

## The Gatekeeper

a true story by Edith Kimbell

In the fifties we were living in Varanasi in the Ganges plain. Our house was the typical Indian compound: a large park-like garden was enclosed by a high wall topped with glass shards to deter thugs and decoits, in the centre of which was our main residence with two tiers of smaller buildings for the kitchen, the bathroom and the servants quarters facing it across an open courtyard. Usually a troop of monkeys sat on the roof of the kitchen, greedily waiting to steal the food as it was carried across the courtyard unless someone stood guard armed with a rolling pin or stout stick. Nearby was a bazaar where it was a common sight to see the scrawny cows and washermen's donkeys wander among the produce stands, snatching whatever mouthful they could when the vendor's attention was otherwise engaged. Angry cries of "Hut," reinforced with the sound of a sharp twack on the rump of the pilferer, interrupted the colourful haggling drama going on around. Seriously harming a sacred cow could and did result in riots, but there was no ban on a vegetable seller protecting his produce with physical force.

Among the trees in our compound was a large mango tree that partly overhung the gate. Mango trees are much loved for their luxuriant wide shady canopy even when they are not bedecked with fruit like glowing little lanterns in the dark green foliage. Unfortunately they are also very popular with less desirable inhabitants. Each year the beginning of the hot season would be officially marked with the visit from the snake catcher, who would inspect every nook and cranny, catching reptiles that were about to emerge. Unerringly he would pounce on snakes none of us were even aware were there and put them in his snake bag. His particular prey was the krait, a small nasty viper almost impossible to see before it had delivered a guaranteed fatal attack. Only the cobras he would leave, as their presence in a house was supposed to be lucky and no entreaty from my parents would induce him to remove them. Once he had determined the house and grounds were clear he took his snakes away with him for another year.

In spite of this ritual, one day a large python draped itself elegantly over a branch of the mango tree above the gate in such a way that the thick tan coils were quite visible to anyone entering or leaving. Since we had many people coming to see my father professionally, this was rather disconcerting and inconvenient. We ordered our chowkidar (watchman) to remove the snake promptly. He assured us he would see to it that the snake did not annoy us further. The next day the snake was still up in the tree in post-prandial torpor. In answer to our complaints the watchman pointed to a small prayer offering of a butter lamp garlanded with marigolds he had set up at the base of the tree.

Properly entreated the snake would soon leave peacefully. Any other measures, he averred with much gesticulation, would bring bad karma on everyone, an unanswerable argument in India. Over the next month the prayer offerings became more lavish but the snake continued to doze on its chosen perch.

The stalemate was broken when we woke early one morning to the sounds of an angry mob armed with lethal brass-tipped staves heading for our compound. As foreigners we of course immediately feared that we had inadvertently transgressed against some taboo and were hastily trying to barricade ourselves. Somewhat to our relief we heard cries of “badmash sanmp — bad snake” and one of the bazaar men shouted that they had come to rid us of this dangerous pest. The python had violated its part of the bargain: sometime during the night it had made its way to the bazaar and engulfed one of the small half-starved donkeys before returning once again to its branch to digest its meal, a clearly visible bulge. Now non-violence and compassion for all living beings no longer applied. Stretched out, the dead python measured nine metres.