



Bond of Love

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- Can there be love and friendship between human beings and wild animals? Let's read a fascinating account of an orphaned sloth bear that was rescued by the author.
- Sloth bears inhabit forested areas, including the tropical rain forests of India and grasslands at lower elevations. Sloth bears have very shaggy hair and long muzzles. Using their claws to dig, they can then use their lips to form a tube, which can go deep into the ground, or into hard-to-reach areas like dead trees for their food. Their main food is termites. You can hear them suck up their food from several feet away.



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1. I WILL begin with Bruno, my wife's pet sloth bear. I got him for her by accident. Two years ago we were passing through the sugarcane fields near Mysore. People were driving away the wild pigs from the fields by shooting at them. Some were shot and some escaped. We thought that everything was over when suddenly a black sloth bear came out panting in the hot sun.
2. Now I will not shoot a sloth bear wantonly but, unfortunately for the poor beast, one of my companions did not feel that way about it, and promptly shot the bear on the spot.



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3. As we watched the fallen animal we were surprised to see that the black fur on its back moved and left the prostrate body. Then we saw it was a baby bear that had been riding on its mother's back when the sudden shot had killed her. The little creature ran around its prostrate parent making a pitiful noise.



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4. I ran up to it to attempt a capture. It scooted into the sugarcane field. Following it with my companions, I was at last able to grab it by the scruff of its neck while it snapped and tried to scratch me with its long, hooked claws.
5. We put it in one of the gunny-bags we had brought and when I got back to Bangalore I duly presented it to my wife. She was delighted! She at once put a coloured ribbon around its neck, and after discovering the cub was a 'boy' she christened it Bruno.



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6. Bruno soon took to drinking milk from a bottle. It was but a step further and within a very few days he started eating and drinking everything else. And everything is the right word, for he ate porridge made from any ingredients, vegetables, fruit, nuts, meat (especially pork), curry and rice regardless of condiments and chillies, bread, eggs, chocolates, sweets, pudding, ice-cream, etc., etc., etc. As for drink: milk, tea, coffee, lime-juice, aerated water, buttermilk, beer, alcoholic liquor and, in fact, anything liquid. It all went down with relish.



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7. The bear became very attached to our two Alsatian dogs and to all the children of the tenants living in our bungalow. He was left quite free in his younger days and spent his time in playing, running into the kitchen and going to sleep in our beds.



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8. One day an accident befell him. I put down poison (barium carbonate) to kill the rats and mice that had got into my library. Bruno entered the library as he often did, and he ate some of the poison. Paralysis set in to the extent that he could not stand on his feet. But he dragged himself on his stumps to my wife, who called me. I guessed what had happened. Off I rushed in the car to the vet's residence. A case of poisoning! Tame Bear—barium carbonate—what to do?



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9. Out came his medical books, and a feverish reference to index began: “What poison did you say, sir?” “Barium carbonate”. “Ah yes—B—Ba—Barium Salts—Ah! Barium carbonate! Symptoms— paralysis—treatment—injections of... Just a minute, sir. I’ll bring my syringe and the medicine.” A dash back to the car. Bruno still floundering about on his stumps, but clearly weakening rapidly; some vomiting, heavy breathing, with heaving flanks and gaping mouth.



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10. Hold him, everybody! In goes the hypodermic— Bruno squeals — 10 c.c. of the antidote enters his system without a drop being wasted. Ten minutes later: condition unchanged! Another 10 c.c. injected! Ten minutes later: breathing less stertorous— Bruno can move his arms and legs a little although he cannot stand yet. Thirty minutes later: Bruno gets up and has a great feed! He looks at us disdainfully, as much as to say, ‘What’s barium carbonate to a big black bear like me?’ Bruno is still eating.



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11. Another time he found nearly one gallon of old engine oil which I had drained from the sump of the Studebaker and was keeping as a weapon against the inroads of termites. He promptly drank the lot. But it had no ill effects whatever.



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12. The months rolled on and Bruno had grown many times the size he was when he came. He had equalled the Alsatians in height and had even outgrown them. But was just as sweet, just as mischievous, just as playful. And he was very fond of us all. Above all, he loved my wife, and she loved him too! She had changed his name from Bruno, to Baba, a Hindustani word signifying 'small boy'. And he could do a few tricks, too.



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At the command, 'Baba, wrestle', or 'Baba, box,' he vigorously tackled anyone who came forward for a rough and tumble. Give him a stick and say 'Baba, hold gun', and he pointed the stick at you. Ask him, 'Baba, where's baby?' and he immediately produced and cradled affectionately a stump of wood which he had carefully concealed in his straw bed. But because of the tenants' children, poor Bruno, or Baba, had to be kept chained most of the time.



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13. Then my son and I advised my wife, and friends advised her too, to give Baba to the zoo at Mysore. He was getting too big to keep at home. After some weeks of such advice she at last consented. Hastily, and before she could change her mind, a letter was written to the curator of the zoo. Did he want a tame bear for his collection? He replied, “Yes”. The zoo sent a cage from Mysore in a lorry, a distance of eighty-seven miles, and Baba was packed off.



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14. We all missed him greatly; but in a sense we were relieved. My wife was inconsolable. She wept and fretted. For the first few days she would not eat a thing. Then she wrote a number of letters to the curator. How was Baba? Back came the replies, “Well, but fretting; he refuses food too.”



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15. After that, friends visiting Mysore were begged to make a point of going to the zoo and seeing how Baba was getting along. They reported that he was well but looked very thin and sad. All the keepers at the zoo said he was fretting. For three months I managed to restrain my wife from visiting Mysore. Then she said one day, “I must see Baba. Either you take me by car; or I will go myself by bus or train.” So I took her by car.



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16. Friends had conjectured that the bear would not recognise her. I had thought so too. But while she was yet some yards from his cage Baba saw her and recognised her. He howled with happiness. She ran up to him, petted him through the bars, and he stood on his head in delight.



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17. For the next three hours she would not leave that cage. She gave him tea, lemonade, cakes, ice-cream and what not. Then 'closing time' came and we had to leave. My wife cried bitterly; Baba cried bitterly; even the hardened curator and the keepers felt depressed. As for me, I had reconciled myself to what I knew was going to happen next.



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18. “Oh please, sir,” she asked the curator, “may I have my Baba back”? Hesitantly, he answered, “Madam, he belongs to the zoo and is Government property now. I cannot give away Government property. But if my boss, the superintendent at Bangalore agrees, certainly you may have him back.”

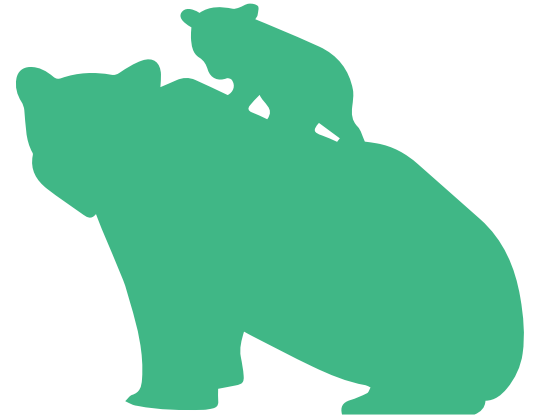
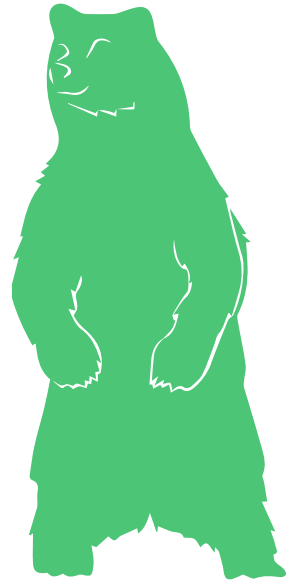


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19. There followed the return journey to Bangalore and a visit to the superintendent's bungalow. A tearful pleading: "Baba and I are both fretting for each other. Will you please give him back to me?" He was a kind-hearted man and consented. Not only that, but he wrote to the curator telling him to lend us a cage for transporting the bear to Bangalore.



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20. Back we went to Mysore again, armed with the superintendent's letter. Baba was driven into a small cage and hoisted on top of the car; the cage was tied securely, and a slow and careful return journey to Bangalore was accomplished.



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21. Once home, a squad of coolies were engaged for special work in our compound. An island was made for Baba. It was twenty feet long and fifteen feet wide, and was surrounded by a dry pit, or moat, six feet wide and seven feet deep. A wooden box that once housed fowls was brought and put on the island for Baba to sleep in at night. Straw was placed inside to keep him warm, and his 'baby', the gnarled stump, along with his 'gun', the piece of bamboo, both of which had been sentimentally preserved since he had been sent away to the zoo, were put back for him to play with.



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22. In a few days the coolies hoisted the cage on to the island and Baba was released. He was delighted; standing on his hindlegs, he pointed his 'gun' and cradled his 'baby'. My wife spent hours sitting on a chair there while he sat on her lap. He was fifteen months old and pretty heavy too!



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23. The way my wife reaches the island and leaves it is interesting. I have tied a rope to the overhanging branch of a mango tree with a loop at its end. Putting one foot in the loop, she kicks off with the other, to bridge the six-foot gap that constitutes the width of the surrounding pit. The return journey is made the same way. But who can say now that a sloth bear has no sense of affection, no memory and no individual characteristics?





THANK YOU