

The Stolen Elephant of Mumbai

By Elora Hughes



Chaya rounded a corner and saw the most amazing sight – The Palace of Mumbai stood before her. Chaya gazed at the symmetrical olive trees that lined the walls and the long promenade lit by strong beams of light. She ducked behind a large pillar as a group of guards in splendid red and yellow uniform passed by. When she was sure they were gone she crept up a staircase and into a corridor with thickly carpeted floors. When Chaya was halfway down the corridor, she was hit by an amazing smell of hot curry and sweet fruit. She followed the smell to a vast dining hall with a table piled high with delectable food. Chaya looked at her watch, it was 12.30. She held back the temptation of sneaking up to the table and eating a rather large, sweet potato that she had her eye on. She carried on walking until she found herself before balcony draped with red velvet curtains. Chaya looked out and realised she was staring at the courtyard. She wondered how Nour and Neel were getting on.

A few minutes later she heard the disguised blow of a whistle and ran as fast as she could towards the sound of the whistle. She saw Neel come out of the adjoining corridor and stumbled towards him. Eventually they reached Nour, who was jumping up and down. She was on the edge of a brick wall and looked exhausted. She beckoned for them to follow her up a large Frangipani tree. All three of them peered through the branches. On the other side of the wall stood Ananda – the King’s elephant. Guards were placed carefully around the elephant. The King had given them one clear instruction. That was to no let Ananda escape.

“We would certainly be put in prison if we stole the elephant.” said Neel in a timid voice.

“It would only be for the rest of your life.” muttered Nour sarcastically.

“Can you two stop arguing.” said Chaya irritably.

“I will stop arguing, if Nour stops saying rude things about me.” muttered Neel.

Chaya was not sure if they would keep quiet, nevertheless she kept quiet. A second later Ananda reared up in pain, one of the guards had poked him when he tried to escape. The guard who had stabbed Ananda backed away and hit the brick wall. Soon the sun would start to go to bed, it would not be long before the moon would come out. The three children needed to get home before Nour’s Dad, Chaya’s Auntie and Neel’s Mum and Dad got worried.

“We will come back tomorrow,” whispered Chaya in Neel and Nour’s ears.

“Where shall we meet?” questioned Neel.

“Outside the palace gates.” answered Chaya confidently.

As Chaya walked home she felt more excited than ever before. They were really going to steal an elephant. Suddenly she felt her arm being pulled back very sharply. She screamed and struggled trying to see who was trying to hurt her and why. Then she saw a glint of fierce red and bright yellow and her heart did a summersault. It was a guard from the palace.

“What are you doing?” asked the guard.

“I was just looking at the palace” squirmed Chaya.

“No, you were going to steal something weren’t you and for it you are going to the dungeons.” he spat aggressively.

Chaya shook her head, but she knew her time was up and miserably let the guard lead her away towards the steep stone steps that lead to the grim dungeons. How on earth was she supposed to steal the elephant now and Neel and Nour would not be able to stop having arguments without her there to split them up. She hung her head low in shame.

Hiding behind a large tree Neel and Nour looked helplessly after Chaya.

“How are we going to free Chaya and steal an elephant?” asked Nour helplessly.

“I have no idea whatsoever” said Neel staring blankly at the place Chaya had disappeared.

The guard that had captured Chaya roughly pushed her into a solitary cell and bolted the door. As Chaya’s eyes became accustomed to the gloom that was half obscuring the already dark dungeons she saw about a dozen or so other cells, all holding captured people. They all had the same tired, anguished look on their faces. As the guard walked away, he looked back at her with contempt and she saw he had a small scar on his nose.

In the vicinity of the dungeon was another small barren room with only a large table and a dusty kitchen where the prisoners had to cook their own food. Chaya realised that the guard had totally thwarted their plan and she inside her she felt a murderous rage rising up. How had this happened, she thought remorsefully to herself?

Later that night Chaya woke up to the sound of scruffling, it was a large grotesque rat that was heading down the dank corridor. She watched the rat carefully and to her surprise she saw it squeeze under some planks and disappear. An idea formed in Chaya’s mind, if she could somehow break free of her cell, then she might be able to investigate what was under the plank and see if it was a way out. She thought to herself that it was a crazy idea but what if it worked?

Neel and Noor felt disheartened as they paced the edge of the palace gate and tried to fathom a plan. It was twilight and Neel and Noor were still thinking and had only come up with a few silly ideas, mostly from Noor, like trying to dig a tunnel into the palace. By the time it was evening, they were beginning to panic. Their parents were going to be wondering where they were and they were going to

Next morning Chaya awoke from a fitful slumber to the sound of jangling keys as the guards made their way towards their prisoner. As the guard with the scar on his nose walked forward Chaya saw his

expression was sullen and flippant. Firstly, the guard led Chaya into the room where she had breakfast, if she was hoping for any nourishment it wasn't there. The breakfast was cold porridge that looked revolting.

Chaya would have to somehow elude the guard or distract him to get out of the cold room and back to where she saw the rat disappear. Suddenly there was a skirmish in the corner furthest away from Chaya between two other prisoners and her guard rushed over to help. Chaya couldn't believe her luck and quickly zigzagged, ducking under the low door and into the corridor.

In the meantime Noor had found some money lying on the ground and Neel had realised that with the money he had and what Noor had found they may be able to afford a small breakfast from a stall in the market. After they had eaten, they felt some of their strength return and they could think more clearly, they felt even more determined to free Chaya. A plan was forming in Noor's mind.

"Ah, I've got an idea." says Noor excitedly.

Disapprovingly Neel says "It better be a good one."

"It is! Listen to this. I have remembered, what happens at 12 o'clock? The Palace gates open and the King comes out to make a speech, I could make a diversion and you could sneak in and try and find Chaya. It would be risky, but it might just work."

"Sometimes, you actually can be very clever" says Neel.

Back in the hellish dungeon Chaya knew she had to act quickly if she was to use this rare opportunity to escape. She skidded to the end of the corridor and heaved open the splintered plank that she had seen the ugly rat squeeze under. It revealed a steep drop to the bottom below that she could only just fit through, contorting her slender body she squeezed into the hole and plummeted into the darkness. She landed awkwardly with a thunk, this tunnel had obviously been used as an escape route before, as in the dim light, she could just make out the outline of a lantern (which was lucky). Fumbling in her pocket she pulled out her box of matches and lit the lamp. Now she could see better, she saw ahead of her a long stretch of muddy ground, going steadily upwards, as she started to walk forward she stumbled a bit and looked down to see the floor was covered in debris. As she kept walking her tummy tightened and she started to feel apprehensive, where would this lead to? When would the guard realise his mistake?

Eventually, after walking for over half an hour (and starting to a rising sense of dismay) Chaya started to see some light and came to a drain. Carefully she lifted a corner and looked out, to her relief the tunnel has led her to just outside the palace. Chaya couldn't believe her luck, but it wouldn't be long until the guard realised she was missing, so she blew out the lantern out and with great effort heaved the heavy drain cover to one side. Being careful that no one saw her she climbed out, fortuitously the clock struck 12 and everyone was distracted as the majestic King rode out on his black stallion flanked by two guards on horseback.

Suddenly Chaya's feelings changed from being relieved that she had climbed out to anxious again, by the golden tipped palace gates, Nour was embroiled in a fight with one of the guards who were dressed in full armour. Wracking her brain, what could she do, what was going on? She had no idea.

Without thinking, she flew over to Nour's side.

“What are you doing?” she shouted and gave her a look that clearly said, what are you doing? Get out of here before you get into trouble!

Nour was completely shocked to see her friend but let her lead her away to safety, before she confronted her. When they were safely out of earshot of the guards, Nour collapsed on an oak bench and incredulously said to Chaya “How on earth did you get here?”

Chaya simply pointed to the drain and Nour’s mouth dropped wide open! Nour tried to speak but she was tongue tied, Chaya laughed and started to explain. When Chaya had finished telling Nour what had happened, Nour blinked and slowly shook her head at her friend. She couldn’t believe Chaya’s luck.

Suddenly Chaya realises Neel isn’t there and in a panic asks Nour where their friend is.

Nour looks awkwardly to the floor before saying “Well, we were trying to find you and I came up with a plan to distract the guards when the King came out, which is what I was doing when you found me. But in the meantime Neel was meant to sneak in and try to find you.”

The magnitude of the situation hit them “Great said Chaya, we are pretty much back to where we started, aren’t we?”

Nour nodded and looked thoroughly glum. What had they done?