Even if there are no books worth purchasing, one can at least run into many old acquaintances by making the rounds of the book fair in the evening. For that reason, Harish Babu used to spend almost every evening at the fair while it was on.

One evening, while making his usual rounds, he wandered into the stall of an English publishing house. As he was leafing casually through some of the books, he noticed an attractive one filled with photographs and descriptions of rare birds from around the world. Turning the pages, entranced, he was suddenly arrested by the picture of a particular bird.

He examined it carefully, although, having forgotten his spectacles, he couldn’t actually read the text. He thought about buying the book, but his wife had asked him to pick up a few things, and he didn’t have enough money with him to buy the book—which was priced at five hundred rupees—as well. Since it was almost closing time for the fair, he decided to come back the next day and look at the book more closely. Just then, however, the man looking after the stall commented that the publisher would be returning to Delhi in the morning.

Harish Babu hesitated. Someone else in the stall had begun to show interest in the book—so, in the end, he was prompted to buy it.
On his way home, he recalled an incident from thirty years before, when he was teaching at a college in Bhubaneswar. His wife had taken the children to Bombay to spend the summer vacation with her sister, so he was alone in his quarters. One day, a very close friend, Saroj—an engineer who was working in the Koraput district, in connection with the Balimela Hydroelectric Project—paid him a surprise visit. He insisted that Harish accompany him to Koraput and spend some of his vacation with him. So Harish arranged for a relative to look after the house and left for Balimela with Saroj.

Harish liked the place, which was surrounded by forests. Every day, he drove around in Saroj’s jeep, revelling in the sight of the Jhanjabati River, the Bagra waterfall, and scenic spots like Chatikona.

Saroj had arranged for a man named Singua to accompany Harish. Singua, who belonged to a tribal people known as the Keya, had only one eye and was probably about fifty years old. After spending some days together, the two became quite friendly. Singua kept harping on one topic—because of the construction of the Balimela Dam, at Chitrakonda, a large area of forest would be submerged under water. Couldn’t this be prevented? He was under the impression that, if Saroj wished, he could stop the construction of the dam. How could Harish make him understand that the decision had been made by people much higher up and that Saroj was only one of the many individuals charged with executing it? Despite numerous explanations, however, Singua could not seem to grasp the idea.

Harish asked him why he was so worried about the forest being flooded. Singua replied that there were places in the forest where birds from heaven came to visit. Harish was amused to hear this, but, not wanting to hurt Singua’s feelings, he asked whether he had ever seen such birds. Singua remained silent, rousing Harish’s curiosity, so he repeated his question several times.

Finally, Singua answered him. Harish still clearly remembers what he said that day.
“Sir, you see that bald hill in the distance? My village is on the other side. Almost everyone in the village cultivates finger millet, hunts in the forest, and digs up roots for a living. At the edge of the village, my father had a smithy, where he used to make arrows, daggers, and so on. Even people from neighbouring villages used to come to our smithy. The income was hardly worth mentioning, but we somehow managed to eke out a living.

“I was nine or ten years old, and I used to go to the smithy to help my father. One day, quite late in the evening, we had locked everything up and were on our way out when we heard a grating sound. We stopped and listened, thinking that wild animals might be prowling around. Suddenly, four people emerged from the darkness. They were wrapped in blankets, with pieces of black cloth tied over their faces, and they were armed with bayonets. My father shook with fear when he saw them, but I wasn’t afraid at all. I knew who they were—dacoits, robbers. But why should they trouble poor people like us? We couldn’t understand their language, but it didn’t take us long to figure out what they wanted. Two of them had their wrists bound together with a chain. Apparently, they had escaped from some jail. They brandished their guns, ordering us to cut the handcuffs off.

“My frightened father opened up the smithy and removed their handcuffs. Before leaving, the dacoits gave us some money and indicated with signs and gestures that if we told anyone about the incident they would kill us and our whole family. We knew they would do as they said. Father threw the broken pieces of the handcuffs into the fire. After that, every now and then, other dacoits would appear, wanting to have their handcuffs cut off. We were living in the shadow of fear.

“One day, the police arrived. They started interrogating us. But neither my father nor I confessed what we had been doing—instead, we asked them what dacoits looked like. The police left. Though we felt relieved at our escape, we were still fearful. We were certain that the police did not believe us and must be keeping an eye on our smithy. Our only hope was to get wind of their approach, as they had to pass through the dense forest to reach our place. After all, the police would not come stealthily at midnight like the dacoits.
“Some time passed, during which we removed the handcuffs of a few more dacoits. Some had escaped from jail, but others—often with the help of the police themselves—had escaped on the way to jail after being arrested. We had no interest in knowing anything about them. We were lured by the promise of money. Having become adept at this work, we were earning a decent income.

“The police never came back, and our worries gradually vanished. One day, two men bound together came straight to our house, at midnight. My father opened up the smithy, and, as he was discussing payment, got busy cutting off their handcuffs. The dacoits were praising him, saying that many of their friends had escaped the police with his help. My father was nodding his head happily.

“All of a sudden, police surrounded us on all sides. The two men were policemen disguised as dacoits. But how could we have known that? The police beat my father mercilessly and took him away with them, leaving us in grief. Father never came home again. We heard that he had been sentenced to a long jail term.

“Our days passed in hunger and deprivation. I had four brothers and sisters, all younger than me. My mother had some disease and suffered constant abdominal pain. Only I was in a position to earn something. The only work I knew was what I had learned from my father in the smithy. But the police had demolished it and warned us not to reopen. We had been living on the money paid to us by the dacoits. Now, after father was taken away, we had nothing to eat, and my brothers and sisters had started scavenging in the nearby forests for roots and berries.

“I felt very restless at home. I wanted to work, but I was at loose ends. One day, a bunch of us Keya were sitting in the forest, gossiping. One of them said that his grandfather had told him that, in a certain part of the forest, a rare bird could sometimes be sighted. Its head was a deep red colour, with blue and white feathers, and its beak was bright gold. It let out a strange sound. It would lay only one egg in its life, and that egg would take a whole month to hatch. Then the bird would spend another month teaching the chick to fly. During that time, the bird would mostly stay in the tree where it had built its nest. Then it would vanish. People thought it came from heaven. Very few people had ever seen it.
“The man said that he had heard another strange thing about that bird. It was supposed to possess a rare gift: it knew where a particular root could be found in the forest. Iron chains would break and locks would open at the mere touch of that root.

“I was startled to hear this. I inched closer and asked him whether it was true. He said he didn’t know—it was just something he’d heard from his grandfather. The others weren’t paying much attention to what he said and, since it was getting late, had started to go their respective ways. But I did not. Instead, I followed that man all the way home, with the intention of meeting his grandfather.

“The grandfather looked like an ancient bird himself. From his posture, you’d think he had been sitting there for ages. I questioned him closely, to get more details. He said that whatever his grandson had said was true. But I had a hidden motive. I was obsessed with the idea of removing handcuffs, and, after hearing what had been said that day, I felt that my luck had turned. I wanted to learn all about the bird and use it to search out the root. The old man said he had no idea how to locate the root, but I had a feeling that he was hiding something. I left, but, a month later, I returned with a pot of liquor for the old man. I massaged his arms and legs, hoping he would tell me what he knew so that I would be able to find that bird.

Finally, one day, the old man revealed the secret. Since the bird had only one fledgling, it would watch over it with great vigilance. It built its nest in a very tall, leafy tree. After the egg was hatched, the bird would leave the nest only briefly, to get food for the chick. If, during that short time, someone managed to climb up to the nest and bind the chick’s legs and wings with a fine wire, the bird wouldn’t be able to teach the fledgling to fly. Then it would carefully examine the chick’s body to find out why it couldn’t flap its wings, and, having found the problem, it would go in search of the root to set the young bird free. The root should be plucked from the nest only if it was still there after the bird had set its chick free and taught it to fly. The old man warned me again and again that if the chick was injured in any way, the bird’s curse would bring down a series of calamities on the culprit.

“I memorized everything he said. From that moment on, I would roam about the forest all day. To find that bird was my only goal. Since I’d been told that the bird comes in winter, I would spend that season living in a
wooden structure up in a tree. I spent five years like that, sir. One day, when I was wandering about the forest, I heard a strange call. I looked up, and there was the bird. Its beak glittered like gold in the sunlight. The tuft of feathers on top of its head looked like a rainbow. My eyes fixed on the bird, I pinched myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. Several minutes passed. It was still sitting there. By scanning the treetop, I located its nest. I knew that the bird would not leave that tree.

“I had vowed to sacrifice a cock as an offering to our forest goddess if she would show the bird to me—and I had lost count of the offerings I had vowed to give her if I got the root. So, after marking the tree, I went to propitiate the goddess. I had no fear of losing my way. After all, I’d grown up in the area and had spent five years roaming the forest.

“The following day, I reached the spot well before nightfall and sat under the tree to wait, covering myself with a blanket. At last, one day, I heard a chirping sound from above and knew that the chick had hatched. Now I had to wait for only a few more days. But I was still impatient. I passed the time thinking of all that I would do to earn money once I got the root. After about eight days, I saw the baby bird peeping out of the nest. The mother would have to fetch food for it. During the short time she was away, I climbed the tree to the nest, tied up the chick’s legs and wings with a thin steel wire, and slipped back down. Then I waited for the mother to notice the problem.

“Another week passed before I heard the bird flapping her wings and letting out strange noises, and I knew she had discovered what had been done to her chick. Awash in anxiety, I watched the bird constantly, waiting for her next move. I had no desire for food or drink. I was physically motionless, although my mind was racing. I would prick up my ears at every sound. From time to time, I could hear the baby bird trying to flap its wings in the nest above. Probably, having grown a little, it could not sit comfortably with its legs and wings tied up.

“It seemed as if that evening would never come. The thick fog of the month of Pousha was gradually descending on the forest. The setting sun appeared quite dim. Sitting under the tree, I scanned every direction, determined not to miss the bird no matter where she came from.

“Suddenly, it seemed as if a thick fog had broken through the mist and was rushing toward the tree. I fixed my eyes sharply on the tree. The
yellow rays of the setting sun seemed to glimmer in that moving fog. In
the bright golden beak could be seen a piece of thick red root.

“I felt as if my pounding heart would burst out of my chest. I could
hardly breathe.

“The baby bird, which had been starving for two days, peeped out, saw
its mother, and started chirping excitedly. Then, in a desperate effort to
fly, it slipped out of the nest and fell—and an animal pounced on it and
carried it off. Seeing this, the mother bird swooped in very fast, making
loud wailing sounds.

“I had seen the root fall from her beak. Unable to stop myself, I threw
off the blanket and ran to look. The bird saw me and, thinking that I was
the one who had carried away her chick, flew toward me at lightning
speed and pierced one of my eyes with her beak. I lay there writhing in
pain, and the bird started attacking my entire body with her razor-sharp
beak. I couldn’t get up and run away. I was covered in blood. After a time,
I lost consciousness.

“Early the next morning, I woke up and sat leaning against the tree. I
knew I had lost one eye. My whole body was bloodied. Still, the hope of
getting the root had not left my mind. I had no desire to see whether the
bird was still around. When the mist cleared, I started looking all around
for the root I had seen in the bird’s beak, but I searched in vain. The place
was full of dry twigs and creepers. I collected some into my blanket and
then stumbled back home. Only the hope of finding the root in my bundle
gave me the strength to limp through the dense forest for miles, despite
being wounded in every part of my body.

“But our dilapidated mud hut wasn’t there. On the spot where it had
stood were a heap of fresh ashes and three half-burnt corpses. I guessed
that this must have been the work of the dacoits. Perhaps the police
had tortured my father in jail and, with the clues they got from him,
had arrested them. Or else my father had identified the dacoits, and, in
revenge, they had set fire to our hut the night before, killing everyone
inside. I lay there looking at the three bodies. I recognized my mother’s
body but could not make out which of my four brothers and sisters lay
dead there. I had lost the strength to look for the other two.

“After three days, the police van arrived. My guess was right. After
the dacoits were identified, tried, and sentenced to death, their comrades
had taken this terrible revenge. The police thought that I had also been attacked and wounded by the dacoits. They took the blanket in which I carried the twigs and roots, shook it out, and wrapped me in it. They took me to a hospital and got me admitted. I was not in any condition to talk or protest.

“Sir, I spent two months in the hospital, recovering. I did not go back to my village. Now I do odd jobs here and there. All this happened long ago, but that bird is still pursuing me. Exactly at sunset, I see a patch of fog rushing toward me with wings spread. Sometimes I feel it will pluck out my eye with its beak. There’s no blood now, but I feel as if a knife has been plunged into me. Occasionally, the bird appears in my dreams and talks like a human being. ‘Just you wait—I’ll kill you. I’ll see that the forest is submerged under water. Didn’t all of you join together and kill my child?’

“Sir, I am a great sinner. My family was destroyed because of my evil deeds. Now this forest, too, will be destroyed. There are so many forests and so many rivers in the state. Why did the government choose this forest for destruction? Nobody else is to blame, sir. Only I am responsible for all this.”

That day, Harish Babu’s heart had been moved by Singua’s sorrow, and he could not help believing what he had said with such conviction. But, when he returned to Bhubaneswar, the people he told laughed it off as mere superstition. Bird experts couldn’t say whether any bird fitting that description had ever been sighted.

The first thing Harish Babu did when he got home from the book fair that day was put on his spectacles and read what it said about the bird. The description tallied almost perfectly with what Singua had told him. The book even said that the bird lays only one egg in its lifetime and is greatly attached to its offspring. And the final sentence mentioned a belief among local people that the bird has some astonishing powers.

But the book also said that the bird’s habitat is the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean, off South America. It never leaves that place and has never been sighted in any other part of the world. Harish Babu wondered
how Singua and the old man from the Keya tribe could have seen that bird in the forests of Koraput if it never left those islands. How could these forest dwellers know so much about that mysterious foreign bird? And yet, when so many other things they had said turned out to be correct, why shouldn’t the curse of the bird also come true?

People believe that terrible calamities are caused by the curse of man. But why couldn’t Chitrakonda have been buried under water because of a bird’s curse? Otherwise, when a seemingly insignificant and long-forgotten event suddenly materializes in some awful form after so many years have passed, who can explain the mystery?

Harish Babu heaved a great sigh and closed the book.