



The Snake and the Mirror

1. “HAS a snake ever coiled itself round any part of your body? A full-blooded cobra?” All of us fell silent. The question came from the homeopath. The topic came up when we were discussing snakes. We listened attentively as the doctor continued with his tale. It was a hot summer night; about ten o’clock. I had my meal at the restaurant and returned to my room. I heard a noise from above as I opened the door. The sound was a familiar one. One could say that the rats and I shared the room. I took out my box of matches and lighted the kerosene lamp on the table.

2. The house was not electrified; it was a small rented room. I had just set up medical practice and my earnings were meagre. I had about sixty rupees in my suitcase. Along with some shirts and dhotis, I also possessed one solitary black coat which I was then wearing.



3. I took off my black coat, white shirt and not-so-white vest and hung them up. I opened the two windows in the room. It was an outer room with one wall facing the open yard. It had a tiled roof with long supporting gables that rested on the beam over the wall. There was no ceiling. There was a regular traffic of rats to and from the beam. I made my bed and pulled it close to the wall. I lay down but I could not sleep. I got up and went out to the veranda for a little air, but the wind god seemed to have taken time off.



4. I went back into the room and sat down on the chair. I opened the box beneath the table and took out a book, the *Materia Medica*. I opened it at the table on which stood the lamp and a large mirror; a small comb lay beside the mirror. One feels tempted to look into a mirror when it is near one. I took a look. In those days I was a great admirer of beauty and I believed in making myself look handsome. I was unmarried and I was a doctor. I felt I had to make my presence felt. I picked up the comb and ran it through my hair and adjusted the parting so that it looked straight and neat. Again I heard that sound from above.

5. I took a close look at my face in the mirror. I made an important decision — I would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome. I was after all a bachelor, and a doctor! I looked into the mirror and smiled. It was an attractive smile. I made another earth-shaking decision. I would always keep that attractive smile on my face ... to look more handsome. I was after all a bachelor, and a doctor too on top of it! Again came that noise from above.



6. I got up, paced up and down the room. Then another lovely thought struck me. I would marry. I would get married to a woman doctor who had plenty of money and a good medical practice. She had to be fat; for a valid reason. If I made some silly mistake and needed to run away she should not be able to run after me and catch me! With such thoughts in my mind I resumed my seat in the chair in front of the table. There were no more sounds from above. Suddenly there came a dull thud as if a rubber tube had fallen to the ground ... surely nothing to worry about. Even so I thought I would turn around and take a look. No sooner had I turned than a fat snake wriggled over the back of the chair and landed on my shoulder. The snake's landing on me and my turning were simultaneous.

7. I didn't jump. I didn't tremble. I didn't cry out. There was no time to do any such thing. The snake slithered along my shoulder and coiled around my left arm above the elbow. The hood was spread out and its head was hardly three or four inches from my face! It would not be correct to say merely that I sat there holding my breath. I was turned to stone. But my mind was very active. The door opened into darkness. The room was surrounded by darkness. In the light of the lamp I sat there like a stone image in the flesh.

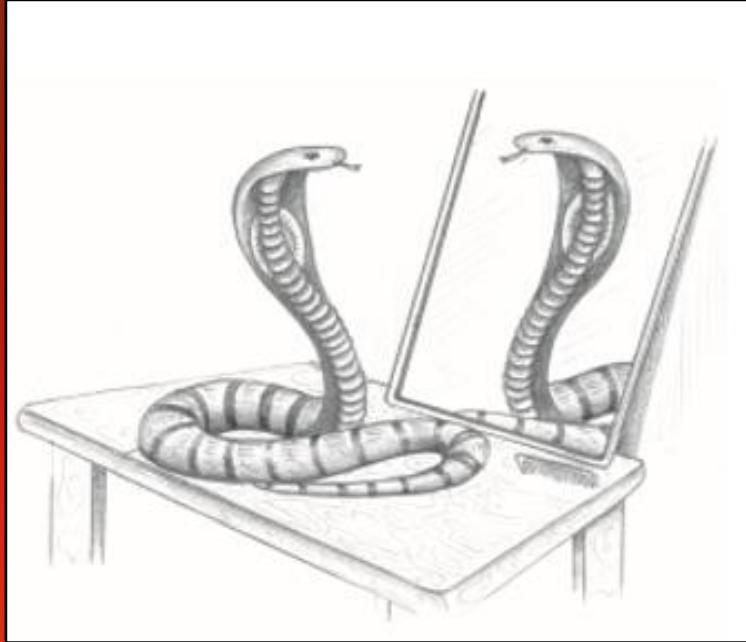


8. I felt then the great presence of the creator of this world and this universe. God was there. Suppose I said something and he did not like it ... I tried in my imagination to write in bright letters outside my little heart the words, 'O God'. There was some pain in my left arm. It was as if a thick leaden rod — no, a rod made of molten fire — was slowly but powerfully crushing my arm. The arm was beginning to be drained of all strength. What could I do?



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9. At my slightest movement the snake would strike me! Death lurked four inches away. Suppose it struck, what was the medicine I had to take? There were no medicines in the room. I was but a poor, foolish and stupid doctor. I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself. It seemed as if God appreciated that. The snake turned its head. It looked into the mirror and saw its reflection. I do not claim that it was the first snake that had ever looked into a mirror. But it was certain that the snake was looking into the mirror. Was it admiring its own beauty? Was it trying

to make an important decision about growing a moustache or using eye shadow and mascara or wearing a vermilion spot on its forehead?



10. I did not know anything for certain. What sex was this snake, was it male or female? I will never know; for the snake unwound itself from my arm and slowly slithered into my lap. From there it crept onto the table and moved towards the mirror. Perhaps it wanted to enjoy its reflection at closer quarters. I was no mere image cut in granite. I was suddenly a man of flesh and blood. Still holding my breath I got up from the chair. I quietly went out through the door into the veranda. From there I leapt into the yard and ran for all I was worth.

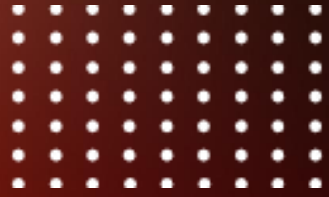
■ “Phew !” Each of us heaved a sigh of relief. Somebody asked, “Doctor, is your wife very fat?”

11. “No,” the doctor said. “God willed otherwise. My life companion is a thin reedy person with the gift of a sprinter.” Someone else asked, “Doctor, when you ran did the snake follow you?”

The doctor replied, “I ran and ran till I reached a friend’s house. Immediately I smeared oil all over myself and took a bath. I changed into fresh clothes. The next morning at about eight-thirty I took my friend and one or two others to my room to move my things from there. But we found we had little to carry. Some thief had removed most of my things. The room had been cleaned out! But not really, the thief had left behind one thing as a final insult!’

12. “What was that?” I asked. The doctor said, “My vest, the dirty one. The fellow had such a sense of cleanliness...! The rascal could have taken it and used it after washing it with soap and water.” “Did you see the snake the next day, doctor?” The doctor laughed, “I’ve never seen it since. It was a snake which was taken with its own beauty!”





Thank You!

