

The Crooked Owl

Mudrarakshas

[RAH: Lakshmi is the Goddess of Fortune. When she travels, she goes by owl. If she sets out to come to someone, but his owl is crooked, she'll end up someplace else.]

The Hindi original is on pp. 72–76 of *Mathurādās kī ḍāyārī*.
This translation © 2020 Robert A. Hueckstedt.

Mathuradas disappeared. There's a reason for his disappearance. His owl had become somewhat crooked. It was absolutely necessary that he straighten it out. A man unable to straighten out his owl, to look out for number one, is considered an owl himself, a fool.

Actually, I was having trouble straightening out my crooked owl because without my knowing it owl straightening became an art form, and not just a simple, straight-forward art form, it became one full of complex, technical advancements. Since this procedure took on an artistic form and a technical aspect, it spawned some high level Institutes and Centres. The rug centre is Bhadoi, the centre for woolen cloth is Ludhiana, the handloom centre is Gorakhpur, and the centre for embroidered muslin is Lucknow. (Actually, I know about the centre in Lucknow only from the Travel Bureau's pamphlet.)

Now I have to find out where the Centre for Owl-Straightening is. Recently some people have begun believing that their Ludhiana is in Bhopal. That's not true at all. While some tremendous owls have been straightened out in Bhopal, if you arrive there with an averagely crooked owl, you'll leave, not with your owl straightened out, but with yourself all bent out of shape.

In this article I am not referring to those people who can take their owl, no matter how crooked, and immediately straighten it out anywhere. For those people the entire question of straight versus crooked is irrelevant. I am referring only to those who have an owl, albeit a crooked one, which no amount of expense has been able to straighten out.

Mathuradas was engrossed in the business of straightening out his owl when *Sārikā* began coming out with Special Issues.

Here I must confess that if a writer is even just a little clever, then a Special Issue can at least straighten his owl out temporarily. In Bengal, moreover, for Durga Puja so many Special Issues and so many big Special Issues come out that your owl can remain straight for a long time. Special Issues came out on *Crime Stories*, then some came out called *Depravity With Women*. (Note what you might be saying if you are not careful with your words.) The owl of Mathuradas wasn't so out of shape that Special Issues like that couldn't straighten him out. If not, he could write that a friend once took him to a disreputable part of town, and as soon as he realized what was going on there, he got angry and left. (On such matters a sworn, written statement is not required.) Mathuradas didn't learn anything from Jainendra either because there was so much confusion over the *Special Issue of Female Torture* that Jainendra's own straight and narrow owl got all out of shape and then straightened out again.

The magazines progressed to the point where Special Issues of Detective Stories began coming out. Therefore, I believe that *Sārikā* will soon come out with its own *Special Issue on Robbery*. That Special Issue will be extremely important. Robbery, after all, is a National Affair, capable of straightening out the owls of many people merely by the actions of one who, if he can't find an owl to straighten out, will straighten out whatever he can before slipping away.

A house in my neighbourhood was robbed. That one robbery almost immediately straightened out the owls of many people. The person whose house was robbed called me and said, "What good news I have to tell you!"

I thought he'd been given a promotion, but he said, "No! What happened is that my house was robbed yesterday!"

"And the good news is?"

My friend didn't continue the conversation because he realized I was one of those unfortunate few who had never been confronted with any kind of owl.

After the robbery, and before going to the Police Station, my friend went to the Insurance Company. He had taken out an expensive policy on all his movable goods. The insurance agent, also, was pleased with the robbery because when word got around that one of his clients had received such a generous cheque in recompense for his stolen goods, he

would make some money off the robbery, too.

Then it was the Police Station's turn. The Station's Superintendent first required, and immediately received, the list of stolen goods. Studying it seriously, he said, "The watch, was it yours?"

My neighbour said, "Yes, sir. I bought it when I was in Bangalore."

"Hmm. Purchased in Bangalore." With much gravity the Superintendent then said, "I need to see the stub of your ticket to Bangalore and the receipt for the watch you purchased there."

Now my owl, Dear Reader, is not just crooked, he's probably crippled as well. My neighbour's, though, is straight and in good shape. Had I been asked for such a receipt I would have gone into a rage, but my neighbour remained pleasant and unruffled. He immediately stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out an envelope which he placed in the Superintendent's hand. It contained five one hundred rupee notes. The Superintendent accepted that as the required receipt and railway ticket and had the Robbery Report written up. Expanding his chest, he then said, "Don't worry about a thing, sir. We'll relentlessly track down the robbers and recover every one of your stolen articles."

My neighbour's owl wasn't only straight, it was smart too. That's why my neighbour then, without any hesitation, pulled an envelope out of another pocket, gave it to the Superintendent and said, "Sir, don't go to any trouble. I had to have the Police Report written up, but we are a respectable family, and we don't want our name associated with any police investigation."

So far, these proceedings have straightened out the owls of four people—the robber, the insurance agent, my neighbour and the Police Superintendent. Now, however, more people got in line to have their owls straightened out. For the newspaper's Crime Reporter the news of the robbery had a particularly important aspect. He immediately went to the city's Chief of Police and said, "A robbery has occurred in Mr. Mathuradas's neighbourhood. The crime statistics are going through the roof."

The Chief of Police responded, "We will very quickly have these crimes under full control."

Then he opened a drawer and pulled out an envelope that he gave to the reporter. The envelope contained a license to own a carbine, officially classified a lethal weapon, in the name of the reporter's retired father.

That license set many fat owls heading straight. Renting out a house is

just asking for trouble. Renting out a motor tempo or even a rickshaw is never without its difficulties. Renting out a carbine, however, is the simplest thing in the world. Every night a robber is happy to rent it for two to three thousand rupees. Therefore, not just the reporter's father's owl, but the robbers' owls also began flying a straight and direct path.

The succession of people wanting to get their crooked owls straightened out doesn't end even here. News of the robbery reached even as far as the Police Station in the neighbourhood next to Mathuradas's. The Superintendent there had always wanted to be transferred to where Mathuradas lived. When he got the news of the robbery, he went to his MLA and said, "Sir. Anarchy has broken out in the next neighbourhood over. Robberies are being committed, and the police are asleep."

The Legislator understood everything immediately and said, "I'm sure you'll be able to handle the situation in an excellent and professional manner. Send in a Transfer Request."

The Superintendent pulled an envelope out of his pocket and placed it on the desk. Instead of a Transfer Request, it contained money.

Taking the envelope the Legislator said, "You may go now. Consider it done. I'll speak to the Home Minister."

The MLA went to the Home Minister and said, "I'm sure you're aware that Mathuradas is a journalist. A robbery occurred in his neighbourhood. The affair could be given an unfavourable light in the newspapers."

The Home Minister responded, "Honourable Member of the Legislature, you once told me you'd give me the opportunity to be of service."

The Legislator suggested to him the matter of the transfer of his dear friend the Police Superintendent. Then he said, "Mr. Minister, sir, I will always be indebted to you."

The Home Minister replied, "My honourable colleague, you often meet with our national leaders. I would be grateful if you would inform them that the Chief Minister is hopelessly corrupt, and his administration is at a standstill. I am the only individual capable of taking over. Fill their ears with this, and ... you know ..."

The MLA said, "I'll support you strongly."

So just look how many clever individuals were able to use this tiny affair to straighten out their owls quickly, while I, Mathuradas, sit apart, pulling and tugging my crooked owl and *Sārikā's* Special Issue is about to come out.