



# *Poison* By ROALD DAHL

*For Harry, for all of us, it was an ordeal of terror. At any moment, the deadly krait might*

IT MUST have been around midnight when I drove home. I hadn't meant to stay on as late as that, but it had been pleasant sitting there with Ganderbai, listening to his stories and drinking his whisky. I have always had a layman's fascination for doctors' stories, the more so if the doctor is—as Ganderbai was—a Hindu who worked among the pathetic, suspicious Indian peasants. Some of his stories were pretty awful, and it was easy to see, by the way he told them, how deeply he felt about his own people and incidentally how much he mistrusted the white men who lorded it over them. Fine person, Ganderbai, I thought. Really a very fine person.

As I approached the gates of the bungalow, I switched off the head lamps of the car so that the beam wouldn't swing in through the window of the side bedroom and wake Harry Pope. Must try not to wake Harry again tonight, I really must. He gets up so hellish early in the morning. For the two years I'd been sharing a house with him he'd got up at five every single morning, seven days a week. I decided I'd creep up the driveway very slowly in bottom gear.

But what a man that Harry was. Not many like him about these days. Coming out to India at twenty-six and going into the poor quarter of the town and starting a boys' club. Persuading all the wealthy merchants to cough up money and starting this club for adolescent boys to keep them off the streets at night. Hindus and Moslems alike. Chucking them together when they were young, before the taste of racialism had become bitter in their mouths.

And now after two years the club was a big thing and the Indians adored him and the English thought he was crazy. Without a doubt, he was a kind of missionary, but he was better than a missionary because he didn't have an ax to grind. What was it Ganderbai had said this evening? "You English," he had said, "you don't know one tenth of what Harry Pope has accomplished in this town. He's the only one of you I know whom I trust absolutely."

So tonight, I told myself, I must be careful not to wake Harry. Needs all the sleep he can get. Been showing a few signs of strain lately too; but who could wonder at that? Two years is a long

time in this climate without a break. Too long a time. I must tell him, I thought. I really must tell him to pack it up and take a trip to Kashmir and get back to normal. But he won't go. I know he won't go.

I turned slowly in through the gates and, as I did so, the bungalow came into view and I saw there was a light shining from Harry's window. So he was awake anyway. But that's late for Harry, I thought. That's very late for Harry. Or maybe he's gone to sleep with the light on. I parked the car and went up the five steps to the balcony, counting each step carefully in the dark so I wouldn't take an extra one which wasn't there when I got to the top. I crossed the balcony, pushed through the screen doors into the house itself, and switched on the light in the hall. I went across to the door of Harry's room, opened it quietly, and looked in.

He was lying on the bed and I could see he was awake. But he didn't move. He didn't even turn his head toward me, but I heard him say, "Timber, Timber, come here."

He spoke slowly, whispering each word carefully, separately, and I pushed the door right

Ganderbai slowly poured a few drops of the chloroform into the funnel, and waited while it ran down the tube. The heavy sickening smell filled the room

in several places and it was impossible to tell if there was anything underneath.

"You don't really mean there's a krait lying on your stomach now?" I said.

"I swear it."

"How did it get there?" I shouldn't have asked the question because it was easy to see he wasn't fooling. I should have told him to keep quiet.

"I was reading," Harry said, and he spoke very slowly, taking each word in turn and speaking it carefully so as not to move the muscles of his stomach. "Lying on my back reading and I felt something on my chest, behind the book. Sort of tickling. Then out of the corner of my eye saw this little krait sliding over my pajamas. Small, about ten inches. Knew I mustn't move. Couldn't have anyway. Lay there watching it. Thought it would go over top of the sheet." Harry paused and was silent for a few moments. His eyes looked down along his body toward the place where the sheet covered his stomach, and I could see he was watching to make sure his whispering wasn't disturbing the thing that lay under the sheet.

"There was a fold in the sheet," he said, speaking more slowly than ever now and so softly I had to lean close to hear him. "See it, it's still there. It went under that. I could feel it through my pajamas, moving on my stomach. Then it stopped moving and now it's lying there in the warmth. Probably asleep. I've been waiting for you." He raised his eyes and looked at me.

"How long ago?"

"Hours," he whispered. "Hours and bloody hours and hours. I can't keep still much longer. I've been wanting to cough."

**T**HERE was not much doubt about the truth of Harry's story. As a matter of fact, it wasn't a surprising thing for a krait to do. They hang around people's houses, and they go for the warm places. The surprising thing was that Harry hadn't been bitten. The bite is quite deadly except sometimes when you catch it at once, and they kill a fair number of people each year in Bengal, mostly in the villages.

"All right, Harry," I said, and now I was whispering, too. "Don't move and don't talk any more unless you have to. You know it won't bite unless it's frightened. We'll fix it in no time."

I went softly out of the room in my stocking feet and fetched a small, sharp knife from the kitchen. I put it in my trouser pocket ready to use instantly in case something went wrong while we were still thinking out a plan. If Harry coughed or moved or did something to frighten the krait and got bitten, I was going to be ready to cut the bitten place and try to suck the venom out. I came back to the bedroom and Harry was still lying there, very quiet, sweating all over his face. His eyes followed me as I moved across the room to his bed and I could see he was wondering what I'd been up to. I stood beside him, trying to think of the best thing to do.

"Harry," I said, and now when I spoke I put my mouth almost on his ear so I wouldn't have to raise my voice above the softest whisper. "I think the best thing to do is for me to draw the sheet back very, very gently. Then we could have a look first. I think I could do that without disturbing it."

"Don't be a damn' fool." There was no expression in his voice. He spoke each word too slowly, too carefully, and too softly for that. The expression was in the eyes and around the corners of the mouth.

"Why not?"

"The light would frighten him. It's dark under there now."

"Then how about whipping the sheet back quick and brushing it off before it has time to strike?"

"Why don't you get a doctor?" Harry said. The way he looked at me told me I should have thought of that myself in the first place.

"A doctor. Of course. That's it. I'll get Ganderbai."

I tiptoed out to the hall, looked up Ganderbai's number in the book, lifted the phone and told the operator to hurry. Much (Continued on page 49)

waken, and strike—and kill

open and started to go quickly across the room.

"Stop. Wait a moment, Timber." I could hardly hear what he was saying. He seemed to be straining enormously to get the words out.

"What's the matter, Harry?"

"Sshhh!" he whispered. "Sshhh! For God's sake don't make a noise. Take your shoes off before you come nearer. Please do as I say, Timber."

The way he was speaking reminded me of George Barling when he got shot in the stomach, when he stood leaning against a crate containing a spare airplane engine, holding both hands on his stomach and saying things about the German pilot in just the same, hoarse, straining half whisper Harry was using now.

"Quickly, Timber, but take your shoes off first."

I couldn't understand about taking off the shoes but I figured that if he was as ill as he sounded I'd better humor him, so I bent down and removed the shoes and left them in the middle of the polished wooden floor. Then I went over to his bed.

"Don't touch the bed! For God's sake don't touch the bed!" He was still speaking like he'd been shot in the stomach and I could see him lying there

on his back with a single sheet covering three quarters of his body. He was wearing a pair of pajamas with blue, brown and white stripes, and he was sweating terribly. It was a hot night and I was sweating a little myself, but not like Harry. His whole face was wet and the pillow around his head was sodden with moisture. It looked like a bad go of malaria to me.

"What is it, Harry?"

"A krait," he said.

"A krait! Oh, my God! Where'd it bite you? How long ago?"

"Shut up," he whispered. "Shut up, Timber."

"Listen, Harry," I said, and I leaned forward and touched his shoulder. "We've got to be quick. Come on now, quickly, tell me where it bit you." He was lying there very still and tense, as though he were holding on to himself hard because of sharp pain.

"I haven't been bitten," he whispered. "Not yet. It's on my stomach. Lying there asleep."

I took an abrupt pace backward; I couldn't help it, and I stared at his stomach, or rather at the sheet which covered it. The sheet was rumbled up

# WALL STREET

## *Has a Sense of Humor*

By MURRAY CAMPBELL



RETURN LOUISIANA; CANCEL FRENCH DEBT  
AND  
DITION  
**THE BAWL STREET JOURNAL.**

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MAY 21, 1943

Every year its merry Bawl Street Journal kids the coupons off bonds and the pants off the brokers who sell them. They love it—to the tune of \$1 a copy

**B**ACK in the very thinnest days of the depression, when many a stockbroker in striped pants was wolfing the 30-cent lunch and glad to get it, at least one Wall Street institution never lost its cheery faith in the future.

This institution was, and still is, a firmly irreverent "newspaper" which looks at first glance almost exactly like the sturdy Wall Street Journal, and is named the Bawl Street Journal.

Bawl never once sulked or brooded. Instead, it

ran a large and handsome free "ad" offering for sale or exchange such knickknacks as yachts, miniatures, old masters and real estate.

Bawl remained fiercely loyal to its journalistic policy of printing *all* the news fearlessly. Here, too, it was all in highly imaginative fun. It ran a gruesome report of a double murder at a downtown New York restaurant. A bond salesman and a life insurance agent had invited each other to an 80-cent lunch under the impression that each was a

prospect for the other's wares. At check-paying time the hideous truth came out, and each man shot the other dead. Police had quite a struggle dispersing the crowd of ragged financiers who assembled at the rumor that a salesman was buying lunch for a prospect.

On the more touching side, Bawl reported in detail on the fresh-air outing, with free hot dogs, given for hungry brokers by the Street's Armenian settlement:

Collier's for June 3, 1950