

OVER THE EDGE

Pritam pressed hard on his horn again, to let the people at the site know that he was approaching. He parked outside a small shed, where the contractor and the foreman were sipping cups of tea. A short distance away, some labourers, Chittru among them, were hammering at chunks of rock, breaking them up into manageable pieces. A pile of stones stood ready for loading, while the rock that had just been blasted lay scattered about the hillside.

'Come and have a cup of tea,' called the contractor.

'I can't hang about all day,' said Pritam.

'Don't worry,' said Bisnu. 'I don't work for contractors, I work for friends.'

'That's right,' called out Pritam. 'Mind what you say to Bisnu—he's no one's servant!'

The contractor wasn't happy until there was no space left in the truck for a single stone. Then Bisnu had his cup of tea, and three of the men climbed on the pile of stones in the open truck.

'All right, let's go!' said Pritam. 'I want to finish early today—Bisnu and I are having a big dinner!'

Bisnu jumped in beside Pritam, banging the door shut. It never closed properly unless it was slammed really hard. But it opened at a touch!

'This truck is held together with sticking plaster,' joked Pritam. He was in good spirits. He started the engine and blew his horn just as he passed the policeman and the contractor.

'They are deaf in one ear from the blasting,' said Pritam. 'I'll make them deaf in the other ear!'

The labourers were singing as the truck swung round the sharp bends of the winding road. The door beside Bisnu rattled on its hinges. He was feeling quite dizzy.

'Not too fast,' he said.

'Oh,' said Pritam. 'And since when did you become nervous about my driving?'

'It's just today,' said Bisnu uneasily. 'It's a feeling, that's all.'

'You're getting old,' said Pritam. 'That's your trouble.'

'I suppose so,' said Bisnu.

Pritam was feeling young. He drove faster. As they swung round a bend, Bisnu looked out of his window. All he saw was the sky above and the valley below.

edge; but it was usually like that on this narrow mountain road.

After a few more hairpin bends, the road dipped steeply on its descent to the valley. As Pritam changed gears, a stray mule ran into the middle of the road. Pritam swung the steering wheel over to

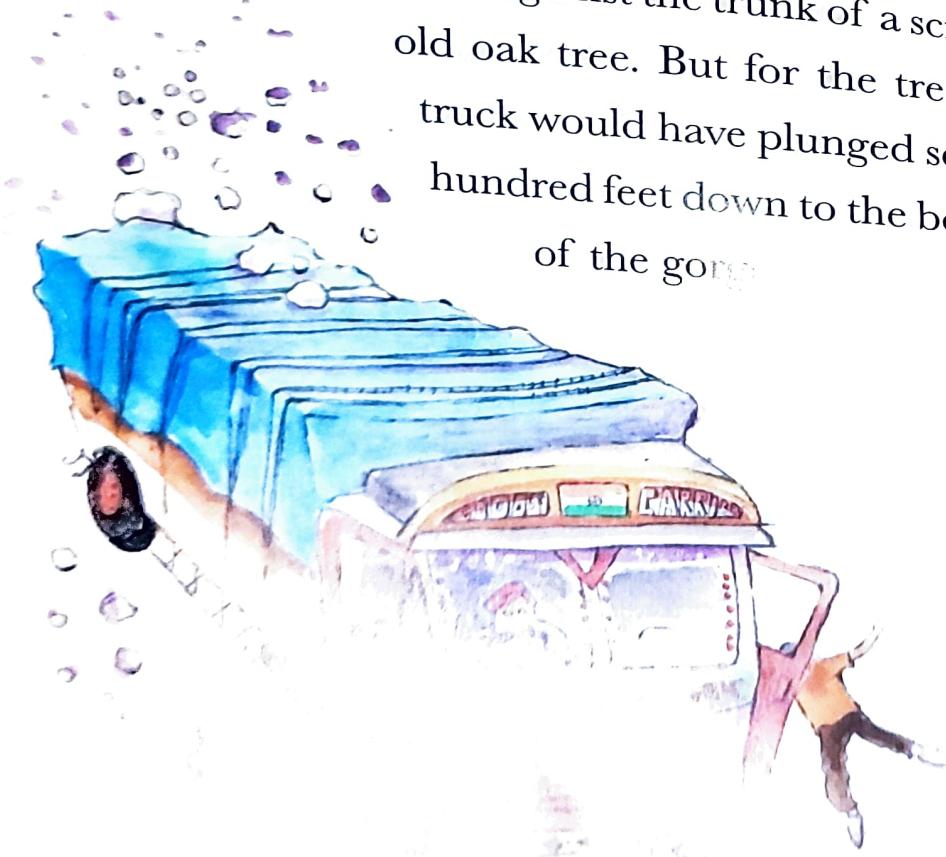
the right to avoid the mule, but at this point the road turned sharply to the left. The truck went straight over the edge.

As it tipped over, hanging for



a few seconds on the edge of the cliff, the labourers leapt from the back of the truck. Then it pitched forward and, as it struck a rock outcrop, the loose door burst open. Bisnu was thrown out.

The truck hurtled forward, bouncing over the rocks, turning over on its side and rolling over twice before coming to rest against the trunk of a scraggy old oak tree. But for the tree, the truck would have plunged several hundred feet down to the bottom of the gorge.



Two labourers sat on the hillside, stunned and badly shaken. The other man had picked himself up and was running back to the quarry for help.

Bisnu had landed in a bed of nettles. He was smarting all over, but he wasn't badly hurt. His first impulse was to get up and run back to the road. Then he realized that Pritam was still in the truck, probably trapped inside it.

Fearing the worst, Bisnu skidded down the steep slope, calling out, 'Pritam Uncle, are you all right?

There was no answer.

THE HILLS OF HOME

When Bisnu saw Pritam's arm and half his body jutting out of the open door of the truck, he thought his friend had been killed. It was a strange position, half in and half out. Bisnu was about to turn away and climb back up the hill, when he noticed that Pritam had opened a blackened and swollen eye. It looked straight up at Bisnu.

'Are you alive?' whispered Bisnu, terrified.

'What do you think?' muttered Pritam. He closed his eye again.

After the contractor and his men arrived, it took them almost an hour to get Pritam out of the wreckage of the truck, and another hour to get him to the spital in the next big town. He had broken bones and fractured ribs and a dislocated shoulder. But the doctors said he was repairable—which was more than could be said for the truck.

'So the truck's finished,' said Pritam, when

Bisnu came to see him after a couple of days.
 'Now I'll have to go home and live with my son,
 And what about you, boy? I can get you a job on a
 friend's truck.'

'No,' said Bisnu, 'I'll be going home too.'
 'And what will you do there?'

'I'll work on my land. It's better to grow things
on the land than to blast things out of it.'

They were silent for some time.

'There is something to be said for growing
things,' said Pritam. 'But for that tree, the truck
would have finished up at the foot of the mountain,
and I wouldn't be here, all bandaged up and talking
to you. I'd have been in some other world by now.
It was the tree that saved me. Remember that, boy.'

'I'll remember. And I won't forget the dinner
 you promised me, either. In the meantime, here
 are some pakoras for you.'

Pritam managed to swallow a pakora, and
 Bisnu ate the rest.

It snowed during Bisnu's last night at the
 quarries. He slept near Chittru, in a large shed
 meant for the labourers. The wind blew the
 snowflakes in at the entrance; it whistled down the
 deserted mountain pass. In the morning the boys
 opened their eyes to a world of dazzling whiteness.
 The snow was piled high against the walls of the
 shed, and they had some difficulty getting out.



Bisnu joined Chittru at the tea stall, drank a glass of hot sweet tea and ate two buns. He said goodbye to Chittru, promising to keep in touch, and then set out on the long march home. The road would be closed to traffic because of the heavy snow, and he would have to walk all the way.

He trudged over the hills all day, stopping only at small villages to take refreshment. By nightfall he was still ten miles from home. But he had fallen in with other travellers, and with them he took shelter at a inn. They built a fire and crowded round it, and each man spoke of his home and fields, and all were of the opinion that the snow and rain had come just in time to save the winter crop. Someone sang, and another told a ghost story. Feeling at home after all, Bisnu fell asleep listening to their tales. In the morning they parted and went their different ways.

It was almost noon when Bisnu reached his village.

The fields were covered with snow, and the mountain stream was in spate. As he climbed the terraced fields to his house, he heard the sound of barking, and his mother's big black mastiff came bounding towards him over the snow. The dog jumped on him and licked his face and then went bounding back to the house to alert the others.

Puja saw him from the courtyard and ran indoors shouting, 'Bisnu has come, Bisnu has come!'

His mother ran out of the house, calling, 'Bisnu, Bisnu!'

Bisnu came walking through the fields, and he did not hurry, he did not run; he wanted to savour the moment of his return, with his mother and sister smiling, waiting for him in front of the house. There was no need to hurry now. He would

be with them for a long time, and the manager of the Picture Palace would have to find someone else for the next season. This was his home, and these were his fields. Even the snow was his. When the snow melted he would clear the fields, and nourish them, and make them rich.

He felt very big and very strong as he came striding over the land he loved.