

Dancing Dogs And Bears

AFTER lunch my husband as usual took some *supari* out of the Horlicks bottle, and, chewing contentedly, went back to work. But I could not stretch out on the bed with the newspaper as I always do at this time. When I am upset I tend to get a mild stomach-ache. And then I can't concentrate at all. Still I forced myself to glance at today's newspaper.

Mrs. Mitra says newspapers are like serialized fiction. If you miss an installment you lose track of everything in the news. And this is what happens to me every time the cleaning woman doesn't turn up or Khoka has a cold. When I get back to the newspaper after a few days, ministries have toppled or strikes have been announced. It takes me several days to find out why these things happened. By the time I have sorted them out, perhaps there would be a wedding in my sister-in-law's cousin's family and I would be packing my bag to go there. I just don't know how the rest of the world keeps track of the details in the newspaper every day.

No matter how much I try today, I cannot understand a thing in the newspaper. My eyes run over the print, but nothing enters the head. I can only think of what he said. And why did he? Sucking the mangoseed he said this very casually, then finished his meal and walked off. He couldn't be bothered to notice what effect his words had on me. Had I been a character in English fiction or drama, he would have observed every frown or smile on my face. He would have made notes on my changes of mood and cyclostyled these notes for distribution among his post-graduate students. But alas, since I am not a Shakespeare heroine only an ordinary woman of flesh and blood, and a mere wife, I have to find my own solution to

my problem. At the most I can go upstairs and ask Mrs. Mitra's advice.

Who knows what Australians like to eat? It's not the cooking that I mind. Give me an hour, and I can cook a feast for ten. But he really puts me in a difficult position by inviting these foreigners. One hears that the Irish eat a lot of potatoes, and the English like boiled things. But what am I supposed to serve these Australians? If I ask him he'd get angry. "No one will believe that you had once passed your B.A.," he'd say impatiently. But who will make this man understand that none of the textbooks I read for my B.A. would tell me whether the Australians like rice or bread, whether they prefer spiced food or bland, whether I should use Postman or mustard oil.

Every time I have to go through the same crisis. I feel quite scared of these ordeals. By the time one is over and I am beginning to breathe normally, a new one develops. For instance, today while mixing the *dal* in his rice he mentioned absent-mindedly, "Oh yes, I have asked Prof. Simmons and the rest to dinner this evening. Didn't I tell you — five of them have come from the Australian National University for this seminar?" That was the end of my afternoon nap, my little luxury of resting. But what he said afterwards made me even more worried. I just cannot figure out why he said it.

There is no end to my problems. Even if I manage to cook something, I'll still have the ordeal of sitting with them, making some sort of conversation. What can I say to them? Mrs. Mitra says I should not be afraid of talking to people: Just go ahead, she says, as you talk to me. How hot it is today—how the train from Delhi was seven hours late because of the cyclone—how today's newspaper reports that an Italian lady has had 27 children. Keep talking, she says, without



being self-conscious. Once you start you will find that one thing leads to another and there's no problem. I try to remember her advice, but in an actual situation I find myself totally tongue-tied.

Last Saturday for the first time, I managed to speak a little bit. But then I couldn't speak to all of them. Let's see, there were three of them that evening—an elderly American, I think he was the main guest. I forget the name now - Professor Mac-something-or-the-other. There was a middle-aged woman with him whom I took to be his wife at first. Later I realised she was a professor herself. The third one was very young. He had made his face rather untidy with a lot of bushy growth, but looking at his lips I could make out how young he was. He was a poet. Later in the evening he told me all about his work with a journal and also how he does odd jobs for the radio and the television.

For the first time I could understand the speech of a foreigner perfectly. My husband should have been pleased with my smartness. He must have seen how well I was carrying on a conversation with this young man. He never said anything afterwards, of course. It is not his nature to say anything nice. I should know by now, after living with him for two years.

He always complains: "You were supposed to have passed your B. A.

Why in heaven's name can't you speak a little English?" Of course I never had to speak English before I got married, but it's not that I can't speak if I try. And Mrs. Mitra has given me some practice too. But the raw foreigners my husband keeps bringing home always manage to confuse me. To understand their English is beyond me.

That evening as soon as I was introduced to Prof. Mac-some-thing-or-the-other, he put out a bear-like paw at me. I nearly stepped back. His hands felt cold to the touch cold like the bark of an ancient tree. The lady's hand felt like the wrong side of a velvet cloth. Don Ashley, the poet, had a warm and moist palm. I followed Mrs. Mitra's instructions faithfully and told them how pleased I was.

And then the trouble started. The Professor said a whole lot of things in a loud resounding voice that I couldn't quite follow. The lady also said a few things in a nasal tone. I got the general idea. They were being polite and nice, so I fixed a smile on my face and looked from the one to the other. Don Ashley did not say anything. He just looked at me from a distance. How black his eyes were! I did not know Americans can have such dark eyes. But then how many Americans have I seen in my life?

My husband has lived abroad for many years. The things he talks about to these foreigners I do not always understand. I don't know any of the people they refer to. So and so has written this book, so and so is going to Europe to teach this summer — they go on endlessly like this. Normally I can follow my husband's English quite well, but when these people come, his English also seems to change.

That evening they kept on talking about the seminar they were holding. Apparently someone had made a statement about the concept of marriage in the Elizabethan age and they were all very critical about it. In the middle of all this I never got a chance to say how hot it was, or how the train from Delhi came late, or anything about the number of

children the Italian lady had. I thought perhaps none of these topics would sound quite right.

So generally I kept quiet, and only occasionally got up to give them chilled tomato juice, or to put the ash trays in proper places and smiled now and then. Some people say I look pretty when I smile. When we first got married my husband used to be quite taken by my dimples. It is not that I smiled now in order to look pretty. Since I could not follow what was going on and could not take part in the conversation, what else could I do except smile?

Don Ashley picked up a glass from the tray and looked at me steadily. There was a faint smile on his lips, as if he shared some secret joke with me. "Where is your glass?" he asked in a deep voice. I picked up the last glass from the tray, put the tray away and came back to sit carefully next to the lady professor. I thought now I can spend some time just turning the glass around in my hand. On one side of the room, my husband and Professor Mac were discussing the concept of marriage. On the sofa opposite them was the lady professor — Mrs. Beecher, shall we say, though I am sure her name was something else — with a glass in one hand and a cigarette in another. I sat stiffly at the other end of the sofa.

Don Ashley who was sitting alone on the third side of the room picked up a *morha* (stool) and came to sit next to me. Mrs. Beecher was paying more attention to the discussion of the men than to me and Don started talking to me in a low voice. He told me what he had seen in India so far, how long he planned to stay, and all about his work at home. He said he had never seen eyes like the eyes some Indian women have. And for the first time in my life I had no trouble following the speech of a foreigner. I could even speak to him about a few things myself. I looked at my husband from the corner of my eyes to see if he had noticed this. He should have been pleased.

Don looked at Khoka's picture on the

table and wanted to know how old he was. He told me he had a daughter exactly the same age. He took out his wallet to show me the picture of his child. The way he spoke about her I could see he was missing his daughter very badly. So when he asked me if Khoka was asleep, I said why don't you come in and see and took him inside.

Now let me recall what I had cooked that day. Is that where I had gone wrong? Perhaps the chicken was not tender enough — otherwise why would my husband say such a thing? I don't remember having made any other mistake. At the end, I thanked each one and said all the usual things that Mrs. Mitra had taught me. Oh yes, there was one error that I remember now. They had coffee after dinner. Instead of bringing milk and sugar separately I had mixed it all together in the kitchen and brought the cups out on a tray. And then I learnt that they don't take milk in their coffee. So I went back to pour the coffee out and make some black coffee all over again. That took some time.

Perhaps that's what my husband was referring to. It would have taken me longer if Don Ashley had not come to the kitchen to help me. At first I didn't let him. After all a guest cannot be made to work. But he said that in their country this is permitted. He said at home he washed the dishes every day. When I looked at him I felt very amused — a big hefty man with a beard, standing at the sink, washing our tiny pink coffee cups. The sight was too funny for words I must have laughed out quite loudly, because my husband looked in from the living room. By that time I had nearly finished making the coffee. My husband talks about my lack of efficiency. He must have been quite pleasantly surprised to see how well I had organized the coffee making. But of course he didn't know that Don Ashley had washed the cups.

As far as I remember, the dinner went off all right. I was as sociable as I could be. People seemed to have enjoyed their food, and yet why did he say this today? Sucking the mango-seed towards the end

of the meal he said, "And look, don't let that kind of thing happen again." And then he didn't say anything more. One would imagine he'd explain what kind of thing, when did it happen — but no, nothing of the sort. I think he does these things deliberately to make me nervous. What could have happened that day? I did my best to please him. He thinks I can't talk to people — he ought to have noticed how much I talked to Don, especially when I took him to Khoka's room. Don must have been quite impressed by my English because he took out a book of his poems from his briefcase and autographed it for me. What a beautiful hand he wrote — the letters squarish in shape, slanted somewhat to the left. I thanked him duly — my husband cannot find any fault there.

My husband says it is bad manners to speak in front of your guests in a language that they cannot understand. In front of foreign visitors he invariably speaks to me in English. Normally I feel shy to answer him in English, but that evening I did even that. The cork of the vinegar bottle had become so tight that I could not take it out. I came and asked him in English to do this for me. This should have pleased him too. Sometimes

I am amazed at myself for the number of things I have learnt in these two years.

But the cork had indeed got stuck rather badly. My husband could not take it out either. At last Don Ashley managed to open it. It must be all this beef-eating that makes them so much stronger. Professor Mac took two helpings of the dessert; Mrs. Beecher asked me for the recipe for the fish curry. Even then I wonder what could have gone wrong. A man like my husband won't make such a comment for no reason. The more I think, the more I remember various minor slips. I forgot to keep *dhobi*-fresh towels in the bathroom. The flower vase on the sideboard was empty. I had not polished the silver that day. Could these be the things he had in mind? I am beginning to

feel quite ashamed of myself now.

There is no end to my worries. The afternoon wore on. I folded the newspaper and got up from the bed to start cooking. As I straightened the bed, Don Ashley's book of poems fell out from under the pillow. I have been planning to read it for the last few days. *Dancing Dogs and Bears* — what a strange title! I kept it back under my pillow. A slim orange-coloured volume — I have never seen a more beautiful book. Some day I must read it. But first of all I must polish the silver now, and put clean towels in the bathroom. He must not find any fault with my arrangements today. After I finish cooking I will go upstairs to Mrs. Mitra to brush up my conversational English.

