yesterday", he explained. "Now you'll be paid regularly."

My spirits rose. But when I took the note, I saw it was still wet from the night's rain.

"Today we'll start writing sentences", he said.

He knew. But neither his lips nor his eyes showed anything. I smiled at Anil in my most appealing way, and the smile came by itself, without any effort.

- RUSKIN BOND

About the Author :

Ruskin Bond is an Indian author of British descent. The Indian Council for Child Education has recognized his role in the growth of children's literature. He received the 'Sahitya Academy' Award in 1992. He was also awarded the 'Padma Shri' in 1999 and 'Padma Bhushan' in 2014.

About the Story :

This story has a simple plot with an important message. A young boy Hari Singh came to live with Anil in the hope of making a theft. Being a good fellow, Anil wants to teach Hari Singh how to read and write. Gradually, Anil develops trust in Hari Singh.

After stealing money from Anil, Hari Singh tries to go away forever but some inner voice stops him from doing so. Thus Hari Singh who was deviated from the right path realized his mistake.

Glossary

approached	-	came near, near to
flattery	-	excessive or insincere praise
modestly	-	humbly, bashfully
grunting	-	uttering a harsh sound
gasping	-	catching breath with open mouth
slid	-	to move, to slip in
sighed	-	drew a deep breath
stuffed	-	filled
arouse	-	to awaken, to excite
curious	-	eager to learn
vagrants	-	persons who have no settled home or job
undetected	-	not discovered

COMPREHENSION

A. Tick the correct alternative :

- What was Anil watching when Hari Singh met him -
(a) cricket match (b) wrestling match
(c) kabaddi match (d) television
- What did Hari Singh get from Anil in return for his work -
(a) salary (b) gold

- (c) food and accommodation (d) clothes
3. Anil was a _____.
- (a) thief (b) writer
- (c) wrestler (d) scientist

B. State whether the statements given below are True (T) or False (F) :

1. Hari Singh took a new name every month. []
2. Hari Singh was twenty years old. []
3. Hari Singh was fond of wrestling matches. []
4. Anil made money by fits and starts. []
5. Hari Singh went by train after stealing money. []

C. Answer the following questions in 20-25 words each :

1. Who was Hari Singh ?
2. Why did Anil dislike the first meal cooked by Hari Singh ?
3. How Hari Singh felt while working for Anil ?
4. How Hari Singh made a profit for himself ?
5. How did Hari Singh steal money ?
6. Why did Hari Singh not stop at the ticket office ?

D. Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each :

1. Why was it difficult to rob Anil ?
2. What study of men's faces was made by Hari Singh ?
3. "Anil was the most trusting person." Discuss.
4. Why did Hari Singh think that he should go back to Anil ?

E. Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each :

1. How did Anil make a living ?
2. How can you say that Hari Singh was a successful thief ?
3. Describe Hari Singh's reactions after the departure of the train ?

ACTIVITY :

Choose extracts from the story that illustrate the characters of Anil and Hari Singh and write down brief character sketches of both.
