



কভাস

মতাজিৎ রায়





C o r v u s

August 15

Birds have fascinated me for a long time. When I was a boy, we had a pet mynah which we taught to pronounce clearly more than a hundred Bengali words. I knew, of course, that although some birds could talk, they didn't understand the meaning of what they said. But one day our mynah did something so extraordinary that I was forced to revise my opinion. I had got back from school, Mother had brought me a plate of halwa, when the mynah suddenly screeched, 'Earthquake! Earthquake!' we had felt nothing but next the papers reported that a slight tremor had indeed been recorded by the seismograph.

Ever since then I have felt a curiosity about the intelligence of birds, although in my preoccupation with various scientific projects, I have not been able to pursue it in any way. My cat, Newton, contributed to this neglect. Newton doesn't like birds and I don't wish to do anything that would displease him. Lately, however perhaps

because of age Newton has grown increasingly indifferent to birds. Which is probably why my laboratory is being regularly visited by crows, sparrows and shaliks. I feed them in the morning, and in anticipation of this they begin to clamour outside my window from well before sunrise.

Every creature is born with skills peculiar to its species. I believe such skills are more pronounced and more startling in birds than in other creatures. Examine a weaver-bird's nest, and it will make you gasp with astonishment, given the ingredients to construct such a nest, a man would either throw up his hands in despair or take months of ceaseless effort to do so.

There is a species of birds in Australia called the Malle Fowl which builds its nest on the ground. Sand, earth and vegetable matter go into the making of this hollow mound which is provided with a hole for entry. The bird lays its eggs inside the mound but doesn't sit on them to hatch. Yet without heat the eggs won't hatch, so what is the answer? Simply this: by some amazing and as yet unknown process, the Malle Fowl maintains a constant temperature of seventy-eight degrees Fahrenheit inside the mound regardless of whether it is hot or cold outside.

Nobody knows why a bird called the Grebe should pluck out its feathers to eat them and feed their young with them. The same Grebe while floating in water can, by some unknown means, reduce its own specific gravity at the sight of a predator so that it floats with only its

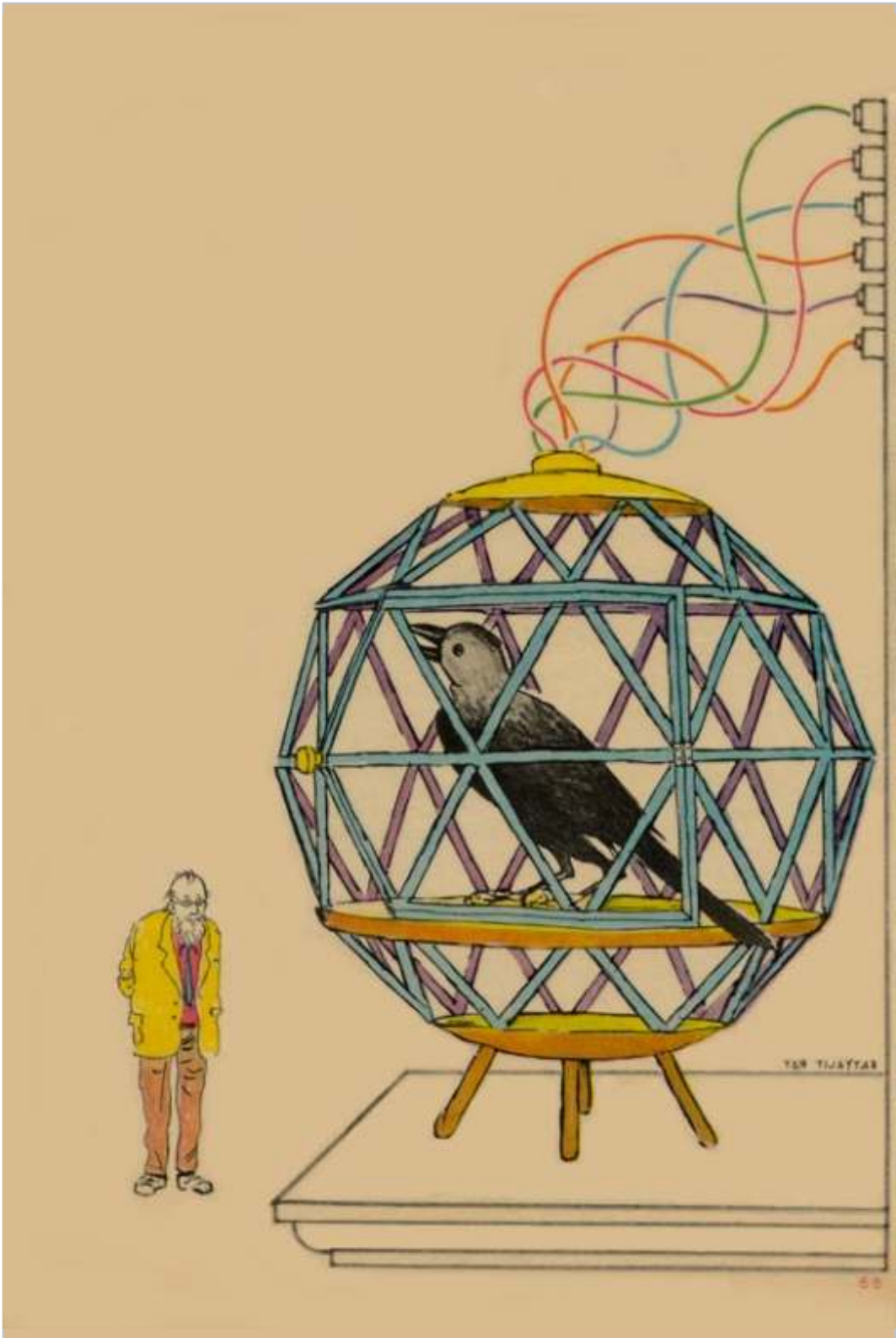
head above the water.

We all know of the amazing sense of direction of the migratory birds, the hunting prowess of eagles and falcons, the vultures' keen sense of smell, and the enchanting gift of singing possessed by numerous birds. It is for this reason that I have been wanting for some time to devote a little more time to the study of birds. How much can a bird be taught beyond its innate skills? It is possible to instill human knowledge and intelligence in one? Can a machine be constructed to do this?

September 20

I believe in the simple method, so my machine will be a simple one. It will consist of two sections: one will be a cage to house the bird; the other will transmit intelligence to the bird's brain by means of electrodes.

For the past month I have been carefully studying the birds which come into my laboratory for food. Apart from the ubiquitous crows and sparrows and shaliks, birds such as pigeons, doves, parakeets, and bulbuls also come. Amongst all these, one particular bird has caught my attention, a crow. Not the jet black raven, but the ordinary crow. I can easily make him out from the other crows. Apart from the tiny white spot below the right eye which makes him easily recognizable, his behaviour, too, marks him out from other crows. For instance, I have never seen a crow hold a pencil in its beak and make



marks on the table with it. Yesterday he did something which really shook me. I was working on my machine when I heard a soft rasping noise. I turned round and saw that the crow had taken a matchstick from a half-open matchbox and, holding it in his beak, was scraping it against the side of the box. When I shoed him away, he flew across, sat on the window and proceeded to utter some staccato sounds which bore no resemblance to the normal cawing of a crow. In fact, for a minute I thought the crow was laughing!

September 27

I finished assembling my Ornithon machine today. The crow has been in the lab since morning, eating breadcrumbs and hopping from window to window. As soon as I placed the cage on the table and opened the door, the crow flew over and hopped inside, a sure sign that he is extremely eager to learn. Since a familiarity with language is essential for the bird to follow my instructions, I have started with simple Bengali lessons. All the lessons being pre-recorded, all I have to do is press buttons. Different lessons are in different channels, and each channel bears a different number. I have noticed a strange thing; as soon as I press a button the crow's eyes close and his movements cease. For a bird as restless as a crow this is unusual indeed.

A conference of ornithologists is being held in November in Santiago, the capital of Chile. I have written to my ornithologist friend Rufus Grenfell in Minnesota. If my feathered friend is able to acquire

some human intelligence, I should like to take him to the conference for a lecture-demonstration.

October 4

Corvus is the Latin name for the genus crow. I have started calling my pupil by that name. In the beginning he used to answer my call by a turn of the head in my direction, now he responds vocally. For the first time I heard a crow saying 'ki' (what?) instead of 'caw'. But I don't expect speech will ever be his forte. *Corvus* will never turn into a talking crow. Whatever intelligence he acquires will show in his actions.

Corvus is learning English now; if I do go aboard for a demonstration, English would help. Lessons last an hour between eight and nine in the morning. The rest of the day he hangs around the lab. In the evening he still prefers to go back to the mango tree in the north-east corner of my garden.

Newton seems to have accepted *Corvus*. After what happened today, I shouldn't be surprised if they end up friends. It happened in the afternoon. *Corvus* for once was away somewhere, I sat in the armchair scribbling in my notebook, and Newton was curled up on the floor alongside when a flapping sound made me turn towards the window. It was *Corvus*. He had just come in with a freshly cut piece of fish in his beak. He dropped it in front of Newton, went back to the window, and sat surveying the scene with little twists of his neck.

Grenfell has replied to my letter. He says he is arranging to have me invited to the ornithologists' conference.

October 20

Unexpected progress in the last two weeks. With a pencil held in his beak, Corvus is now writing English words and numerals. The paper is placed on the table, and Corvus writes standing on it. He wrote his own name in capital letters: C-O-R-V-U-S. He can do simple addition and subtraction, write down the capital of England when asked to , and can even write my name. Three days ago I taught him the months, days, and dates: when asked what day of the week it was today, he wrote in clear letters: F-R-I-D-A-Y.

That Corvus is clever in his eating habits too was proved today. I had kept some pieces of toast on one plate and some guava jelly on another in front of him; each time he put a piece in his month, he smeared some jelly on it first with his beak.

October 22

I had clear proof today that Corvus now wants to stay away from other crows. There was a heavy shower and after an earsplitting thunderclap I looked out of the window and saw the simul tree outside my garden smouldering. In the afternoon, after the rain stopped, there was a tremendous hue and cry set up by the neighbourhood crows who had all gathered around the simul tree. I sent my servant

Prahlad to investigate. He came back and said, 'Sir, There's a deed crow lying at the foot of the tree; that's why there is such excitement.' I realized the crow had been struck lightning. But strangely enough, Corvus didn't leave my room at all. He held a pencil in his beak and was absorbed in writing the prime numbers: 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13 . . .

November 7

Corvus can now be proudly displayed in scientific circles. Birds can be taught to do small things, but a bird as intelligent and educated as Corvus is unique in history. The Ornithon has done its job well. Questions which can be answered in a few words, or with the help of numbers, on subjects as diverse as mathematics, history, geography and the natural sciences, Corvus is now able to answer. Along with that Corvus has spontaneously acquired what can only be termed human intelligence, something which has never been associated with birds. I shall give an example. I was packing my suitcase this morning in preparation for my trip to Santiago. As I finished and closed the lid, I found Corvus standing by with the key in his beak.

Another letter from Grenfell yesterday. He is already in Santiago. The organizers of the conference are looking forward to my visit. Till now these conferences have only dealt with birds in the abstract; never has a live bird been used as an illustration. The paper I have written is based on the priceless knowledge I have gathered in the last two months about bird behaviour. Corvus will be there in

person to silence my critics.

November 10

I'm writing this on the plane to South America. I have only one incident to relate. As we were about to leave the house, I found Corvus greatly agitated and obviously anxious to get out of the cage. I couldn't make out the reason for this; nevertheless, I opened the cage door. Corvus hopped out, flew over to my desk and started pecking furiously at the drawer. I opened it and found my passport still lying in it.

I have had a new kind of cage built for Corvus. It maintains the temperature that best suits the bird. For his food, I have prepared tiny globules which are both tasty and nutritious. Corvus has aroused everyone's curiosity on the plane as they have probably never seen a pet crow before. I haven't told anyone about the uniqueness of my pet I prefer to keep it secret. Corvus too, probably sensing this, is behaving like any ordinary crow.

November 14

Hotel Excelsior, Santiago, 11 pm. I have been too busy these last couple of days to write. Let me first describe what happened at the lecture, then I shall come to the disconcerting events of a little while ago. To cut a long story short, my lecture has been another feather in my cap. My paper took half an hour to read; then followed an hour's

demonstration with the crow. I had released Corvus from the cage and put him down on the table as soon as I ascended the podium. It was a long mahogany table behind which sat the organizers of the conference, while I stood to one side speaking into the microphone. As long as spoke, Corvus listened with the utmost attention, with occasional nods to suggest that he was getting the drift of my talk. To the applause that followed my speech, Corvus made his own contribution by beating a tattoo with his beak on the surface of the table.

The demonstration that followed gave Corvus no respite. All that he had learnt in the past two months he now demonstrated to the utter amazement of the delegates who all agreed that they had never imagined a bird could be capable of such intelligent behaviour. The evening edition of the local newspaper *Correro de Santiago* splashed the news on the front page with a picture of Corvus holding a pencil in his beak.

After the meeting, Grenfell and I went on a sight-seeing tour of Santiago with the chairman Signor Covarrubias. It is a bustling, elegant metropolis to the east of which the Andes range stands like a wall between Chile and Argentina. After an hour's drive Covarrubias turned to me and said, 'You must have noticed in our programme that we have made various arrangements for the entertainment of our delegates. I should particularly like to recommend the show this evening by the Chilean magician Argus. His specialty is that he uses a

lot of trained birds in his repertory.'

I was intrigued, so Grenfell and I have been to the Plaza theatre to watch Senor Argus. It is true that he uses a lot of birds. Ducks, Parrots, Pigeons, hens, a four-foot-high crane, a flock of humming birds all these Argus deploys with much evidence of careful training. But none of these birds comes anywhere near Corvus. Frankly, I found the magician himself far more interesting than his birds. Over six feet tall, he has a parrot-like nose, and his hair, parted in the middle, is slick and shiny as a new gramophone record. He wears spectacles so high-powered that they turn his pupils into a pair of tiny black dots, and out of the sleeves of his jet-black coat emerges a pair of hands whose pale, tapering fingers cast a spell on the audience with their sinuous movements. Not that the conjuring was of a high order, but the conjuror's presence and personality were well worth the price of admission. As I came out of the theatre, I remarked to Grenfell that it wouldn't be a bad idea to show Senor Argus some of Corvus's tricks now that he had shown us his.

Dinner was followed by excellent Chilean coffee and a stroll in the hotel garden with Grenfell. It was past ten when I returned to my room. I changed into my nightclothes, put out the lamp and was about to turn in when the phone rang.

'Senor Shonku?'

'Yes -'

'I'm calling from the reception. Sorry to trouble you at this hour,

sir, but there's a gentleman here who is most anxious to see you.'

I said I was too tired to see anybody, and that it would be better if the gentleman could make an appointment over the phone next morning. I was sure it was a reporter. I had already been interviewed by four of them. Some of the questions they asked tried the patience of even a placid person like me. For instance, one of them asked if crows too, like cows, were held sacred in India!

The receptionist spoke to the caller and came back to me.

'Senor Shonku, the gentlemen says he wants only five minutes of your time. He has another engagement tomorrow morning.'

'This person is he reporter?' I asked.

'No Sir. He is the famous Chilean Magician Argus.'

When I heard the name, I was left with no choice but to ask him to come up. I turned on the bedside lamp. Three minutes later the buzzer sounded.

The man who confronted me when I opened the door had seemed like a six-footer on stage; now he looked a good six inches taller. In fact, I had never seen anyone so tall before. Even when he bowed he remained a foot taller than me.

I asked him in. He had discarded his stage costume and was now dressed in an ordinary suit, but this one too was back. When he entered, I saw the evening edition of the *Correro* sticking out of his pocket. We took our seats after I had congratulated him on his performance. "As far as I can recall, I said, 'there was a gifted person

in Greek mythology who had eyes all over his body and who was called Argus. An apt name for a magician, I think.'

Argus smiled, 'Then I'm sure you also remember that this person had some connection with birds.'

I nodded, 'The Greek goodness Hera had plucked out Argus's eyes and planted them on the peacock's tail which is supposed to account for the circular markings on the tail. But what I'm curious about are your eyes. 'What is the power of your glasses?'

'Minus twenty', he replied. 'But that doesn't bother me. None of my birds are short-sighted.'

Argus laughed loudly at his own joke, then suddenly froze open-mouthed. His eyes had strayed to the plastic cage kept on a shelf in a corner of the room. Corvus was asleep when I came in, but was now wide-awake and staring fixedly at the magician.

Argus, his mouth still open, left his chair and tiptoed towards the cage. He stared at the crow for a full minute. Then he said, 'Ever since I read about him in the evening papers, I've been anxious to meet you. I haven't had the privilege of hearing you speak. I'm not an ornithologist, you know, but I too train birds.'

The magician looked worried as he returned to his seat. 'I can well appreciate how tired you must be,' he said, 'but if you could just let your bird out of the cage. . . just one sample of his intelligence. . .'

I said, 'It's not just I who is tired; Corvus is too. I shall open the cage door for you, but the rest is up to the bird. I can't force him to do



anything against his wish.'

'All right, fair enough.'

I opened the cage door. Corvus came out, flapped up to the bedside table, and with an unerring peck of his beak, switched off the lamp.

The room was plunged into darkness. Intermittent flashes of pale green light from the neon sign of the Hotel Metropole across the street glared through the open window. I sat silent. Corvus flew back to his cage and pulled the door shut with his beak.

The green light played rhythmically across Argus's face making his snake-like eyes look even more reptilian through the thick lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles. I could see that he was struck dumb with amazement, and that he could read the meaning behind Corvus's action. Corvus wanted to rest. He didn't want light in the room. He wanted darkness; he wanted to sleep.

From under his thin moustache a soft whisper escaped his lips 'Magnifico!' He had brought his hands below his chin with his palms pressed together in a gesture of frozen applause.

Now I noticed his nails. They were unusually long and shiny. He had used nail polish silver nail polish the kind that would under glaring stage lights heighten the play of his fingers. The green light was now reflected again and again on those silver nails.

'I want that crow!'

Argus spoke in English in a hoarse whisper. All this time he had

been speaking in Spanish. Although, as I write this down, I realize that it probably sounds like unashamed greed, but in fact Argus was pleading with me.

'I want that crow!' Argus repeated.

I regarded him in silence. There was no need to say anything just now. I waited instead to hear what else he had to say.

Argus had been looking out of the window. Now he turned to me. I was fascinated by the alternation of darkness and light on his face. Now he was there, now he wasn't. Like magic again.

Argus moved his fingers and pointed them at himself.

'Look at me, Professor. I am Argus, I am the world's greatest magician. In every city of North and South America, anyone who knows about magic knows me. Men, women and children they all know me. Next month I go on a world tour. Rome, Madrid, Paris, London, Athens. Stockholm, Tokyo. . . Every city will acclaim my genius. But do you know what can make my wonderful magic a thousand times more wonderful? It is that crow that Indian crow. I want that bird, Professor, I want that bird! I do. . .'

As Argus spoke, he waved his hands before my eyes like snakes swaying to a charmer's flute, his silver nails catching the green light from the neon flashing on and off. I couldn't help being amused. If it had been anyone else in my place, Argus would have accomplished his object and got his hands on the bird. I now had to tell Argus that his plan wouldn't work with me.

I said: 'Mr Argus, you're wasting your time. It is useless to try to hypnotise me. I cannot accede to your request. Corvus is not only my pupil, he is like a son to me, and a friend a product of my tireless effort and experiment.'

'Professor!' Argus's voice was much sharper now, but he softened it the very next moment and said, 'Professor, do you realise that I am a millionaire? Do you know that I own a fifty room mansion in the eastern end of this city? That I have twenty-six servants and four Cadillacs? Nothing is too expensive for me, Professor. For that bird I am willing to pay you ten thousand escudos right now.'

Ten thousand escudos meant about fifteen thousand rupees. Argus did not know that just as expenses meant nothing to him, money itself meant nothing to me. I told him so. Argus made one last attempt.

"You're an Indian. Don't you believe in mystic connections? Argus Corvus. . . how well the two names go together! Don't you realise that the crow was fated to belong to me?"

I couldn't bear with him any more. I stood up and said, 'Mr. Argus, you can keep your cars, houses, wealth and fame to yourself. Corvus is staying with me. His training is not over yet, I still have work left to do. I am extremely tired today. You had asked for five minutes of my time, and I have given you twenty. I can't give you any more. I want to sleep now and so does my bird. Therefore, good-night.'

I must say I felt faint stirrings of pity at the abject look on his

face; but I didn't let them surface. Argus bowed once again in continental style and, muttering good-night in Spanish, left the room.

I closed the door and went to the cage to find Corvus still awake. Looking at me, he uttered the single syllable 'kay' (who?) in a tone which clearly suggested a question.

'A mad magician,' I told him, 'with more money than is good for him. He wanted to buy you off, but I turned him down. So you may sleep in peace.'

November 16

I wanted to record the events of yesterday last night, but it took me the better part of the night to get over the shock.

The way in which the day began held no hint of impending danger. In the morning there was a session of the conference in which the only notable event was the stupendously boring extempore speech by the Japanese ornithologist Morimoto. After speaking for an hour or so, Morimoto suddenly lost the thread of his argument and started groping for words. It was at this point that Corvus, whom I had taken with me, decided to start an applause by rapping with his beak on the arm of my chair. This caused the entire audience to burst out laughing, thus putting me in an acutely embarrassing position.

In the afternoon there was lunch in the hotel with some delegates. Before going there, I went to my room, number 71, put Corvus into the cage gave him some food and said, 'You stay here. I'm

going down to eat.'

The obedient Corvus didn't demur.

By the time I finished lunch and came up, it was two thirty. As I inserted the key into the lock , cold fear gripped me. The door was already open. I burst into the room and found my worst fears confirmed: Corvus and his cage were gone.

I was back in the corridor in a flash. Two suites down was the room-boys' enclosure. I rushed in there and found the two of them standing mutely with glazed looks in their eyes. It was clear that they had both been hypnotized.

I now ran to 107 Grenfell's room. I told him every thing and we went down to the reception together. 'No one had asked us for your room keys, sir,' said the clerk. 'The room-boys have the duplicate keys. They might have given them to some one.'

The room-boys didn't have to give the keys to anyone. Argus had cast his spell over them and helped himself to the keys. In the end we got the real story from the concierge. He said Argus had arrived half an hour earlier in a silver Cadillac and gone into the hotel. Ten minutes later he had come out carrying a cellophane bag, got into his car and driven off.

A silver Cadillac. But where had Argus gone from here? Home? Or somewhere else?

We were now obliged to turn to Covarrubias for help. He said, 'I can find out for you in a minute where Argus lives; but how will that

help? He is hardly likely to have gone home. He must have gone into hiding somewhere with your crew. But if he wants to leave the city, there's only one road leading out. I can fix up a good car and driver and police personnel to go with you. But time is short. You must be out in half an hour and take the highway. If you're lucky, you may still find him.'

We were off by three fifteen. Before leaving I made a phone call from the hotel and found out that Argus had not returned home. We went in a police car with two armed policemen. One of them, a young fellow named Carreras, turned out to be quite well-informed about Argus. He said Argus had several hideouts in and around Santiago; that he had at one time hobnobbed with gypsies, and that he had been giving magic shows from the age of nineteen. About four years ago he had decided to include birds in his repertory, and this had given his popularity a great boost.

I asked Carreras if Argus was really a millionaire.

'So it would seem,' Carreras replied. 'But the man's a tightwad, and trusts nobody. That's why he has few friends left.'

As we left the city and hit the highway we ran into a small problem. The highway branched into two one led north to Los Andes, and the other west to the port of Valparaiso. There was a petrol station near the mouth of the fork. We asked one of the attendants there and he said, 'A silver Cadillac? Senor Argus's Cadillac? Sure, I saw it take the road to Valparaiso a little while ago.'

We shot off in pursuit. I knew Corvus would not come to any harm as Argus needed him badly. But Corvus's behaviour last night had clearly indicated that he hadn't liked the magician at all. So it pained me to think how unhappy he must be in the clutches of his captor.

We came across two more petrol stations on the way, and both confirmed that they had seen Argus's Cadillac pass that way earlier.

I am an optimist. I have emerged unscathed from many a tight corner in the past. To this day none of my ventures has ever been a failure. But Grenfell, sitting by my side, kept shaking his head and saying, 'Don't forget, Shonku, that you're up against a fiendishly clever man. Now that he's got his hands on Corvus, it's not going to be easy for you to get your bird back.'

'And Senor Argus may be armed,' added Carreras. 'I've known him use real revolvers in his acts.'

The highway sloped downwards. From Santiago's elevation of 1,600 feet we were now down to a thousand. Behind us the mountain range was becoming progressively hazier. We had already done forty miles; another forty and we would be in Valparaiso. Grenfell's glum countenance was already beginning to make a dent in my armour of optimism. If we did not find Argus on the highway, we would have to look for him in the city, and it would then be a hundred times more difficult to track him down.

The road now rose sharply. Nothing could be seen beyond the

hump. We sped along, topped the rise, and saw the road ahead dipped gently down as far as the eye could see. A few trees dotted its sides; a village could be made out in the distance; buffaloes grazed in a field. Not a human being in sight anywhere. But what was that up ahead? It was still quite far away, whatever it was. At least a quarter? It was still quite far away, whatever it was. At least a quarter of a mile.

Not more than four hundred yards away now. A car gleaming in the sunlight, parked at an angle by the roadside.

We drew nearer.

A Cadillac! A silver Cadillac!

Our Mercedes drew up alongside. Now we could see what had happened: the car had swerved and dashed against a tree. Its front was all smashed up.

'It is Senor Argus's car,' said Carreras. 'There is only one other silver Cadillac in Santiago. It belongs to the banker, Senor Galdames. I can recognize this one by its number.'

The car was there; but where was Argus?

What was that next to the driver's seat?

I poked my head through the window. It was Corvus's cage. Its key was in my pocket. I hadn't locked it that afternoon merely put the door to. Corvus had obviously come out of the cage by himself. But after that?

Suddenly we heard someone scream in the distance. Carreras and the other policeman raised their weapons, but our driver turned

out to be a milksop. He dropped on his knees and started to pray. Grenfell's face had fallen too. 'Magicians as a tribe make me most uncomfortable,' he groaned. I said, 'I think you'd better stay in the car.'

The screams came closer. They seemed to be coming from behind some bushes a little way ahead to the left of the road. It took me some time to recognize the voice, because last night it had been dropped to a hoarse whisper. It was the voice of Argus. He was pouring out a string of abuse in Spanish. I clearly heard 'devil' in Spanish a couple of times along with the name of my bird.

'Where is that devil of a bird? Corvus! Corvus! Damn that bird to hell! Damn him!'

Suddenly Argus stopped, for he had seen us. We could see him too. He stood with a revolver in each hand near some bushes some thirty yards away.

Carreras shouted, 'Lower your weapons, Senor Argus, or '

With an earsplitting sound a bullet came crashing into the door of our Mercedes. This was followed by three more shots, the bullets whizzing over our heads. Carreras now raised his voice threateningly. 'Senor Argus, we are fully armed. We are the police. If you don't drop your guns, will be forced to hurt you.'

'Hurt me?' moaned Argus in a hoarse voice. 'You are the police? I can't see anything!'

Argus was now within ten yards of us. Now I realized his plight.

He had lost his spectacles, and that is why he was shooting at random.

Argus now threw down his weapons and came stumbling forward. The policemen advanced towards him. I knew that none of Argus' tricks would work in this crisis. He was in a pitiful state. Carreras retrieved the revolvers from the ground, while Argus kept groaning, 'That bird is gone that Indian crow! That devil of a bird! But how damnably clever!'

Grenfell had been trying to say something for some time. Now at last I could make out what he was saying.

'Shonku, that bird is here.'

what did he mean? I couldn't see Corvus anywhere.

Grenfell pointed to the top of a bare acacia tree across the road.

I looked up - and sure enough there he was: my friend, my pupil, my dear old Corvus, perched on the topmost branch of the tree and looking down at us calmly.

I beckoned, and he swooped gracefully down like a free-floating kite and alighted on the roof Mercedes. Then, carefully, as if he was fully aware of its worth, he placed before us the object he had been carrying in his beak: Argus's high powered, gold-rimmed spectacles.

———— * * * * * ————