

Fiction

LANDSLIDE

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"I've never been out of Ranikhet", Chaman said softly, "but I feel this little hilltop must be the prettiest spot in the world".

Varun looked around him. The view from Tree Top Point was clear and unfettered. The magnificent snow-clad mountains seemed just a short walk away. Silhouetted against them were towering deodars, rhododendrons with crimson flowers, chestnut and oak trees. The air was pure and sweet, with the freshness imparted by myriad pine trees. "It certainly is something special," Varun agreed. "You'll appreciate it even more if you do venture out of Ranikhet. In the city, all we can see from our flat is buildings, traffic and people. And there's so much pollution, everything's covered with a grimy, oily deposit." Chaman shuddered, "I'd die if Ranikhet ever got like that, Varun."

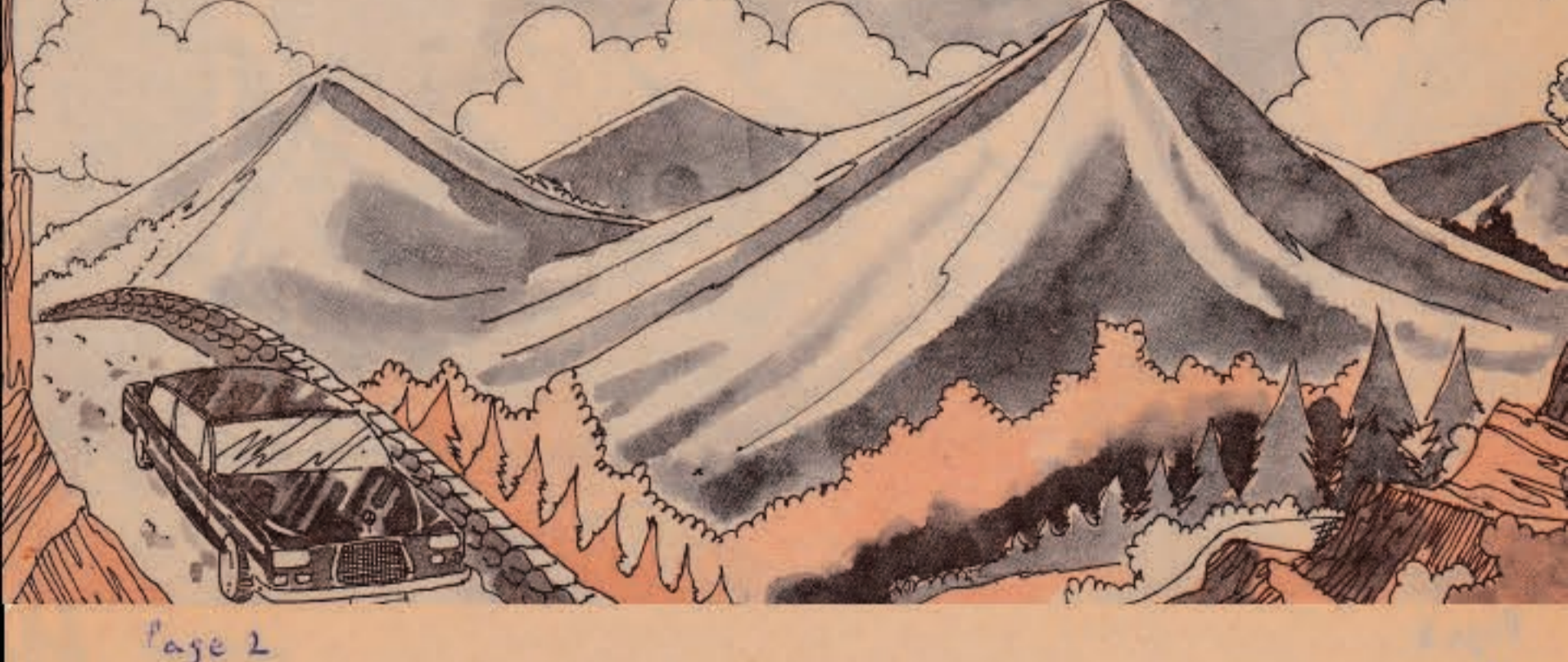
Varun laughed. "There's no danger of that happening, Chaman, so relax. And how about opening the picnic basket? I'm getting a little hungry." Chaman spread out a rug and opened the tiffin carrier. "Lila Chachi has packed a feast!" Varun exclaimed appreciatively. There was *Murgh-mussalam*, *puri*, *alu-mattar*, and the delicious Kumaoni sweet, *baal*, a chocolate-brown preparation studded with white sugar granules. And, of course, there was hill fruit: ripe

cherries, and sweet, fat plums with just a hint of tartness. "Oof, bliss!" said Chaman, as Varun handed her a glass of refreshing rhododendron squash.

Lunch over, the children chatted for a while and then stretched out. The afternoon sun was warm. It made them a little drowsy.

Drr-rr-rr. The noise increased, slowly but steadily. Chaman sat up with a start. "A car, here?" "But no one in Ranikhet ever drives up here. Who could it be?" Her question was soon answered as a dark blue Mercedes-Benz drove up and parked just a little away from them. A uniformed chauffeur opened the door, and an old man stepped out and walked up the hill. With him was a little boy with a serious face. The old man and the boy stopped just short of the children's picnic spot, looked around them, and then drove away. Varun and Chaman were puzzled. Who were these strangers? What had they come for?

Well, there was no time to think about that now. It was almost 4 o'clock. Time to head for home. "Let's take the short cut," Chaman suggested, leading the way through a narrow mountain path. "We'll get some berries on the way." So, they walked home, plucking *kafal*, the



Fiction

hunting was the fashion then, just as five-star hotels are the fashion now. We can't stop it, children. We can only watch the destruction."

But if Grandfather had given up, the children had not.

"Let's start a signature campaign," Varun suggested.

"Good idea!" Chaman exclaimed.

The children drew up a list of names that very day and then walked from house to house, collecting signatures. The going was not easy. Not knowing how much time they had, they pushed themselves to the limit of their endurance. Blisters and corns covered their feet. Though most people were in sympathy with their cause, many were reluctant to "get involved".

The children worked hard to convince them how important it was to act. By the end of the week, Chaman and Varun had collected a formidable list of signatures. They then sat down and drafted an appeal. This is what it said:

"Dear Mr. Kumar,
We, the people of Ranikhet, request you to re-consider your decision to open a five-star hotel at Tree Top Point. To do so, you will have to cut down many trees and also level the mountain. This may lead to landslides, which would endanger the lives of the people living below Tree Top Point. It would also destroy the habitat of the numerous langurs and other wild animals that live there.

We are sure that you will consider our appeal sympathetically."

All the signatures they had collected so painstakingly were attached.

Early the next day, Chaman and Varun went to meet Mr. Kumar, who was staying at the West View Hotel.

Mr. Kumar came down as soon as the receptionist gave him their message. With him was the little boy they had seen earlier. The children greeted them politely and handed over the appeal to Mr. Kumar. His face reddened angrily as he read it. "What nonsense!" he spluttered. "You can't stop development because a few trees have to be cut." He laughed contemptuously, "I'm not interested in a few impoverished villagers and some monkeys! Ranikhet is a tourist paradise. I intend to open a grand five-star hotel here. The whole mountain top will be levelled. There will be a skating rink,

a discotheque, two tennis courts, beauty parlours, boutiques, saunas..."

"My grandson, Arjun here, is the only family I have left. I am going to make him a millionaire. This hotel will make him a millionaire." Angrily, he tore the appeal into half, dropped it in the bin in the lobby and walked off.

Arjun lingered for a while after the gentleman had left. "I wish we could have been friends," he



sour-sweet wild berries. Crunch, crunch, crunch, their shoes crackled on the dry pine needles that lay on the ground. Overhead, birds twittered noisily, while langurs jumped from branch to branch, chattering away.

"You know, Chaman," Varun said, "Ranikhet is really quite noisy in its own way, it's just that it's a really quiet, a restful noise."

"Of course," Chaman agreed. "The mountains, the forests are not dead, empty places, the way city people sometimes imagine. They're full of insects, birds, animals."

"How come you're so pally with all these feathered, four-legged creatures, Chaman?" Varun teased.

Chaman pretended to ponder for a while. "Perhaps because these langurs remind me of a favourite cousin," she suggested naughtily, giving Varun a friendly thump.

Bantering, laughing, the children soon reached home. The setting sun cast a soft glow on the sloping roof of the elegant, old bungalow. Inside, everything was cosy and inviting. Their grandfather, Col. Harakh Singh, with his silver whiskers and neatly swept-back hair, was sitting in his favourite rocking chair, reading the newspaper. Around him sat the rest of the family, listening to his acerbic comments.

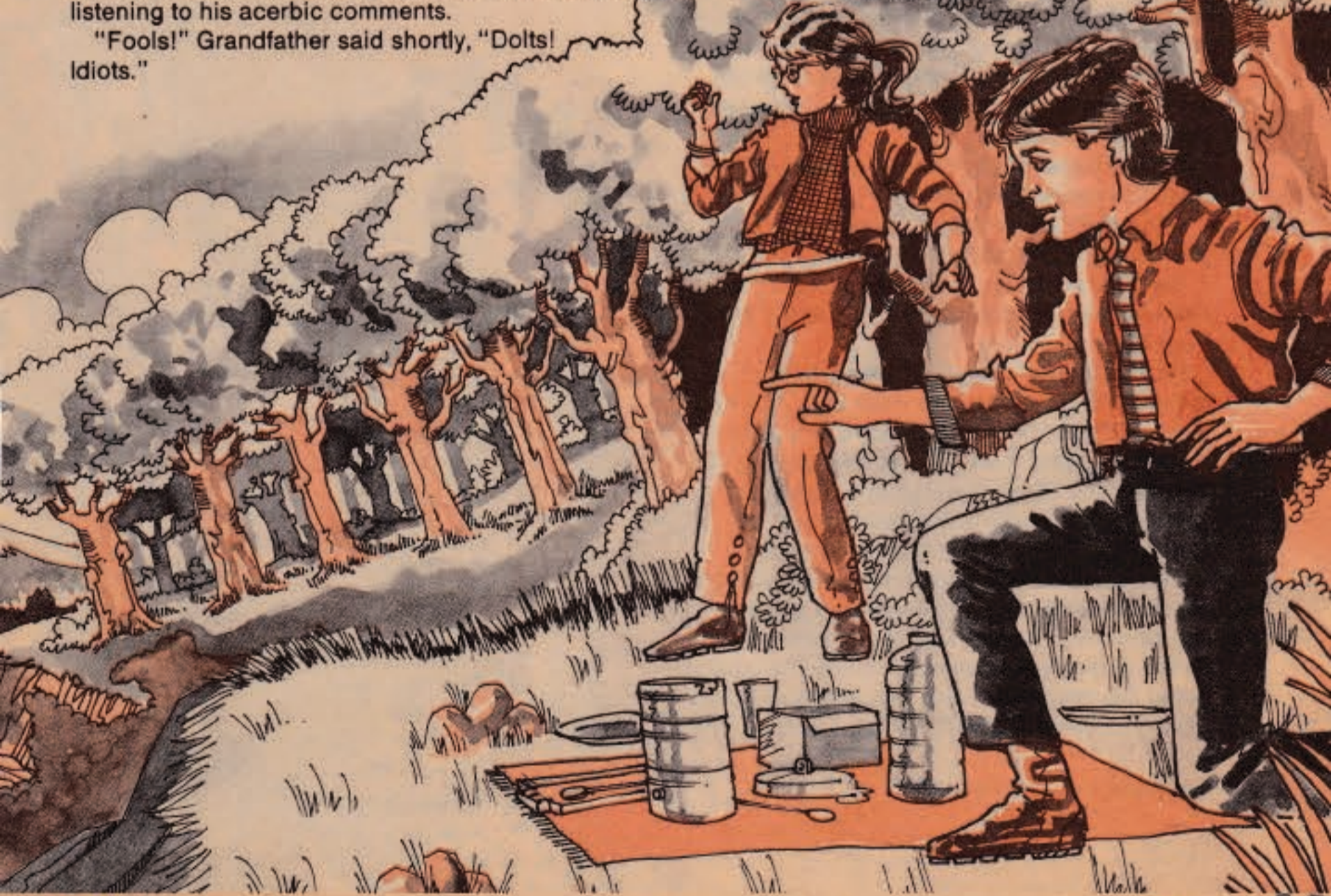
"Fools!" Grandfather said shortly, "Dolts! Idiots."

"Who, Dada?" the children asked. "Chaps who don't realise that nature is as beautiful and fragile as a string of pearls. Pull out one pearl, just one, and the whole thing comes apart. There is a chap here from Bombay, the paper reports, a Mr. Kumar; he wants to build a five-star hotel in Ranikhet at Tree Top Point. He'll raze the hillside, never worrying about the landslides this may set off, destroy the flora and fauna. But what does he care? As long as the money pours in, he'll be happy."

The children stopped short in their tracks. Chaman looked as if she had been given a punch in the stomach. And even Varun felt a sense of sadness that cement and concrete, noise and activity, was soon to disturb the perfect little world he had found.

"We've got to stop Mr. Kumar, Dada! We've got to!" Chaman said passionately. "Let's go to him tomorrow. You come, too."

"No," said Col. Harakh Singh. "He won't listen. They never listen. When I was a boy, these forests were full of panthers. Deer sometimes strayed into our garden. But hunting's almost finished our wildlife. *Shikar* or



said to the children. "I don't want to be a millionaire. I only want to study birds, but my parents died in a car crash last year, and Nana is my guardian now. I don't want to displease him. I'd better go now, or he will get angry." With a wave to the children, he left.

Slowly, sadly, the children walked home. They had tried so very hard. And they had failed.

That very afternoon, work started at Tree Top

Point. Dynamite was used to blast one part of the hillside. How deafening the explosion was!

That night, fierce, unseasonal rains lashed Ranikhet. The sky crackled with flashes of lightning, strong winds howled and buffeted the trees.

The next day, work at the site continued. Axes cut at trees, shovels shifted rubble. Chaman and Varun watched from a safe distance. Mr. Kumar was there too, they noticed, overseeing operations from above.

"I hope he's happy," Chaman said bitterly, watching her beloved trees being cut. "Hush, Chaman," Varun soothed her. "You can't let yourself burn up like this".

Suddenly, without warning, the earth from one side of the hill started to slide down.

"*Bachao!* Help!" came a thin cry. At first, no one knew where it came from. Then, Chaman saw a flash of a red sweater. "It's Arjun!" she exclaimed. And, in a second, she ran to him. "Catch hold of that root, Arjun!" she screamed. "Hold on to the root of that old tree just below you!" Arjun looked up, startled. Then, clumsily, he tried to reach for the old, gnarled root that protruded from the mountain. The children prayed that it would hold. Arjun looked terrified. Afraid that he would lose his nerve and let go, Chaman calmed him down by talking to him reassuringly.

Varun ran, shouting to Mr. Kumar to send help. The labourers took one look at what was happening and swung into action. They tied themselves a long rope and lassoed the other end around Arjun. Slowly, carefully, they eased him up.

Trembling with emotion, Mr. Kumar embraced Arjun. Then, turning to Chaman and Varun, he said warmly, "You children have saved my only grandson." He patted Chaman and Varun tenderly on the head. "What a fool I've been. But things will be very different from now on."

Mr. Kumar abandoned his hotel project. And the town heaved a sigh of relief.

"All's well that ends well," said Varun. "Oh, no, no," said Mr. Kumar. "Things aren't ending just yet. In fact, Arjun's holidays are just beginning. I'm sure your children have lots planned out for the rest of the summer, huh?" Arjun smiled happily. "Hurray!" cheered Varun and Chaman.

