

High Maharajah



Summer was done. The sky that had been white with heat was blue. The days that had been long and heavy were short and gentle. All day now we could have flown our kites.

We flew them in the afternoons in the big paddock that had been cleared for the horses. There was no scrub there to trip us as we ran, no trees to trap or tear the kites.

My kite, like Lal's, was home-made. Its face was newspaper - brown paper was too heavy - but when it was swaying in the sky it looked grey and beautiful. But it was the tail that was really beautiful. It was red and green cloth that Ama had dyed especially to be beautiful.

Rashida's kite was different. It sang. It had come from India. When Rashida was born, an old friend of her father had sent it to him, for her. It had been bright green when she had first flown it, but that was a long time ago and it had had many coloured faces since then. But the sticks and the pierced bamboo reed that was the kite's voice, they were always the same.

The coloured paper to make its faces came from Song Ling, a Chinaman who had a store in town. Sometimes his goods were packed in coloured paper and he always saved it for us. A long time ago, in China, he had flown kites, too. Father kept the paper in a box. It was used only for Rashida's kite, which we all knew was special; it could sing.

We wound the kite strings round bamboo rollers which father had brought with him from the Punjab. He had been the best kite flyer in his village. He used to tell us stories of the kite seasons there and of the Basant Panchami, the spring festival, when all India flew kites and there were competitions to see who flew them best.

Ama told us stories, too, legends about brave young rajahs using kites as messengers of love, of a general who cheered his soldiers by tying a lantern to a kite and telling them it was the star of victory, of villagers who all night long flew singing kites so that they might sing away every harm and hurt.

But these things belonged to India and legend and not to Rashida, not to Lal and not to me. We flew our kites because we loved the dip and dive and sway of them against the sky, the tug of the string on the rollers in our hands. That was why we took the billy of flour and water paste, the paper for mending, the string and our kites down to the big paddock and chased the horses away from us, down to the far end where the trees were.

"Rashida", I said, "there is no string for your kite."

She looked at the rollers. "I'll use ordinary string."

“Your kite’s too big. Father said, you will have to use the thick string.”

“It will be all right,” said Rashida. “The wind is not strong today.”

We were tying the string to the kites when Lal mentioned the High Maharajah. We looked up at the sky, looked in every direction.

“He is not here,” said Rashida.

“He always comes when we fly our kites,” I said.

“We can not fly them unless we ask him,” said Lal, looking as though he would cry. “He is the king of the sky.”

“We can’t ask him,” said Rashida, “if he’s not here.”

We stared at the third hill. It was from there that he always came.

“Perhaps he can see us,” I said, “even if we cannot see him.”

“But we have to ask,” said Lal. “We always ask him first.”

“I suppose we could salaam,” said Rashida, “That should satisfy him.” But it was Lal she was thinking about, not the High Maharajah.

We bowed very low towards the third hill. Then Rashida began grabbing at the kites.

We put Lal’s kite up first, he was little and always needed help. Then Rashida and I put mine up, sometimes I needed help, too. Then Rashida put her own up; she was bigger than we were and she never needed help.

The kites flew high, riding the wind. The newspaper kites danced and Rashida’s bright orange kite sang for them, sang for us, sang for the whole world. The string spun on the rollers, playing out and out, while the kites danced higher. They were pulling at our hands and arms and we were running with them. It was as though we were flying and dancing too.

Suddenly Lal gave a shout. “Look ! The High Maharajah !”

And there he was the -- High Maharajah of the Sky, the great eagle that owned the air. Serenely and without haste he circled the three kites. His wing hardly moved. He glided solemnly while they danced for him and Rashida’s kite sang. And then, as if approving, he soared suddenly high -- higher than all the kites in the world. He circled once more, looking at us and then flew towards the third hill.

“He is beautiful”, said Rashida.

“He is too big,” I said, “I am glad he doesn’t come close to us.”

“He is the High Maharajah,” said Lal “He would never hurt us.”

“I want to fly”, said Rashida, and she jumped up and down with her kite as though she were flying already. “If I could fly I would go so far, so far up, that no kite could catch me. I’d be so high that you, Nimmi, and you, Lal, would look like ants -- would look smaller than ants. I would fly up so high that I could see all the world, everything, the whole world spread out like a carpet.” She flung out her arms, to show us how wide the world was. The roller fell from her hand and her kite began to leap away.

I screamed and Lal shouted and Rashida grabbed desperately to catch the string. It was cutting her hand, but she held on to it. With my free hand, I tried to pick up her roller. I had just got it when Rashida jerked the string -- to make it hurt less -- and it snapped. It snapped high up, farther than Rashida could jump, farther than we would reach. We could only stand -- Lal and I with our newspaper kites and Rashida with her useless string and watch the singing kite fly upwards and away from us like a bird that had been set free.

At home, Ama scolded Rashida and called her impatient. She sat disconsolate.

“No tears,” said Father, “I will write to India. We will get another singing kite.”

“It will not be the same,” said Rashida, “It will not be mine for being born.”

We were out searching for it when we saw Mr. Angus. He was our neighbour, a big man with a voice so loud it frightened you, but with so many smiles that it didn’t matter.

“Oh, Mr. Angus !” said Rashida. “Have you seen an orange kite ?”

“No kites today,” he said. “Not even orange ones.” Suddenly he looked up at the sky. “There is that eaglehawk again. Savage - looking brute.”

“It’s the High Maharajah,” I said, “He wouldn’t harm a fly.”

“Not thinking of flies,” said Mr. Angus. “Thinking of your father’s lambs. I’ll shoot him if he comes near my place.”

“You couldn’t shoot him !” We were shocked.

“You are right,” he said, “I couldn’t shoot him. Too quick, too mean, too cunning.”

I looked at his gun. “But if you see him again--”

“I’ll raise my hat to him.”

The next day Mr. Angus came to our place. He had brought some things from town that father wanted on the farm.

“That kite,” he said, “did you find it?”

“No,” said Rashida, “we will never find it.”

“Then you’d better look at these.” He handed her a long thin parcel. “I will take them back, if you don’t like them.”

“Kites !” said Rashida, “Australian kites !”

There were three of them -- one pink, one green, one orange. Father and Mr. Angus put the sticks together and fitted the faces over them. They were big kites as tall as Lal and the orange one was for Rashida.

But when we were running down to the paddock to fly them, Rashida said, “It is not the same. There is no kite in Australia that can sing.”

“What is the Maharajah doing ?” said Lal.

“He was there, at the foot of the third hill, flying low over the bush and scrub. Sometimes he swooped down out of sight. We watched and saw him do it many times. He would hover over the one place, circling and dipping, then he would fall towards the ground. He was like a kite that would not stay up.

“There must be something wrong with him,” said Rashida.

“He must be hurt. Lal, you mind the kites. Nimmi and I are going to see what’s the matter with him.”

“I am not going,” I said. “He’s too big. We should go and get Father”.

“We won’t go close,” said Rashida. “Just close enough to see if he is hurt.”

I followed her then, as I always did.

The Maharaja had not risen for a long time, but we walked towards the scrub around which he had hovered. The track was overgrown. It was rocky and the trees grew low to the ground.

“We should go back now. He must have flown away.”

“Just a little bit further.” Rashida kept saying that.

At last she leant against a big rock. “We will go back now,” she said, “He is nowhere here.”

Suddenly, there was a noise from the other side of the rock. There was a movement of branches and a sound like a rushing wind. We looked up and saw red eyes, hooked bulk and huge red brown feathered body. The wings were beating over our heads and the great bird was very close.

We clung to each other, hiding our eyes, terrified. But we could not hide our ears. The beating of those mighty wings became the beating of our own hearts.

When Rashida realised that she raised her head and made me raise mine. High, high in the blue was the Maharajah, a speck, a tiny thing moving towards his hill.

Rashida went round to the other side of the rock and then called me to her, "Look !"

It was the singing kite. Its tail was caught in a bush. It was moving in the wind, bumping up and down. The sticks were broken. The orange face was slashed to pieces but the bamboo reed-the voice, the singer, the kite's own self -- was safe.

Ama scolded us at home. "You are not to go near any of these wild creatures."

But Father smiled. "Rashida is happy," he said. "We can make her Australian kite sing."

Ama was holding the kite, looking at its torn paper. "This is what he could have done to you. He must have thought it was a living thing."

"But he didn't hurt us," said Rashida. "And he showed me where the kite was."

"He is a good Maharajah," said Lal.

Ama looked at him and then at all of us. "You will not go near him again," she said.

Outside, in the yard, Rashida said, "The High Maharajah of the Sky has given me my song, and I will thank him." She salaamed very solemnly towards the third hill and, after a moment when I almost laughed, so did Lal. And so did I.

- MENA ABDULLAH

- RAY MATHEW

About the Authors :

Mena Abdullah : She spent her childhood in Sydney. Abdullah's stories have been described as the best example of short fiction. She contributed short stories to the bulletins. She collaborated with Ray Mathew to produce a collection "The Time of Peacock" : Stories (1965).

Ray Mathew (1919-2002) was an Australian author. Mathew wrote poetry, drama, plays, novels and literary criticism and also worked as a freelance writer.

About the Story :

This is a short story of Indian children Lal, Nimmi and Rashida and their activities in countryside Australia in the 1950s. The story recreates a fascinating world where these children enjoy flying the kites. It also depicts their concern, attachment and compassion for the giant eagle christened as the High Maharajah.

Glossary

paddock	-	a small field or enclosure where horses are kept
scrub	-	bush
pierced	-	went through
reed	-	a small thin piece of bamboo producing sound
wound	-	an injury to the body
legends	-	old stories that may or may not be true
billy	-	a metal can with a lid and a handle
grabbed	-	seized suddenly and roughly
serenely	-	calmly and in an untroubled manner
soared	-	flew or rose high in the air
glide	-	fly using air currents, without moving wings, fly effortlessly
solemnly	-	seriously and reflecting tradition
leap	-	jump
scolded	-	spoke angrily
disconsolate	-	very unhappy
brute	-	a wild animal
swooped	-	moved rapidly downwards through the air

hover	-	stay in the air at one place / float / move in circles over one place in the air
speck	-	a very small spot
creature	-	a living organism, animal, beast

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative :

- Rashida's kite was different because it _____.
 (a) danced (b) sang
 (c) jumped (d) played
- The paste of flour and water used for mending kites is called _____.
 (a) gum (b) glue
 (c) billy (d) tape
- High Maharaja usually came from -
 (a) the third hill (b) the fields
 (c) the paddock (d) the valley
- Mr. Angus had a _____.
 (a) bow (b) gun
 (c) pistol (d) sword

(B) State whether the statements given below are True (T) or False (F) :

- Rashida's kite was home-made using a newspaper. []
- Song Ling never flew a kite. []
- The High Maharajah was a giant eagle. []
- There was no kite made in Australia that could sing. []

(C) Answer the following questions in 20-25 words each :

- Who was Song Ling ?
- Who is the High Maharajah in the story ?
- Who was Mr. Angus ? What were his peculiarities ?
- How did the children thank the High Maharajah ?

5. Name the three children who flew kites everyday ?

(D) Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each :

1. What kind of kites Lal and Nimmi had?
2. Why was Rashida's kite different ?
3. What did the long thin parcel contain ? Why was it handed over to Rashida by Mr. Angus ?
4. What did Rashida imagine while flying the kite ?
5. Did Rashida get back her singing kite ? Where was it found ?
6. Do you think that the High Maharajah helped in searching Rashida's kite ?

(E) Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each :

1. How did Rashida's kite sing ? Where did it come from and when ?
2. Who brought the Australian kites ? What do you know about these kites ?
3. What was Ama's reaction after seeing the torn kite ?

ACTIVITY :

Kite-flying is an adventure for most of the people. Does it affect the flight of birds in the sky? Discuss it with reference to the 'High Maharajah'.
