

Chota's Way

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami

(illustrations by Keśisudana dāsa)

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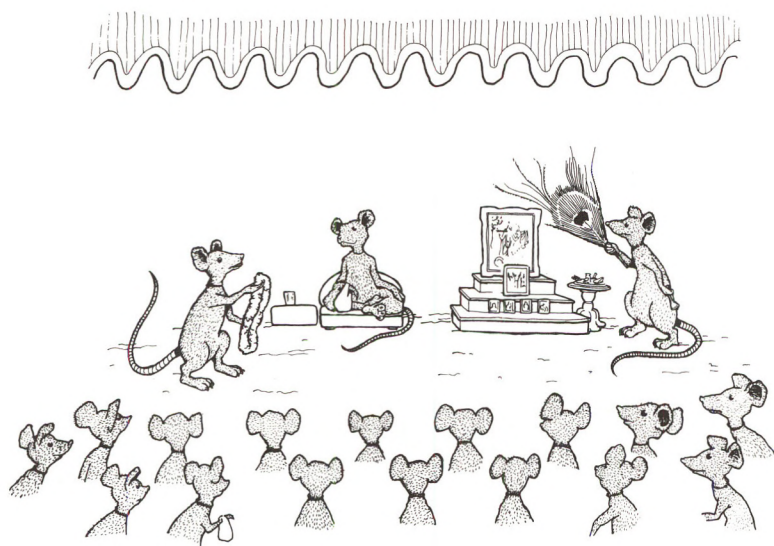
CHAPTER ONE

At the edge of a palm tree jungle, in a large open tent, three hundred mice and a few crows sat together to honor Choṭa dāsa on the occasion of his fourth birthday. They had erected a temporary altar with pictures of Śrīla Prabhupāda, Lord Caitanya, Lord Nityānanda, and Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. Choṭa sat to the left of this altar facing the audience, while a young field mouse stood making a speech.

". . . And after quickly assimilating the rudiments of Vaiṣṇava philosophy from Prabhu Nimāi, our Choṭa Prabhu became—I think it is safe to say—the first pure devotee of the Gauḍīya-sampradāya to appear in the mice species!"

"No, not the first and a not a pure devotee," said Choṭa, but the mice were cheering and didn't hear his mild protest. Even if they had heard it, they would have smiled at his humility. It was well known that Choṭa *was* the first mouse devotee who knew and exemplified the teachings of Śrīla

Prabhupāda. There had been many generations of mice living in the Hindu temples, but they had not become enlightened. Until Choṭa's arrival in



Guyana a year ago, a mouse's life had simply been eating, mating, sleeping, and defending. Now hundreds of mice had become devotees of the Lord, and they were eager to praise Choṭa for his part in spreading the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement.

"Nor is Choṭa Prabhu *merely* a pioneer," said the speaker with a flourish of his paw. "He continues to lead us by his nectarean discourses from the scriptures. He continues to wipe out our forgetfulness of God. I know that Choṭa doesn't like to hear his glo-

ries, but we request that today he please allow us to speak from the heart for our own purification."

"*Jaya! Jaya!*" the mice cheered. Choṭa sat still with downcast eyes and a grave expression. The field mouse concluded his speech and placed a garland of lotuses around Choṭa's neck and shoulders. Choṭa took off the garland because he already wore four other flower garlands. He felt that he was being buried under lotus blooms. Now another mouse came to the dais and began an oration that was like a continuation of the previous one. Choṭa had told them that the whole birthday program shouldn't take more than half an hour, but they had been speaking now for a full hour and the crowd was still attentive. Some of the crows had become fidgety and had walked off, but those who remained were listening intently.

"Choṭa's devotional talents are unlimited, so I will speak only to the extent I am able." The speaker was a lady mouse who was one of the main organizers of the children's schools. "As we all know, Choṭa has always been a very bold preacher, beginning with his dangerous forays into the walls of houses in North America. He has continued the same compassionate work among the mice of Guyana by going door to door in every town and village to spread Lord Caitanya's mission. He has also opened many temples and has been the prime mover in organizing a Vaiṣṇava movement among mice species, just like the worldwide movement of human Vaiṣṇavas. Choṭa has continued to do as-

tounding things even in recent months. I refer to his breakthrough in learning how to read Prabhupāda's books. Whereas previously we were limited to learning by hearing whatever Choṭa had learned and passed on from Nimāi Prabhu, now it is possible that the whole world of Śrīla Prabhupāda's books may be open to us!"

The mice rose to their feet, raised their arms, and began cheering "*Jaya Choṭa Prabhu! Haribol! All glories to Prabhupāda's books!*"

"Not only that," the *gurukula* matron continued, "but even more recently Choṭa Prabhu has done what we always thought was impossible. He has introduced Lord Caitanya's teachings to *other* animal species. Truly Choṭa Prabhu is an empowered Vaiṣṇava just like the great *ācāryas* of the past. Who knows what unprecedented new discoveries and advances Choṭa will reveal to us in the coming days? Let us simply pray for the long life of our leader. Let him find us all always active and submissive to his directions!"

Choṭa felt uneasy hearing the praise, but his feeling was more than the usual humility. Something had been building within him for months. He hadn't thought that he could tell them, but now when he heard their expectations of him he decided at least to hint indirectly at what was on his mind.

Choṭa addressed the crowd, "My dear friends and devotees . . . " (He remembered what Nimāi had told him of how *ācāryas* responded when they were praised.) "Whatever kind things you have

said describing a Vaiṣṇava are not true of me. I am a fallen soul in a mouse body. But like all of you I have been fortunate to come into contact with the teachings of the pure devotee, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, as passed down by his human followers and as contained in his books. And thus we have all been engaged in chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*." Choṭa thought, *Tell them that if they really love me they should allow me time to chant and read.*

"If there is any worth in my activities," said Choṭa, "it comes from the enlightened *paramparā* teachings and loving guidance I have received from our beloved preceptor, Nīmāi Prabhu. He was so patient and considerate that he was able to impart Kṛṣṇa consciousness even to subhuman species who are not usually able to receive higher learning. That is his credit. I have shared that with you, and you have submissively received it, and your lives have benefited. As Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, even a little devotional service—such as a mouse might be able to perform—can save one from the greatest danger at the time of death. The danger is that in the next life we may be pushed into a still lower species of life with complete forgetfulness of God. So my request is that you observe my birthday not by praising me, but by resolving that we shall all cooperate together to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness and spread it. Let us dedicate all our energies to this goal."

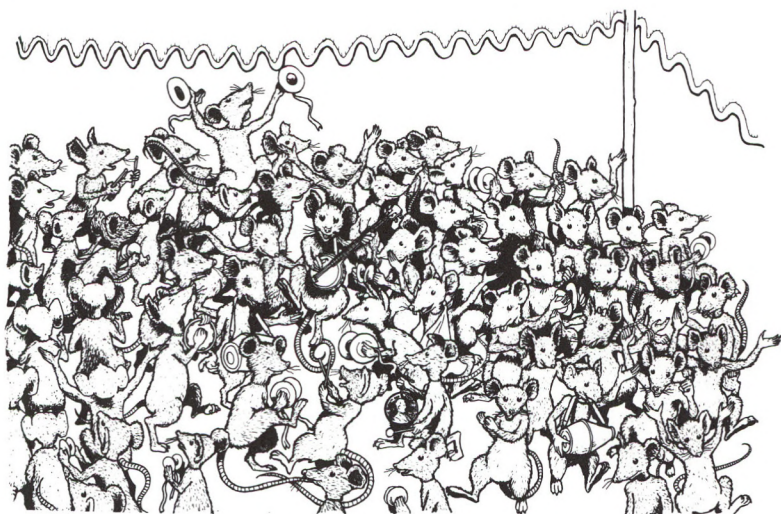
The mice responded by beating on their *mṛdaṅga*

drums and clashing their hand cymbals. The ladies made sounds of ululations with their tongues. Some of the devotees who had been cooking in an adjoining kitchen came to the doorway and peeked in to hear Choṭa's words.

Choṭa told himself, *Go ahead, tell them what's on your mind*. "I have one personal request," said Choṭa. "If I am actually to serve you and other living beings, then I have to be a fit devotee. But at present I am not fit. I do not have a taste for the most basic practices of chanting and hearing. So I humbly request you to please allow me to pursue the basic *sādhana* of Vaiṣṇavism, of which I have so far not realized, not even a drop. Without this higher taste, all my activities are actually trivial and farcical. Please give me your mercy in this very tangible and practical way so that one day I can actually become a genuine chanter and reader of Prabhupāda's books. Only then can I convince others to do the same."

Choṭa ended his speech here, and everyone was pleased with him. They asked him to be the lead singer for a *mahā-kīrtana*. He knew the mice liked to chant for at least an hour, and he wasn't sure if he could last that long, but he would give it a try. Closing his eyes, Choṭa sang the introductory prayers to Śrīla Prabhupāda and the Pañca-tattva and then the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*. He sang the first tune he had ever heard from Nimāi. Within moments, the mice were moving back and forth. Choṭa usually preferred a more sedate *kīrtana* where one could

meditate on each *mantra*. The real purpose of chanting was to vibrate the holy name and to hear it, and not to get carried away by melodies or fancy steps. But when the dancers started smiling and inducing one another to step lively, and when the drummers beat their instruments with expertise and pleasure, it was infectious, and Choṭa wanted to join their spirit.



One mouse started a circular march around the whole tent area, and soon hundreds of mice were in motion and song. Then another group formed an inner circle within the first, and a few of the more celebrated dancers moved within that ring and began twirling and bending, inducing one another into more and more displays of graceful dancing. Because of his seniority and relatively old age,

Choṭa wasn't expected to leap and cavort, yet he watched with appreciation. He wished he had their freedom from inhibition—and their springy legs. At least he could carry the tune, so he took responsibility for that, as loudly as he could. His mind and body were soon complaining, but Choṭa hoped to transcend his difficulties. If all these younger devotees and even children and crows could be so absorbed in *kīrtana* for an hour, why couldn't he? "It's not boring," he thought, "it will destroy all boredom and complaints, if I can just enter and taste the holy names: Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare, Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rama Rāma, Hare Hare."

The ecstatic *kīrtana* was an indication of the health of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement among the mice. Only a year ago very few were interested, but now wherever Choṭa and the devotees went in Guyana, mice enjoyed their chanting and many liked to take part. Devotee-mice had learned to make *mṛdaṅgas* and *kāratālas* as well as to use some of their popular instruments like banjos, tinpot drums, and rhythm sticks. In this way they tasted the bliss of devotional service and fulfilled the desires of the *ācāryas* that all living beings, "even the worms, birds and beasts," become elevated in *bhakti*. Or as Śrīla Prabhupāda said, "Even a child can take part in the chanting, or even a dog can take part in it and dance in ecstasy."

By mouse standards, the *kīrtana* for Choṭa's birthday celebration was a big one. The regular

members all joined wholeheartedly, and some who rarely attended meetings had also come and plunged into the center of it. The giant *harināma* chorus attracted many onlookers including birds who jeered. A few crow *bhaktas* took up guarding the *kīrtana*, and they had to drive away an unfriendly hawk. They did this by circling him and harassing his flight.

"Anyway, it's stupid," said the hawk as he finally flew off.



"No, it's not," replied a crow. "You are."



Choṭa felt waves of fatigue and boredom, but then they went away. He began to embrace the *mantra* and appreciate how God was so great and kind to appear in His name. "This is just a shadow of the full, perfect name because I am not qualified," thought Choṭa, "but even this is *very* merciful." He felt the auspicious presence of the names and knew for sure that the chanters were pleasing the spiritual masters.

It was not a matter of gauging one's symptoms, or even of meditating on them, but of just surrendering, crying out "Kṛṣṇa! Kṛṣṇa!" and singing against time and death.

Finally the head cook approached Choṭa and humbly asked if the *kīrtana* could end soon because the feast was all prepared and hot. Choṭa had lost

track of the time. It had been about one-and-a-half hours. So he increased the rhythm for five more minutes. The dancers became frenzied, and the holy name roared into the sky. Choṭa ended it, and they all sat down sweating and laughing and grinning. As Choṭa sang the song to Nṛsiṃhadeva, he also prayed that Nṛsiṃhadeva please protect all the mice and the movement from the attacks of demons and predators. Choṭa then stood up and announced, "As Śrīla Prabhupāda used to say, 'Chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and when you get tired—take *prasādam*!'"

They sat in long rows. The servers entered the area carrying big pots and ladles. Freshly washed orange leaves and clay pots were placed before every seated devotee. There was a commotion of excited chatter, shouts, and laughter. The men sat down beside each other, and families sat with their children. The first servers to walk down the aisles carried rice and dropped a portion of it on each leaf plate. Then came the *dāl* bearers. By the time the *sābjī* carriers entered, Choṭa was loudly reciting the prayer for honoring *prasādam*:

"Śarīra abidyā-jal!"

The congregation responded with a mighty shout, "ŚARĪRA ABIDYĀ-JAL!"

"Joḍendriya tāhe kāl."

"JODENDRIYA TĀHE KĀL."

When the formal prayer was finished, a devotee called out, "*Bhagavat prasādam ki—*"

And everyone responded, "JAYA!"

"His Divine Grace Choṭa Prabhu kī—"

"JAYA!"

And then the eating began in earnest. There was so much food that all the plates were heaped and spilling over.

"Hey, did you try the *sāmosas* yet? They're great!"

"Bhakta Mickey took six pieces of pizza!"

Aside from the regular devotees, many guests were present. Some animals came by just for the food and so got their first introduction to Kṛṣṇa's *prasādam*. The crows couldn't believe that there was so much food! They kept looking around to protect their own plates until they realized that everyone had enough, and more kept coming!

There was a particularly nice vegetable preparation of eggplant and curd. Another favorite was fried *urad dāl badas* in a creamy yogurt sauce topped with tamarind chutney. There were baked Gaur-āṅga potatoes with sour cream herb sauce, and broccoli with cheddar cheese sauce. Some devotees quickly finished their portions, but the servers came by again with seconds. All the preparations were popular, but especially the *sāmosas* with tomato chutney, the cauliflower *pakorās*, and the hot *purīs*. The servers didn't wait long before bringing out an array of sweet preparations: sweet rice, *gulābjāmons*, *sandēśa*, *laddus*, *burfi*, varieties of milk sweets, and cakes.

Some of the preparations were carried on big trays by several mice. Servers had to wind their way carefully between the narrow rows of animals.

"Prabhu, could you please pick up your tail?"

Everyone was cooperative. The devotees who were serving were also enthusiastic, knowing that they too would get their chance to honor the *prasādam*.

Some devotees became talkative. Some were silent, absorbed in honoring *prasādam*. Some finished quickly and left. Others stayed long, relishing the event until the very end. Some became intoxicated and boisterous. There was praise for the cooks. The babies seemed to be tasting the food with all the parts of their bodies. Some of them began walking around dropping food, occasionally knocking over a cup of nectar, but no one seemed to mind. *Dhotīs* were loosened and legs stretched out to accomodate the excess *prasādam*. Some sat straight, but others leaned back on one paw, and a few even lay on their sides.



Choṭa sat at the place of honor, flanked by some of the senior devotees of Guyana. He was aware that many eyes were watching him, and he didn't want to appear voracious. But he was quite hungry and not satisfied to just nibble politely at his food. When he dropped his inhibitions, the devotees were pleased to see him eat as much as the others. Again and again the servers came by encouraging

him to take another portion of eggplant *sābjī*, more hot *purīs*, another crisp *pakora*. Some palates are particularly fond of savory food, while others are inclined to sweets, but Choṭa was inclined to both—with a particular weakness for sweets. He refused to take more than one gulābjāmon, although he could have eaten two or three. After half an hour, he decided it would be good for him to stop eating and leave the feast scene. As he got up the mice cheered, and Choṭa realized that he had forgotten all his dissatisfactions. He was satiated not merely from food, but from Kṛṣṇa's mercy. And he found it particularly pleasing to see hundreds of devotees and guests gathered before the altar pictures, honoring the Lord's *prasādam*.

CHAPTER TWO

When Choṭa returned to his room, his cousin Yamala dāsa was waiting for him.

"Did you take the feast?" asked Choṭa.

"Yeah, but I could hardly enjoy it. I'm in such anxiety." Choṭa gave him a mat to sit on, but Yamala began pacing the room, fingering the beads in his bead bag. Yamala wore a team jacket with the letters "Lord Chaitanya's Army" printed on the back. He had been recruited along with Choṭa and Choṭa's kid brother, Arjuna, three years ago when all three of them lived as ordinary mice in the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple in Pennsylvania. They had been trained together in Kṛṣṇa consciousness by Nimāi and brought by him to Guyana where

they were still the only American-born mice. They had each grown in different ways. Choṭa remained the spiritual leader while Yamala had blossomed



into a dedicated and able manager, although less inclined to reading and chanting. He was respected among the mice devotees but was seen as rough and impetuous.

"Your brother Arjuna has gone nuts," said Yamala, staring at Choṭa. "He's blaspheming you and the whole movement. We have to stop him!"

"What's he doing?" asked Choṭa. Choṭa wished Yamala would sit down, but there was no use asking him.

Yamala blurted, "He's gone around to all six of our temples preaching blasphemy and directly attacking you. He's become a demon. He says that Nimāi Prabhu was a flaky devotee, and so our movement is bogus because it's based on him as our Founder-Ācārya."

"Whoever said Nimāi was Founder-*Ācārya*?" asked Choṭa. "I said . . ."

"I know," said Yamala. "But they don't know. The devotees are getting bewildered. He's turning a lot of heads. So *you've* got to do something right away to stop him." Something in Yamala's jacket pocket began beeping loudly. It was his emergency communicator signaling him to go to the nearest telephone and call his home number.

"I'll be back in a minute," said Yamala.

Choṭa sighed. Troubles weren't new to him. He usually took them as daily fare, knowing that, "If you take on headaches, you'll become dear to the Lord." As Choṭa often quoted from Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, "Troubles that I encounter in Your service, my Lord, I will consider a great happiness." But on hearing this latest outbreak, Choṭa again felt his growing desire to be free of management. He wanted to let someone else handle it. Would these troubles never end? He felt his life slipping by, but he was not becoming a real devotee. Choṭa gazed out the window and saw devotees wandering leisurely, recovering from the big feast. More ceremonies—a dramatic skit and *kīrtanas*—were scheduled for the evening.

Yamala returned, talking. "That was Raṅcora dāsa in Berbice. They're all getting agitated by Arjuna. Now he's printed a leaflet and is giving it to the guests at the feast. He says that Nimāi is bogus and that you, Choṭa, are puffed up and want followers. You accept too much wealth. I'd like to haul

off and belt Arjuna in the mouth. He's written some nonsense that you eat too much to be a spiritual leader."

Choṭa laughed, "At least that's true for today."

"It's not funny," said Yamala, and he walked up and down the small room, his whiskers twitching menacingly as he chanted an incoherent *mahā-mantra*. "Something has to be done to stop your brother."

"He's just peeved," said Choṭa "because we have always called him 'Junior.' And he feels guilty, I think, that we've left our family and . . ."

"Arjuna says that you are trying to take the credit for this movement, whereas actually it's all Lord Caitanya's mercy."

"That's true."

"He even tells some story that once you didn't want to get out of the van to go on *saṅkīrtana*, and he had to convince you."

"I don't remember that," said Choṭa. "I know I'm guilty of pride and things like that. But why should Arjuna attack the whole movement? We're all imperfect, even Nimāi is imperfect, and he always admitted that. We are imperfect, but we are repeating the perfect message from Śrīla Prabhupāda's books."

"Right!" Yamala cried. "And this is what you've got to tell them." The machine began beeping again in Yamala's jacket, but he ignored it. A mouse came to the open window and said that they were waiting for Yamala to come to rehearse his part as the

Muslim Kazi in the dramatic skit.

"Tell them to wait," said Yamala. His pacing quickened like an animal in a cage.

Choṭa suddenly wanted to tell Yamala what he had been thinking, that he wanted to take time to improve his *sādhana*. Arjuna's criticism seemed to confirm for Choṭa that the most important thing he could do would be to somehow gain attraction for chanting and hearing. He hesitated to express it to Yamala, knowing that he wouldn't see the logical connection. "But if my credibility is being challenged," Choṭa thought, "the best response would be to make my spiritual life beyond challenge. As Prabhupāda used to quote, 'Caesar's wife should be above suspicion.' If I actually became a devotee with attraction to chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and reading Prabhupāda's books, then my position would be beyond reproach. It would be a wonderful example to follow rather than a cause for fighting."

"Listen to this," said Yamala. "Arjuna says that animals cannot really understand the chanting. He has some quotes from Prabhupāda that Kṛṣṇa consciousness isn't for animals, only for humans, that the difference between humans and animals is that the human being can become self-realized and the animals can't. He says that the examples which Nimāi and you have given from Vedic literature are only rare exceptions. The examples of Lord Caitanya inducing the jungle animals to chant the holy names and of Śivānanda Sena being kind to a dog who then chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa for Lord

Caitanya are all just exceptions. He says that what Prabhupāda actually taught is that the only thing you can do for animals is not to kill them and to give them *prasādam*."

"I don't agree," said Choṭa. "The main point is that we are not this body. As Kṛṣṇa says in *Bhagavad-gītā*, 'The humble sages, by virtue of true knowledge, see with equal vision a learned and gentle *brāhmaṇa*, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater.' Yes, an animal taking to Kṛṣṇa consciousness is very unusual, but we can't deny the Lord's extraordinary mercy. Even an animal can take the mercy of the Lord, and that's the ultimate conclusion of the *saṅkīrtana* movement."

"I know that!" Yamala now came up close to Choṭa and tapped him on the chest with his paw. "But now you've got to tell them. We have to make vigorous propaganda against Arjuna Prabhu."

"I'll do the needful," said Choṭa. "But listen, Yamala, here's what I think. Our response to these criticisms should be to improve our spiritual lives. I want to take more time for chanting and reading. This is the leadership which is required, not just making counter-propaganda. I would like to work full time on my chanting and my study of Prabhupāda's books."

"What?!" Yamala's mouth fell open in disbelief. "This is not time for weakness, Prabhu."

"You call a desire to chant and hear a weakness?"

"Yes. Remember in the *Bhagavad-gītā* when Arjuna wanted to retire from the battle? What did Kṛṣṇa do? He chastised him!"

Choṭa became quiet and listened.

"Chanting and reading is *bābājī* stuff," said Yamala. "We're preachers. And you're the leader. You can't retire. We've got to confront this menace. Call meetings. Make a tour. Go to Arjuna and tell him he has got to stop or else. Don't allow him even to visit the temples. He has to leave Guyana. Many mice are already bewildered by him, and you've got to tell them to do their regular work."

"I agree," said Choṭa in a subdued voice. "But there has to be a time—"

"This isn't a time for chanting and hearing," said Yamala. "Listen, I'd like to take time for that myself. I'm about a hundred rounds behind on my quota, and I haven't read a page in weeks. I'm not proud of that. But I know I have to fight so that our spiritual movement can be protected."

Choṭa began to speak but Yamala cut him off. Yamala said, "As far as I'm concerned, chanting and introspection are luxuries, although I know they are the goal of life. There's no time for them now. We have to get out and fight. We're declaring war on *māyā*. You know Prabhupāda said, 'Work now, *samādhi* later.' So don't mind my saying so, Choṭa, but you're on the mental platform. As Kṛṣṇa's representative I'm telling you that it's your duty to go out there."

"Okay," said Choṭa. "I'll take action. I'll write a

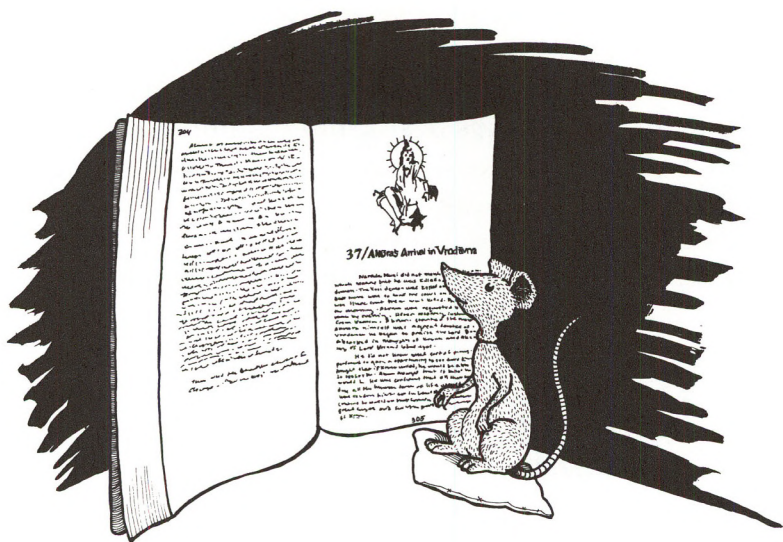
letter to the temples against Arjuna's propaganda. And I'll take a tour of all the temples."

"Now you're talking," said Yamala. The two mice embraced, and Yamala left to answer the call of his beeping communicator.

Choṭa told the devotees that he could not attend the dramatic skit or evening *ārati*. He sat down to write a letter against Arjuna's propaganda. Then he remembered that he had not finished his daily quota of sixteen rounds. He got up and began walking and chanting on his beads, but his mind was too agitated for even the slightest attention to the holy names. He tried calming himself, sitting on his bed, but then he felt sleepy. He wanted to go outside for fresh air, but he knew that wherever he went he would meet crowds of animals. So he resigned himself to pacing the room, in the style of Yamala dāsa, and grinding out a few poor rounds of *japa*.

Choṭa woke at 2:00 A.M. the next morning. Although he usually rose from bed at 3:00 A.M., he felt impelled to get up and read *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* before the rush of events began. He had no strict reading program, and so he decided that any book by Prabhupāda would do. Prabhupāda himself had said that the books were just like sweet balls, and they would taste sweet no matter where you bit into them. Choṭa selected the *Kṛṣṇa* book and began reading "Akrura's Arrival in Vṛndāvana." It was such a nice meditation, Akrura traveling to Vṛndāvana and anticipating seeing Lord Kṛṣṇa. At first Akrura thought himself too materialistic to actually see the

Lord, who is very difficult even for *yogīs* to see. But then Akrura said, "Enough of such thought! After all, even a fallen soul like me can have the chance to behold the infallible Supreme Lord, for one of the conditioned souls being swept along on the river of time may sometimes reach the shore."



Under lamplight in a quiet room, Choṭa read on. Akrura was confident that the Lord would be merciful to him. Akrura said, "I am going to see the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu, the reservoir of all beauty, who by His own sweet will has now assumed a humanlike form to relieve the earth of her burden. Thus there is no denying that my eyes will achieve

the perfection of their existence."

Choṭa paused and looked up thoughtfully from the page. Unless one regularly heard these narrations, how would it be possible to remember the form and activities of the Supreme Lord? And without remembering Kṛṣṇa, how was it possible to be a devotee? It was not enough just to "belong" to a movement or to wear a team jacket. As Akrura had said, "All sins are destroyed and all good fortune created by the Supreme Lord's qualities, activities, appearances, and words that describe these. Words bereft of His glories are like the decorations on a corpse."

Choṭa recalled how he had been given the gift of reading less than a year ago. Yes, it had been a *gift* from the Lord. Choṭa bowed down and placed his head at the base of the book. He prayed, "I thank you, Lord, for speaking to us through scripture. Despite my sinful body, which is not better than a poisonous snake like Kāliya, You have nevertheless allowed me at least to glimpse Your form and teachings through *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. But now that You have given me the ability to read, please make it complete and reveal Your actual presence through the words."

Choṭa allowed his greed for reading Prabhu-pāda's books to fill him without guilt. He felt the conviction that Śrīla Prabhupāda was pleased with him and that he should not squelch his growing desires. Choṭa thought, "Hearing about Kṛṣṇa is the most important thing. Unfortunately, although the

mice devotees are enthusiastic, they do not know yet of the importance of reading. They praise me for reading, yet they don't seek to do it themselves." Choṭa attempted to study further. But he found his attention span had been exhausted within ten minutes. So this was the predicament: Although he had been praised as the great leader of devotees among the animals, he did not deeply appreciate reading or chanting. And if the leader had no taste, what kind of example could he set for the followers? "Therefore," Choṭa thought, "even if no one else encourages me, I must find the means to concentrate on chanting and hearing." With mixed feelings, Choṭa closed the book and turned to *japa*. Now he could hear mice stirring; the little temple was coming to life. Soon he would have to face them.

CHAPTER THREE

As requested by Yamala, Choṭa started at once on a tour of the country to counteract the propaganda of Arjuna. Choṭa held meetings in temples and visited people's homes, preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness and answering challenges and doubts. For example, in Berbice he was invited by a devotee-mouse, Mr. Apsara, who worked in a bauxite mill. Mr. Apsara and his wife, two sons, and two daughters had all been active devotees attending the local temple, but since hearing criticisms of Choṭa, they became somewhat standoffish. Still, they invited him to their modest house, and after a *kīrtana* and

scripture reading, Mr. Apsara asked some questions.

He inquired in a polite and indirect way, but what he really meant to say was, "Is it true what they say about you, Choṭa, that your teacher wasn't a pure devotee and that you are also faulty? Are you proud? Are you too fond of sweets like they say?" Choṭa had been repeating the same philosophy wherever he went, that the criterion for speaking perfectly is to follow strictly the authority of guru, śāstra, and sādhu. Choṭa quoted statements by Śrīla Prabhupāda such as, "I don't claim that I am a pure devotee or perfect, but my only qualification is that I am trying to follow the instructions of the perfect." And, "One may be rascal number one from material estimations, but if he simply strictly follows whatever is said by Caitanya Mahāprabhu or His representative spiritual master, then he becomes a guru." But although he defended himself, Choṭa thought, *I shouldn't be doing this. Arjuna's criticisms of me are light compared to the real truth, which is that I don't love Kṛṣṇa and I find chanting His holy names a heavy chore. I am posing as a spiritual leader, but I don't realize anything that I read or say in my lectures.*

When Choṭa stopped speaking about himself and went on to defend the movement, he felt more conviction. Arjuna's handbill had stated that Śrīla Prabhupāda never expected animals to follow the four rules (no illicit sex, no meat-eating, no intoxication, and no gambling) and he never expected them to understand *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. It was

more honest, Arjuna claimed, to admit this, to engage in animal propensities and stop the farce. In reply, Choṭa quoted many scriptural statements and attempted to prove that they were intended for all souls, including animals. If previously the mercy had not been extended to the animals, that did not mean that it could not be done now by the extraordinary grace of the Lord's empowered preachers. Rūpa Gosvāmī had said of Lord Caitanya, "You are the most munificent incarnation of God, and You are teaching the highest form of love of God in a way that was *never before so freely distributed*."

Most of the devotees who heard Choṭa assured him that they supported him and that he had turned the tide in his favor by his visit. But it was tiring going from place to place, sometimes hitching a ride on a train or walking or taking a boat from village to village. Yamala dāsa had formed a "Committee to Counteract Blasphemy," and they had given Choṭa his itinerary. He had to keep in touch with the CCB by phone calls and letters, and sometimes they assigned him new places to visit. Choṭa felt a sense of accomplishment in carrying out the duty, but sometimes it seemed futile to him. It was like superficial patchwork rather than an actual remedy. Choṭa had his idea of a deeper rectification both for himself and the movement, but whenever he had brought it up, no one seemed interested.

After spending a week in Crabwood Creek, Choṭa had to wait while the car went in for repairs. As

soon as he heard of the delay, he decided to visit an old devotee-friend who lived in that town. So he started out with no assistant to the house of Padma dāsa, who was a crow. Padma was the first crow who had been converted into a devotee of the Lord. Choṭa had met him in a park at a festival for vegetarians. (At that time the crow was not a vegetarian but was attracted by the garbage thrown out at the festival.) They had sat down together and struck up an acquaintanceship. After associating with Choṭa for a few weeks, Padma had decided to commit himself fully to the teachings of Śrīla Prabhupāda. Some of the mice devotees were hesitant to accept him at first, since crows were traditionally their enemies. Because Choṭa was personally so friendly with the crow (who later accepted the name Padma dāsa), and because Padma himself showed the symptoms of being a dedicated devotee, they begrudgingly accepted the fact that Kṛṣṇa consciousness could indeed be spread to animal species other than mice.

Choṭa and Padma had worked together lecturing at animal schools, which had also led to Choṭa's interest in learning to read. In fact, it was Padma dāsa's encouragement that bolstered Choṭa in his first difficult attempts to gain literacy. Padma was considered a serious and honorable devotee, but unfortunately he had begun to backslide. His wife said that he sometimes smoked an intoxicant the locals called "weed." His health was not good, and he became very absorbed in taking health cures and

in reading books on psychology with the aim of self-improvement. He seemed less interested in *bhakti-yoga*. Choṭa never deliberately abandoned his friend, but their ways began to part. Choṭa was intent in serving the purposes of the movement, and Padma began avoiding the association of devotees.

To reach Padma's house, Choṭa had to enter the crow neighborhood, which was somewhat risky. Hare Kṛṣṇa was a popular movement among mice, but only a very few crows had taken to it. Crows remained the enemies of mice, or at least they were always harsh and sarcastic toward them.



As Choṭa walked quickly down the garbage-littered street, crows called out at him from their front porches.

"Hey mouse! You lookin' to be a meal?!"

"Hey Mousey, you better get your face outta here before dark if you like breathing! Caw! Caw!"

Choṭa showed a faint smile but was very nervous as he kept walking ahead. The tense situation at

least forced him to chant fervently in his mind, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare, Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare.

Padma lived in a rundown, unpainted little house on stilts. Although almost all the crows on the block perched on their front porches or on their roofs, Padma was within his house, and Choṭa had to knock repeatedly on the front door. As soon as Choṭa was admitted, the two friends exchanged obeisances and a hearty embrace.

"How are you doing?" asked Choṭa, smiling.

"Okay," said Padma and he laughed. "Please come in and sit down. What would you like, wheatgrass or carrot juice?"

"Oh, I'll just take some water if you don't mind."

Choṭa was glad to see pictures of Kṛṣṇa on the wall. But he noticed many different kinds of books on the shelves. *The Transparent Ego: How to Be Your Own Psychiatrist* was open on the table, and Choṭa picked it up.

"Is this any good?" Choṭa asked.

"Yes," replied Padma, "it's helpful. But not really."

"You look a little worn," said Choṭa. He was a bit shocked to see Padma so thin and without his black luster. Padma replied that he hadn't been feeling well; his back hurt him, he had indigestion, and he was feeling depressed.

"But I'm on a new diet, taking just wheatgrass and enemas. I think it will be good. I recommend it to you, too."

Padma was married and had a young daughter. His wife and daughter said, "Hello," but then allowed the two friends to talk in private. They sat on comfortable cushions, and Choṭa sipped at his water while Padma drank down some pills with wheat-grass juice.

"Do you still smoke?" asked Choṭa.

"Sometimes."

"I wish I could help you," said Choṭa. "But I know you don't want preachy talk. Remember though, how happy and effulgent you were when we were visiting the schools together?"

Padma brightened, and they began to reminisce about better days.

"I always remember," said Choṭa, "how spontaneously you were attracted to Prabhupāda's books. You used to read by the hour. I think only because of your help was I able to learn myself."

Padma agreed that he had been happier when he was following the spiritual practices. At Choṭa's request, Padma tried explaining his mental predicament. He said one dilemma was whether to be more responsive to his family's material demands or more concerned with his own spiritual advancement. He spoke of feeling inadequate and oversensitive—everyone seemed to be against him, or even if they weren't, people were too loud and demanding. He had always been a misfit. It was a very psychological explanation, and Choṭa couldn't quite follow it. He sincerely nodded and encouraged Padma that the real solution was to take shelter of

the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Padma looked sincerely into Choṭa's eyes and asked, "How are *you* doing? I heard they were blaspheming you."

Choṭa confided to his old friend. "Yes, I'm being so-called blasphemed. But what they say is really true. Or even if the details aren't true, it's true that I'm not a qualified spiritual leader. The good thing about this criticism is that it makes me want to really improve myself. I'm hopeful that if I could just spend time chanting and hearing, I could make real progress."

"Sounds good," said Padma.

"But they won't let me do it."

"They?"

"Yamala and the devotees. They say my attempt to increase my *sādhana* means that I just want to be a *bābājī*."

"But what do you say?"

"I think the desire to increase *sādhana* is auspicious," said Choṭa. "In my case I think I crucially need it at this particular point in my life. Otherwise, the more people praise me and sometimes criticize me, and the more leadership I assume, the more it becomes a farce. Even the greatest active preachers sometimes took considerable time out for self-cultivation."

"Yes, of course. And what does Śrīla Prabhupāda say about this?"

"You know he often criticizes those who go alone to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa just to get some cheap reputa-

tion. But I don't think those instructions are an absolute condemnation of *bhajana*. I've been noticing that there are many references to great devotees—even Lord Caitanya—going alone, avoiding crowds, and seeking solitary places. I heard that Bhakti-siddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura chanted alone for ten years before he began his mission. And Śrīla Prabhupāda did also when he lived in Vṛndāvana."

"Speaking of solitude," said Padma, "have you ever met the turtle who lives in the jungle? They say he's an accomplished hermit and mystic. Maybe he could tell you something about it first-hand. Anyway, if you feel so convinced, why don't you just spend more time chanting and reading?"

"Maybe I will," said Choṭa, and he began thinking aloud. "Maybe right now I'll take a three-day retreat. I'm supposed to be on this whirlwind tour to counteract propaganda. But I don't think anyone would notice if I just disappeared for a few days."

"Yeah, I think you should do it."

Choṭa and Padma had been together for two hours, but neither wanted to part. Choṭa agreed to stay for lunch. It was an all-raw meal of lettuce, sprouts, and a tomato. For dessert, there were grapes. After eating, they both rested a little while on blankets on the floor.

Choṭa then suggested that they could read together, which they used to do in the old days. Their method was that they would take two copies of the same book and read aloud together. First Choṭa would read while his friend listened, and



they would both make comments. With two copies of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, they began chanting and hearing. As Padma read, Choṭa became drowsy but then jumped to his feet. "I always do this!" he laughed. "This is what I want to cure." When Padma read the verses about one's mind being the best friend or worst enemy, he put the book down and spoke more about his mental troubles. Choṭa had observed over the years that Padma always had new problems—there didn't seem to be any end to them or any ultimate root, except for the explanations given in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. And Padma seemed to lack faith in the process of *bhakti* as a cure-all. Choṭa tried to encourage him. Together they looked up references about controlling the mind. And so they went on reading for an hour.

It was dark when Choṭa finally left his friend's house. Some crows hooted him, but he took it in stride and hurried back to the temple.

"Where were you for so long?" a devotee asked. "We were worried."

"I was at Padma's."

"Oh, him. He hardly ever comes to the temple anymore. He's in *māyā*. It's your mercy to go and see such a fallen person. But I don't know if he deserves your attention."

Choṭa wanted to say, "He helped me." But instead he said, "Padma is an old friend. He's done a lot of service for Prabhupāda and Lord Caitanya. Maybe one day he'll come back. But even now, wouldn't it be funny if he were closer to God than we were?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Choṭa decided to take three days for a spiritual retreat. He phoned Yamala and told him he was exhausted from his tour and that he needed to rest. Yamala was suspicious at first, but when Choṭa lied saying that he had a fever and flu, Yamala agreed that he should rest. Choṭa confided in a few devotees at Crabwood Creek as to his actual activities. A friend lent him the use of a shack in the jungle, and a young field mouse named Bhakta Eddie volunteered to assist Choṭa by cooking. Choṭa was a bit skeptical whether Eddie would respect the solitude that he was seeking. But Choṭa wasn't ready to do it

entirely alone, and so he agreed.

They arrived around 9:00 A.M., and Choṭa immediately began chanting *japa*. The shack was in the middle of a coconut grove where the trees were strong and gracefully bending, with bunches of green coconuts at the top. They could hear the rustle of big leaves and the gentle clacking of bamboo



in the breeze. Many varieties of birds were singing—the yellow bird known as the banana quit was most frequently seen flying and hopping about. A

dappling of shade and sunshine created a pleasant effect, and Choṭa's spirits soared.

Choṭa thought of Śrīla Prabhupāda's profound but simple instruction on how to chant: Just pay attention to the words of the *mantra* and nothing else. Choṭa's intention was to serve the holy names without expecting a reward. He focused on the sound vibrations, but after half an hour, he realized it was going to be difficult to keep it up. He would have to go on chanting with little or no taste for it. He found himself inattentive in the extreme. It was as if the holy names were a signal for his mind to turn over plans and reflect on current topics or simply to go off anywhere in the universe at the speed of mind. He doubted whether being alone with *japa* as his main activity would actually enable him to improve.

Bhakta Eddie had been busy in the kitchen, but then he peeked out at Choṭa on the porch and asked if he could chant with him. Choṭa nodded in agreement. After a few minutes Eddie turned and said, "Choṭa Prabhu, may I ask you a question?" Choṭa nodded.

"I'm trying to understand," said Bhakta Eddie, placing his palms together in respect. "Didn't Prabhupāda say that he preferred to stay at a temple rather than a hotel and that he wanted to always be near devotees? So whatever you are trying to do, shouldn't you be doing it in a temple?"

"This is a temple," said Choṭa. "See the *tulasī* plant? Do you know what a temple is?"

"I see," said Eddie. "But isn't the most important thing to associate with devotees? Shouldn't we just spend our time in the company of other devotees rather than relying on our own minds?"

Choṭa smiled. "Who's relying on his own mind? I've come here to rely on the holy names. Do you want to help me or not?"

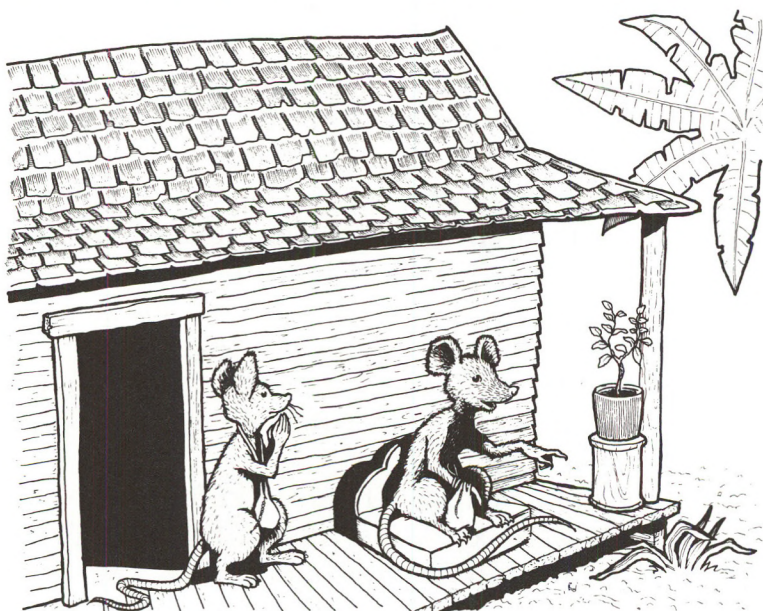
"I'm sorry," said Bhakta Eddie, "I didn't mean to be offensive."

"It's just for a couple of days," said Choṭa. "Let's both chant." The two resumed their *harināma* in the jungle, but Bhakta Eddie's questions remained with Choṭa and added to his uncertainty.

He continued grinding out the *mahā-mantra* without taste or attention. But after a few hours, when it was near lunchtime and he was hungry, Choṭa began to beg for the holy name. It occurred to him, at least theoretically, that the holy name was the Supreme Lord Himself. Choṭa thought, "Please be with me as I chant Your names. Help me to surrender to this real work. Help me chant from the heart." His budding mood of prayer was interrupted by the lunch of *dāl* and rice, after which Choṭa felt heavy and went inside to sleep.

After an hour of rest, Choṭa woke suddenly to Bhakta Eddie's voice. Eddie was about a hundred feet away on the jungle path talking to a passerby mouse. Eddie and this mouse attended the same school, and so they talked for a while about teachers they knew and then about cricket matches and a girl mouse named Wanda who had won the spelling

bee. The passerby said he wanted to be an engineer, and Eddie replied that he was undecided, although maybe he would like to become a lawyer. Choṭa sat up wondering why Eddie was wasting his time in a conversation which Choṭa found pointless. The idle talk forced him to see how much he had changed in his outlook. He sensed his own strong determination for spiritual achievement. Choṭa felt tempted with pride, and so he rose to his feet chanting loudly. He walked onto the porch as a hint to Eddie that he should break up his chatting.



The afternoon's *japa* was hard work, but Choṭa felt good about it. It was very humbling to see his inadequacy. He felt helpless to improve, but he

chanted with faith in the process. When Eddie came onto the porch again and asked to join him in chanting, Choṭa hoped he would not ask more questions. But after a few minutes of *japa*, Eddie turned and asked, "Choṭa Prabhu, could you help me?"

"What is it?"

"How can I control my mind? I have so many material desires."

"Just chant," said Choṭa.

"Is that all? Just chant?"

Choṭa switched abruptly from his own feeling of inadequacy to the role of a superior.

"Not *just* chant," said Choṭa. "Don't minimize the chanting. If we could actually just chant, then all our problems would go away. Chanting means that you're invoking the presence of God, and if God is with you, then your mind is controlled, material desires are gone, and everything is blissful."

"But I don't feel blissful," said Eddie.

"Yes, well neither do I. But at least I'm not eager for *material* bliss. We shouldn't be discouraged. And because we're not so advanced that we can *only* chant, Prabhupāda and the *ācāryas* have given us many duties. Sometimes we can chant, sometimes read, sometimes cook—whatever we like to do, but for Kṛṣṇa. That way we can always practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Is that all right?"

Bhakta Eddie nodded hopefully. He had more questions, but Choṭa asked him to hold them for now.

At dusk, the mosquitoes came out, and Choṭa and Eddie took shelter under mosquito nets. From across the river they heard the strains of rock music. Choṭa chanted on his beads and noticed that subtle "muscles" in his mind were beginning to exert attention and to neglect unwanted thoughts. But it was strenuous. By 10:00 P.M., with a sense that he was chanting just to complete a quota, Choṭa pushed the counter beads indicating the completion of sixty-four rounds. And then he fell fast asleep.

For the second day of his retreat, Choṭa planned to concentrate on reading. Full sets of Prabhupāda's books were scarce in Guyana, and all he had was his own copy of the *Kṛṣṇa* book. He woke early, turned on the light, and remained under the mosquito netting while Bhakta Eddie slept. Choṭa was hoping that his reading would not be like the drudgery of a schoolboy's homework. He hoped that Lord Kṛṣṇa would speak to him from the pages of Śrīla Prabhupāda's book. Before opening the book, he prepared himself to recognize that he was about to do something very special. He knelt down, offered a brief prayer, and then touched the *Kṛṣṇa* book respectfully to his head. Opening the book at random, he settled at Chapter 45, "Uddhava Visits Vṛndāvana."

Choṭa knew that he was not qualified to be included in the intimate pastimes of Lord Kṛṣṇa, Uddhava, and the residents of Vṛndāvana. Kṛṣṇa and Prabhupāda were kindly allowing him to hear, but in a higher sense he was not really included. At

certain points in the narrative, however, Śrīla Prabhupāda turned and spoke directly to Chota.

Those who are in the most exalted position of devotional service and ecstasy can live with Kṛṣṇa always by remembering His pastimes. Any book of *kṛṣṇa-līlā*, even this book *Kṛṣṇa* and our *Teachings of Lord Chaitanya*, is actually solace for devotees who are feeling the separation of Kṛṣṇa.

When Śrīla Prabhupāda included him in that way, Choṭa realized that actually he had never been ignored by Kṛṣṇa in His pastimes. The Lord was inviting him to take part. Kṛṣṇa was saying to Choṭa as well as to every willing reader, "Come to Me, I am the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Live with me always." This was the inspiration Choṭa had been seeking: a sâstric confirmation for his own desires to spend more time with Prabhupāda's books. As he read on, it happened again. Uddhava had entered the house of Nanda Mahārāja and was offered an honorable reception. Nanda inquired how Kṛṣṇa was doing in Mathurā and whether He remembered His father and mother. Nanda described some of Kṛṣṇa's uncommon activities to Uddhava and became so overwhelmed that he could not speak anymore. Choṭa read it as if observing from a respectful distance. But Prabhupāda included him:

. . . To remain always absorbed in Kṛṣṇa consciousness was the standard of the inhabitants

of Vṛndāvana as exhibited by Mahārāja Nanda, Yaśodā and the *gopīs*. If we simply follow their footsteps, even to a minute proportion, our lives will surely become successful, and we will enter the spiritual kingdom, Vaikuṇṭha.

Choṭa read for half an hour and was still going strong when Bhakta Eddie woke up. Eddie tried chanting but again fell asleep. After another hour, Eddie roused himself again and said to Choṭa, "It's really tough being a mouse. Maybe I'll get a better body next time. Should I want a better body? What do you think?"

"Yes, you should want a better body," said Choṭa. "You should want a spiritual body so that you can dance and play with Kṛṣṇa. But even subhuman persons are spirit souls. We're more covered over. You shouldn't just lament and *wait* for a better body. What do you think?"

"I think that by Prabhupāda's grace and by your association I can chant Hare Kṛṣṇa even now. I just have to stay awake." Bhakta Eddie began slapping his cheeks and pinching himself. He tried chanting loudly, but after half an hour, both he and Choṭa were nodding sleepily under the dim naked bulb.

Later in the morning, when Choṭa was again feeling hungry before lunch, he had another successful reading session. He began it with his little ritual, bowing down before the book and telling himself that he was about to do something very special. He prayed for the ability to listen to the Lord. This time

he read about Uddhava's delivering a message from Kṛṣṇa to the *gopīs*. When he came to Rādhārāṇī's transcendental madness in speaking to a bumblebee, Choṭa felt that it was way over his head. It was fascinating, yet he could not dare to think he was included in Her relationship with Kṛṣṇa. But when Uddhava read Kṛṣṇa's letter, it seemed to be addressed not only to the *gopīs* but to everyone. Kṛṣṇa informed the *gopīs* that they should not feel separation from Him because "separation between ourselves is impossible at any time, at any place or under any circumstances, because I am all-pervading." And then Śrīla Prabhupāda turned to Choṭa dāsa and said, "Not only the *gopīs*, but all living entities are always inseparably connected with Kṛṣṇa in all circumstances." Choṭa thought of the controversy whether subhuman persons could practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Here was another confirmation in his favor: *"Not only the gopīs, but all living entities are always inseparably connected with Kṛṣṇa in all circumstances."* Later in the chapter Prabhupāda confirmed it even more:

The effect of taking up Kṛṣṇa consciousness is just like that of drinking nectar. With or without one's knowledge it will act. The active principle of Kṛṣṇa consciousness will manifest itself everywhere; it does not matter how and where one has taken his birth. Kṛṣṇa will bestow His benediction upon anyone who takes to Kṛṣṇa consciousness without any doubt.

As Choṭa read on, he felt as if he were encountering waves from the spiritual ocean. He thought, "If I regularly give the best time to hearing Prabhupāda's books, I'll be covered by continual, blissful waves, and gradually my sense of material life will diminish in place of *kṛṣṇa-kathā*. My faith will grow strong and I'll want to spend more and more time with the books. But what if I like it so much I get addicted and want to leave off other duties? Probably that wouldn't happen. I could both read and perform active duties. But even if I did become a madman addicted to hearing *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, wouldn't Śrīla Prabhupāda be pleased with that? And wouldn't it be a good example for others?"

At the end of the second day, Bhakta Eddie's younger brother came and said that Eddie's mom wanted him to come home right away.

"Tell her you'll come home tomorrow night," said Choṭa. But then he saw that Bhakta Eddie was inclined to go home. He had had enough of the retreat.

"I think you'd better go," said Choṭa. "We don't want to disturb your mother."

"Yes," said Eddie. "It's been very, uh . . . transcendental. Thank you for letting me stay with you."

After dark, the sounds of the insects and animals made Choṭa nervous, but he felt that he was finally beginning to face himself.



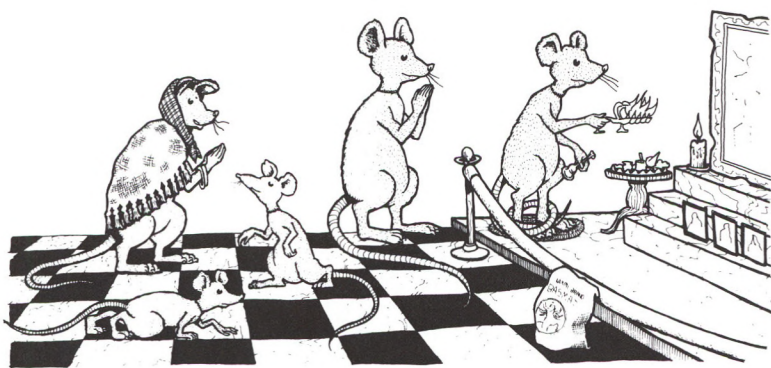
On his third day, Choṭa decided not to cook but to eat only bananas and coconuts that he could gather easily. He chanted and read the *Kṛṣṇa* book, and his moods alternated between very elated and quite depressed. Sometimes he considered that he would like to live the rest of his life this way, but then he did not want to stay alone for even another hour. He reasoned that staying alone was an art which he knew nothing about. Perhaps he should go see that meditating turtle whom Padma dāsa had mentioned and learn more how to survive in solitude. Finally Choṭa decided not to stay another night on his own but to return right away to the temple.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Choṭa approached the temple building, he heard the sound of the bell ringing for evening *ārati*. He entered the room, and his nose twitched from the aroma of sandalwood incense. His eyes feasted upon the sight of the Deities' pictures being worshiped on the altar. He was glad to be back; it felt safe.

He had arrived just at the start of the evening *ārati*, which was usually attended by only one or two mice besides the *pūjārī*. The room was bare, just

varnished floors and no furniture except for a wooden altar with framed pictures and candles. Choṭa stood close to the altar and carefully observed the brahminical movements of the *pūjārī*. The *pūjārī* touched the flame to the *ghee* wick and held the wick as an offering to the picture of Śrīla Prabhupāda. Choṭa watched as if for the first time. He felt appreciation for the steady attitude of this *pūjārī*, who he knew performed the same ritual four times a day with simple faith.



The room was dark except for the candle flames on the altar and one light bulb in the rear of the hall. An old lady mouse with a couple of grandchildren was in attendance, and she had left a bag of rice as a donation before the altar rail. They all stood quietly and watched, while a tape of Śrīla Prabhupāda singing *Śikṣāṣṭakam* played softly. Choṭa heard the cries of the insects and other animals in the jungle night, but it didn't make him

nervous as when he was alone. He felt that he was receiving extra mercy.

After *ārati* Choṭa was bombarded with messages and confronted by persons who wanted to see him. Most urgent was a phone call from Yamala dāsa, who had been trying to reach him for two days.

"Don't ever again go off to where there's no phone," said Yamala. "You have too many responsibilities to just disappear like that, even if you are sick." Yamala said that Arjuna dāsa and his sympathizers "have declared war on the movement." Apparently some of Arjuna's followers had gone to a temple but were not allowed to enter, so they pushed their way in and ate lunch without permission. They also took a drum from the temple, claiming it belonged to them. When they were leaving, there was a scuffle with the temple mice, and one was pushed down the stairs and sprained his ankle. Yamala said, "Choṭa Prabhu, you have to go personally to Arjuna and tell him to leave the country *or else*. No one can do this but you. Do you agree?"

Choṭa agreed to go see Arjuna. He traveled to the town where Arjuna lived and called at his house. As soon as they saw one another, the two brothers embraced.

"I've heard so many rumors," said Choṭa. "Tell me Arj, what is your actual complaint?"

Arjuna gave Choṭa a cup of water and gestured for him to sit on a wicker chair.

"My complaint," said Arjuna, "is that we

shouldn't have left our home and our responsibilities to Mom and Dad."

"What?" said Choṭa. "Then why didn't you say so? Why the big smoke screen about Nimāi and how animals can't become Kṛṣṇa conscious?"

"Because you're so fanatical you wouldn't listen."

"No, I can listen. But maybe I am fanatical. Please forgive me. Anyway, if you feel that way about leaving Mom and Dad and everything, why don't you go back?"

"Do you think I should?"

"Yes," said Choṭa, "I think that would be best. And you could also apologize to them for me. But don't go with this idea that I forced you to leave home. You left them by your own free will."

A few of Arjuna's friends came into the room, but Arjuna asked them to leave "so we can talk in private."

"What did I know of free will?" asked Arjuna. "You just swept me away with your talks and promises. And then we had to go out in freezing weather in a van, *in a cage!* You call that free will?"

"I'm sorry," said Choṭa, "You're right, I was fanatical. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. If I go North I'll need money," said Arjuna.

"No you won't. Mice can travel as stowaways in boats."

"Yes, but I'll have to pay an agent to find the right boat at the right time."

"I don't have any money," said Choṭa.

"Yes, you do. The movement has money."

"But that's all for Kṛṣṇa."

"Then I'll fight you," said Arjuna.

"All right," said Choṭa. "I'll get you the money somehow. But you have to call off this 'war.'"

"Okay, okay."

After things were amicably settled, Choṭa and Arjuna went to the kitchen and cooked their lunch. Choṭa had heard rumors that Arjuna was no longer practicing devotional principles, but he was glad to see it wasn't true. Arjuna sang the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* while they cooked, and he offered the food to pictures of the Deities. Friends from the neighborhood came by, and they all sat on the floor honoring *prasādam* off citrus leaves.

"We *did* have some good times together," said Choṭa. "Admit it, Arjunajī."

"Yeah," said Arjuna, smiling over hot rice and *dāl*. "Remember that time when we tried to distribute *prasādam*, but the ghetto mice came and took it away? Then we met some albino mice who were very interested."

Arjuna's neighbors laughed and asked to hear more adventures.

"Tell them," urged Choṭa, "how Nimāi taught us how to chant."

"Oh yeah!" Arjuna recalled, "Actually *you* taught us Choṭa. But I remember one time Nimāi told us to cry out like a baby for its mother. When he said that, at first I just squealed and squeaked, but then I learned to say the words: *Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa*,

*Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare, Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma,
Rāma Rama, Hare Hare."*

The very next day a big scandal was uncovered within the movement, and Choṭa was asked to rectify it. Two mice devotees who lived in the far south of the country came to Crabwood Creek and reported it. One of the female mice living in the southern temple had complained to her father that a male mouse living in the temple had seduced her into illicit sex. The father of this girl was a judge, and he became very disturbed. The accused male mouse was one of the managers of the temple, and the rumor was that he had had illicit dealings with a number of lady mice in that town, all under the pretense of engaging them in devotional service. The southern mice requested Choṭa to please come with them to meet the judge and at least explain that this was not the proper behavior for devotees, and that the offender would be punished. Choṭa would also have to meet the accused mouse, who completely denied the girl's story. Even while Choṭa spoke with the southern mice, Yamala dāsa phoned him—he too had heard news of the brewing scandal. Yamala said that it was the worst possible trouble that had ever happened. It could smear the movement as a sex cult and ruin their preaching. "But why me?" asked Choṭa. "Why do you all come to *me* with this?" Yamala replied that Choṭa was the only one capable of pacifying the judge, and the only one with enough spiritual clout to get the

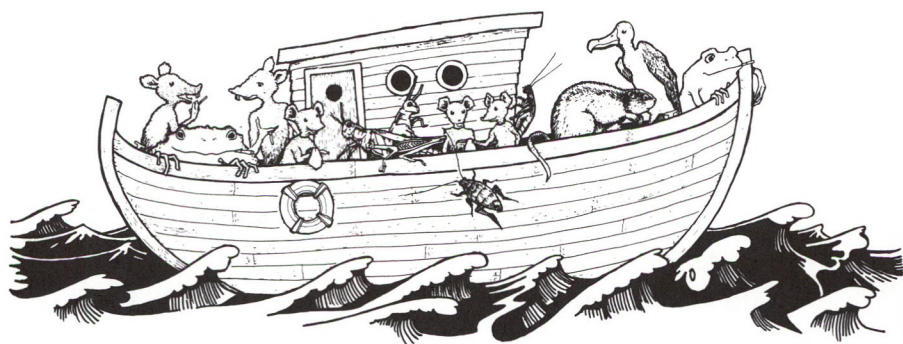
accused to break down and tell the truth.

"You should also interview the girls in the temple," said a devotee from the South. "Some of them are starting to admit that they fell down with this guy. But others still deny it, although we're not sure. But everyone respects you, Choṭa, because you're very pure. When they speak to you, we think they'll admit what they didn't admit to us."

Choṭa agreed to leave the next day if he could get a boat going south. But that night he couldn't sleep well. His three day spiritual retreat seemed to have taken place long, long ago. As thoughts passed through his sleepless mind, Choṭa considered that maybe he should just go away from all this, leave Guyana, and go somewhere to chant and read. Of course, he couldn't just leave; that would be irresponsible. "Anyway," thought Choṭa, "I just proved that I am incapable of living alone. I couldn't even stay alone more than a single night. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't become a *bābājī* like that." Choṭa then recalled that Padma said a meditating turtle lived in the South, not far from their temple there. He decided that he could go see him and try to find out how to practice solitude. The idea of seeing the turtle became pleasing to Choṭa and gave him a new motivation for going south. Otherwise, his assignment brought him mostly disgust and aversion.

Choṭa took an animal ferryboat down the southern canal. It was a five hour journey. The water was

muddy brown and the scenery pleasant, but the crowded conditions on the boat and the behavior of the passengers made it a test of tolerance. There were many carts and wagons on board, and their drivers almost invariably smoked cigarettes. There



were muskrats and frogs and a few sewer rats who exuded an obnoxious odor. At one point the passengers at the stern became alarmed when they saw an alligator in the water, but it turned out to be an alligator's floating corpse. On the same trip with Choṭa were several mice devotees who were also going to the southern temple. These young devotees took the opportunity of the ferryboat ride to distribute transcendental literature to the passengers, although only a few were interested. Choṭa watched as a group of roaches and grasshoppers gathered around one of the book distributors and made inquiries. One of the mice pointed over to Choṭa and said, "He's one of the leaders," after which a few roaches crawled over and asked Choṭa some questions. When the mice devotees shared a

simple lunch among themselves, Choṭa joined them. He was inspired to be with the younger preachers, and he thought, "How could I be planning to leave all this? Even if I *did* leave to practice my vows in solitude, it wouldn't be a permanent thing, and it certainly wouldn't be leaving the movement or Kṛṣṇa consciousness." After lunch, when Choṭa sat to chant *japa*, he nodded off in sleep even while others were watching him. He cursed himself and thought, "How can I not take action to improve this?"

On arrival in the South, Choṭa allowed his companions to go ahead. He said he would catch up with them later. He then went looking for the mangrove swamp where he had heard the turtle lived. Crawling through dense thickets of shrubs and tropical evergreens, he came to the edge of a pond. The whole area was filled with tangled roots and crevices where animals lived. A mysterious-looking moss hung down from the trees, and large birds, not all of them friendly, glided through the air and landed here and there. Choṭa asked himself why he was coming to see this turtle since he was not a Kṛṣṇa conscious devotee. It was all right, he told himself. He wanted to talk with a genuine solitary to get some questions answered, just as devotees sometimes consulted doctors or lawyers. He could use it in devotional service, and if the turtle said anything against Vaiṣṇava principles, Choṭa would reject it.

From the shore, Choṭa studied the surface of the pond until he noticed a certain slimy rock that looked like the back of a turtle.

"Turtle! O Turtle!" he called, but the rock didn't respond. A field mouse ambled over to Choṭa and looked him up and down. "Looking for the hermit turtle, eh?"

"Yes, can you help me?"

"It's not so easy," said the field mouse, brushing bits of underbrush from his shaggy coat. "He doesn't just come up and talk to any one. He's very particular. They say he is over 130 years old. He's meditating, ya know."

This mouse is so ignorant, thought Choṭa, that he doesn't know I am perhaps the most famous spiritual mouse in the world and that I have just been worshiped by 300 mice at my birthday party. But Choṭa kept this to himself.

"Well, what do I have to do to get his attention?" asked Choṭa.

"I dunno. You might have to stay here for a long time."

"I can't do that," said Choṭa, and the other mouse huffed and shuffled into a crevice in the ground.

"Turtle!" Choṭa called out loud. "My name is Choṭa dāsa, and I have come to respectfully ask you a few questions. I'm interested in practicing solitude. I'm a student of *bhakti-yoga*. We read the *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. I have heard that you are a great solitary. Also, in the *Bhagavad-gītā* the tortoise is mentioned honorably several times, as you may

know." Choṭa felt somewhat silly because no one was there, but then the rock on the pond moved slightly, and Choṭa was sure that it was the turtle.

"Yes," Choṭa called out, "the *kūrma* is compared to the *yogī*: 'One who is able to withdraw his senses from sense objects, as the turtle draws his limbs within the shell, is firmly fixed in perfect consciousness.'"

At these words the turtle lifted his head—it was a slimy head covered with algae, resembling a *yogī*'s matted locks—and looked noncommittally in Choṭa's direction.

Choṭa continued, "There's also a verse in Vedic literature that states, 'By meditating only, the turtle maintains his offspring and so do I, O Padmājā!' I really do wish you would come over and let me speak to you for a few minutes, dear turtle."

With a swift movement, the turtle submerged and reappeared perched on a rock in the water just a few feet from Choṭa. The turtle was three times Choṭa's size. Its massive shell was covered with slime and chipped in a few places. Its legs were scarred and it emanated a rotten odor. But Choṭa sensed that he was face to face with a genuine hermit.

"What do you want to know?" asked the turtle. "Anyway, there's nothing that I can put into words."

"I've become interested in solitude," said Choṭa. "For us devotees that means chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and reading the Vedic scriptures. I heard that you

have been practicing solitude for a long time. So—how did you decide you wanted to live alone and practice meditation?"

The turtle blinked. "You have to be called to it," he said. Choṭa waited for him to say more, but he was silent. Choṭa sensed that this was going to be a short interview, and so he had better be as direct as possible.

"How do you know if you're called?"

"Some know it from their earliest youth," the turtle said. "They find their way by instinct to the place where they will be alone. But some reach solitude the hard way, through suffering and disillusion."

"I don't understand," said Choṭa. "How do you get invited, or as you say, called?"

"Look," the turtle said, "if you can't firmly decide for yourself, then you aren't called. Solitude can choose you, but you don't belong to her until you accept. Do you understand?"

Choṭa decided to keep asking questions and to think it over later.

"What was your main motive in becoming a hermit? Were you feeling that you just wanted to get away from it all?"

"That's not it," said the turtle. "Although God knows the turtle's life is full of suffering. Our mothers' eggs are always being destroyed by humans or eaten by animals. But solitude isn't separation from life. If you try to go alone merely to get



away from people you don't like, you won't find either peace or solitude. I go alone not to escape from everyone but in order to find everything and everyone in God. In solitude I feel love for others and communion with them that I can't find when I'm just doing all the things the turtle crowd does. So for me it's not running from the world; it's my *place* in the world."

"Do other animals criticize you?" asked Choṭa. "Or do you criticize yourself? I mean, when you have doubts how do you justify this life?"

The turtle said, "Too much self-justification is just a distraction. Look, *everyone* is alone. What's the big deal? Why are you asking?"

Choṭa felt embarrassed that the turtle did not seem to consider his questions very intelligent. The advantage he had gained by his *Bhagavad-gītā* quotes was ebbing away. Choṭa thought that he had already learned something valuable, and he wanted to ask more. But before he could speak again, the turtle sniffed, and then both animals twitched on hearing something to their right. Two female turtles emerged from a thicket at the pond's edge and were entering the water. As soon as they entered, a big male turtle poked his head up from within the pond and floated nearby. Seeing the hermit turtle, the other male turtle stretched his neck and hissed.

The hermit turtle said, "He thinks that I am after the women, but I couldn't care less. Let's move over here."

After repositioning themselves at a distance from

the mating scene, Choṭa asked, "Do you follow any particular teachings? What is your science of God or theology?"

"I would rather not discuss it," said the turtle. "The main thing is to practice. Isn't that what you want to know?"

"Yes," said Choṭa. "But you have to be practicing something worthwhile. Otherwise you're just beating on an empty husk."

"But there can be too much talk of theology," said the turtle.

Again they were interrupted by noises. The intruding male turtle had gone into the marsh with one of the females, and he was mounting onto her back. But then another male turtle arrived, and the two males began to fight. One male tipped the other over on its back and then disappeared with the females into the water.

Choṭa asked the hermit, "Do you find yourself making spiritual advancement by being alone?"

The hermit turtle did not reply but gave a loud, smelly belch. Then he said, "I am usually unable to pray. I do my meditating work and generally I'm peaceful. All I have is my solitude. It's there. It's inescapable. It's everything. It contains God."

Choṭa was impressed, but he would have to figure out the meanings later. He wanted to ask, "Why don't you preach?" but he doubted that the turtle would know enough about it. And anyway, Choṭa thought, he's not my guru. Choṭa opted for an easier question. "Can you have an inner life," he

asked, "without being physically alone?"

The turtle said, "Physical solitude is important. Learn to be alone. But it's the means to the end. Don't you at least have a room or some place where you can go set yourself free? If you have found such a place, be content with it. Go there and breathe. Return to your private place as soon as you can. That's all."

The turtle went under the water. Choṭa called him back but he was gone. Choṭa then hurried off to join the devotees in the southern temple, without thinking much about what he had just seen and heard.

Choṭa's investigation threw him into a whirlpool of events for the next four days. He first went to see the judge whose daughter claimed she had been seduced. The judge was not unreasonable, but it took a long evening of sitting with him and answering many questions on the philosophy, practice, and organization of the mouse movement in Guyana. Choṭa assured the judge that there would be a thorough investigation, and if the culprit was found guilty, he would be punished. But the culprit denied his guilt, and so did the other women whom some said were in an illicit connection with him. Finally after two days of almost constant interviews with women, one of them confessed to having had an illicit relationship with the so-called counselor for ladies. Choṭa gathered painstaking, overwhelming evidence, and the accused male finally admitted

some of his guilt. He spoke remorsefully and asked to be given another chance. Choṭa ordered that the counselor be removed from his duties and sent to another place. He then went back to speak to the judge and everyone else involved until everyone seemed satisfied. After four full days, Choṭa thought he had done all that was possible, and he told the devotees that he would leave the next day and return north.

That same night, however, several hours after eating, Choṭa felt a pain in his stomach. He had had it for months, but now it hurt badly. It increased until he couldn't sleep, and the next morning he didn't feel like eating. The devotees phoned a friendly doctor who stopped by the temple to see Choṭa.

"You have the hurry-worry-curly disease," said the doctor. "It's an ulcer, the disease of modern civilization." The doctor said that he could give some medicines, but the only cure was to reduce stress.

"How do you do that?" asked Choṭa.

"Behavior modification," said the doctor. "Change of lifestyle, change of occupation."

Choṭa decided to stay an extra day in the South in order to rest. He was alone in his room, but he felt too tired to read or to put effort into *japa*. His stomach still hurt, and now that he understood it was an ulcer, it caused him more worry. By the afternoon, he began writing a report of his investigation to be sent to Yamala dāsa. Throughout the hectic activities, Choṭa had also been thinking, at least uncon-

sciously, of his meeting with the meditating turtle. It had influenced him in a significant way, but his main conclusion was that only a senior Kṛṣṇa conscious devotee could help him.

CHAPTER SIX

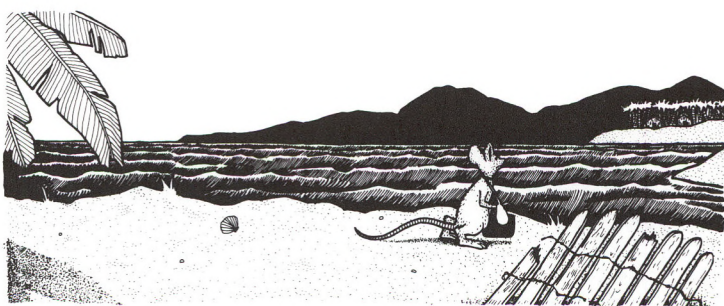
Choṭa decided to take a sabbatical, so he wrote a note and mailed it to Yamala:

I am going to take a sabbatical for increasing chanting and hearing. I will do it for a year. I will keep in touch. Please don't be angry with me. I'm trying to improve myself to be a better servant. I'm sure you will all be able to handle things in my absence.

Choṭa didn't know exactly how he would live alone, but he hoped that the Lord in the heart would guide him. After all, it was God who provided for all living creatures, and so He would also provide for a mouse who sought to spend his full time in self-realization. Choṭa knew this fact theo-

retically, and he often recited it in lectures, but now he wanted to experience it. He especially wanted to experience Kṛṣṇa's loving presence in His name and in His teachings and pastimes as manifest in Vedic literature. Carrying a small suitcase, Choṭa hopped onto a fishing boat and went to the nearby Caribbean island of Tobago.

He went to the beach. There he saw banana and mango trees and coconut palms as well as nut-bearing trees and fresh ponds. Combing the hot beach for a few days, Choṭa came upon abandoned bamboo shacks and the ruins of a few small stone houses. He selected a shack located in a palm tree grove within sight and sound of the ocean surf. There he spread out his straw mat, fashioned a primitive bookstand from pieces of wood covered with a cloth, and decided to make the place his home.



He thought that one of the most important features of his new life should be privacy. A complete daily schedule of devotional activities was also important. Therefore on his first day in the beach

shack, Choṭa sketched a plan for his daily routine. He would rise very early, by 1:30 or 2:00 A.M. He would chant in the quiet with the surf as the only accompanying sound. As early as possible, he'd start reading. Because Choṭa had left the security of his home and friends so abruptly, he hadn't been able to take many books, or amenities like a tape recorder. All he had was the *Kṛṣṇa* book. He could get more books later, but he wanted to be satisfied with this one book, which was good enough for a great devotee like Mahārāja Parīkṣit. Choṭa planned time for chanting and reading as well as time for food foraging and for making efforts to locate Nimāi by letter. His only other long-term plan was to keep in touch with the boat agent, so that if and when he learned of Nimāi's whereabouts, he could go there without a long delay.

Choṭa's first reading session in his new hermitage was from the section, "Lord Kṛṣṇa Teases Rukmiṇī." He began to read it just as the sun came up on a balmy tropical morning. Bowing down before the book and praying that Lord Kṛṣṇa would speak to him directly through the pages, he sat back to read the pastime of the Lord. He had heard it before, but it always delighted him. How could the Supreme Lord be so light-hearted as to tease His pure devotee? How is it that He spoke not in edifying words but with jokes to tell a dearest devotee that She was wasting her time by worshipping Him? Choṭa knew that Kṛṣṇa was being wonderful to speak to her like that. He was so intimate with

Rukmiṇī that He wanted to see her loving annoyance. It was His conjugal relationship with Her. Choṭa knew that he himself was trying to approach the Supreme Lord in the mood of the reverent servant. He wanted to see Kṛṣṇa as the worshipable Godhead and guru and himself as the always reverent disciple. Rukmiṇī-devī also wanted to see the Lord as her beloved master, but Lord Kṛṣṇa's desire was to joke in order to see Her shining beauty. Choṭa enjoyed reading the Lord's self-berating talk, because He used many of the jibes which nondevotees make about His character, such as His having two sets of parents, His bellicose spirit, His dancing with unmarried girls and then deserting them, and so on.

By testing His devotee directly, Kṛṣṇa seemed to turn everything upside down. When the Lord said, "I release you from devotional service. You don't have to go through the trouble of worshiping me anymore," Choṭa wanted to cry out with Rukmiṇī, "No, Kṛṣṇa, I want You! I don't find fault in You!" But still Kṛṣṇa persisted in joking. He said that He was detached from loving relationships: "I actually have no love for you, although you loved Me even before our marriage." In response to these words, Rukmiṇī felt great fear and fell unconscious like a banana tree cut down by the wind.

As usual, Choṭa was able to keep up his interest only for about ten minutes, and then he seriously lagged. He knew that he should like the *Kṛṣṇa* book, and he *did* like it. But he was covered by the lower

modes of nature, especially sleepiness and mental restlessness. And Choṭa realized that so far, he only read with his tiny brain. He was not able to read from his heart. Still, he hoped that one stage would lead to another. Just as exterior solitude would lead to inner awakening, so his study of the *Kṛṣṇa* book would lead to *bhakti*.

After a few days in his new home, Choṭa became acquainted with his neighbors. The quiet was regularly broken by the raucous cries of crows, who moved around the palm trees and on the ground nearby looking for food. When he heard the cry of the hawk, Choṭa stayed indoors and peeked timidly out the window until the hawk was gone. He often saw sea gulls flying, and at the water's edge he saw sandpipers and tiny ghost crabs who lived in holes on the beach. Choṭa went for a dip in the ocean's wavelets each morning. Fortunately, he had picked a deserted stretch of beach, and so humans didn't come by often. When they did appear, they were a great disruption with their loud radios. On one occasion a man and woman came right to the door of Choṭa's shack and looked in. Then they threw a bag of garbage and empty beer cans through the window which took Choṭa an hour to clean up.

One day a hermit crab scraped its way into the shack entrance. He was a strange looking fellow with an oversized claw, and he carried an abandoned snail shell on his back. Choṭa couldn't speak his language but indicated that he wanted privacy, and

the hermit crab dragged itself away. But he continued to appear at the door almost daily. Choṭa soon discovered that a black bat hung from the ceiling of the *bhajana-kutir*. When he first saw it, Choṭa considered either stoning it or vacating the shack. But the bat slept quietly all day and was gone all night, so Choṭa decided to live with it. There were also the usual spiders and passersby, like the sideways-walking land crabs and dogs from whom Choṭa had to hide.

Choṭa was paid a visit by some friendly field mice. They were impressed to hear that Choṭa had traveled so widely. He explained about the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa, but they didn't want to know anything about it.

"I had a friend who once traveled to Trinidad," said a field mouse, "but I never before met anyone who has been to as many places as you have. Can you tell us more about Pennsylvania and all the places you have been?" Choṭa tried to satisfy them, but he made it clear that he had come to the beach for solitude. The field mice took the hint and mostly left him alone, although he and the field mice shared fruit that fell from the trees and often met at the water holes. The babies of the field mice also played at Choṭa's front door.

Choṭa had come to Tobago near the end of the rainy season. He had to endure a leaky roof, dark skies, and heavy winds. He attached a piece of plastic from wall to wall and stayed dry within one part of the room. As for bugs and mosquitos, it was

pretty much the same as in his former home. So there were considerable flaws in his paradise, but on the whole, Choṭa remained encouraged. He spent his days virtually alone, faithfully following his *sādhana*. When he read the *Kṛṣṇa* book, he felt that he was neither in Guyana or Tobago, but in the spiritual world. He read in small doses, but they began to accumulate.

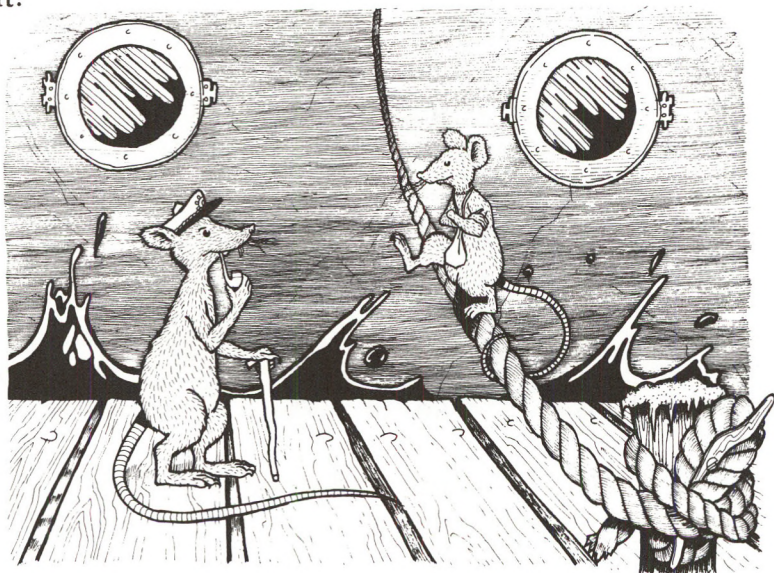
Choṭa's intensified attempt to worship Lord Kṛṣṇa in book form also brought out some of his latent misgivings. Lord Kṛṣṇa's superhuman activities were sometimes hard for him to believe. How could He have a billion family members? Were there actually demons with a thousand arms? From a mouse's point of view, it certainly seemed fantastic to hear of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma jumping eighty-four miles from a mountain, or of Kṛṣṇa expanding into seven forms to wrestle with bulls and then marrying sixteen-thousand princesses. Despite all the warnings given by Śrīla Prabhupāda in the *Kṛṣṇa* book, Choṭa sometimes thought of the pastimes as "stories," or he wondered whether Kṛṣṇa was an ordinary man.

Choṭa dealt with these doubts soberly and knew them to be dangerous by-products of his untrained mind. He reread the preface and appreciated Prabhupāda's explanation that God is Bhagavān and all-powerful. As the Supreme Controller, He floats all the huge planets in outer space, and He expands as the inner guide within every living entity. So if God appears in His original form to show

us a small sample of His inconceivable opulences by lifting Govardhana Hill or marrying 16,108 wives, why should we doubt? Choṭa had brought up the same doubts a year ago to Nimāi, who had told him the story of the frog in a well. The frog was visited by a cousin who had just seen the Pacific Ocean. When the cousin frog tried to explain the size of the ocean, the frog in the well could only compare it with his own experience of a tiny well. Yes, Choṭa reasoned, there are *many* things I have not experienced in this world, what to speak of other planets. Choṭa also fought his doubts by simply disregarding the empirical or speculative approach and by accepting Kṛṣṇa book as scripture. The liberated *ācāryas* accepted Lord Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Truth. Choṭa's doubts never went away completely, but they didn't overwhelm him. He tolerated them just as he tolerated the hermit crab coming to the doorway or the spiders dangling in midair.

Sometimes Choṭa also had doubts about his sabbatical for improving *sādhana*. One night he suddenly thought, "What am I doing here? Why have I left the devotees and my position in the movement?" But he learned to deal with this. He called it "the dissatisfaction factor." He had been dissatisfied that too much activity within the movement was taking his attention from *sādhana*. And now that he was devoting fulltime to his *sādhana*, he was also feeling dissatisfied. But did it mean that every time he felt dissatisfied he had to run and change his

whole environment? When he thought about it with a cool brain, Choṭa concluded that he was now doing the right thing. He was becoming spiritually stronger and gradually gaining an appreciation for chanting and reading. If he sometimes felt stabs of dissatisfaction, the real cause of that was his lack of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and he would have to tolerate it.



Choṭa was not inclined to go anywhere, but he had to make a trip into town on business. He posted his letter to Nimāi and rented a mailbox without any difficulty. But when he went to the harbor to inquire about voyages, a seafaring rat tried to discourage him.

"You, a mouse, go aboard a ship?" The rat

laughed. "Can you climb across a mooring rope?" Choṭa assured him that he could do it, and he walked halfway up the hawser to prove his point. Choṭa found a boat agent and was put on a list for departures to distant places.

"Where are you staying?" asked the agent, who was a house rat. When Choṭa said "the beach," the rat gave a serious warning. "You better watch out for snakes out there. They could swallow you in a minute!" Choṭa decided not even to think about it and to just depend on Kṛṣṇa. He was glad when his chores were over and he returned to his shack by the sea.

Choṭa practiced prayer as he had never before done in his life. When he became nervous from sounds at night or when a dog came by, he prayed, "O Kṛṣṇa, please protect me." But even when he was peaceful, he tried to call out to Kṛṣṇa. He prayed before reading and when trying to remain attentive in his *japa*. Prayer was part of his *sādhana*. He felt that Lord Kṛṣṇa was inviting him to pray. Choṭa also realized (at least in a theoretical way) that he needed to call on Kṛṣṇa constantly. He tried not to limit his prayers to demands and blessings, but to listen to what the Lord wanted. If he could learn the art of prayer, he knew that he would not be so indecisive or dependent on others. But he was also afraid that the Supreme Lord might ask him to do things that he was not ready to do. Choṭa's prayer was not at all perfect, and yet he persevered. Every day he tried again. He always seemed to fail,

but he always tried again.

His new life gave him scope for wholehearted *sādhana*, with few distractions. He noticed that he was attaining a state of steadily high consciousness. He relished peace and simplicity. He always anticipated reading yet another *Kṛṣṇa* book section. And although in one sense his chanting didn't seem to improve, he was always filled with good intentions and eager to wake up in the middle of the night to begin chanting again. Sometimes all of nature seemed to be chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and inspiring him with the presence of God. The ocean was an aid to meditation, and it hinted of the greatness of Kṛṣṇa. The rising and setting of the sun drew him into a natural worship of the "eye of God." He was grateful for the sea breezes and the rustling palm fronds and the fact that he was far away from industrial noise. He also increased his practice of physical obeisances whenever he could remember it. Although he didn't count them, he sense that he was bowing down many times a day.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Choṭa's appearance had changed. White hairs had begun to appear on his head. His fruit diet had made him noticeably thinner, and his fur was usually flecked with sand. To ward off the sunshine, he

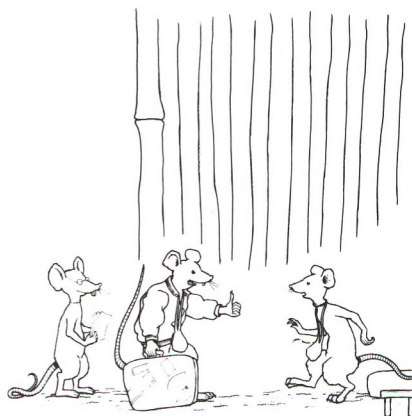
sometimes wore a piece of straw hat he had found in the shack. Many saw him as another beach-comber. Neighbors who overheard him talking to himself thought he was eccentric. They didn't know what he was doing.

Choṭa's "talking to himself" began as part of his readings. Sometimes he read aloud from the *Kṛṣṇa* book, and then he started speaking his mind, asking Kṛṣṇa to please reveal Himself through the scriptures. At first he spoke only a sentence or two, and then he went on for ten minutes or half an hour. He began thinking of the Lord as a highly respected friend to whom he could tell everything. He spoke as honestly as he could and tried to elevate his talk to give thanks and to praise the glories of Lord Kṛṣṇa as described in the Vedic literature. In Choṭa's prayers sometimes Lord Kṛṣṇa spoke—as Choṭa read His words from the *Kṛṣṇa* book or remembered other words of the Lord—and sometimes Choṭa spoke. Choṭa prayed while walking to the ocean, collecting fruit, or sitting alone in his hut. It enlivened him, and he noticed that it improved his *japa*. He no longer felt that *sādhana* was merely a chore. And he no longer felt that he was all alone.

One day while sitting and reading, Choṭa suddenly jumped from his seat at the sight of his cousin, Yamala, entering the shack.

"The jig is up, Choṭa," said Yamala in a loud voice. "I've come to bring you back to your duties." Yamala was wearing his team jacket and sweating.

He carried a heavy-looking suitcase. "You really picked an outpost! I had to *walk* the last mile. Got anything to drink?" Choṭa felt embarrassed at his meager shack and his sandy appearance. Then he noticed that behind Yamala was a mouse devotee named Paṇḍita dāsa. Choṭa guessed that Paṇḍita had been brought along to supply Yamala scriptural arguments against Choṭa.



"Please sit down," said Choṭa.

"No thanks," said Yamala. "But maybe *you* better sit down." Yamala looked around, displeased. "I can see," he said, "that you've deviated from Prabhu-pāda."

"Don't talk like that," said Choṭa, "or I'll ask you to leave. Why can't you accept that I'm different from you and not be so judgmental? Accept me as I am."

"Why should I accept you as you are?" said

Yamala sharply. "That's bogus. There *is* such a thing as right and wrong, ya know. It's not that 'everything is one.'"

Paṇḍita dāsa said, "According to Rūpa Gosvāmī, if you practice *bhakti* without following the *śruti* and *smṛti*, then you're a disturbance."

"But wait a minute," said Choṭa, "I'm following all the rules. The first is to always think of Kṛṣṇa and never forget Him. All the other rules are maid-servants to that." They were each speaking tensely and quickly.

"Read to him, Paṇḍita," said Yamala, "from the quotes." Paṇḍita dāsa took out a sheaf of papers, but before he could read, the bat on the ceiling began squeaking. It was a high-pitched sound.

"What's *that*?" asked Yamala, and he stepped back in fear. "It's a bat! Choṭa!"

"This is too much," said Paṇḍita, and his mouth turned with disgust.

"Is he gonna come down?" asked Yamala.

"He's registering a complaint," said Choṭa. "He might come down if you're too noisy. So calm down."

They sat down as Paṇḍita dāsa read aloud. "This is from Prabhupāda's purport in the *Caitanya-car-itāmṛta*. He says, 'At the present moment we see that some of the members of ISKCON are intending to leave their preaching activities in order to sit in a solitary place. This is not a very good sign. It is a fact that Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura has

condemned this process for neophytes. The neophyte devotee must act and work very laboriously under the direction of the spiritual master, and he must thus preach the cult of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Only after maturing in devotion can he sit down in a solitary place to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mahā-mantra* as Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu Himself did."

"There are other quotes also," said Choṭa. "For—"

"It's no good, Choṭa," said Yamala. "Listen, I love you. When I see other mice devotees deviate, it doesn't matter to me. But you! You're like my *śikṣa-guru*." Yamala's eyes filled with tears. "Please come back to your prescribed duties."

"*Yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhas,*" quoted Paṇḍita dāsa. "Whatever action a great man performs, common men follow. And whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues."

Choṭa became softened. "I appreciate what you're saying," he said. "But maybe you've got the wrong impression. I never said that I wouldn't go back to my duties. I'm just taking a sabbatical for a year, and I'm doing it in order to become fit to serve. As for the scriptures, Lord Kṛṣṇa has said that when a person practices self-realization he lives in a solitary place. Lord Caitanya Himself used to avoid large crowds. For example, when he went to Vṛndāvana He chanted the holy name at Imlitala by Himself."

"Are you Lord Caitanya?" asked Yamala. "Our quotes are heavier than yours, Prabhu. Give him another, Paṇḍita."

Paṇḍita dāsa read aloud, "A devotee is not interested in so-called meditation in the Himalayas or the forest. Rather his interest is in the busiest part of the world, where he teaches people Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement was started for this purpose. We do not teach one to meditate in a secluded place just so that he may show that he has become very much advanced in so-called transcendental meditation, although he engages in all sorts of foolish material activity. Rather, every member of the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement is interested in going door-to-door to try to convince people about the teaching of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*.' That's from the Seventh Canto of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, Ninth Chapter, forty-fourth verse."

"Yes," said Choṭa, "Kṛṣṇa consciousness is for preaching. But what is preaching? For example, Śrīla Prabhupāda praises the Six Gosvāmīs as great preachers. The song says that 'they were very expert in scrutinizingly studying all revealed scriptures with the aim of establishing eternal religious principles for the benefit of all human beings. They're honored all over the three worlds because they are absorbed in the mood of the *gopīs*.' And what did they do? They lived in Vṛndāvana and wrote. Also, Paṇḍitjī. I can quote back to you the same verse, 'What a great man does, others will follow.' Because unless we *practice* Kṛṣṇa consciousness what is there to follow? And Lord Caitanya stated that a devotee's behavior establishes the true purpose of

religious principles. It's because I do want to set a good example that I've been feeling like a hypocrite when I'm not really chanting or reading. I think that our whole movement needs more examples of devotees who go back to the basics. We are too much caught up in solving problems and worrying about money and public relations, at least *I* was too caught up. If you had given me time to practice my *sādhana*, I wouldn't have had to act in this extreme way to get what you should have given me gladly."

"I didn't know you were so stubborn," said Yamala. "Usually you do what I say. You've always been submissive to the wishes of the Vaiṣṇavas. This new stubborn spirit is, I think, on a lower platform. Look at you, you're as sandy as a beach-comber. Do you think Śrīla Prabhupāda would be pleased?"

Yamala sensed that he was wearing away at Choṭa's confidence but that it wasn't going to be a quick victory. Choṭa felt distraught, but at the same time he was aware of the etiquette in receiving guests.

"Why don't we just cool down," he said. "It's time to get ready for lunch *prasādam*. You both look hot and sweaty."

And so they agreed to break for lunch. In the mood of a temporary "cease-fire," Yamala and Paṇḍita went with Choṭa to bathe in the ocean. They sat uncomplainingly before a lunch of bananas and coconuts. Choṭa hoped that while eating they would speak on lighter topics, but Yamala

took the occasion to speak of the latest troubles.

"The temple in the south," he said, "was destroyed by humans in a bulldozer. None of the mice devotees were hurt, but now they're spread out, mostly living with their parents. Some of them have also not been practicing as strictly as they were. So we've got to get money to build again. If you were there, Choṭa, you could take collections."

"The real thing," said Choṭa, "is for the devotees to regain their spirit after the catastrophe. They have to associate with each other and support each other. Even if they stay home they can still chant, and they can meet together. The important thing is not to lose the spirit of enthusiasm. It doesn't depend on the building. If we're sincere, Kṛṣṇa will supply. Just like we've heard in Prabhupāda's life. When the devotees first went to London, they had no place. Prabhupāda told them to go on preaching, and then eventually they got a place and George Harrison helped."

"Well, then, you should be there to preach," said Yamala.

Choṭa replied, "I need to do what I'm doing, and I ask for your patience."

Yamala quickly finished his meal and began pacing back and forth while the others were still seated.

Yamala said, "Choṭa, your reputation is suffering. The mice devotees don't know where you are and what you're doing."

Yamala was pleased to see that these words struck home. Choṭa looked worried.

"Why don't you tell them nicely?" Choṭa asked. "Or let me write a letter for you to take back. But you're right, it wasn't very considerate of me. I'm sorry. Will you take back a letter?"

Paṇḍita dāsa said, "One who takes the position of spiritual leadership but does not deliver his dependents will go to hell. And here's another quote by Prabhupāda regarding preaching. It's in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*: Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī says the spiritual master authorizes his devotees to preach, but 'those who are not advanced prefer to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* in a solitary place. Such activities constitute a type of cheating process in the sense that they imitate the activities of exalted persons like Haridāsa Ṭhākura. One should not attempt to imitate the activities of such exalted devotees. Rather everyone should endeavor to preach the cult of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu in all parts of the world and thus become successful in spiritual life. One who is not very expert in preaching may chant in a secluded place, avoiding bad association, but for one who is actually advanced, preaching and meeting people who are not engaged in devotional service are not disadvantages.'"

Yamala and Paṇḍita could see that they had weakened their opponent. At least he was not looking very happy.

Yamala said, "I can see that you're still sincere and that you want to do the right thing. We'll give you time to think it over. We're catching a boat back tomorrow, and I hope you'll go with us."

Yamala and Paṇḍita left to stay for the night at an animal hotel. For the rest of the afternoon, Choṭa's head was spinning. He couldn't read or chant. At night he couldn't sleep but only lay down while his mind replayed all that they had said and done. He felt violated.

The next morning before dawn, Yamala came by himself to the beach shack. He bowed down before Choṭa who immediately returned the obeisances.

"Please forgive me," said Yamala, "for acting roughly yesterday."

Choṭa was relieved to hear it, although he suspected this might be another tactic.

"I had a dream last night," said Yamala in a softer voice. "Before I took rest I thought of what you said about how a devotee shouldn't be a hypocrite. Then I had a nightmare that the messengers of death were after me. I woke up scared and with a strong impression that I should come to you and make a confession. But you must keep it confidential. A few times last year I was very agitated for sex, and . . . I . . . went . . . to a prostitute. And still sometimes I practice self-abuse."

Choṭa's mind said, "I told you so," but he listened respectfully and tried to think of the best advice.

"I suppose you should get married," said Choṭa. "That's the Vedic solution. Also if you can make your *sādhana* strong, you can fight *māyā* from any position. You know, Prabhupāda has described that the mind works in three stages: thinking, feeling, and willing. We can't avoid all thoughts of illicit

sex, but we can make the deliberate effort not to let our mind progress into the stages of feeling and willing." They continued talking about the problem, and Yamala thanked him.

"Another reason I became so weak," Yamala said, "is that I've been working too hard. I think it was good for me to come here and see how you're living with so much attention to your spiritual needs. I couldn't do it myself. I see your point, but I have to do the needful for the movement. I'll die fighting on the battlefield of *saṅkīrtana* rather than become a *bābāji*. I mean, what if we all left like you did? Won't you please come back with us? We all need your help." Choṭa felt guilty and wavered. "Give me a week more," he said. "I have a quota of reading that I want to finish."

"Okay," said Yamala. "We'll take your letter and read it to all the devotees. I admit that I've been badmouthing you to others. Please forgive me. Now I'll tell them that what you're doing is actually glorious. But I just think that your own spiritual advancement is a luxury at this stage. I'll tell the devotees you're coming back in a week."

CHAPTER EIGHT

After they left, Choṭa tried to restore the sanctity to his life, but he felt that it was broken to pieces. Twenty-four hours passed, and he still couldn't force himself to open the *Kṛṣṇa* book. He kept imagining Yamala telling the devotees, "Choṭa was in *māyā*, but we saved him." And he felt guilty that he had left Guyana to tend to his own spiritual needs. Instead of living in the present moment and concentrating on the words of the *mahā-mantra* and the scriptures, Choṭa's mind dragged him to other times and places: he saw Yamala walking into the beach shack, and he saw the faces of the devotees in Guyana, as in dreams. Hours passed in disturbed reveries.

Choṭa also lost his tolerance for the inconveniences of the beach: The sounds of baby mice at play annoyed him, and the fleas became unbearable. He thought about deadly snakes, and he became afraid of unfamiliar sounds.

Finally he decided that he *must* reenter the *Kṛṣṇa* book at once. He opened the book looking for a passage that would assure him that God is great and that we should hear His glories and serve Him. After a few moments, he stopped at a page in which the transcendental surabhi cow came to see Kṛṣṇa after the Lord had subdued the pride of Indra. Choṭa read, "The *surabhi* offered her prayers as follows:

My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, You are the most powerful of all mystic *yogīs* because You are the soul of the complete universe, and only from You has all this cosmic manifestation taken place. Therefore, although Indra tried his best to kill my descendent cows in Vṛndāvana, they remained under Your shelter, and You have protected them all so well. We do not know anyone else as the Supreme, nor do we go to any other god or demigods for protection. Therefore, You are our Indra. You are the Supreme Father of the whole cosmic manifestation, and you are the protector and elevator of all the cows, *brāhmaṇas*, demigods and others who are pure devotees of Your Lordship. O Supersoul of the universe, let us bathe You with our milk because You are our Indra. O Lord, You appear just to diminish the burden of impure activities on the earth.

Choṭa read it a second time aloud. He liked

Surabhi's affection and the fact that Lord Kṛṣṇa alone was her protector. Choṭa thought that Lord Kṛṣṇa was also his protector. As He protected the descendent cows of Surabhi, so He would protect Choṭa's *sādhana*. Choṭa saw his practices of chanting and hearing as calves and cows in a field, and Kṛṣṇa was protecting them. Choṭa sighed—he had re-entered the spiritual ocean. Once again he felt that everything would come out well by the regular practice of reading.

After a single day of neglect, he had had to break through accumulated resistance. Old doubts and prejudices filled his mind again like cobwebs. But when he had persisted and read, he gradually had been allowed to enter the sacred presence. Choṭa also understood better that his attempt to read in a prayerful way and to enter a kind of dialogue with the Lord through the scriptures was really "shooting for the rhinoceros." Kṛṣṇa's *darśana* was not so easily attained. It was not wrong to read that way—it was ideal—but maybe unattainable for now. Choṭa humbly begged for the smallest crumbs of realization as he read the passage again, "We do not know anyone else as the Supreme Therefore You are our Indra. You are the Supreme Father of the whole cosmic manifestation, and You are the protector . . ."

Within a few days he had restored much of his former schedule, but he was convinced that Yamala dāsa's passionate association had made him unable to read and chant. He tried not to think of returning

to Guyana or what would happen if he didn't go as promised.

Soon after, Choṭa had another visitor. It was Padma, the crow, who had flown from Guyana.

"Haribol, Choṭa."

"Padma! What a surprise!"

Padma looked different from all the vicious crows who fought on the beach. He was an enlightened soul—but today he looked very sad.

"Why have you come?" asked Choṭa. Padma began to speak, but tears welled from his eyes and rolled down his wan, black cheeks. He broke down sobbing. When he had calmed himself and Choṭa had given him a seat and a cup of coconut water, Padma managed to tell his tale of grief.



"My wife left me for another male crow," he said. "I never knew before what it meant to be 'broken-hearted,' but now I feel an actual pain and emptiness in this region." He pointed to his chest with his right wing. "How could she have done this to me? What did I ever do to deserve this ultimate transgression?" He began crying again. "I can't eat. I cry all the time and just feel sorry for myself. But at the same time I know it's like a lesson from life and from Kṛṣṇa. The knots of bondage built up in my heart from sex life have been severely weakened and bruised. I just want the miserable feeling to go away. So I came to see you."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Choṭa, "but sooner or later it had to happen. If not an embarrassment like this, then at least by the death of one of you. But your hurt feelings will gradually subside. Remember, millions of marriages break up every year, and people live through it. It's unfortunate, but it's an opportunity to reach out and increase your own relationship with Kṛṣṇa—He won't let you down."

"I gave up so many opportunities to follow the path of householder life," said Padma. "And now it's all ripped away, what little happiness I had. I'm still attached to her. It's crazy." Choṭa listened. He thought that was probably better than anything he could say.

"I'm sorry," Padma cried, "that I've strayed away from Kṛṣṇa consciousness. I think now I should move back into a temple. What do you think?"

"Could you really move into the temple?" Choṭa frowned. "You have so many bad habits. Shouldn't you go more slowly and carefully? You feel renounced now but—why don't you stay with me for a few days to chant and hear?"

Padma brightened. "That would be very nice. Thank you."

"But you have to stay busy here, or it will be *māyā*. Remember how you used to read Prabhupāda's books and memorize Sanskrit verses? Why not try that again?"

Choṭa suggested a day's outing. He knew of a "secret" waterfall up in the hills. They began by walking along the beach until they saw a stream merging into the ocean. A path alongside it led into the jungle. The palms and sand soon led into an open forest with banyan trees, breadfruit trees, and filtered shade. As they walked, they gained in elevation, gradually at first and then as the path became steeper, they climbed with more noticeable strain. The crow hopped ahead while Choṭa sometimes scampered or slowed down to a crawl. It became shadier and cooler. They began hearing more birds and less ocean. Twittering birds were close by, and occasional, louder calls came from further in the jungle. Now bigger trees towered over the medium range. Spanish moss trailed and ferns blanketed the forest floor. The two friends walked silently, sharing the refreshing sensations, the feel of water in the air, and the cool shelter of the trees.

By now the path was less trodden, and it was harder climbing. They began noticing more—parrots and other brightly colored birds flying from tree to tree looking for the ripest fruits and the most fragrant flowers. Then they heard the waterfall. It was a sound like wind rustling leaves or heavy rain on a roof. The sound increased, and they quickened their pace in anticipation. The water in the stream rushed faster, bubbling around the rocks and under the bank. Finally, they broke into a clearing by a large pool and above was the fifty-foot high falls. The whole area was brighter—the forest seemed to stand back admiring the cascades. The force of the waterfalls was broken by rocks jutting out into its path, and so although it was loud, it was not deafening. The pool was crystal clear, and the bottom pebbly with flat rocks around the edge. Choṭa and Padma began wading into the calm water. After the intense sun of the beach and the labor of climbing, it felt good swimming in the pool. After wading, they lay on the bank and considered which fruits to eat. The sweetest ones were those lying on the ground, already tasted by the parrots. Choṭa gathered up some custard apples, bananas, guava, and mangos. They assembled a sumptuous fruit meal and offered it to Lord Kṛṣṇa with prayers.

Padma seemed to have temporarily forgotten his troubles. He turned to Choṭa and said, "You seem to be doing well here."

"I have to leave in one week," Choṭa replied.

"So soon?"

"Yamala convinced me to go back."

"Do you think it's right?"

"It's not enough time," said Choṭa, "I wanted to establish strong chanting and reading as a part of my life, so that when I go back I can keep it up. If I go now just because he said so, it will be the same thing."

"Your ulcer may get worse," said Padma.

Choṭa laughed, "Yamala says the movement will collapse without me."

"It's true that your presence is important," said Padma. "But you can keep in touch by writing letters for now. And maybe you can invite some of the mice out here on Ekādaśis so they can see you."

"Yamala would be afraid," said Choṭa, "that if they come out, some of them might not go back."

"Maybe you worry too much what he thinks," said Padma. "Yamala, Yamala, caw, caw."

"I'm not sure about myself yet," said Choṭa. "That's why I want to go and see Nimāi Prabhu. But talking with you also helps. I don't think I'll go back. Not just now. I'm only at the barest, barest beginning. I'm just a baby in spiritual life in terms of learning how to chant and read and pray."

Choṭa began to share some of his realizations with Padma. He told about his method of prayerful reading, and he remembered how he had been trying to converse with the Lord as a daily practice.

Choṭa said, "I also went and saw that meditating turtle that you recommended."

"Did he help?"

"Some. He said you have to be called to be a solitary. Anyway, I'm not going to be a lifetime hermit."

While the two friends made their way leisurely down the hill, Choṭa spoke yearningly of chanting and hearing the holy names.

"Chanting is so important," he said. "It cleanses the heart and enables you to stop committing the four sinful activities. But my problem is I don't *feel* it."

"Do you have to feel it?" asked Padma. "Isn't the holy name a fact whether you feel it or not?"

"Yes, but if you feel nothing at all, the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* says your heart is steel framed."

That night, Choṭa and Padma read Kṛṣṇa book together. The small shack was dark outside the glow of their candle. The towering figure of the crow barely moved, but the gray head of the mouse followed the words from line to line. Choṭa paused and looked up, "I enjoy reading Kṛṣṇa's teasing Rukmiṇī. Kṛṣṇa said that she should divorce Him because He was a vagabond unworthy of her." The mere mention of marriage turned Padma back into depressed feelings, but Choṭa hauled him back to *kṛṣṇa-kathā*.

"Let's read aloud this section where Rukmiṇī analyzes each of the Lord's self-deprecating remarks and sees them as true praises of His glory."

Choṭa read:

My dear Lord, Your statement that You do not

act as an ordinary person with a particular aim in life is also perfectly correct. Even Your great devotees and servants, known as great sages and saintly persons, remain in such a state that no one can get any clue to the aim of their lives. Human society considers them crazy and cynical. Their aim of life remains a mystery to the common human being; the lowest of mankind can know neither You nor Your servant. A contaminated human being cannot even imagine the pastimes of You and Your devotees.

"Yes," Padma smiled, "it's interesting that she uses the word cynical. Nondevotees think we are cynical because we turn down the sense gratification activities that they pursue with so much passion. The other crows, for example, are always harassing *jīvas*—robbing eggs, killing babies. And they say *we're* cynical!"

Choṭa read on:

My dear Lord, You have stated that marriage between persons equal in social standing, beauty, riches, strength, influence and renunciation can be a suitable match. But this status of life can be possible only by Your grace.

This passage hit too close to home for Padma. He began thinking again about his broken marriage, so they talked about it some more. Choṭa mostly listened.

"How could she do such a thing?" asked Padma. "I feel now like I'll never be able to meditate on Kṛṣṇa again, I'm so distracted. I suppose I should

think about getting married again in the future, but my faith is completely blown. Is there any such thing as Kṛṣṇa conscious marriage in Kali-yuga or is it all pie in the sky? I tried to make her a devotee, where did I go wrong?" Padma was crying again, sniffing his tears. After a while, he blew his nose and said, "Anyway, let's hear more about Kṛṣṇa's marriage, not mine."

Choṭa read on:

In the society of the servitors and served in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, one is not subjected to the pains and pleasures of material society, which functions according to sex attraction. Therefore, everyone, man and woman, should be an associate in Your society of servitors and served.

"I'd really like to be a servant in that society she describes," said Choṭa, "of the Lord and His servants. That's our Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. I really believe it's the best society there is, and I want to be a part of it. I haven't come out of Guyana to get away from it, you know."

"I know," said Padma, "you're trying to be an honest servant."

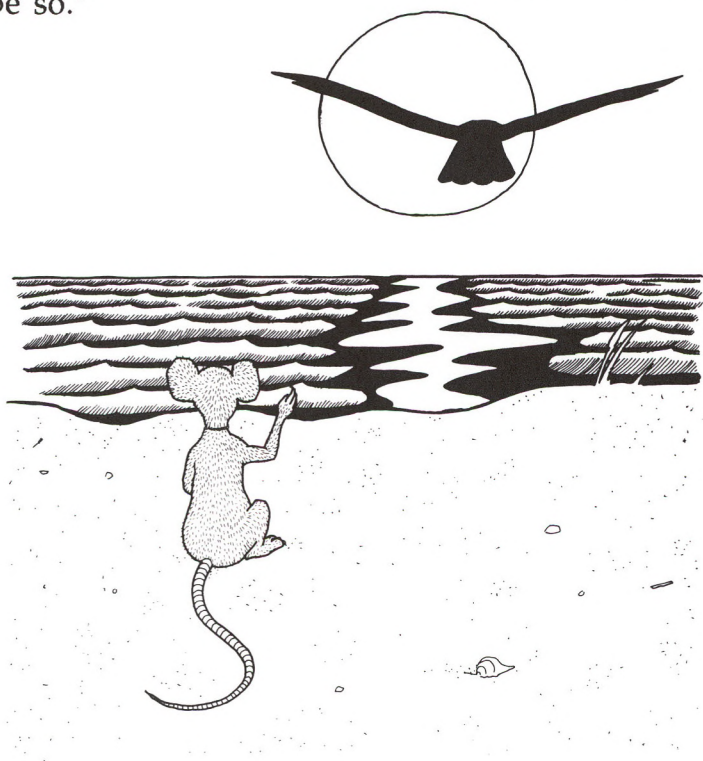
Padma took a turn reading:

My Lord, You have stated that only beggars praise Your glories, and that is also perfectly correct. But who are those beggars? Those beggars are all exalted devotees, liberated personalities and those in the renounced order of life. They are all great souls and devotees who

have no other business than to glorify You. Such great souls forgive even the worst offender. These so-called beggars execute their spiritual advancement in life, tolerating all tribulations in the material world. My dear husband, do not think that I have accepted You as my husband out of my inexperience; actually, I've followed all these great souls. I followed the path of these great beggars and have decided to surrender my life to Your lotus feet.

Choṭa cheered, "*Jaya Śrī Kṛṣṇa* and the transcendental beggars!"

"It sounds wonderful," said Padma. "I think the Lord may be turning me into one of those beggars. I hope so."



After two days, Padma thought that he should return to his place in Guyana. Choṭa accompanied him to the edge of the beach. Before he flew off, Padma grinned and embraced his friend.

Choṭa said, "It must be wonderful to be able to fly. And now you can do it for Kṛṣṇa."

"Yes," said Padma. "I am already thinking of how to arrange my life in that way. At least I'm one devotee who is glad that you have come out here alone to improve your *sādhana*. Your solid example has inspired me. Thank you." With a deft hop, Padma spread his wings and flew up. He was soon flapping over the ocean. His silhouette looked like a sleek jet plane, and Choṭa thought of Jatāyu, the king of the birds.

CHAPTER NINE

The boat agent came to Choṭa's shack to inform him of a rare opportunity: A ship was leaving for New York, and Choṭa could go as part of a group tour.

"But the person I'm looking for," said Choṭa, "may not be in New York. He could be anywhere."

"From New York you can find out where he is, that's for sure," said the boat agent. He wanted to sign Choṭa up on the spot.

Choṭa's breast fluttered with emotion. He was happy on the beach, and yet he wanted to see Nimāi. If he stayed where he was, there would probably be another confrontation with Yamala.

"All right, I'll go," he said decisively. The agent

began filling out the ticket.

"But there is one condition," said the agent. "You have to travel incognito and not reveal to the other passengers that you are a Hare Kṛṣṇa mouse."

"Why?"

"Because my boss is afraid it may hurt business. You know some people regard you all as a cult. Not *me!* I say, 'to each his own.' But the boss is afraid because this is a high-class human ship, and we mice have to be very careful. As I said, it's a tour group of about twelve mice, and you'll be taking your meals together. It will only take five days, and you'll be in New York before you know it."

"All right, all right," said Choṭa. He was used to such ignorance. Although he didn't choose to go incognito, he thought it might be interesting.

Climbing aboard the freighter was easy enough, but when he joined the tour group in the cargo hold, he was expected to socialize. He introduced himself as a teacher in a boys' school and shook hands with the male and female passengers. When he entered the sleeping compartment, which he shared with two male mice, Choṭa felt that he had been plunged into hell. He considered jumping ship and returning to the beach shack. "I want to be alone!" Choṭa thought. "Why go to New York?" But he reminded himself that although his beach life was peaceful, he remained unsettled. He wanted to be alone to practice *sādhana*, but he also wanted to submit to higher authority. The idea of going to Nīmāi and settling it once and for all was a

comforting thought. If it took some austerity to reach Nimāi, he would have to accept it.

The first night at sea, the tour group met for an orientation meeting. There, to Choṭa's great surprise, he saw his brother, Arjuna!

The tour leader smiled, "You gentlemen know each other?"

Choṭa stammered that they were former school mates who had not met in quite a while. Like Choṭa, Arjuna was also incognito, but their eyes spoke to each other with happiness and relief.

Choṭa tried to get in the same room as Arjuna, but on the first night it wasn't possible. Choṭa was assigned to a tiny compartment along with two North Americans who had been vacationing.

"Did you go to the Merry Mouse Tavern in Tobago?" one mouse asked.

"The other replied, "Yeah, I was there. I had to fight to keep the girls off."

"Yeah, man!" the first mouse replied. "I had three girls in one night. But there was a brawl, and I had to smash a guy's face in."

"Rum is real cheap," said the other. Both of them were carrying bottles of liquor in their luggage, and they placed them carefully on the floor.

Choṭa said nothing but sat on his bunk, while the two tourists—Hank and Chuck—struck up a quick friendship.

Chewing a scavenged cigarette butt, Chuck asked Choṭa, "What were you doing in Tobago?"

"I've been living down here for quite a while,"

said Choṭa. "In Tobago I was staying on the beach.

"Do you know the Beach Rat Lounge?"

"Naw," said Choṭa, "I don't care for that stuff."



"A teetotaler, huh?" Chuck winked at Hank.

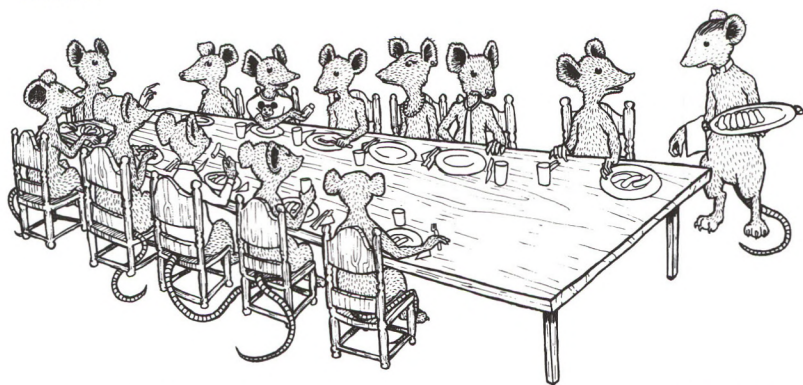
Hank said, "Let's go forage for drinks in the human bar."

Choṭa soon turned out the light and tucked himself into bed. His roommates came back late, making noise and filling the compartment with the odor of tobacco. Finally they fell asleep, and there was only the sound of snoring and the ship's engine reverberating through the bulkheads.

Choṭa sat up and started chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* in his mind. He pictured himself in a temple or on the beach under a sky filled with clean stars. But silent, mental *japa* seemed out of his reach. Even Lord Kṛṣṇa's friend, Arjuna, had said he wasn't able to think of the Lord in that way. Choṭa began making a whispering sound as quietly as possible, *Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa*. . . . His whispers proved effective. Although he felt unhappy and

alone, his mind paid close attention to the *mantra*. He lost track of time. In the morning it seemed to Choṭa that he had stayed up all night in deep supplication of the holy names.

The first group meal was breakfast. They had assigned seats, and Choṭa was about six places away from Arjuna. When the waiter attempted to put bug sausages on his plate, Choṭa abruptly pushed them away. "No thanks, I'm vegetarian," he said. "I'll just have some fruit." Arjuna said the same, and a mouse at the end of the table also refused the meat.



"Well, you can give *me* meat," laughed a big muscular mouse. "They can have their rabbit food."

"Vegetarian, huh?" said the mouse beside Choṭa. "What's wrong with meat?"

"Meat is somebody's flesh," said Choṭa. "Humans kill animals just to enjoy a taste sensation. But a mouse—or a human—can actually avoid killing fellow creatures and still eat well."

"I'll second that," said the mouse at the end of

the table. "We tend to forget what a piece of meat actually is. Besides the violence factor, meat isn't healthy."

"That's a lot of nonsense," said a female mouse.

"I know what meat is," said Choṭa's roommate Chuck, "and I don't care for your do-gooder meddling. Without meat in a mouse's diet he becomes a wimp."

"Now, now gentlemen," said the tour guide, a fat fellow with a white fur belly. "Let's just drop the subject and enjoy our meals."

Choṭa noticed the lady mouse beside him saying a prayer of grace before she ate. The two devotees glanced at each other and nibbled at their fruit, surrounded by the odor of sausage, heavy munching, and common talk.

Choṭa and Arjuna managed to get reassigned to the same room, and the other vegetarian mouse was put in with them. As soon as Choṭa and Arjuna were left alone, they hugged each other with joy.

"O my dear Vaiṣṇava," said Arjuna. "Meeting a person like you is the perfection of one's eyesight. Touching your lotus feet is the perfection of the sense of touch. In the material world, it's very difficult to find a pure devotee of the Lord."

"I don't consider myself a Vaiṣṇava," said Choṭa, "but I'm sure glad to see *you*."

The two brothers spoke about where they were each going, but they were even more eager to talk about Kṛṣṇa. They had been through a night of bad

association, but it had intensified their appreciation for Kṛṣṇa and His devotees. Choṭa told Arjuna that he had stayed up all night chanting in whispers.

"I couldn't chant well," said Arjuna. "How can we hear each word when we chant? I'm real unhappy about that."

"We have to first recognize that we're not hearing the *mantra* very well," said Choṭa, "before we can try to hear better. So if you are unhappy about bad chanting, that's not as dangerous as complacency. If we think, 'Well, I've always chanted my rounds in this way, and anyway, Prabhupāda said it's a gradual process,' then how can we improve?"

"But it is a gradual process, isn't it?" asked Arjuna.

"Unfortunately," said Choṭa, "it's a gradual process *both ways*—one can just as easily lose one's taste for Kṛṣṇa consciousness gradually. If we chant offensively, gradually we lose our desire to be a devotee and, we lose the ability and the desire to complete even sixteen rounds daily." Choṭa was carried away by enthusiastic realizations.

"I think that we are meant to control the mind," said Choṭa, "and fix it on Kṛṣṇa a lot more than we do. We're meant to hear, chant, and remember, and that's what I've been trying to do in my concentrated *sādhana*. Prabhupāda and Kṛṣṇa say it all the time: 'Our activities should be so molded that we can't help but think about Kṛṣṇa during the day.'"

"Yes," said Arjuna, "but the problem is that for many of us that mold has been broken. Just to sur-

vive we have to go to work, and we definitely get distracted from Kṛṣṇa. I think what you're doing is great, re-emphasizing the importance of remembering Kṛṣṇa always."

The two mice were standing close together gesturing, but they suddenly froze. The doorknob turned, and their roommate re-entered.

"It's a beautiful day," said the roommate. "You ought to go topside and see the ocean and the sky." It was painful to be cut off from their *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, but the two brothers sat down and made friends with their fellow mouse. He said his name was Bob and he was a language teacher. "I also write poetry," he said. The three spoke more of vegetarianism.

"They take it lightly," said Bob, "but meat is murder. Of course for a carnivore, it's hard to stop. But some ancient texts tell us that there used to be a time when even humans and animals got along amicably." Bob sat back in a chair and crossed his legs. He was a chubby, curly-headed rodent and seemed at ease in discussion.

"The solid basis of vegetarianism is nonviolence," said Choṭa. "And the basis of nonviolence is God consciousness. Because all creatures are sons or daughters of the Supreme Father, *therefore* we shouldn't kill."

"I don't believe in God," said Bob. "I think the idea of God as a person is something the humans have made up. Some of the humans speak of God, other cultures call it the Self or Buddha. I just think of it as Life."

"But if we don't believe in God," said Arjuna, "we're just materialists. Like Choṭa was saying, there has to be a spiritual basis for vegetarianism."

"What makes you think," said Bob, "that you have to believe in God in order to be spiritual? There were plenty of spiritual persons among the human atheists. Many of the Eastern teachers, and many poets, were certainly spiritual, but they didn't believe in God."

"What do you mean by God?" asked Choṭa.

"Some person," answered Bob, "like you said, the Father, the Supreme Being."



"Scriptures like *Ved-ānta* say that He's a person," said Choṭa, "but not a person like you or me. He has inconceivable potency, and everything comes from Him, including life and everything im-

personal. God cannot be understood just by speculating about Him. He has to be understood from scriptures and then revealed in a devotee's heart."

"Hmmm," Bob mused, looking from one brother to the other. "Are you brothers?" he asked.

Choṭa and Arjuna replied together, "Yes." They wanted to tell him that they were devotees of Kṛṣṇa and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. But they remained incognito. Choṭa said a few more things in defense of pure

theism, but if he couldn't talk about Kṛṣṇa, it would be impossible to go on. How could he explain God consciousness without finally referring to the teachings that he knew best, the authoritative *Vedas*? The question of the existence of God slipped away from their discussion. They found other things they had in agreement with Bob, and he showed them one of his favorite poems:

One instant is eternity;
Eternity is the now.
When you see through this one instant,
you see through the one who sees.

"Would you like a milk sweet?" asked Arjuna, bringing out a piece of *prasādam* he had brought from the temple.

"Mmm! Thank you very much." The two brothers glowed with satisfaction as Bob munched on God's mercy and accepted a second one.

The three vegetarian mice continued to be a subject of conversation at the group dinner table, although everyone avoided angry disagreements. In particular, the behavior of Choṭa and Arjuna made people curious. Someone had noticed Choṭa walking alone in the passageways early in the morning saying something to himself. He was often seen reading an unusual book. Someone asked, "Do you belong to a secret society?"

"Sure," said Choṭa, "but if I told you it wouldn't be a secret anymore."

Someone else asked, "Why do you get up so early?"

"I was praying to God," said Arjuna, who tended to be too open for someone traveling incognito.

One day at lunchtime a lady mouse asked, "Is there some religious reason why you don't eat meat?" And so bit by bit, although they had tried to play the incognito role, the truth was uncovered: the two quiet mice, Choṭa and Arjuna, were followers of the Hare Kṛṣṇa sect. There was momentary surprise and some under-the-breath mutterings between some of the passengers, but in the end it didn't make a great deal of difference. At least now no one bothered to ask them to go to the bar, and the females seemed less interested. But their roommate, Bob, was eager to know more.

"I should have guessed you were Kṛṣṇa devotees," he said, "when you gave me that sweet. May I ask you some questions?"

Choṭa and Arjuna no longer tried to hide. They wore *japa-mala* beads around their necks, and the *Kṛṣṇa* book was displayed on a desk.

"I've been to your temple feast," said Bob. "I like it. But there's one thing I can't reconcile. I once overheard some of your people advising a student that he should quit school, leave home, and join the temple. Why do you do that?"

"It's not really our policy," said Arjuna. "Once a *brāhmaṇa* wanted to leave his home and join Lord Caitanya, but the Lord told him that he should stay home and chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and tell people about

Kṛṣṇa.

"I see," said Bob. "I just have trouble accepting renunciation of the world wherever I find it. Even when I heard the Buddha left his wife, I always thought that his wife was more enlightened than he because she just went on with the regular business of life."

"But Lord Buddha was *also* enlightened for *leaving* the world," said Choṭa. "In Lord Caitanya's case, He left His wife in order to minister to the whole human—and animal—family. His wife, Viṣṇupriya, also became a glorious renounced saint, who is worshiped by all Vaiṣṇavas."

"I see," said Bob. He didn't seem to agree with what they said, but he was interested and pleased to talk with them.

The brothers became bolder and began cooking and offering *prasādam* to a Deity picture in their room.

"Now that I know it's *prasādam*," said Bob, "I like it even more—although I don't believe in it."

"Now you know our secret," said Choṭa handing him a dish of hot *halava*. "What's yours?"

"Secret?" asked Bob. "Oh, I believe one thing on one day and something else another day. I think we're all bozos on the same bus. I believe in animal protection—I'm a charter member of Rodent's Rights. I believe in Life with all its beauty and terribleness, or I aspire to believe in it. I believe in Love. But I better not tell you some of the things I'm into," he laughed, "they're not proper for a monk

to hear."

On the last night at sea, a party was held in the dining hall. Meat dishes and alcoholic drinks had been foraged from the human's restaurant—and special vegetarian plates for the three nonmeat-eaters. The mood was mellow. A world-traveling



rat came and sang a folk song. Bob read some poems. Bob then asked the tour guide, "Could the two Kṛṣṇa mice sing their chant for us?" Choṭa and Arjuna launched into a *kīrtana*, and without knowing exactly what it was, most of the passengers joined in as if it were a community sing-along. When the *kīrtana* was over, the passengers asked questions. Although the inquiries were more racy than reverent, Choṭa felt it was well worth it. "Their questions are glorious," he thought, "and to answer them properly is the prime duty of a devotee." At least for the time being, the freighter-hell had become Vaikuṇṭha.

After, the devotees served sweet rice to the guests. Choṭa and Arjuna returned to their room in an ecstatic mood—and since Bob shared the room, he also shared their bliss. Choṭa and Bob exchanged addresses and promised to keep in touch.

As the ship pulled into a Manhattan pier, the mice shivered. Choṭa and Arjuna had been long-term residents of the South, and their natural coats were not thick enough for northern winter. But like everyone else, they had to clamber down the mooring rope. Many of the passengers were greeted by friends and relatives on the dock, but Choṭa and Arjuna were alone.

"Tell Mom and Dad that I'm all right," said Choṭa. "I used to think that they were demons, and I preached to you like that. So please explain to them that I'm sorry."

"Why don't you come with me?" asked Arjuna.

"Maybe later," said Choṭa. "We have different responsibilities. Kṛṣṇa wants you to fulfill our family duties, and I'm meant to serve the movement. So as two brothers we can share the duties. You're freeing me to preach, and I"

"Pray for me," said Arjuna. "Pray I don't fall into *māyā*."

"Hare Kṛṣṇa."

They parted on a city street. Choṭa began asking for the whereabouts of the New York Hare Kṛṣṇa temple, while Arjuna sought directions to Pennsylvania.

CHAPTER TEN

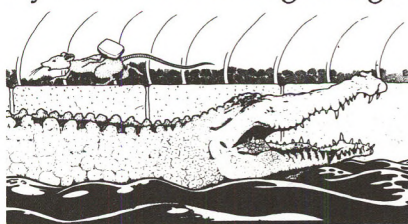
Choṭa asked scores of mice, "Where is the humans' Hare Kṛṣṇa temple?" but they said they didn't know. Someone suggested, "Look it up in the Yellow Pages," but Choṭa didn't know how to do that. It was cold and dark, and the mice were busy in the struggle to survive.

One said, "Hey Mac, better get off the street before yuh get killed."

In a group of mice huddled around a hot laundry vent, Choṭa found an old one who had heard of Hare Kṛṣṇa. "Yeah, there was a book about it, the Swami who came to Manhattan. He came at an old age with no money. He was brave! I think his place was on the Lower East Side. Something like 26 Second Avenue." Choṭa thanked him and gave him the last of the *prasādam* he had carried from the boat.



Choṭa went underground and started downtown. He had never been in such a hellish place. Every few blocks he ran and hid as gangs of rats swarmed by. And he saw huge alligators!



ing noise of trains screeching, and the ground shook as in an earthquake. Choṭa nosed up through the opening in a sewer grate

to see where he was—but that was even more frightening than below. Heavy cars and trucks

rolled by shaking the earth. In between cars Choṭa caught a glimpse of buildings that were so tall you couldn't see their tops. And the humans were rushing everywhere. "Kṛṣṇa! Please protect me!" he gasped. He traveled on by instinct. He surfaced at First Street and Second Avenue, traveled in the dark shadows of the curbside, and finally reached Prabhupāda's storefront, at 26 Second Avenue. On the door was a sign:

PRABHUPĀDA MUSEUM AND CULTURAL
CENTER

Kirtans MWF 8:00 P.M.

The hall was locked and dark, but Choṭa entered through the mail slot. In the aura of the street lights, Choṭa looked around the interior of the store-



front. It was a temple room with an altar at one end, an oriental rug on the floor, and pictures on the wall. One blow-up photo showed Śrīla

Prabhupāda dressed in his robes with his hand in his bead bag, standing in the courtyard in front of a birdbath. Another picture frame held a printed "Notice" of rules for initiated devotees signed by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami on November 26, 1966. There were also paintings of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa with a cow in Vṛndāvana and the Pañca-tattva of Lord Caitanya. A faint odor of incense pervaded the room.

Choṭa realized that he was in a sacred place. Nimāi had told him about 26 Second Avenue, the first temple where humans in the West had gathered to see and hear His Divine Grace Śrīla Prabhupāda. He had heard how they had wild *kīrtanas* here and how the hippies came and challenged Prabhupāda with their crazy theories. It was here that Prabhupāda calmly and strongly preached Kṛṣṇa consciousness and typed his own manuscripts on an old typewriter. He and his boys served Love Feasts on Sundays. They said that Śrīla Prabhupāda used to cut up an apple after *kīrtanas* and distribute it to his congregation. Once a derelict came in and gave Śrīla Prabhupāda toilet paper, and His Divine Grace accepted it as service. From here the devotees would walk to Tompkins Square Park where they all chanted. In those days they used to call Śrīla Prabhupāda "Swamiji."

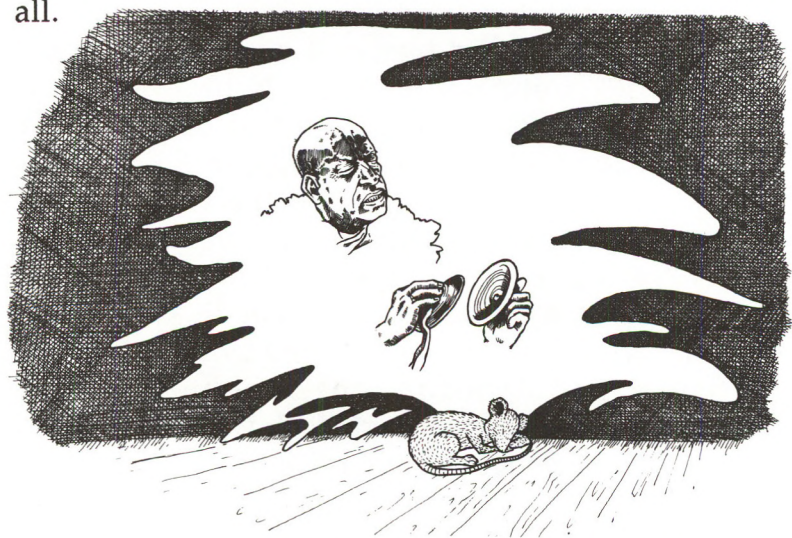
This was the place. Choṭa felt blissful just to be off the streets and away from the violence of the subways. Only a flimsy door and a glass window separated him from the outside, and yet it was quiet in

here at Prabhupāda's lotus feet. Choṭa surmised that the devotees didn't live in this place, and so he had it all to himself. He circumambulated the room, bowing down before the pictures. But soon he felt fatigue, and so he curled up under a corner of the rug.

Choṭa dreamed that the lights were turned on and human devotees had entered the room from a back door. They wore fresh Vaiṣṇava *tilaka* on their foreheads. Some of them wore beards and street clothes, and one or two were dressed in yellow *dhotis*. They brandished cymbals and a drum, and he overheard one of them say, "When the Swami comes." Then the front door opened and guests started arriving, taking their shoes off and sitting down in yoga style on the floor. Some of them also said "the Swami," and one said he wanted to "get high" from chanting. And then Prabhupāda himself entered from the back door. Choṭa dreamed that he was watching him from a mouse hole in the wall where he had a vantage of the whole room. Prabhupāda was golden and looked very beautiful, and yet he was right there with all the young people, mixing in a friendly way. Swamiji sat upon a dais, wrapped the cords of his hand cymbals around his fingers, and started the one-two-three rhythm. Soon everyone was chanting to a slow, sedate beat.

It was a *kīrtana* from the past, and Choṭa was allowed to join the audience. First the Swami sang with his steady, holy voice, and then everyone responded in tune. A few rose to their feet and

moved back and forth, and then they started a stately, circular procession in the middle of the room. Swamiji looked around the room making little nods with his head and closing his eyes when he chanted. Sometimes his eyes were closed in meditation, and then sometimes he opened his eyes to approve and conduct the worship. Choṭa felt that he had never been in such a deep, blissful *kīrtana*. Imitating the Swami, sometimes he too closed his eyes and sometimes opened them and swayed back and forth. He felt that not only his body was swaying to the music, but that his soul was swaying, and the whole universe was swaying. Faces showed happiness as they swayed and danced, and it was perfect because the Swami was there conducting it all.



As the singing continued in waves of lead and

response, Choṭa noticed many musical instruments, like flutes, a man in the back stroking the wires of a piano's insides, a man playing a bongo drum, someone a flute, another a guitar—and the Swami who opened his eyes approved them, and kept them all within the meditation on the holy names: Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare.

Choṭa woke from his dream feeling sheltered and at peace. Drunken passersby made noise outside, and trucks rumbled, but it was on the other side of the door. "I'm safe," he thought, "if I can stay in the *kīrtana*." And so he slipped back into a blessed sleep. When Choṭa woke again, although his body was tired, he rose up to practice his early morning *sādhana*. He thought of his schedule in the beach shack and how nice that had been. The boat trip had turned out to be exciting, but he had not found time to read Prabhupāda's books. Choṭa noticed an open book placed on a bookstand in front of the altar. He went up to it, and in the light from the street he was able to make out the words. It was *Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta, Planting the Seed*.

Choṭa began reading but then remembered that he wanted to say a prayer before beginning. Placing his head at the base of the bookstand he whispered, "My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, I want to read this book now with awareness that it is very special. Please reveal Yourself to me as I read, if that is Your desire. This is a book about Your pure devotee, Śrīla Prabhu-

pāda. Let me read to appreciate and adore him and to give thanks to You, although I am unworthy."

The book was open to a section where Prabhupāda was lecturing in the Second Avenue storefront in 1966:

This sound—Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare—will cleanse the dust, and as soon as the dust is clear, then, as you see your nice face in the mirror, similarly you can see your real constitutional position as spirit soul. In Sanskrit language it is said, bhava-mahā-davagni. Lord Caitanya said that. Lord Caitanya's picture you have seen in the front window. He is dancing and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. So, it doesn't matter what a person was doing before, with sinful activities. If he is engaged in service, then he will be purified.

To focus better on the meanings, Choṭa read the same passage twice. He tried to hear Prabhupāda speaking through the book . . . "Anyone can take to it. It doesn't matter where you happened to take birth. There is no bar for anyone." *Just listen*, Choṭa told himself, *Prabhupāda is speaking to you if you'll just listen.*

People are suffering for want of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Therefore each and everyone of us should be engaged in the preaching work of Kṛṣṇa consciousness for the benefit of the whole world. Lord Caitanya, whose picture is in the front of our store, has very nicely preached the philosophy

of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The Lord says, "Just take my orders, all of you and become a spiritual master." Lord Caitanya gives the order that in every country you go and preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness. . . . We should not have any attraction for worldly activities, otherwise we can't have Kṛṣṇa. But it doesn't mean that we should be inimical to the people of the world. No, it is our duty to give them the highest instruction, that you become Kṛṣṇa conscious . . .

Choṭa thought, "Here it is, the message for preaching, you can't avoid it." He read it again. Choṭa then turned directly to Prabhupāda in the book and said, "But Prabhupāda, does Yamala dāsa have to be the judge of what is preaching?" Choṭa read looking for strength and confirmation. He couldn't help but look for support of his own beliefs, but he wanted to look further, to be touched by the will of the Lord and Prabhupāda.

This time he read the story, told by Prabhupāda, of a thief who went on pilgrimage with friends. Prabhupāda said the story illustrated how habit was second nature. The man's habit was to steal at night, and so he got up and took his friends' baggage. But instead of stealing it, he just moved the baggage around. In the morning he told the travelers, "I am a thief by occupation, and because I have the habit to steal at night I could not stop myself. But I thought, *I have come to this holy place, so I won't do it.* Therefore I placed one man's bag in another man's place. Please excuse me."

The *Līlāmṛta* then described how as Prabhupāda was lecturing, an "old derelict" walked into the room with bathroom tissues for the toilet. Prabhupāda had laughed, but thanked his visitor, "Just see, it is a natural tendency to give some service." Choṭa thought, *It all happened here*. There was the dais where Prabhupāda sat, and there was the door to the toilet where the derelict had put the roles of tissue. Choṭa again felt overpowered by sleep, and he lay down in front of the bookstand.

Choṭa dreamed that Prabhupāda came and spoke to him from the dais. Humans were also there, but Prabhupāda turned to him. Prabhupāda looked at him and said, "You too may chant Hare Kṛṣṇa." Choṭa looked up and said, "But what shall I *do*, Śrīla Prabhupāda?"

"That's all right," said Prabhupāda.

Choṭa woke. He accepted what Prabhupāda had said: *He wants me to chant, me and everyone*.

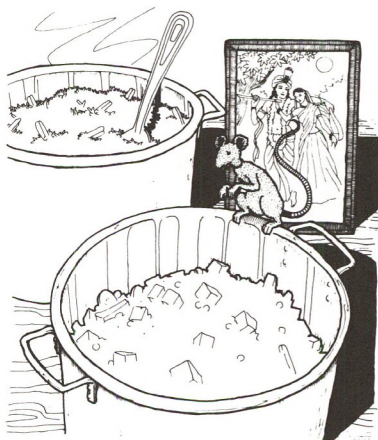
As the morning sunshine entered, the noises of the city increased, but Choṭa remained in the storefront. He chanted *japa*, sometimes sitting, sometimes walking back and forth. He was elated just to do it. And when he wasn't elated, he practiced and practiced.

In the early evening, human devotees entered the storefront. Choṭa ran into a hole and watched them. They turned on the lights, tidied the place, and then began a *kīrtana*. The music was sweet, with harmonium and expertly played *mṛdaṅgas*. About a dozen guests gradually arrived. Choṭa ex-

pected that there would be *prasādam*, and he was very eager for it. In fact, during the lecture given by a young man who quoted many verses from *Bhagavad-gītā*, Choṭa became distracted with hunger. By his highly developed sense of smell, Choṭa was well aware of the presence of Kṛṣṇa's mercy. When he noticed ladies carrying pots out of the storefront, Choṭa couldn't restrain himself. He ran after them into the courtyard and upstairs into Prabhupāda's old apartment. Choṭa looked quickly into the two main rooms, but he was drawn irresistibly into the kitchenette, where the ladies stood before the small stoves. "It's ecstatic to cook here," said a *mātāji*. "You can think that Śrīla Prabhupāda used this same stove. And in the other room the devotees used to sit everyday for lunch, and Prabhupāda would serve them."

The ladies began to heat up some of the preparations they had cooked in their temple, and they placed them in pots on the floor before a table and picture in Prabhupāda's main room. As Choṭa watched from a concealed corner, he saw plate after plate, pot after pot assembled before the pictures of the Deities. There were whole wheat *purīs* cooked in *ghee*. In a bowl sat a big stack of fine *basmati* rice with peas and fried cashews. An open pot revealed a *sabji* made of eggplant, tomato, chickpea, and spinach. Coming a little closer and standing on his toes, Choṭa noticed a pot of banana *halava* with golden raisins and coconut. He also saw cauliflower *pakorās* with tomato chutney. There was *burfi* made

from fresh whole milk that appeared to have black walnuts added to it. And there was a big pitcher of nectar, which he guessed was made with buttermilk and orange juice with a touch of vanilla and with fresh strawberries floating on top. When all the preparations were gathered, the ladies left the room.



"This is my chance," said Choṭa, "but I must act quickly." He was about to dart ahead and eat, but then he caught hold of himself. How could he eat food that was not yet offered to Kṛṣṇa? Choṭa thought that maybe he could consider that it *was* offered since everything in Prabhupāda's apart-

ment was holy. Or maybe they had already offered it in their temple before coming here. "I know!" said Choṭa, "I can offer it myself without waiting for the humans to offer." But before he had a chance to carry out his plans, the ladies came back, and he scampered out of sight. One *mātāji* bowed down and reverently said the prayers for offering *prasādam* to the Supreme Lord through the mercy of His pure devotee.

"Let's go downstairs," said one of the women, "we can catch the end of the *kīrtana*, and then some

of the *brahmacārīs* can help us bring the *prasādam* down."

Left alone with the duly honored *prasādam*, the famished devotee mouse made a heartfelt prayer of thanks and dove into the pots.

Choṭa was interrupted, but he managed to come back again and again and eat when no one was looking. When he was fully satisfied, and visibly fattened, he waddled into a hole and thought of sleeping. But then he heard a devotee say, "All right, let's go back to Brooklyn." Choṭa had to make a quick decision. Should he stay on here in Prabhupāda's storefront or go with the devotees? If no one came here except for three nights a week, would he have to fast until then? The solitude would be delicious, and he had had such intimate dreams. But then he remembered his purpose. "I almost forgot!" thought Choṭa. "Living in Manhattan is so distracting! I came here to find out where Nimāi Prabhu is. I have to go to their temple and work on it." Choṭa jumped into a picnic basket of leftover *halava* and rode in the van with the devotees, who chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa all the way to Brooklyn.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Choṭa didn't know what to expect when he arrived at the humans' Hare Kṛṣṇa temple. It was a huge building. He quickly found a mouse hole and entered within the walls. "I hope it's not like that city sewer," he thought. To his pleasant surprise, Choṭa found a mouse singing the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* while mopping the floor in the hallway.

Choṭa ran up to him, "Haribol! I didn't know there were mice devotees here!"

"Whaddya mean?" the mopper asked. He began wringing out his mop in a bucket.

"I—I thought," said Choṭa, "I thought I was the only one."

The mouse laughed. "You must be joking. There are devotees all over the world, aren't there?" The mopping mouse seemed young and inexperienced, so Choṭa asked in a patronizing tone, "Where did you learn about Kṛṣṇa consciousness?"

"From Śivā-jvara Prabhu."

"I don't think I know him," said Choṭa, and he began to feel uneasy. "Is he *here*?"

"His office is on the third floor in the inner level wall," said the mouse. By the way, my name is Bhakta Joe. What's yours?"

"Choṭa dāsa." They shook paws, and Joe offered to bring Choṭa to the office of Śivā-jvara Prabhu.

On the second floor, Joe said, "This is the women's quarters." The door swung open and three female mice came out talking loudly. They carried books in a carrier with wheels just like the female devotees in Guyana. All this was uncanny to Choṭa. How could it be? By the time they reached Śivā-jvara's office, Choṭa had seen several more mouse devotees, and it seemed as if there might be many more. A plaque on the door said:

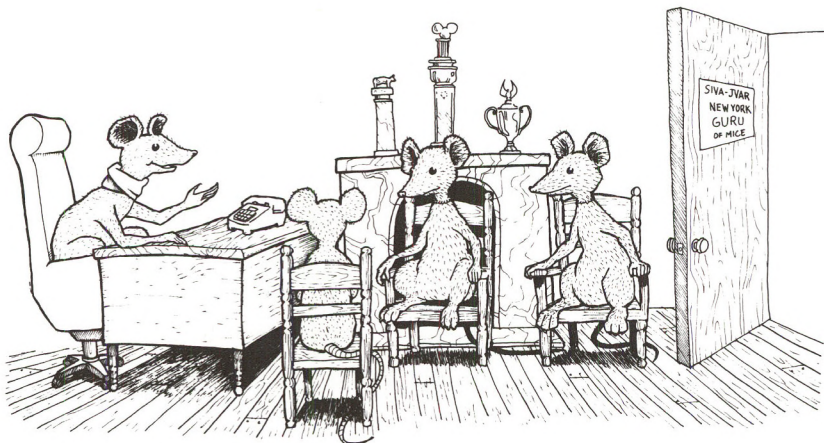
Śivā-jvara Prabhu
New York Guru of Mice

It was a well-decorated office. Two mice sat on comfortable chairs. The larger mouse wore a silk saffron scarf around his neck, and Choṭa guessed that that was Śivā-jvara. There were shiny trophies on the cabinets, and Choṭa noticed a tank for dis-

pensing drinking water. There were intercoms on the desk.

"Yes?" the mouse with the silk scarf looked up.

"Uh . . ." Choṭa suddenly felt awkward. "My name is Choṭa dāsa," he said. "I have just come from Guyana. I didn't know. . . "



"Choṭa?" Śivā-jvara seemed to find the name familiar. "Are you *the* Choṭa?" He grinned. "Are you the original mouse-devotee Choṭa?"

This is more like it, thought Choṭa. "Yes!" he said and he blushed.

"Please accept my humble obeisances," said Śivā-jvara. He scraped his chair back and bowed down to the floor. Choṭa also dove for the floor saying, "Please accept mine."

"Excuse me," said Choṭa, "but I just met a mouse mopping in the hall, Bhakta John or Joe, and he

said that he had learned Kṛṣṇa consciousness from you. I'm very curious—could you tell me, where did you learn?"

"From the human devotee, Nimāi Prabhu," said Śivā-jvara, looking steadily at Choṭa. "From the same person that you did."

Choṭa was visibly shaken. He could hardly believe it. *This will be hard to adjust to*, he told himself. But he smiled sociably as if he were only mildly interested.

"I never knew," said Choṭa. "It's quite a surprise for me. I feel like Lord Brahmā in that story where he goes to see Lord Kṛṣṇa in Dvārakā. Do you know that one?"

"Yes, of course," said Śivā-jvara. "Lord Brahmā of this universe once went to see Lord Kṛṣṇa, but the Lords' doorman asked him, 'Which Brahmā are you?' Lord Brahmā thought that he was the only master of the universe."

Choṭa wanted to sit and he also wanted to drink. But he couldn't presume. This Śivā-jvara seemed to be the big leader here. Choṭa's whole world had just turned upside down, and he didn't know what to expect.

"Please sit down," said Śivā-jvara. "Would you like a cup of water? Have you had *prasādam*? We're very honored to receive you here."

Choṭa sat down heavily in the chair. The pace of his recent adventures was making him overtense.

"So what brings you to Brooklyn, Choṭa Prabhu?"

Choṭa replied, "I'm trying to find Nimāi Prabhu,

and someone said that New York City was a good place for world communications."

"It is that," said Śivā-jvara. "Unfortunately, our Nimāi Prabhu is not considered an important devotee by the humans. They don't realize that he's empowered to teach mice. So we hardly ever hear anything about Nimāi. We sometimes listen in the walls to what the humans are doing, and we find out what's going on all over the world movement. But they don't talk about Nimāi. Since you're here though, I could ask more mice to listen, and we'll try to get some news of him. You simply must stay at least a few days and speak to all the devotees. They would love to hear from you how you first met Nimāi Prabhu. And maybe you can go out on *saṅkīrtana* with us."

As Choṭa sat he continued to go through big changes, the enormity of which only he could appreciate. "I suppose I should have considered such a possibility," he thought to himself. "Nimāi is free to teach whoever he wants, and certainly Lord Kṛṣṇa is free. But I just didn't know. This must mean that I'm special only in Guyana." Once he accepted it, Choṭa began to feel cheered at what he'd just learned. It was actually very good news. It was enthusing. The world was a friendlier, more liberated place than he had ever expected. The Hare Kṛṣṇa movement was spreading way beyond his power and control—and that was good! But it was also a fact—hard to accept—that Choṭa was not the only devotee in the world. He was only a tiny one

among many.

Choṭa was given a private cubby hole where he could stay. Early the next morning, he joined about a hundred mice for *maṅgala-ārati*, within a large hall before an altar. They had *kīrtana* together, just like in Guyana. Śivā-jvara then addressed the assembled devotees and officially welcomed Choṭa Prabhu to New York. Śivā-jvara said, "Choṭa was the first devotee-mouse to hear Kṛṣṇa consciousness from Nimāi Prabhu. He will give a lecture tonight." The devotees cheered, and one hit the drum a few times. Śivā-jvara then said that there was a big mouse festival today at a cheese factory uptown, and all the devotee-mice were going. "We have a book table, and we will be distributing *prasādam*," Śivā-jvara said. "And I hope that Choṭa Prabhu will honor us with his presence. Will you come?" Choṭa nodded yes, although he resented being pressured in public.

The Brooklyn Mouse Temple, located within the walls of the human temple, was the home of a fast-moving community. Choṭa was swept through the morning program, and before he had time to think about it, he was sitting with a dozen devotee-mice in the back of an underground cart, which roared uptown in the sewer. He was bewildered by the billboards and the tremendous numbers of rodents, bugs, and human beings everywhere. When they arrived at the cheese factory, Choṭa could hardly believe that they were expected to expose themselves

in such a dangerous situation. Choṭa thought mice always avoided humans, but here they were right in their midst. He even saw a mouse corpse lying in the gutter, being picked at by crows. No one had told Choṭa what to do, but when he asked the mouse beside him, he said, "Don't let your tail get caught. Watch out for the buses."

And then they were on the street. Someone gave Choṭa a bag of *prasādam* and a cart of books. He stood alone. He cringed from the sound of a jackhammer, sirens from humans' cars, screeching brakes, and beeping horns.

"Excuse me, sir," said Choṭa as a mouse sped in his direction.

"Get lost, rat face," said the mouse, who grazed by Choṭa's shoulder.

Choṭa asked the next mouse, who replied, "I don't give to beggars."

He approached a group of mice sitting on a bench. Most of them waved him away, but one said, "I've got one minute. What's it about? Shoot."

"This is spiritual food," said Choṭa. "It's being introduced to mice for the first time in history. It's very tasty. And these books tell us revolutionary information, that we are not actually our bodies. We are souls. We can know this by chanting." Choṭa placed a book in his hands.

"Is this Hare Kṛṣṇa?" asked the mouse. "I've already got a religion. No thanks."

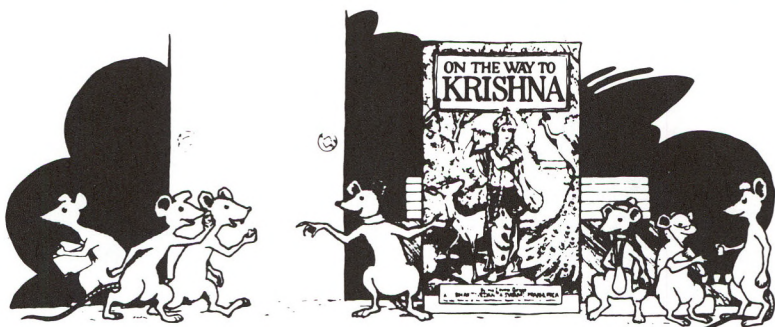
Choṭa bit his lip and asked for a donation.

"Donation? You *gave* me the book. Do you want

me to call da cops?"

Choṭa looked imploringly at the other mice on the bench. A lady mouse said, "Why don't you do something useful?"

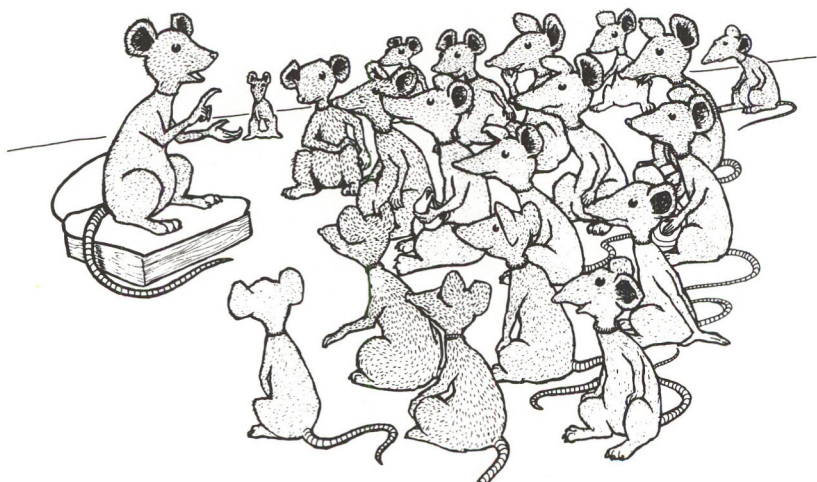
Choṭa wasn't used to being insulted and he took it hard. He kept trying, but no one took anything from him. Only a few even stopped to hear him. He felt very cold and was shivering, and so he went inside a building. But it was too hot in the building so he came out again. He wanted to talk to another mouse-devotee, but he had lost his way. Choked by



fumes from the gigantic city buses, Choṭa staggered as big pieces of garbage blew into his face. Finally he found the main hall where the devotees had their book table, and decided to stay there. He sat beside an elderly female mouse who was distributing cups of nectar to anyone interested. The old female noticed Choṭa shivering and gave him a knit hat and scarf. She then requested Choṭa to tell her some stories of his association with Nīmāi Prabhu in the old days.

Throughout the long day, Choṭa saw Śivā-jvara

boldly approaching mice and other rodents. He got them to stop while he gestured and talked in an entertaining way. They listened to Śivā-jvara, gave him money, and took books and *prasādam*. Choṭa had gotten over his initial shock—the fact that other mouse-devotees did exist—and now he was appreciating the qualities of the New York mice and noting the differences between them and the mouse devotees that he knew. He was impressed by Śivā-jvara's leadership and also by the respect that was offered to him by all the mouse-devotees.



At 7:00 P.M., after a long day of *saṅkīrtana*, a hundred mouse-devotees gathered in the *kīrtana* hall of their temple to hear Choṭa dāsa speak. He was a bit nervous but mostly eager and confident. "Yesterday I discovered that I am not the only mouse to hear about Kṛṣṇa," he thought. "And today everyone

saw that I can't distribute books on the New York City streets. But that doesn't mean that I can't tell great stories of the early days!"

"It all began one day several years ago," said Choṭa. Looking at the admiring faces in the audience, Choṭa felt proud. "I can't help it," he thought, "it's the truth. I was the first mouse-devotee to hear from Nimāi, *long* before Śivā-jvara heard."

Nimāi Prabhu came up the stairs to his room," said Choṭa, "and I came out of a hole—and our eyes met. He said, 'What do you want, *prasādam*?' He wasn't like other humans. Something inside me made me respond and for the first time in my life, I spoke human English language. I said, 'What's *prasādam*?'"

"Then Nimāi began to instruct me," said Choṭa. As he spoke, Choṭa forgot his pride and became absorbed in pleasure. "Nimāi taught me about transmigration of the soul," said Choṭa, "at our very first meeting. He said all living beings are spirit souls, and they are all equal. Only due to *karma* is someone in the body of a human and another in the body of a mouse. He told me about Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. He said everything had to be learned on the basis of scriptures.

"But he wasn't teaching academic knowledge from the *Vedas*. I asked questions, and we talked back and forth about the *qualities* of a devotee. The lessons came from life. For example, when we went out on traveling *saṅkīrtana* in the winter, me and the other mice lost heart, and Nimāi preached to us

about surrender, and then we learned about prayer. One time, Nimāi—he was so humble—said that he thought preaching to mice was a small thing, and he was embarrassed by it. We encouraged him, and I repeated what I had already heard from him, how the Lord is pleased by any little service we do if the *bhakti* is strong. Under Nimāi's guidance, I developed the urge to preach. That's when we started going into the walls of the houses with *prasādam*."

Choṭa spoke and tasted nectar. He was aware that a talk like this could easily turn into self-praise, and he didn't want to do that. He knew that his audience was hankering for genuine talks of Nimāi and the beginnings of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement among the mice. They wanted to hear of the ecstasies that were awaiting all sincere devotees. So Choṭa steered away from praising himself. If he spoke about himself, it was mostly as a blundering disciple.

After an hour Choṭa paused, and Śivā-jvara suggested that he could answer questions. Paws went up around the room. "Could you explain why it is that you were able to speak to Nimāi Prabhu and not to other humans?" The question was asked by a mouse with a penetrating look. In his one day in Brooklyn, Choṭa had observed that the mouse-devotees were more complicated persons than those in Guyana. In Guyana he had never been asked a question like that.

"I really don't know," said Choṭa. "If I tried to analyze it, it would be speculation. The fact that I was

able to communicate at all was Kṛṣṇa's grace, and the fact that I could only communicate to one was also His grace. Is that all right?"

The mouse who asked the question shrugged his shoulders. "I thought perhaps you could analyze it more," he said. Choṭa said he couldn't. "Does your ability to talk with Nimāi have something to do with your *karma* from a past life?" asked another intent devotee-mouse.

"Yes, according to the scriptures," said Choṭa, "but I don't know specifically in this case." He hoped the questions wouldn't all be like this. He looked around for someone with a less demanding expression and called upon the elderly lady who had given him a knit cap on *saṅkīrtana*.

She asked, "Could you tell us something about the movement in Guyana?"

Choṭa began telling it with zest. They had been smuggled into the country in a lunch box by Nimāi. They went on padayātrā along with the humans. Choṭa's own role was so central in the movement in Guyana that he couldn't help but take a boastful tone. But then in his mind he heard Yamala saying, "Yeah, Choṭa, and tell them that you walked out on it!" Choṭa stopped abruptly, as if Yamala were actually in the room. He continued describing it in a subdued way. They had recruited hundreds of congregational members, constructed temples, some of them had learned to read, and they had introduced it to a few crows. Neither Choṭa nor the audience had had enough, but Śivā-jvara drew it to a close.

He said they could schedule another meeting for another night. Śivā-jvara also mentioned to the assembled devotees that Choṭa had come to New York in hopes of learning the whereabouts of Nimāi Prabhu.

"I told Choṭa that we sometimes listen in on the humans through the walls," said Śivā-jvara. "And I said that some of us could volunteer our time to do some listening on his behalf. Unfortunately, the human devotees, although they're more enlightened than other humans, have an improper estimation of Nimāi Prabhu. They don't understand how he's empowered to speak to mice, how he spoke to Choṭa and to me. So although we usually hear news about other leaders, we hardly ever hear mention of Nimāi. That's their shortcoming. Anyway, if any of you have some time, please volunteer to do some wall-listening so that we can help our honored guest to accomplish his mission here in Brooklyn."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Listening in on the humans was a simple process for the mice. There was a concealed mouse hole in the human temple president's office, and a mouse could sit there and snoop on anyone speaking with the temple president. Ārjavam dāsa, the temple president, saw men and women in his office almost all day long. And when he spoke on the phone, the voice of the person he spoke to was projected over a conference loud speaker on his desk. Śivā-jvara told Choṭa that the mouse-devotees would help him by eavesdropping so that he could get news of Nimāi, but as it turned out, the mice were too busy

to put in time at the listening hole. So Choṭa did it himself, several hours a day.

He heard many names and places but no mention of Nimāi. One day a devotee phoning from India mentioned the name Gauracandra Swami. Choṭa knew this was Nimāi's Gurudeva. The devotee said he was calling on behalf of Gauracandra Swami, who wanted his secretary to come and join him in Bombay. But before the message was completed, the line became full of static. The devotee in India said he would phone again, but so far he had not, or at least not when Choṭa was listening, which was often.

As Choṭa watched Ārjavam, he developed a liking for him. Ārjavam heard everyone's complaints and tried to help, although he often couldn't do much.

Ārjavam didn't overeat or sleep too much, and Choṭa noted that when he had a few spare moments, Ārjavam would open the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* and read—even if it was only two minutes—until the next interruption. He also chanted his rounds with strong feeling, and Choṭa even heard Ārjavam pray out loud a few times when he thought no one else was listening. Once he said, "O Kṛṣṇa! O Prabhupāda! What am I going to do? I can't do this service nicely. No one seems to be pleased with me, but please engage me in your service."

Among the devotees who frequently came to see Ārjavam were the treasurer, the *saṅkīrtana* leader,

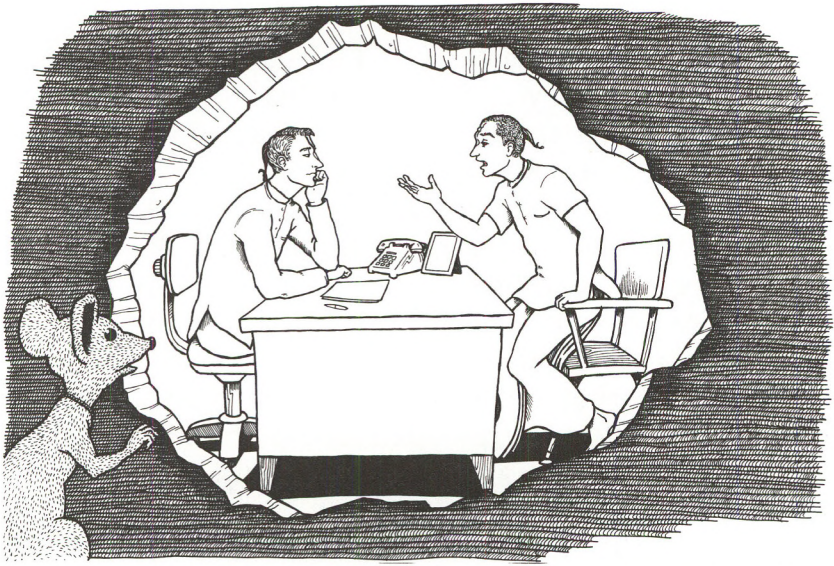
and the temple commander. The treasurer said that they had no money and Ārjavam had to get it. The *saṅkīrtana* leader said that Ārjavam had to get more devotees out on *saṅkīrtana*. The temple commander said that no one was cooperating, and he threatened to quit. Then a devotee came in and told Ārjavam that he wasn't qualified.

"You're too soft," said the critic, "and if I may say so, you're too simple to be the temple president. My wife told me that you listen too much to your wife. Nowadays a temple president has to be like a top executive. My wife said that you ought to let someone else more qualified take over."

"I wouldn't mind," said Ārjavam. "But who?"

"Maybe I could do it," said the critic. Ārjavam suggested that he bring it up at the next meeting of the temple board. Ārjavam's wife came in every day at noon and gave him a cold plate of *prasādam*. She said that she wanted to move away from the city, and she told him of the women who picked on her. Several of the unmarried girls who were past thirty years old or even over forty, and who were very anxious to get husbands, regularly came by and asked Ārjavam if he had any prospects yet. Ārjavam seemed genuinely concerned for them, but he couldn't produce husbands, although Choṭa heard him phoning around asking on the ladies' behalf.

Ārjavam sometimes interviewed devotees who wanted to leave Kṛṣṇa consciousness. He listened to



what they said and encouraged them to keep trying. He interviewed persons who wanted to join the temple and encouraged them, and he told them the rules. Sometimes at the request of the temple board, Ārjavam had to call a devotee in and give him or her an official reprimand. Ārjavam began these sessions with apologies and asked the devotee to please not take offense. The devotees would present him with ultimatums. For example, the cook came in and said, "I want to change my service so I can go out and preach." Ārjavam told him that it was a good idea but that he should not do it until they found a replacement. He was often telling people to be patient and tempering extreme remarks such as the cook's saying, "I don't see the spiritual benefit anymore in feeding people."

One young devotee's parents came to see

Ārjavam. They said that they liked the temple, but they wanted their son to become a doctor. When Ārjavam said he had no objection, the parents said, "He listens to you, so please talk some sense into him. He's just being rebellious, isn't he?"

By listening regularly, Choṭa noticed that Ārjavam was often misquoted and misrepresented by devotees in their arguments. But when Ārjavam himself heard the distorted reports, he often said nothing to correct it, or he did so gently.

One day while Choṭa was listening, but not very attentively, Vira dāsa, the temple commander, came in and asked permission to exterminate the mice. Choṭa jumped and began trembling. He was about to run away but forced himself to stay and hear it.

"They come at night and eat from the kitchen *bhoga*," said Vira, "sometimes even in broad daylight. The cooks are sick of it. So I'm just going to spread some strychnine all over the floor boards. I think there's a lot of them."

"It's better to keep everything clean," said Ārjavam. "Vaiṣṇavas are not supposed to kill. Remember the story of the hunter who was converted by Nārada into a devotee? He avoided killing even ants."

Choṭa was thrilled to hear a human preaching nonviolence. He poked his head out of the hole to see the effect of Ārjavam's words on Vira.

"But that's not practical," said Vira. "Once the mice get into a place, you can clean day and night,

and they won't go away."

"Prabhupāda didn't like it," said Ārjavam. "I read that a devotee once asked him, 'Can we kill the rats, Śrīla Prabhupāda?' And Prabhupāda replied, 'No, *you* should be killed.' Prabhupāda said that the rats or mice were Māyā's agents sent to us when we don't keep clean. Can't we just have a *mahā*-clean-up? Maybe there's a nonlethal disinfectant we can use."

Ārjavam sounded determined. It was an issue that he felt strongly about. Choṭa wished he could help him with his arguments. He thought of one himself: What about the example of Śrīla Prabhupāda's father, who would put a bowl of rice out in the middle of his cloth shop at night so that the rats could eat it? Choṭa knew many quotes also, but he couldn't speak. His fate—and the fate of all the mice—lay in Ārjavam's hands.

"Nonviolent disinfectant? You mean like boric acid? That stuff doesn't work even on roaches."

"What about those Havahart mousetraps?"

"No," said Vira, "the mice are too clever for that. We've got to poison them."

"Prabhu," said Ārjavam, "you've got to think how to avoid killing. Think of the heavy śāstric statements against killing. We'll get karmic reactions. Even the *kṣatriyas*, who were allowed to kill animals, still had to atone for it. I recently read something in the Seventh Canto, and I think it mentions mice."

Ārjavam opened his desk volume of the

Bhāgavatam and found a reference, which he read aloud:

One should treat animals, such as deer, camels, monkeys, mice, snakes, birds and flies exactly like one's own sons. How little difference there actually is between children and these innocent animals.

"I believe it," said Vira. "But when the rodents get too offensive, even Śrīla Prabhupāda would allow killing them. I heard that the landlord in 26 Second Avenue wanted to exterminate, and Prabhupāda said it was all right."

Choṭa felt like screaming out, *"That's not the whole story! The landlord asked and Śrīla Prabhupāda said no. Then the landlord came back and insisted. But in this case, no landlord was insisting."*

"Ārjavam Prabhu," said Vira, "the mice are even going on the altar and taking Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's water and flowers. They crawl on the Deities. *That's* offensive, *sevā-aparādha*. And if *we* let the mice do this, this is also *sevā-aparādha* for us. You're the temple president, so you'll get the *karma*. The Deity is God, but it's up to God's devotees to protect Him against rodents and enemies."

"Yeah," said Ārjavam, and he seemed to be weakening. Devotees knew that Ārjavam was a soft touch, and if they just persisted long enough, he would change his mind.

"A temple president has to act as a *kṣatriya*, not just as a *brāhmaṇa*," said Vira. "It's a war, isn't it?"

We're the devotees, and the mice are demons as far as I'm concerned. Lord Kṛṣṇa came to kill the demons and to protect the devotees. I've poisoned them before, but this time I just thought I'd mention it to you." Vira got up, ready to leave.

"I guess this matter is your department," said Ārjavam. "But I think we should discuss it more at the weekly board meeting."

"That's okay with me," said Vira. "But in the meantime, I'm going to wipe out the current batch of mice with some strychnine tonight. Thanks for your time, Prabhu," said Vira, as he left the room.

Ārjavam put a sign on his door, "Resting. Do Not Disturb." He sat at his desk, gently massaging his forehead. He then opened the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*.

Choṭa came out of his hole and started climbing up the leg of the temple president's desk. He was acting under a strong instinctive drive. But because Choṭa was a highly developed mouse, he stopped for a moment to think. "If Nimāi could talk to other mice, " Choṭa thought, "then I can talk to other humans." Choṭa reached the top of the desk and peered up at Ārjavam. He noticed that Ārjavam was a stockily built human with dark hair and kind eyes. Choṭa prayed, "Lord Kṛṣṇa, please help."

Ārjavam was surprised to see him. "Oh?" he said looking at the bewhiskered pointy face of the mouse. "Did you hear us plotting to kill you?" asked Ārjavam.

"Yes," said Choṭa, "and I wish to submit a plea on behalf of many devotees of the Lord that you please spare us."

Ārjavam was astonished to hear the mouse

speaking. He blinked his eyes several times and shook his head.

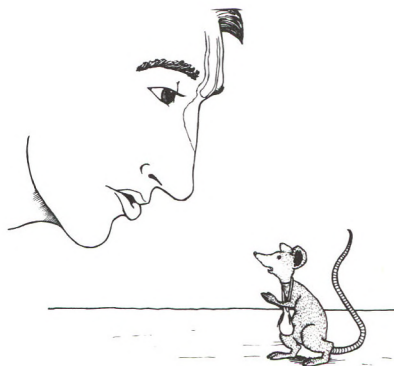
"It's real, Prabhu," said Choṭa. "By the grace of *guru* and Kṛṣṇa, a lame man can walk, a blind man can see the stars, and a mouse can speak."

"So be it," said Ārjavam. "But what can I do?"

"Give the order to spare us," said Choṭa. "The temple commander only gave arguments of why *demons* should be killed. But what you don't know is that there are a hundred mice living in this temple who are actually chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and practicing *bhakti-yoga*. Living entities should never be killed, but especially devotees!"

"How is it possible?" asked Ārjavam. He and Choṭa were about three feet apart. Ārjavam seemed to accept it as another important interview. "Prabhupāda says that animals can't take to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, only humans."

"But sometimes they can," said Choṭa. "Lord Caitanya's mercy is expanding all over the world,



thanks to Prabhupāda and his human followers. Even long ago Prahlāda Mahārāja told his demon friends, 'O sons of the demons, everyone including you, the *yakṣas*, *rakṣāsas*, the unintelligent women, *sūdras* and cowherd men, the birds, the lower animals and the sinful living entities, can revive his original eternal spiritual life and exist forever simply by accepting the principles of *bhakti-yoga*.' That's in the Seventh Canto."

"I'm very impressed, to say the least," said Ārjavam. "But from what Vira says the mice are getting very offensive. We can't just let them crawl on Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and take the food offered to them. It's one thing to give *prasādam* to the animals, but it's a different thing when the animals come and steal the food before it's offered or disturb the Deity worship."

"Just give me twenty-four hours and I'll stop all offensive behavior by mice," said Choṭa. "Don't let him kill us tonight. If we stop all offensive behavior, what reason is there to kill us?"

"I agree," said Ārjavam. "I don't know if anyone will believe me if I say I spoke with a mouse. But I'll try to stop it. I'll tell them to wait a day, and if the mouse offenses stop, then there's no need to kill."

"Thank you, Prabhu. Please accept my humble obeisances." Choṭa bowed and then scampered down the desk and into the mouse hole.

Choṭa rushed into Śivā-jvara's office and said,

"Call all the devotees together at once! We're about to be poisoned by the humans!"

Śivā-jvara wanted to talk about it among the leaders, but Choṭa insisted that there wasn't a moment to lose. When most of the mice had hurriedly come together, Choṭa told them of the temple commander's plan to commit genocide on the mice using strychnine. The temple president of the humans, Ārjavam, did not agree to it, but it was likely to take place anyway tonight! [

"I knew it," said Śivā-jvara, and he stamped his foot. "They call themselves devotees, but they're actually our deadly enemies."

A mother mouse cried out, "The children! They may have eaten it already."



"Let's get out of here," said one mouse to his friend—they had moved into the temple the day before.

"Hold on, Prabhu," said Choṭa, and he looked at the mice who were about to leave. "Let's depend on Kṛṣṇa. There is more danger outside the temple than inside."

"This report has to be investigated," said one of

the analytically-minded mice. "How do we know for sure that they have even got strychnine?"

"I seen it! I seen it!" said Bhakta Joe, the mopper. "I seen the temple commander putting boxes of it out on the shelf in the kitchen." Voices rose in panic while Choṭa tried to get their attention.

"I told you," said Śivā-jvara, "we should have discussed this in private."

"Just let me speak," said Choṭa. "We have a plan to avert this disaster."

Someone called out, "I know a plan! Let's send in a team of hit mice. They can defuse the strychnine."

"We have to do more than just run away or defuse the poison," said Choṭa. "I promised Ārjavam that the mice would stop stealing *bhoga* and would stop disturbing the altar of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities. In return, he said that he would personally try to stop the poisoning."

"Why should we trust Ārjavam?" asked Śivā-jvara.

"If Kṛṣṇa consciousness is going to spread to all species," said Choṭa, "we have to cooperate with the humans."

"That's all right," said a voice from the rear of the hall, "but don't be sentimental."

Śivā-jvara finally agreed with Choṭa that mice should not go into the humans' kitchen to steal *bhoga* and should not go on the altar. He said that he would set up a twenty-four hour watch by guards who would make sure that no mice would break the rules.

Meanwhile, Ārjavam kept his side of the promise. He phoned the SPCA and asked about nonviolent means to restrict rodents. Their expert, "Trapper Dan," suggested putting Skippy peanut butter in a Havahart trap and then relocating the trapped mice several miles away. When Ārjavam said these mice didn't want to be relocated, Trapper Dan suggested spreading ammonia and said, "No need to kill them, they're just looking for food and shelter like anyone else."

Ārjavam confiscated the strychnine from the temple commander and placed it in his own closet. He also plastered up all the mouse holes, sprayed foam insulation into the cracks, and told Vira to wait a day to see if these nonviolent methods worked.

The next day Vira dāsa reported to Ārjavam that there had been no incidents. The flowers and water of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa were unmolested, and no *bhoga* had been taken. Vira said that he had even set out some tasty *bhoga* just to tempt the mice and had placed flour around the area to detect the mice footprints, but none came. "It must have worked," said Vira.

When the mice saw that the strychnine had been put away and that the obnoxious but not lethal ammonia was spread around, they considered themselves saved from the disaster. Everyone praised Choṭa. The cooks made him cupcakes with carob icing and a cheesecake with the words, "Choṭa, kī jaya" printed in icing. Some devotees

suggested that a brass plaque be made and engraved with Choṭa's name and a description of how he saved a hundred lives. Choṭa enjoyed the praise, but he said it was Kṛṣṇa who had saved them.

Choṭa felt too shy to go back to Ārjavam and thank him. He no longer possessed the intense inspiration that had driven him to speak to a human being. Choṭa thought that maybe his speaking to humans was something that was given to him on special occasions, and he shouldn't try to use it unnecessarily. And so he thought of another way to communicate with Ārjavam. When Ārjavam left his office to go to the bathroom, Choṭa slipped in and placed a piece of his cheesecake on the temple president's desk along with a note:

Dear Arjavam Prabhu,

Deepest thanks from all of us. I will do my best to keep everyone off the altar and out of the bhoga.

Your servant,

Chota dasa (the mouse)

After a few days, the mice became somewhat complacent about the new rules. Some of the mice guards began complaining of losing sleep. The praise of Choṭa as a great hero began to ebb away. When a devotee approached Śivā-jvara for money for Choṭa's plaque, Śivā-jvara said that it wasn't necessary. Some of the analytically-minded devo-

tees began to express doubts as to whether Choṭa had spoken with Ārjavam. Some doubted whether the humans had actually been planning to use strychnine. When Choṭa noticed his popularity fading, he thought it was probably a good thing. But he never doubted what had happened.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

About a week after the genocide threat, Śivā-jvara called Choṭa into his office. Śivā-jvara asked him if he would like to move to 26 Second Avenue. He could be in charge of a full-time preaching center for mice. Choṭa thought it was a wonderful idea. He was beginning to feel aimless in the Brooklyn temple, which Śivā-jvara had noticed. Since Ārjavam had blocked up the mouse hole in his room, Choṭa was no longer able to listen in for news of Nimāi. Neither could he fit in as just another member of Śivā-jvara's *saṅkīrtana* team. And he also didn't have the presence of mind, at least while in the crowded Brooklyn temple, to pursue his own chanting and reading. When Choṭa did

spend one day reading *Kṛṣṇa* book in his room, a mouse-devotee asked him, "Are you becoming a bookworm?"

Śivā-jvara explained exactly what he wanted at 26 Second Avenue. The storefront should be turned into a *saṅkīrtana* base for book distributors, with programs all day long for the public. Choṭa thought of Prabhupāda's original temple in terms of its sanctity—it was a *tīrtha*. It would be a good place to be alone, to recover one's own thoughts and *sādhana*. Choṭa thought, "If I can get close to Prabhupāda like I did that night, by reading and recalling his *kīrtanas*, it will be nice—and Śivā-jvara won't mind. There's no need to argue with him about our different styles." *But I wonder what Nīmāi Prabhu would think of me being there?*

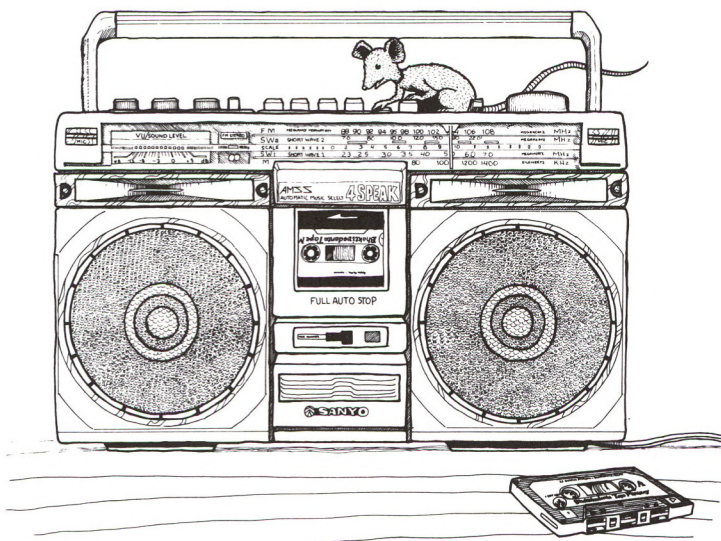
So Choṭa moved to the Lower East Side. He selected a corner of Śrīla Prabhupāda's writing room as his own living space. He would hold *kīrtana* on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights, which were the nights when the humans didn't use the storefront. Choṭa had heard of Prabhupāda's rooms within the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple in Vṛndāvana, India, and he hoped to arrange his quarters at Second Avenue in a similar way. He wanted to keep the atmosphere simple and quiet, with only one or two *brahmacārīs* living there. People could come and visit to see where His Divine Grace sat and where he worshiped, and they could take part in *kīrtana*. Choṭa would absorb himself all day in Śrīla Prabhupāda's books and activities, and impart

some of it to the guests in the evening.

As Choṭa moved from room to room in Prabhupāda's apartment and when he went downstairs through the courtyard into the storefront, he tried to meditate on the presence of Kṛṣṇa and His pure devotee. He imagined how Prabhupāda might have seen the sunshine falling into the room with the dust motes in the air. He guessed where they might have bowed down and touched their heads to the parquet floor and where Prabhupāda walked with bare feet.

Choṭa knew Prabhupāda's daily schedule, and he followed it. He rose early and read at the time when Śrīla Prabhupāda had written his books. He honored *prasādam* at 8:00 A.M. and noon, and held *kīrtana* at 7:00 P.M. And to whomever he met, Choṭa spoke about Prabhupāda's mission and recalled the activities he had read of in the early New York days: "Prabhupāda sat over there under a picture of Kṛṣṇa playing a flute. He sat on that pillow just behind the little trunk which served as his desk. Prabhupāda wore a *khāḍi dhotī* and spoke on *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* and *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* in his classes. Prabhupāda said that the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa cleanses the mind and brings transcendental pleasure—because Lord Kṛṣṇa is the reservoir of all pleasure. Everyone should take to Kṛṣṇa consciousness and make their lives sublime, there is no tax on chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa, and anyone can do it. Even a child can take part, even a dog can dance and chant in ecstasy."

In addition to hearing Prabhupāda speak through his books, Choṭa discovered Śrīla Prabhupāda's voice over the tape recorder. The human devotees kept a large collection of Prabhupāda's tapes, and it



wasn't difficult for Choṭa to open a box, place a tape in the machine, press the "play" button, and listen. After finishing a tape, he stored it back where he had found it. Hearing Prabhupāda's voice was difficult at first. Hardly any of the mice were able to appreciate it. They preferred to hear Kṛṣṇa consciousness spoken by another mouse. "But if they tried to hear it," thought Choṭa, "they could do it." He thought of ways to encourage them. Even if one didn't have much time for sitting and listening, still one could push on a tape and hear even a sim-

ple sentence by His Divine Grace, and it was just like being there with him. Choṭa couldn't pay attention for long, either in reading or hearing, but he loved to press the tape machine and hear even a sentence like: "Now the thing is, unless I think of Kṛṣṇa, that He is an ordinary man, how could he speak to the sun-god Vivasvān? But that sort of thinking is not bona fide. Because if you want to study *Bhagavad-gītā*, then you have to take the words from *Bhagavad-gītā*. The Lord is not like an ordinary man."

Only two devotee-mice had joined Choṭa at 26 Second Avenue. Their life was simple. They picked fruits and greens from the garbage thrown out by a grocer on First Avenue. After they washed it, it was quite fresh, and they offered it with prayers and ate their simple meals. Each mouse pursued his personal studies and greeted guests. Three nights a week they held *kīrtanas* and Choṭa lectured. Since only a few mice attended the lectures, Choṭa spoke informally, based on what he had been reading each day in the *Kṛṣṇa* book.

One night they were joined by two Lower East Side mice who had been practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness on and off for about a year. A small, dusty sparrow also came in and asked if he could attend. Choṭa began by recalling what he had just read in the *Kṛṣṇa* book, "The Rājāsuya Sacrifice." Choṭa explained that in Kṛṣṇa's pastimes He appears to be acting like a member of the human species, but Vyāsadeva and Śukadeva always point out that

Kṛṣṇa is not actually a human being, but the Supreme Personality of Godhead. No one should think of Kṛṣṇa as a historical human being with limitations of a mortal creature. Neither should Kṛṣṇa's superhuman activities be thought of as imaginary stories.

"In this chapter," said Choṭa, "there is a nice example of Lord Kṛṣṇa being appreciated as the Supreme Truth. At the Rājāsuya sacrifice they had to pick out a person to be worshiped first in the ceremony. Sahādeva began to speak in favor of Lord Kṛṣṇa, and this is what he said:

No one can be equal to or greater than Kṛṣṇa in terms of time, space, riches, strength, reputation, wisdom, renunciation or any other consideration. Anything considered opulent is present originally in Kṛṣṇa. As an individual soul is the basic principle of the growth of his material body, Kṛṣṇa is the Supersoul of this cosmic manifestation. All the Vedic ritualistic ceremonies, such as the performance of sacrifices, the offering of oblations in the fire, the chanting of the Vedic hymns and the practice of mystic yoga are meant for realizing Kṛṣṇa. . . . Ladies and gentlemen, it is superfluous to speak about Kṛṣṇa, because everyone of you knows the Supreme Brahman, Lord Kṛṣṇa, for whom there are no material differences between body and soul, between energy and the energetic, or between one part of the body and another. Since everyone is part and parcel of Kṛṣṇa, there is no qualitative difference between Kṛṣṇa and all living entities.

Everything is an emanation of Kṛṣṇa's energies, material and spiritual.

Choṭa knew that if he read too much it would tax their small attention span. He tried to draw them into discussion.

"Can any of you think of other scriptural references," asked Choṭa, "where Kṛṣṇa is declared as the Supreme Personality of Godhead?"

The sparrow shook his head no. A mouse who was a bit chewed around the ears said, "Isn't the whole *Bhagavad-gītā* about that? Kṛṣṇa says He is the light of the sun and the taste in water."

One of the *brahmacārīs* said, "Among beasts I am the lion and among birds I am Garuḍa."

"Yes!" said Choṭa. "And Kṛṣṇa concludes that chapter by saying whatever you see in the whole world is just a spark of His splendor."

Two street mice entered the storefront through a recently enlarged hole in the door. They were rough-furred and unkempt. But Choṭa had come to learn that rough-edged mice could be thoughtful.

After listening for a moment, one of the newcomers asked, "Isn't Kṛṣṇa just a manifestation of God?"

"No, He's God," said Choṭa.

"But if He's God," asked the unkempt mouse, "does that mean that all other teachings of God that don't mention Him as Lord Kṛṣṇa with a flute and so on are false?"

Choṭa sensed that the question was not asked as a

challenge, but as a natural doubt. He felt enlivened to answer. "The Vedic scriptures teach us," said Choṭa, "that there are many, many manifestations of God. Some are in the group known as Viṣṇu, or God Himself, and some are manifestations of God in mortal beings, and they are called *jīvas*."

"I always thought," said the doubting mouse, "that although there may be manifestations, God is ultimately the whole universe, or The Spirit."

"Yes, God is the spirit, and He's the universe," said Choṭa, "but He's also the Supreme Person. The *Bhāgavatam* states: *vadanti tat tattva-vidas*, God is present as impersonal spirit, and as God in the heart, but in His highest feature He is the Supreme Person, Kṛṣṇa."

The questioner became silent, as if he wanted to think over what Choṭa had said. Choṭa then went on to present another segment from his reading. It was a passage which showed that Kṛṣṇa was especially inclined toward His devotees. Choṭa wanted to show that it is not a contradiction for the Lord to be the Supreme Truth and yet to have a personal inclination for His devotees.

"Here's an example," said Choṭa, "of Kṛṣṇa's special affection for the devotee. It was spoken by Queen Kuntī in the Tenth Canto:

For You, the well-wishing friend and Supreme Soul of the universe, there is never any illusion of "us" and "them." Yet even so, residing within the hearts of all, you eradicate the sufferings of those who remember you constantly.

Choṭa asked his audience for other examples of the same teaching. No one replied, and so Choṭa quoted *Bhagavad-gītā* 9.29.

"So Kṛṣṇa is God," said Choṭa, "and yet He has special love for His devotees."

"How come He always appears as a human?" another mouse asked.

"He doesn't," said Choṭa. "He appears in all species. But in His original form of Kṛṣṇa, He's humanlike. Don't think He's just for the humans. In the spiritual world all kinds of liberated entities enjoy with Kṛṣṇa."

For about twenty minutes he had held their attention, and they continued to stay for a second *kīrtana* and cups of milk. As Choṭa sat up late talking with one of the guests (and overhearing other mice *brahmacārīs* talking to guests), he felt blissful. "This is New York preaching," he thought, "and in the same place where Prabhupāda used to preach." In his satisfaction, Choṭa had even forgotten about his dilemma which had made him leave Guyana. He forgot about his search for guidance.



One day an older mouse named Mother Candra arrived at 26 Second Avenue along with two younger female mice. Candra said that Śivā-jvara Prabhu had instructed them to live at the Second Avenue center and make it a base for going out to distribute books and *prasādam* to mice. Choṭa objected to their moving in.

"It's for preaching, Prabhu," said Mother Candra. "I we can do the austerity of going out to meet the people, you should be able to put up with us living in 'your' center. Do you have something against female mice?"

"No, I regard you as mothers," said Choṭa.

Mother Candra had orders from higher authority, and so there was nothing Choṭa could do about it. They moved in. Choṭa's place was within Śrīla Prabhupāda's apartment, and the new residents stayed in the storefront. Choṭa figured that it might not be so bad as long as they remained independent of his activities. But the very next day, one of the young females asked Choṭa if she could speak with him. He said that he could not see her alone, and so she brought her female friend. Choṭa set out three mats, and they sat in Prabhupāda's worship room in front of the picture of Lord Caitanya.

"How can I help you?" asked Choṭa.

The mouse named Bhaktin Janey blinked her long eyelashes and a tear emerged from the corner of her eye. "Mother Candra is very hard on us," she said.

"We're only mice," said the mouse named Durgā

dāsi, "but we have to go out six days a week." Choṭa immediately felt sorry for them.

"We want to please Śivā-jvara Prabhu," said Durgā dāsi, "but we can't keep up the pace. The city is such a heavy place! Just yesterday a rat chased us for a whole block."

"And a street mouse tried to pull off my whiskers," said Bhaktin Janey, touching her face.

"It sounds very difficult," said Choṭa, glancing at the mice, then at the picture of Lord Caitanya, and then at the floor. "We all have austerities to face," he said, "but none of us can do what we're unable to do. I'll talk to Mother Candra on your behalf and see if we can arrange some relief for you."

"Oh, thank you, Prabhu," said Janey with a faint smile. "I knew you would understand. You seem so saintly."

When Choṭa approached Mother Candra, she was putting tiny sweetballs into individual bags for distribution on the street. Choṭa hesitated, not knowing whether to refer to Janey and Durgā as "girls" or "young mothers." He also disliked the fact that he was becoming entangled in their affairs.

"Mother Candra?" said Choṭa. "The devotees in your party came to see me, and they said that it's too hard for them to go out six days a week."

"Humph," said Mother Candra, and she sat back from her packing work. "If they don't complain about one thing, it's something else. Anyway, it's not *my* order. Śivā-jvara Prabhu said that they should go out six days, and we just have to surren-

der to it." Candra threw an open look at Choṭa. "Sometimes I also feel overworked," she said. "And I don't have a husband anymore to go to. But as Śivā-jvara Prabhu says, 'We're all like soldiers in the *saṅkīrtana* army. When we take on a little difficulty, we can alleviate untold sufferings of people we approach.'" Mother Candra convinced Choṭa that he should speak again to the young girls and urge them to do their prescribed duties.

"You're a better preacher than I am," said Mother Candra, "so you can change their minds."

The next day Janey and Durgā came again to see Choṭa, and Mother Candra accompanied them. He spoke the party line, but with sympathy.

"But we're not humans, you know," replied Bhaktin Janey, "we're limited."

"The real problem" said Durgā, "is not that we have to go out six days a week, but that we have to work eight hours a day."

"And the result of that," said Janey, "is that we can't chant all our rounds every day."

"No," said Choṭa calmly. "You *have* to chant your rounds every day."

"Śivā-jvara says we don't have to," said Bhaktin Janey.

"I don't think he said that," said Mother Candra. "He said . . ."

Choṭa became annoyed. He decided to speak what he felt. "Lord Caitanya once praised Haridāsa Ṭhākura for being a good preacher and a well-behaved devotee. So we can't give up either one.

But if you don't have enough time to chant your rounds and you're so agitated, then what's the use? It would be better if you spent less time on *saṅkīrtana* and kept your *sādhana* healthy. We can't be fanatical. That's all I have to say about it. Is there anything else you want to ask me?"

"Why can't we sleep in beds of shredded paper?" asked Janey. "Why do we have to sleep on the floor?"

"Can't we eat cheese that's not offered to the Deity when we're out on *saṅkīrtana*?" asked Durgā.

"I can't answer these questions of policy," said Choṭa, and he stood up, indicating that the interview was over. "I'm not your authority, I'm just a tiny mouse. All glories to Prabhupāda."

Later that night, when Choṭa was alone, he had an impulse to look at himself in the mirror. It was something he hardly ever did. He crawled up on the bathroom sink and looked at his image. He preened his whiskers and turned his face to see it from a three-quarter profile. Then he combed his hair with his claw until he'd formed a part, as he'd seen some of the fancy New York mice do. He thought of Guyana and the inner turmoil that had forced him to come to New York, but somehow that all seemed distant. Images of the evening continued to linger in his mind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A few days later, six male mice arrived at the storefront. They said that Śivā-jvara had ordered them to start a daily lunch program at 26 Second Avenue.

"We already have lunch every day," said Choṭa.

"No, silly," said Rudra dāsa. "This is for the public. Śivā-jvara Prabhu wants it to be like a charity meal for any mice in the neighborhood who need it. It will be good publicity. And we'll give them *prasādam*, food offered to Kṛṣṇa."

Choṭa couldn't object, but he knew that such a program would completely change the atmosphere at Prabhupāda's storefront. He watched with mis-

givings as the mice moved in their pots and stores of grains. They sectioned off a part of the storefront as their sleeping space and also took over the kitchen and the worship room upstairs. Choṭa retreated to his corner in Prabhupāda's writing room and grumbled to himself. When Mother Candra complained to Choṭa about sharing space with the lunch program devotees, Choṭa reminded her that they were all meant to sacrifice for the higher cause. "Śivā-jvara wants to bestow his mercy on the Lower East Side in the form of *prasādam*. And we should all try to cooperate."

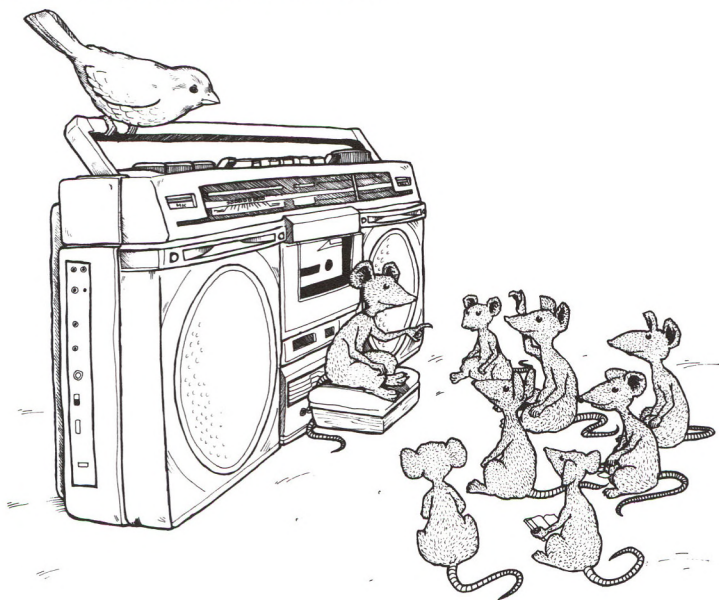
For Choṭa, the storefront as a Prabhupāda-*tīrtha* had been demolished. But he tried to make the best of it. The one *good* thing he saw from the changes, was that there were now more devotees present for his evening classes.

Choṭa started giving classes on how to appreciate Śrīla Prabhupāda's tape-recorded lectures. Some of the mice thought animals weren't capable of comprehending the human voice, but Choṭa disproved that by his own example. Some admitted that hearing a tape by Prabhupāda might be possible, but like Sanskrit grammar or typewriting, it was too difficult to be any fun. So Choṭa coaxed them into it by playing a short segment of a tape and then discussing it. First he told them some of the rudiments of good listening.

"It's like a reward for a day's devotional service," he said. "Only those who please Lord Kṛṣṇa will be able to hear, not others. If you can't listen at first,

just relax and open your inner ear. By this one act, hearing Prabhupāda, you can become completely Kṛṣṇa conscious and lose all fear. Prabhupāda says so."

"What do you mean by hearing with the inner ear?" asked Mother Candra.



"I mean don't listen like an animal," said Choṭa.

About fifteen mice were gathered around Choṭa, who stood poised by the recorder. Attendance at his classes was steadily increasing, and he was gaining a reputation as an interesting speaker.

"Okay, Prabhus, just listen," said Choṭa. "This is Śrīla Prabhupāda talking to some devotees in his room in 1969. He's telling how he himself was ea-

ger to listen to his spiritual master." Choṭa pressed down on the tape recorder with both paws, and the sound came on:

My spiritual master said this boy hears very nicely, he does not go away. That first impression he gave to other Godbrothers. "I shall make him disciple." These very words he said. Actually I didn't follow him in the beginning. It was high philosophical speaking, and I was a new boy. I could not follow him, but actually I was much glad to hear. I was simply asking, "When Guru Mahārāja will speak?" and I will sit down and go on hearing. I'll understand or not understand. Others will disperse, I will not disperse. That was my qualification.

Choṭa pressed the pause lever and then sat back on his haunches.

"So what did Prabhupāda say?" Choṭa asked.

"I couldn't make it out," said Rudra dāsa, and others agreed with him.

"I heard some of it," said Bhaktin Janey. "He's saying that he wanted to please his spiritual master and all he could do was listen. That was his qualification."

"Very good," said Choṭa. "Anybody else?"

"He asked," said Durgā dāsī, "'When Guru Mahārāja will speak?' And his guru noted it."

"Yes, and how can we apply this to our own lives?" asked Choṭa.

A mouse named Willy spoke up. He was one of

the regular but unkempt visitors to the storefront. "I've heard that hearing is one of the first principles in *bhakti*. Is that right?"

"Yes, it's called *śravaṇam*," said Choṭa. "Whereas in other yoga disciplines you have to practice difficult austerity, in *bhakti* you just have to sit like we're doing and listen. If we aren't listening to this tape, we'd be listening to something else like noises or nonsense talk. But when you listen to Prabhupāda or Kṛṣṇa and if you listen with devotion . . ."

"Okay, Choṭa," said Rudra dāsa, "let's try again. Give us another segment." Choṭa pressed the "play" button:

There was one first instance. At that time I was not initiated. There was a circumambulation of the whole of Vṛndāvana. And so although I was not initiated, I was one of the important members. I thought, "Let me go. What these people are doing circumambulating all over Vṛndāvana." So I went to Mathurā, then I went to Vṛndāvana interior to a place known as Kośi. In that Kośi one of my Godbrothers declared that Prabhupāda is going tomorrow back to Mathurā. He will speak this evening. So anyone who wants to hear him they can stay, and others may prepare to go to the Śeṣasāyī temple. So although I was new, I did not want to go to the temple, I decided that I shall hear. At that time I was so new that some of my important Godbrothers were sitting together like this, and I was sitting last. My Guru

Mahārāja knew that this boy is new, everyone has gone except a few selected Godbrothers. So he marked it that this boy is interested in hearing.

This time more mice had been able to understand it. Several of them raised their paws.

"Hearing is even more important than visiting the Śeṣasāyī temple," said one of the *brahmacārīs*.

"This shows that Prabhupāda was very special," said Rudra, "even in the beginning, and his guru noted it."

Choṭa let everyone speak what they had heard and understood. A lively conversation continued for twenty minutes. Then Choṭa played another section:

So hearing is very important. Just like Arjuna heard from Kṛṣṇa. Because I was serious about hearing, therefore now I am serious about *kīrtanaṁ*. *Kīrtanaṁ* means speaking or preaching about the Lord. So one who is serious about hearing, he can become a future nice preacher. *Śravaṇam*. The next stage is *kīrtanaṁ* and that is development. If one has heard nicely, then he can speak nicely. *Śravaṇam kīrtanaṁ smaraṇam*, then the consciousness will automatically develop, unless your mind is concentrated and your consciousness is right, you cannot rightly hear or speak.

Choṭa asked each person in the audience to say at least a few words on what they had appreciated

from the tape. Then the sparrow, who hardly ever spoke at meetings, said, "I liked the sound of his voice."

"Isn't hearing Prabhupāda's tapes blissful?" asked Choṭa. "And it's easy. So let's try whenever we can to go on hearing. Don't think it's something boring or too difficult."

"It's not boring when you teach it," said Bhaktin Janey, "but by myself it's very hard."

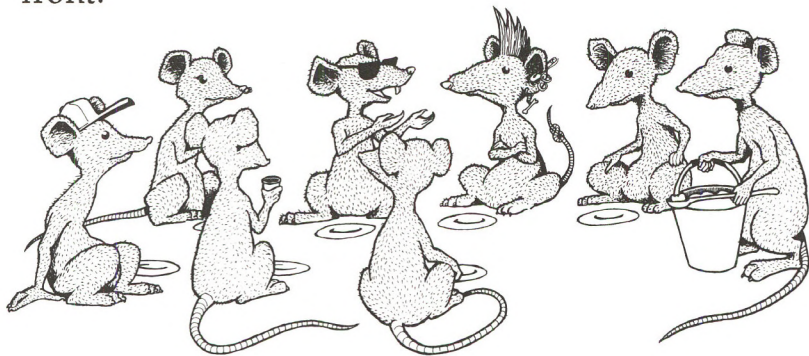
After the listening session, all of the devotees and guests lingered for cups of milk. Some of them personally thanked Choṭa for the classes and asked, "When will you be speaking again?"

Choṭa's classes ran about half an hour over the scheduled time, and as a result, some of the mice went to sleep later than usual. Mother Candra reported this to Śivā-jvara in one of her regular visits to the Brooklyn temple. She also told Śivā-jvara that Choṭa had said that the *saṅkīrtana* females didn't have to work six days a week or eight hours a day if it was too difficult. This report disturbed Śivā-jvara, who wrote Choṭa a note:

The sankirtana is more important than your classes. Don't instruct Candra's party. I suggest you start attending our weekly board meetings in Brooklyn and learn our mood for preaching in the New York area. What about your search for Nimai Prabhu?

Choṭa was sorry to read this and figured it was caused by a misunderstanding created by Mother

Candra. He promised himself to go see Śivā-jvara, but as the days went by, Choṭa became entangled with duties and didn't have time to leave the storefront.



The daily free lunch was well attended, although the crowd was a smelly and somewhat cynical group. It took the full-time concentrated efforts of six mice to gather food and cook and distribute it daily. In addition, it took them all afternoon to clean up the kitchen and storefront. After a few days, two of the lunch workers disappeared, and Choṭa was dragged into the work. He started cleaning up the storefront in the afternoon, since no one else did it. He hoped that Śivā-jvara would hear how he was trying to cooperate.

The female *saṅkīrtana* party proved to be a serious distraction for Choṭa. Mother Candra kept allowing the young ones to come and get counseling from Choṭa, although he asked her not to. Janey and Durgā took a special liking to Choṭa. They rendered little acts of service to him, such as putting flowers

in a vase on his desk. Janey gave him a saffron scarf like the one Śivā-jvara wore. And they often asked him if there was anything they could do for him while they were out on *saṅkīrtana*. At first, Choṭa saw them as sentimental youngsters, although he appreciated their attentiveness in his classes. Then someone started a wild rumor that Choṭa had agreed to become the guru of Bhaktin Janey. When he thought about it later, Choṭa figured the rumor started with an answer he had given to Bhaktin Janey. She had asked if only human beings could be spiritual masters, and he had replied that according to the scriptures anyone who knew the science of Kṛṣṇa was qualified to be a guru. But Choṭa hadn't been thinking of it for himself. In fact he had all along avoided the issue, even in Guyana. It was another one of those things that he wanted to consult with Nimāi Prabhu about, although he saw that Śivā-jvara was going ahead and accepting the title "guru" on his door. Choṭa figured that the rumor must have been spread by Mother Candra and that was how it reached Śivā-jvara.

Choṭa gave a class on the importance of reading Śrīla Prabhupāda's books and chanting one's daily *japa*. He began by what he thought was an important verse:

*śṛṇvatām sva-kathāḥ kṛṣṇaḥ
 puṇya-śravaṇa-kīrtanaḥ
 hr̥dy antaḥ stho hy abhadraṇi
 vidhunoti suhṛt satām*

Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Personality of Godhead, who is the Paramātmā [Supersoul] in everyone's heart and the benefactor of the truthful devotee, cleanses desire for material enjoyment from the heart of the devotee who has developed the urge to hear His messages, which are in themselves virtuous when properly heard and chanted.

—*Bhāg.* 1.2.17

Choṭa spoke for a few minutes repeating what he had heard: The messages of Lord Kṛṣṇa are nondifferent from Him. Whenever somebody hears and chants God's glories, Lord Kṛṣṇa is present in the form of the transcendental sound vibration. Therefore, it is very easy theoretically to directly associate with the Supreme Lord. It can be done at any time by anyone just by chanting and reading. The only problem is that people don't have a taste for hearing and chanting. Kṛṣṇa *wants* us to give up this material world of sin and reaction to sin—He wants to take us back to His eternal, blissful abode. But unfortunately, most of us don't want to go back to Godhead. Or even if we have a little desire, we're stuck with our sinful habits. But if we try to chant and hear, then by the grace of God, who is in everyone's heart, we get strength—Kṛṣṇa Himself cleans our hearts, and we develop a taste for spiritual life.

"Let's talk about this problem," said Choṭa, "of not having a taste, and of neglecting *sādhana*."

The mice devotees knew that this was Choṭa's

speciality, and when he spoke about it, it aroused their own desires for *sādhana*.

"What about the fact that we're only mice?" asked Willy. "How much is really expected of us?"

"By Lord Caitanya's grace," said Choṭa, "we've discovered that we can chant and hear. When Prabhupāda was here at 26 Second Avenue, he used to say that even a roach in the wall can hear the chanting. Prahlāda Mahārāja said to his friends that everyone, including the demons, the birds, and all the lower animals, can revive their eternal spiritual life just by practicing *bhakti-yoga*."

"But how much?" asked Willy. "Do we have to follow a daily quota for reading and chanting?"

This was a touchy point for the devotees. Some had said the quotas that had been given to humans did not apply to animals.

"Our discussion should be how to achieve perfection," said Choṭa, "rather than trying to find a way to do as little as possible."

"My question," said Rudra, "is, what if your work is so demanding that you don't have time for the quota of chanting and reading?" Choṭa began to reply more openly, assuming that he was among friends.

"When I don't do my quota of chanting and hearing," Choṭa said, "I feel like a hypocrite. Our whole mission is to tell people to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness. But if I don't chant and read, how can I tell others to do it? Aside from that, if I don't chant and read, I get agitated and I start resenting

my work."

Choṭa's words struck chords in the others. Some of the mice began admitting their own lackings and asking help from Choṭa. Some of the mice felt defensive. A few weren't sure whether Choṭa himself knew the proper balance between *sādhana* and regular work.

"There shouldn't be conflict between work and *sādhana*," said Choṭa. "But sometimes there is. There's supposed to be a perfect system to follow, whether you perform your prescribed duties living in a temple or elsewhere. But that perfect system doesn't just work by itself. Each individual has to figure out his or her own balance. All I can say, speaking for myself, is that the more attention I give chanting and hearing, the stronger I become. And when I neglect it, I feel like I'm drowning. Also, it's not just the quantity that we do, it's the quality."

Even if some of the audience thought that Choṭa was going overboard about *sādhana*, they respected him and believed that he had a keen desire to chant and hear. But what Choṭa couldn't express to them, even as he spoke, was that his own *sādhana* was only a fond memory. He felt that he had exhausted his sincerity and that he was talking about a yearning he *used* to have. He felt empty while urging the others to be more serious about their *sādhana*. He felt the need to revive it again.

"What should you do if you get fried," asked Mother Candra, "from going too long without

doing your minimum quota of *sādhana*?"

"You better get unfried," said Choṭa. "When an elephant is burning to death in a forest fire, his only relief is to get out of the fire and into the stream. We have to enter the stream of chanting and hearing. Don't remain fried, save yourself."

"Can't we think about Kṛṣṇa even while we work?" asked Bhaktin Janey. "If our work is devotional service, why can't we think of Kṛṣṇa all the time?"

"We should read and then work," said Choṭa, "and chant and then work. Or better yet, we should chant while we work and think of what we've read even while working. Yes, everything we do should be devotional service, and so we should act in a way to always remember Kṛṣṇa and not do things that make us forget Him."

The questions and answers ran on for an hour beyond the scheduled time. But no one complained. Despite his reluctance to speak as Vyāsa's perfect representative, Choṭa assumed the position. By doing so he was able to assert that everyone *could* keep a balance between work and *sādhana*. This satisfied most of the questioners in the audience. And if Choṭa's ideal balance was still beyond him, that didn't make the message less valid. After all, they had gathered not just to talk about their own shortcomings, but to hear from Śrīla Prabhupāda and Vyāsadeva.

Once again, the devotees lingered in the storefront and sat together to drink hot milk. While

Choṭa was listening to more questions from two newcomers, the quiet sparrow who had attended all his classes came up beside him.

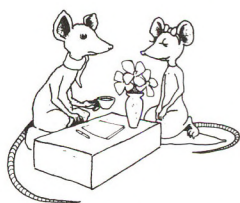
"I just wanted to let you know," the sparrow said, "that I appreciate these lectures. Especially tonight, I think I see a breakthrough for myself."

This confidential moment with the sparrow—who then hopped out of the storefront—made Choṭa feel that all his troubles were worthwhile.

When the cook quit, the entire responsibility for the daily lunch fell on Choṭa's shoulders—foraging, cooking, serving the guests, and cleaning up. The first day he did it, he was too exhausted to give a class at night.

"Tell Śivā-jvara Prabhu," Choṭa said to Mother Candra, "that I can't keep this up."

Bhaktin Janey brought Choṭa a cup of herbal tea and suggested that he take extra rest. Then she asked for more counseling.



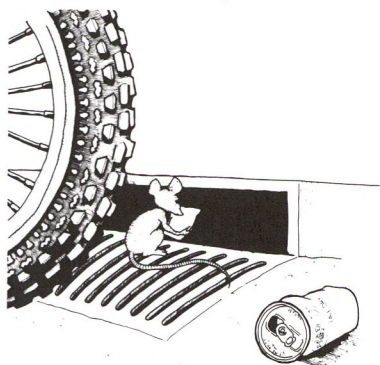
"I think I know what my problem is," said Janey with a downcast glance. "I really need to be married, don't I?"

"Yes," Choṭa said, "that's the Vedic system."

"Mother Candra says I need to be protected," said Bhaktin Janey. She scratched her claws on the floor in an idle gesture, as if she were drawing a pattern. Choṭa watched her. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Mother Candra is right," said Choṭa, "it's the Vedic system." He couldn't think of anything else to say but added, "So just be patient and Kṛṣṇa will fulfill your desires."

After that, Choṭa lost his ability to hear the holy names with attention. While fingering his beads and uttering the *mahā-mantra*, he either thought of his lunch program or Bhaktin Janey. Thoughts of Janey were especially overpowering. They weren't really thoughts, but heart tugs. Choṭa couldn't remember ever feeling like that before. She had invaded his room and his life in the form of flowers, tea, and other service. He wore the scarf that she gave him. Choṭa thought, "Unless I leave this situation, I will soon be over my head."



"Where are you going?" asked Mother Candra as Choṭa walked out of the storefront.

"It's time to go forage," said Choṭa.

"Here's a note from Śivā-jvara Prabhu," she replied and handed him a white envelope.

Choṭa crawled warily down the gutter of First

Street, towards First Avenue where the grocer left produce in the back alley. Stopping a moment beside a parked motorcycle, Choṭa opened the note:

I heard that you are overwhelmed with the lunch program. It seems like an over-endeavor to me. I'm thinking to call back all the devotees to centralize preaching in Brooklyn. What do you think?

ys

Siva-jvara dasa

P.S. Nimai Prabhu just arrived in Brooklyn.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

From the moment he read the note, Choṭa traveled as fast as he could to the Brooklyn temple to look for Nimāi. He couldn't find him in the men's dormitory or in the temple room. Choṭa then looked in the "boot room," a place used by the human devotees to store boots and out-of-season clothes. There he saw Nimāi Prabhu seated on the floor talking with Śivā-jvara. Choṭa's heart beat faster, and he was about to run forward, but he checked himself. He felt pain that he was not the only mouse devotee in Nimāi's life. He knew that he could go in and claim his own place beside Nimāi, but decided it would be better to go later

when Nimāi was alone.

Choṭa waited patiently, and as Śivā-jvara began to leave the room, Choṭa hid himself. But then Nimāi laid down on a pile of summer clothes and fell asleep. Choṭa watched and waited. He was surcharged with thoughts and feelings, which he tried



to condense to the most direct and important questions. His desire to take direction from Nimāi had built to a pitch, but he didn't want to ruin his opportunity by incoherent ramblings. And so he rehearsed what he wanted to ask his beloved teacher. Choṭa felt relieved just to be near Nimāi. He watched and waited, making sure that Nimāi did not slip out of sight. After an hour, Nimāi woke. As he sat up, Choṭa entered. When he saw that Nimāi recognized him, Choṭa jumped on Nimāi's knee and ran up to his shoulder. He nuzzled against his friend's ear, while Nimāi softly stroked his back.

"Choṭa, my little one . . . " said Nimāi.

"I've been waiting so long to see you," said Choṭa. "Always listening in to find out where you were."



"I also missed you very much," said Ni-māi. "How have you been?"

Choṭa began to pour out what he wanted to say. He tried recalling his neat outline of questions but was unable to remain within bounds.

"I don't know where to begin," said Choṭa.

"First, you should know that the movement of Kṛṣṇa consciousness among mice in Guyana has increased *wonderfully*, way beyond our dreams!"

"*Jaya!* Tell me about it!" Choṭa had climbed upon a small box so that he was a little bit lower than eye level with Ni-māi—just like they used to sit a year ago.

"Yes, I'll tell you everything," said Choṭa. "I've been really anxious to find you. That's why I've come to New York—to consult you about a personal dilemma I'm having. How long will you be here in New York?"

"I have to leave tomorrow to go to India," said Ni-māi, "to join my spiritual master. I also want to

tell *you* what I've been doing, although it's mostly that I've been in *māyā*, and my Gurudeva has been saving me."

"Leaving tomorrow?" asked Choṭa. "Then we'll have to talk right away. Or can I go with you to India?"

"Sure you can come," said Nimāi. "We did it before." They both paused, silent.

"It was difficult when we traveled before," said Nimāi, "wasn't it? We can decide. But let's talk now. I want to hear *everything*."

"As the movement developed in Guyana," said Choṭa, "I received honor, and they regarded me as a big leader." Choṭa laughed. "Your Choṭa who couldn't even drink a *loṭa* of milk without spilling it. I accepted their honor as Kṛṣṇa's mercy, although I always made it clear that I was representing my authorities like you and your Gurudeva and Prabhupāda. But they regarded me as a special mouse, and it built up until some months ago at my birthday party, 300 mice held a big celebration for me."

"That's amazing," said Nimāi. "Are there mouse temples?"

"Yes," said Choṭa. "I'll tell you about it. But here's the thing—although they praise me, I don't actually have a taste for the most basic practices of Kṛṣṇa consciousness—chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* and reading and hearing from Śrīla Prabhupāda's books. This is my problem, although in a sense it's a good problem. This year I've developed a strong

desire to spend as much time as possible chanting and reading. I've learned how to read Prabhupāda's books. So when I read and chant, I feel like I'm entering into Kṛṣṇa's presence, which is what the *śāstras* say will happen if you hear submissively. Kṛṣṇa is in the holy name, and Lord Kṛṣṇa is in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, which is as brilliant as the sun.

"But I think I want this *sādhana* so badly that my other duties seem too burdensome. It's like I have to make up for lost time, all the time in which I haven't read or chanted nicely. And my time of life is running out—even Mahārāja Parikṣit spent his last seven days *only* in hearing *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. But the mice devotees don't encourage me. They themselves don't chant or read hardly. They're more interested in active things. My cousin, Yamala, whom you remember, is now one of the responsible leaders, and he tells me that my intense interest in chanting and hearing is false renunciation. He says I'm becoming a *bābājī*, as if that's the worst thing possible. And so they make me feel guilty. But even if I try I can't give up the conviction and craving for taking long periods of time to chant and hear. I even had to leave Guyana; I took a sabbatical. And now I'm coming to you. How can I give up my love for *sādhana*? And yet how can I give up my other duties?"

After Choṭa had gotten this much out, he was panting and trembling. He worried that maybe it all sounded completely inconsequential or incoherent.

Nimāi looked quiet and thoughtful. "Your prob-

lem is so spiritually advanced," said Nimāi, that I don't think I can help. You've gone beyond me, Choṭa. You were always an advanced devotee, even from the beginning."

"That's not true," said Choṭa. "You were always my teacher, and so only you can solve my dilemma. I went to hear from a famous meditating turtle in Guyana, but I couldn't accept what he said as absolute. And, of course, when I hear from Yamala or from my friends, whatever they say I always think that only Nimāi can tell me, only when I hear from Nimāi can I trust it. Nimāi Prabhu, I want to do the will of Lord Kṛṣṇa and Prabhupāda. And *that's* why I've increased my practice of *sādhana*. Because the books say that we should do it as most important. And yet sometimes it seems to be *my* will. And there are many quotes by Prabhupāda that stress mostly active preaching. So is my desire for solitude a lack of surrender? But I can't surrender to someone like Yamala. I want to obey God."

"You are obeying God," said Nimāi. "I think you've become a very sanctified mouse. But you don't want to hear that, do you? It's only your humility that makes you think I can help you still. The fact is, Choṭa, all I know is what my Gurudeva has told me. But I'll try to help you. You've waited so long to ask me these questions, and I don't want to just reply with something off the top of my head. Let me think."

Nimāi glanced at his watch. "Oh! I've got to go downtown," he said. "I've got to put my passport in

for a visa in order to get it out tomorrow."

At Nimai's suggestion, Choṭa agreed to travel in a small box with Nimāi, so that they could stay together while Nimāi did his business in Manhattan. At the Brooklyn subway station, Nimāi went to the end of the platform where it was deserted and started telling Choṭa what he had been doing.

"Basically, I fell into *māyā*," said Nimāi. "That's sort of my whole life story in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. I'm a testimony to the power of the material energy to bewilder someone even after he comes to practice spiritual life. You know, *māyā* tries to cover us and tell us to give up spiritual life. But if I ever become successful, my life will also be a testimony that the mercy of the pure devotee is the most powerful thing. Anyway, after I left you mice in Guyana, I felt I was really bereft because I was so attached to your association. I felt too unhappy to just go back to my regular place on the farm, because devotees used to tease me there. So I met a wandering devotee, Pūjā, and we went off to India together."

Nimāi stopped speaking as someone walked their way. The passerby gave him a strange look.

"And then what happened?" asked Choṭa from the box.

When they entered the subway car, Choṭa could see only little bits of light and bits of faces of many human beings, and he felt the jolting and the screeching. He wondered how he had ever been able to endure long periods in a little box and travel

by plane all the way to Trinidad and Guyana. Choṭa thought that maybe he had grown to be less flexible and less surrendered. He used to be able to jump into any little box just because Nimāi asked him. When the other mice in the box complained, Choṭa had always preached to them and remained cheerful. Choṭa thought that maybe his former surrender was also a kind of recklessness, or the innocence of a new devotee. At least now he didn't think he could stand being cooped up for long. Aside from the physical inconvenience, Choṭa's mind kept telling him that he had better things to do—more important devotional service to perform on behalf of Nimāi and Lord Kṛṣṇa—and *that* was why he couldn't tolerate sitting cramped in a box and just tagging along wherever Nimāi went.

When Nimāi reached his subway stop in Manhattan, he paused a few more minutes on the platform and continued his story. "We went to Vṛndāvana," he said, speaking to Choṭa in the box, "although I never really entered Vṛndāvana in proper consciousness. Still, I'll never forget it and I hope I can return someday to really render service there. My whole problem is that I was acting independently. Anyway, I got very sick, then I went to some health cure place where I got affected by hearing Māyāvādī philosophy. I'm too embarrassed to tell you all the things I went through. You'd probably lose faith in me. But what finally happened in South India was that my Gurudeva came and rescued me, and he put me in his direct service as his

servant."

"Then what happened?"

"We traveled together to many places, and I became purified hearing him preach and act as a pure devotee. Then when we were in Canada, we were together in a plane crash. We wound up in the mountains far away from any civilization, and we had to live there alone for five months. It was a very beneficial experience for me. I learned more about myself there in those few months than I did in years anywhere else. And I learned to trust my spiritual master. If you and I can stay together and I have time, I'd like to tell you more about it."

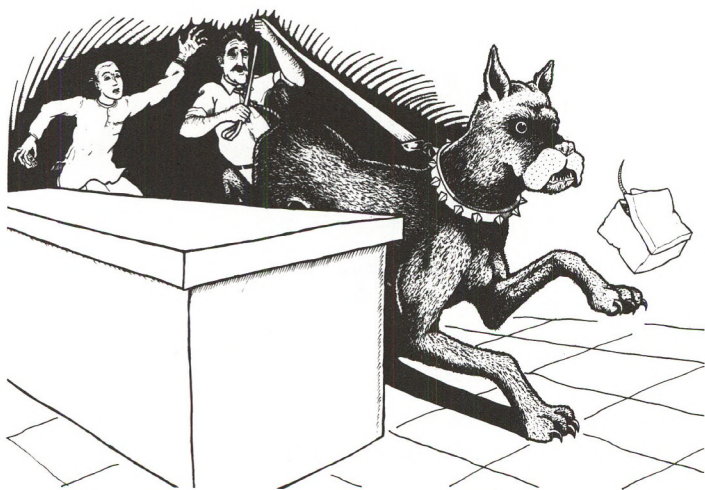
When Nimāi submitted his passport at the Indian Embassy, the office clerk noticed that he was carrying a pet in a box.

"What is that, a hamster?" he asked. "You can't take him with you to India."

"Of course not," said Nimāi. "I'm just keeping him with me for now. I'll be leaving him with a friend."

Nimāi told Choṭa he had to do some last minute shopping, and so Choṭa banged around with him as they went into a store to buy a duffle bag. Then they went to an electrical store where Nimāi purchased an electrical transformer so that he could play his tape recorder on Indian voltage. In the electrical shop, Nimāi put down Choṭa's box while he wandered down an aisle to inspect the latest tape recorders with earphones. Nimāi had no tape with him, and so he put on the earphones and listened

to a demonstration tape of the Moody Blues band. Absorbed in music, Nimāi didn't notice the store's watchdog, a big boxer, enter from the rear. The dog immediately sniffed Choṭa's presence and dove for the box. While the mouse squeaked, the dog knocked the box onto the floor with his massive paws and growled and bit into it. Choṭa felt the walls crashing in on all sides, and he felt the hard teeth and the drool from the dog's mouth. He uttered the holy names in fear of death.



The store owner grabbed the dog and pulled him back. "What have you got in that box?" he asked. Nimāi had finally noticed. He ran to the spot and picked up the crushed remains. The dog was still straining heavily at his collar and growling.

"It's a goddamn mouse!" said the store man. "Get it out of here!"

Choṭa's body was not injured, but he was in a state of shock, like a human who survives the wreck of his automobile. Nimāi held him in his hands and apologized profusely. Choṭa told him that it was all right and not to worry, but he began to tremble. Only when they reached the privacy of the boot room in the temple did Choṭa relax the fearful tension of his limbs. Nimāi covered him with warm clothes and gave him a plate of *mahā-prasādam*.

"It's not your fault," said Choṭa. "I shouldn't have been born into the material world. Kṛṣṇa is giving me warning."

Nimāi stayed with him while Choṭa dozed. When he woke, they began talking again.

"The biggest surprise of my life," said Choṭa, "was when I learned that you had spoken Kṛṣṇa consciousness to another mouse, Śivā-jvara. I had thought that me, Yamala, and Arjuna were the only ones."

"I didn't exactly choose to do it," said Nimāi. "That was when I was passing through New York with Gurudeva. It almost happened once before when I was in South India. I guess it happens when Kṛṣṇa want it to. He makes me tell one mouse about Kṛṣṇa and then that creature tells others. Śivā-jvara said that you also spoke to Ārjavam Prabhu here. I heard that you acted heroically and saved all the mice from poisoning."

Choṭa mumbled a modest reply.

"There's something I haven't told you so far," said Nimāi, "which I'd like to confess. In the

months after I left you, I began gradually to deny our experience. There was no one I could talk to about it, and I knew people would think I was crazy if I told them. I've never really even discussed it thoroughly with my Gurudeva. So I began to think of it as part of my whimsical behavior for which people call me "Nimāi the Gnome" and other nice names. Although the time I spent with you was a revival of my spiritual life because I was able to serve you and assist you to become *bhaktas*, I gradually began to forget and even think that maybe it never happened. I didn't want to be seen as eccentric."

Choṭa heard him thoughtfully but returned to his central question. "Nimāi Prabhu, what should I do? Please tell me what Kṛṣṇa wants. Is it wrong to spend so much time alone chanting and reading? What should I do?"

"I don't know yet," said Nimāi. "Maybe we should go together to ask my Gurudeva. Or if you don't come with me I could ask on your behalf."

It had become obvious that Nimāi and Choṭa could no longer travel together. It was too dangerous. And Nimāi now felt it was also an insult to Choṭa, as if he had nothing better to do than remain hidden in the dark of Nimāi's pocket. Choṭa had full faith in Nimāi. Nimāi was waiting before giving him answers to his questions, but Choṭa felt patient. Just by being near Nimāi, he felt spiritually peaceful. He felt confident that the answer would come, because he had submitted it earnestly to Kṛṣṇa's representative, and he was ready to follow whatever Nimāi said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mice usually didn't attend the humans' *kīrtanas*, but since Nimāi was present, Choṭa went to watch. It was a Wednesday night, the best *kīrtana* of the week in the Brooklyn temple. Many devotees who lived outside gathered on this night with temple inmates, and the mood was "let's cook it up." Sweaters, shawls, and bead bags were doffed and placed to the side. Some had brought their own drums from home, and they tuned them even before the *kīrtana* began. A strong singer was selected, and the men with *kāratālas* and drums moved in close to urge him on. As the Deities of Rādhā-Govinda looked on, the devotees sang the Hare

Kṛṣṇa *mantra*, and some danced with abandon. Guests and the more reserved devotees backed to the walls, although sometimes a dancer would pull an onlooker into the middle. Although the large hall was not well heated, the singers and dancers began sweating. Some were dripping from the forehead, and their *kūrtas* were soaked. In the back beside Śrīla Prabhupāda's *vyāsāsana*, women danced holding hands and running back and forth in a row. When the lead singer lagged, he gave the microphone to a fresh singer, and in this way the *kīrtana* stayed strong for an hour.

As Choṭa watched he felt disappointed that he was not a human who could leap like that. The incense on the altar gradually wafted back to where Choṭa was, and he caught the scent of a feast. He was also aware of the odors of sweating bodies as well as the perfume of some of the women guests. He couldn't see the Deities clearly from a distance, but he could hear, and he felt the pounding of the dancers' feet.

When the *kīrtana* was over, it took about five minutes for devotees to calm down. Choṭa was happily surprised to see that Nimāi had been asked to give the *Bhagavad-gītā* lecture. He had never been chosen before, but since he had just come from his Canadian survival experience, which had been published in *ISKCON World Review*, the temple president had asked him to speak. Choṭa wanted to go forward and help adjust the microphone and put a cup of water within Nimāi's reach, but he con-

tented himself to watch the others do it.

The verse for the evening was *Bhagavad-gītā*, Chapter Eight, verse six:

*yaṁ yaṁ vāpi smaran bhāvaṁ
tyajaty ante kalevaram
taṁ tam evaiti kaunteya
sadā tad-bhāva-bhāvitaḥ*

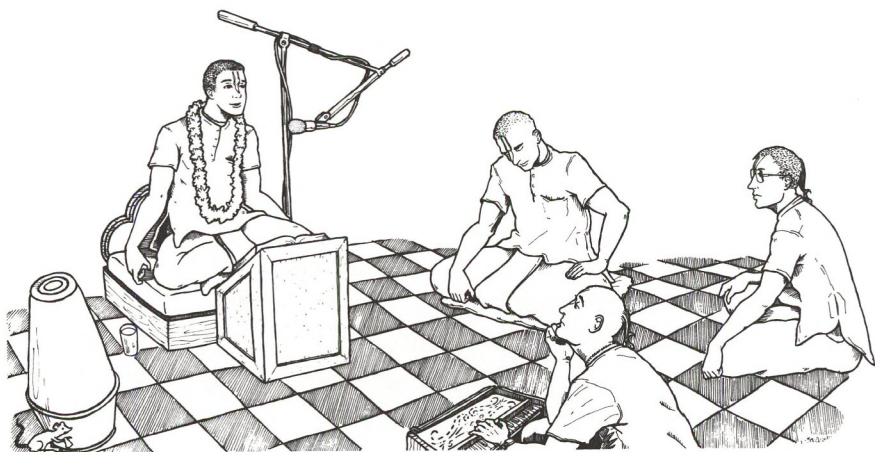
Nimāi read Śrīla Prabhupāda's purport, ending with the words, "Therefore, the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare is the best process for successfully changing one's state of being at the end of one's life."

"In Prabhupāda's introduction to *Bhagavad-gītā*," said Nimāi, "he also refers to this Eighth Chapter verse. Prabhupāda says that if we are to remember Kṛṣṇa at the end of life, we have to do so by practicing during this life. But mostly our thoughts are in the material energy. So the best way to transfer ourselves to the spiritual energy, says Prabhupāda, is to give up mundane literature and to absorb our thinking in the Vedic literature. That's why the sages have given us so many books, such as *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, *Bhagavad-gītā*, and the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*."

Choṭa's ears pricked up. He felt proud to see his preceptor lecturing before many senior devotees and guests. He knew that someone might see Nimāi's speaking manner as shy and a bit faltering,

but Choṭa saw it as natural humility.

"So we have to practice chanting and hearing," said Nīmāi, "while we are well, and then we can pass the test at the end of life. It is stated in the *Bhāgavatam*, *ante nārāyaṇa smṛti*, 'everything will be tested at the time of death.' Prabhupāda once stated that we have a type of disease, which is to think that we may live for a long, long time, as if for hundreds or millions of years. Or we think that we'll never die. We don't think that we're in a predicament like Mahārāja Parikṣit, who heard that he had only seven days to live. But actually our life is jeopardized, and so we should take the opportunity to hear *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* and to chant. Hearing and chanting are the main activities in *bhakti-yoga*, and they will cleanse the heart. So no matter what else may be our prescribed duty, either within the institution or in our homes or business life, we should never minimize our attention to these basics of *śravaṇam kīrtanam*."



Choṭa listened with such rapt attention that he didn't notice how stiffly he held his back and that his tail was twitching. He took a deep breath and tried to relax. He had heard these themes and these exact words in other lectures, but when Nimāi spoke, it had a special influence over Choṭa. It confirmed that he had a spiritual link with Nimāi and that he could benefit very much by submissively hearing from him in *paramparā*. Choṭa was a bit distracted by a buzzing sound in the speakers, but it didn't really matter, because Nimāi was potent, and Choṭa's hearing was ideal.

"The most important quality of chanting is described by Lord Caitanya," said Nimāi, "in His *Sikṣāṣṭakam*. Although Lord Caitanya was the greatest scholar of His time, He wrote only eight verses, and they're all about chanting. Lord Caitanya says, *tr̥nād api sunicena*: 'We should chant constantly by being in a very humble state of mind, thinking ourselves lower than the straw in the street.' And then Lord Caitanya, speaking as a conditioned soul, says that He cannot relish the taste of chanting because of committing offenses to the holy name. Therefore, offenseless chanting is a way of life which we have to follow. We should remind ourselves every morning how to behave so that we don't commit the ten offenses to the holy name. This means to chant our *japa* nicely in the best possible time and condition and to associate with like-minded devotees who also speak and hear about Kṛṣṇa. As stated in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, *satām*

prasaṅgān mama vīrya-saṁvido/bhavanti hr̥t-karṇa-rasāyanāḥ kathāḥ: "In the association of pure devotees, discussion of the pastimes and activities of the Supreme Personality of Godhead is very pleasing and satisfying to the ear and the heart."

Choṭa knew that Nimāi was thinking of him. He thought that this lecture was for him, and he drank it in. It was what he had been waiting for. Choṭa prayed that Nimāi's lecture would go well.

When Nimāi asked if there were any questions, Ārjavam began speaking without raising his hand. "You spoke on the relationship between service and the importance of hearing and chanting. So hasn't Prabhupāda given us a balanced program of sixteen rounds for chanting and attending the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* class for hearing, and that's all we need?"

"Yes," said Nimāi, "but since the scriptures *stress śravaṇam and kīrtanam*, we should know that they don't happen automatically—we have to give them attention and devotion. As for the balance between *śravaṇam, kīrtanam* and other services, that may be different according to different individuals. Prabhupāda has written that out of the ninefold practices of *bhakti*, one may favor particular ones—and that's according to one's individual taste. Each and every one of the processes is so powerful that if a person follows even a single one of them, he can achieve perfection. If we are unable to execute all these different types of devotional service, we must try to execute at least one of them."

Nimāi continued answering questions for about ten minutes. When some of the questioners challenged Nimāi, Choṭa became apprehensive. He felt a pinch of enmity toward the people who challenged, but he was relieved because Nimāi gave the right answers.

Nimāi ended by apologizing. He said there were many senior devotees present, and he hoped that they would forgive his presumption in giving the *Bhagavad-gītā* class and speaking. Someone then asked Nimāi if he could speak a little about his survival ordeal in Canada. Nimāi replied that he had already used up enough time, and he was sure that everyone was eager to take the feast. This remark drew some cheers, which Nimāi took as his final cue to get down from the *vyāsāsana*.

Choṭa saw Nimāi merge into the crowd going to honor *prasādam*, and he knew he wouldn't get much chance to see him again. Choṭa ran to join the mice and tell them about Nimāi's speech, but most of them were busily engaged and didn't have time to hear him.

The next morning, immediately after *maṅgala-ārati*, Nimāi caught sight of Choṭa and signaled that they should meet in the boot room. When Choṭa came before him, he saw that Nimāi was in a sober mood. They both felt sanctified from attending the *maṅgala-ārati* and from the *brahmā-muhūrta* hour.

"I'm ready now," said Nimāi, "to reply to your personal questions." Choṭa nodded and sat up

straight.

"Don't be afraid to be yourself," said Nimāi. "If you are feeling strong desires to intensify your *sādhana*, don't suppress them. They're good desires. One may have to wait many, many lifetimes to have such desires. So don't let your Godbrothers intimidate you by calling you a *bābājī* or whatever. You may not be exactly like them. I was trying to make this point last night in the lecture. We're each individuals, and even in the liberated stage everyone has a very particular *rasa* with Kṛṣṇa. So even now your "*rasa*" should be respected. But you have to start by respecting it yourself. Don't be guilty or wishy-washy. My Gurudeva once said that about me and all the trouble I got into in India—it



was because I was too wishy-washy. Even my Gurudeva went through this soul-searching, and he still does, to find his own place in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. When we were together in the mountains, he told me how he wanted to pray, just like you're doing. And Gurudeva wanted to start a Vaiṣṇava school, and he wants to travel and preach as a *sannyāsī*. He's doing all that now. But

it's an important thing to recognize your way, and it has to come from within. Kṛṣṇa wants our *voluntary* service. I also realized that aside from what others might say or debate, I have my own relationship with my spiritual master. That way, my faith became stronger. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," said Choṭa.

"But I don't think you should abandon your *prabhu-datta-deśa*," said Nimāi. "Do you know the meaning of *prabhu-datta-deśa*?"

"Not really," said Choṭa.

"*Prabhu* means master," said Nimāi, "and *deśa* means land. So *prabhu-datta-deśa* is the land, country, or place that has been given to you by the *guru* or the Lord where you should perform your service. You have a wonderful field in Guyana, which you have developed yourself, and now you also have followers there. I think it's your responsibility to continue there. If not forever, at least it should not be left prematurely. I don't think you should come with me to India. I believe that what I'm saying is what my Gurudeva would also say in your case. You don't have to run all over the world looking for places to hold retreats. You can chant and hear in your *prabhu-datta-deśa*, and the other devotees will learn to accept you. They may not be able to do it themselves, and they may not even approve of what you're doing. But they'll see, 'That's Choṭa's way. That's the way he's serving Kṛṣṇa.'"

"I think it is my way," said Choṭa, "but how can I be sure that it's Kṛṣṇa's way for me?"

"One way to know is by the symptom of satisfaction. When you serve Kṛṣṇa without motivation and without interruption, the symptom is *yenātmā su prasidati*, you feel satisfied. As you feel deep satisfaction by this chanting and hearing, so you'll enter Kṛṣṇa's presence. Besides that, you are asking me and other devotees for confirmation. So you should go ahead and do it, Choṭa. Chant and hear to your heart's content, and at the same time help others. Help them to find their own best way to serve Kṛṣṇa. Just as you have particular tendencies and a kind of calling within Kṛṣṇa consciousness, so others may have a different one, and you have to help them find the strength to follow their own path. You said you wanted to do Kṛṣṇa's will? So Kṛṣṇa says in *Bhagavad-gītā* that the best servant is he who preaches to His devotees. That should be part of your plan, because it's Kṛṣṇa's plan.

"I want to do that, Nimāi Prabhu," said Choṭa. "Recently I've been giving classes in the evening to the mice at 26 Second Avenue. But unless I get regular *sādhana*, I feel like a hypocrite. How can I preach chanting and hearing if I don't do it myself?"

"So do both," said Nimāi. "Just as Lord Caitanya said of Haridāsa, be well-behaved and preach."

Choṭa felt trust in what Nimāi was saying. He felt filled up with assurance. Because it was from Nimāi, Choṭa knew that he could follow these instructions and live by them.

"I feel satisfied now," said Choṭa. "I feel fixed. I

want to go back to Guyana. I want to get involved again. But I'll take time, as much as I need—no matter what they say—to chant and hear."

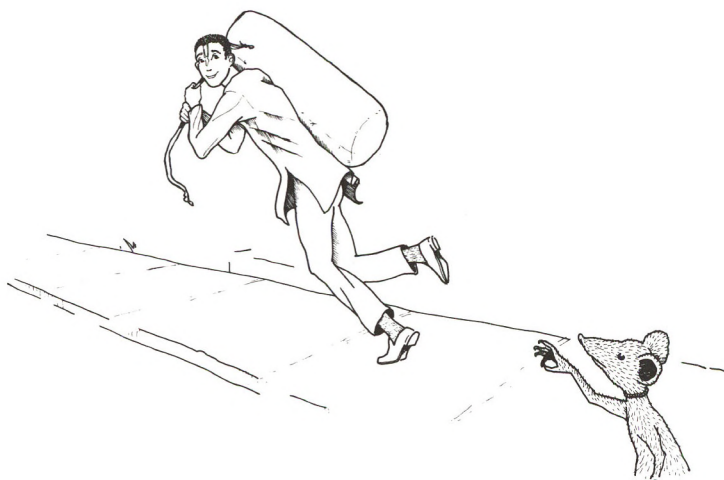
Choṭa stole *prasādam* for Nimāi from the humans' transfer tray. He had never done that for Nimāi before, but he dared to do it, and it made him think of Sudāmā, the poor *brāhmaṇa* friend who pleased the Lord by giving Him a small pack of chipped rice. Choṭa and Śivā-jvara scavenged enough *prasādam* for Nimāi's plane trip. Nimāi kindly accepted it, although he was distracted with last-minute travel arrangements. He had planned to get into the car with the *saṅkīrtana* devotees who were going to the airport to distribute books, but they had left without him. So he would have to go to Manhattan and take the train to the plane.

"How will we keep in touch?" asked Choṭa.

"It's difficult," said Nimāi. "We belong to different species, at least for now. But we're together in heart and instructions. If Kṛṣṇa wants, He can bring us together physically as well. Anyway, I'll probably see you in Guyana. Either my Gurudeva will go there and I'll go with him, or somehow I'll make it down to see you."

"Don't wait *too* long," Choṭa laughed. "We mice don't have a very long life duration."

They parted at the front door of the temple. Nimāi flung his duffle bag onto his shoulder. It was heavy and he staggered.



"You have no coat or hat," said Choṭa.

"I don't need it, I'm going to India," said Nimāi as he stumbled down the street. "*Haribol*, Choṭa!"

Choṭa wished that he could offer help, or that the human beings would drive Nimāi in their car, as they did with their *sannyāsīs* and temple leaders. Choṭa stood watching on the temple step until Nimāi was out of sight. Then he turned back and waited for someone to open the door so that he could scoot inside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The day Nimāi left New York, Choṭa tried to leave by boat to Guyana. But the next departure was not for a week, and so Choṭa decided to use his time by going alone to chant and read. As he said good-bye to Śivā-jvara, he told him that Nimāi had encouraged him to take as much time as needed for chanting and hearing.

Choṭa went to an empty mouse hole in a garage on Long Island, which a friend had provided. There he planned a daily schedule for reading *Kṛṣṇa* book and chanting *japa*. He no longer saw solitude as a frantic escape, but as a regular addition to his life. Neither did he expect that in two or three days he

had to make a dramatic breakthrough in spiritual advancement. Solitude was a normal routine, like eating *prasādam* and breathing. It was a necessary replenishment for his hungry spirit. And so he took to it in a workmanlike, patient way, following the schedule of activities from morning until night.

Because of Nimāi's assurances, Choṭa felt more secure, not only about his solitude, but also in his relationship with Lord Kṛṣṇa. He still had to break through his mental inattentiveness, his tendency for sleepiness, and so many other bad habits, but beneath it all, he felt a simple peace and cheerfulness. There was no doubt about it—reading and chanting alone brought his attention into sharper focus. He *noticed* better what Śrīla Prabhupāda was saying in his books, and he was able to *hear* the Lord's names.

One day while reading, something caught Choṭa's attention in a special way. It was in the *Kṛṣṇa* book narration of Lord Kṛṣṇa's visit to the poor *brāhmaṇa*, Śrutadeva. Lord Kṛṣṇa had expanded Himself into two forms in order to visit two very sincere devotees who lived in Mithila. Thus the Lord simultaneously went to the home of King Bahulāśva and a *brāhmaṇa* named Śrutadeva. The Lord also brought with Him many exalted sages who were all pure devotees. Śrutadeva was himself a pure devotee, described as "very learned, with no other desire than to be fully situated in Kṛṣṇa consciousness." Śrutadeva never took great pains to earn anything for his livelihood; "He was

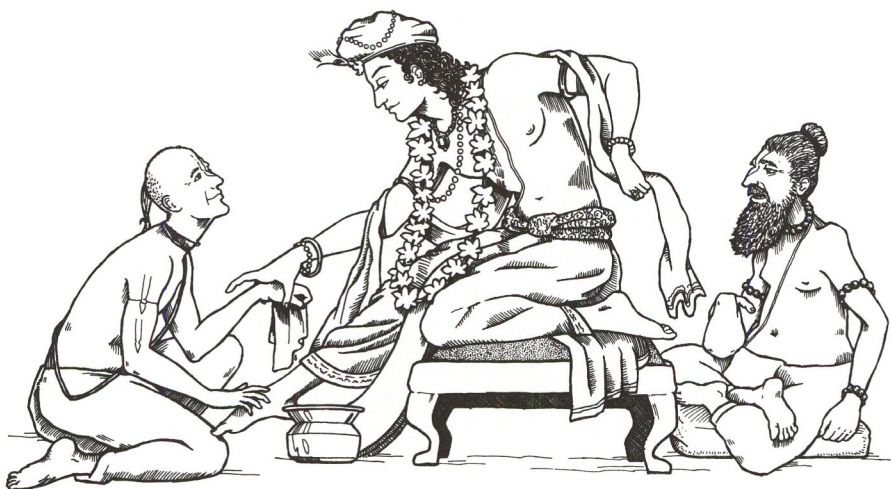
satisfied with whatever he could achieve without much endeavor, and somehow or other he lived in that way." While King Bahulāśva received Lord Kṛṣṇa and the sages in a very opulent and devotional style, Śrutadeva, because of his lack of money, was only able to offer the Lord and the sages simple accommodations, mattresses, wooden planks, straw carpets, and so on. But he welcomed them to the best of his ability. Śrutadeva's wife cooked rice and *dāl*, and Lord Kṛṣṇa's followers were very pleased to accept it, because it was offered with devotion. After his exalted guests were satisfied and sitting back comfortably, the *brāhmaṇa* Śrutadeva began massaging the lotus feet of Lord Kṛṣṇa and offering prayers.

As soon as Choṭa began to read the prayers of Śrutadeva, he became more alert:

My dear Lord [said Śrutadeva], we can appreciate that not only today have You given me Your audience, but You are associating with all living entities as Paramātmā since the beginning of creation.

In his summary study comment, Śrīla Prabhupāda declared that "the statement by the *brāhmaṇa* is very instructive." Śrutadeva was praising the Lord for His entering into the material world as Lord Viṣṇu and sitting in a very friendly attitude in the heart of the conditioned soul. This means that every living entity from the very beginning has the Lord with him, and only due to

mistaken consciousness does he fail to understand it. "When his consciousness, however, is changed into Kṛṣṇa consciousness, he can immediately understand how Kṛṣṇa is trying to assist the conditioned souls to get out of the material entanglement."



Although every word in the *Kṛṣṇa* book is relevant and absolute, these words were particularly what Choṭa wanted to hear. He did not want to study the books looking for a reward, and yet he had a yearning in his heart—he wanted to know that Kṛṣṇa was his friend. So Śrutadeva confirmed it. And as Choṭa took it, *the Lord will be known by a*

devotee who goes alone to read the scriptures and who takes the time to be with Him. Kṛṣṇa wanted this intimate union, and that was why He had come into the heart of the jīva. As stated in the Upaniṣads, the Lord and the individual soul are like two birds in a tree, and the Lord is simply waiting for the jīva bird to turn to Him. Śrutadeva continued to pray:

Thus from the beginning of the conditioned soul's entering into the material world, You are his constant companion. When, therefore, the conditioned soul comes into contact with the pure devotee and takes to devotional service, beginning from the process of hearing Your transcendental pastimes, glorifying Your transcendental activities, worshipping Your eternal form in the temple, offering prayers to You and engaging in discussion to understand Your transcendental position, he gradually becomes freed from the contamination of material existence. His heart becomes cleansed of all material dust, and thus You gradually become visible in the heart of the devotee. Although You are constantly with the conditioned soul, only when he becomes purified by devotional service do You become revealed to him. . . . For one who engages in Your devotional service and purifies his heart by constant chanting of Your holy name, You are easily understood as his eternal constant companion.

Choṭa took this all in a personal way, just like the encouragement Nimāi had given him. There was

no doubt that Kṛṣṇa wanted us to be with Him but that He only reveals Himself to those who are purified "by constant chanting of Your holy name" and by "hearing Your transcendental pastimes." This was the way to clean the heart and to know that Kṛṣṇa is with us, full of bliss, and that He is our protector. Kṛṣṇa would never be revealed, however, to the nondevotee, or to one who didn't take the time to be with Kṛṣṇa. Such a person only sees Kṛṣṇa as Death, who comes to take away his mis-spent life.

"Yes," thought Choṭa, "direct union with Kṛṣṇa is not only allowable, but Kṛṣṇa wants it. He wants us to turn to Him. And I want to do it."

Reading in an exalted mood, Choṭa soon came to the end of Śrutadeva's prayers. He then read Lord Kṛṣṇa's affectionate reciprocation with Śrutadeva. Prabhupāda wrote, "When He heard Śrutadeva's prayers of pure devotion, He was very much pleased and immediately caught his hands and addressed him." Choṭa very much liked the description of the Lord taking Śrutadeva's hands within His own hands. It was also mentioned that the Lord was smiling as He spoke. Choṭa envisioned the scene, and it seemed that Kṛṣṇa was saying to Śrutadeva, "You know the truth about Me, and I also know about you. So now I will tell you something special":

Dear Śrutadeva, all these great sages and saintly persons have been very kind to you by

personally coming here to see you. You should consider this opportunity to be a great fortune for you. They are so kind that they are traveling with Me, and wherever they go they immediately make the whole atmosphere as pure as transcendence simply by the touch of their feet. People are accustomed to go to the temples of God. They also visit holy places of pilgrimage, and by prolonged association with such activities for many days, by touch and by worship, they gradually become purified. But the influence of great sages and saintly persons is so great that by seeing them one immediately becomes completely purified.

Choṭa sensed that Lord Kṛṣṇa had changed the subject, both of Śrutadeva's prayers and also the mood of Choṭa's own reading. The Lord was saying something different than Śrutadeva. And although Śrīla Prabhupada didn't say so directly, it appeared that maybe Lord Kṛṣṇa was restraining Śrutadeva's mood. Choṭa became a little surprised by Lord Kṛṣṇa's words, and he realized that the Lord is not a completely predictable person, but He is independent in whatever He speaks. So as Choṭa had listened submissively to Śrutadeva, he now listened to Lord Kṛṣṇa:

My dear Śrutadeva, if a *brāhmaṇa* remaining self-satisfied, practices austerities, studies the *Vedas* and engages in My devotional service, as is the duty of a *brāhmaṇa*—or in other words, if a *brāhmaṇa* becomes a Vaiṣṇava—how wonderful is his greatness!

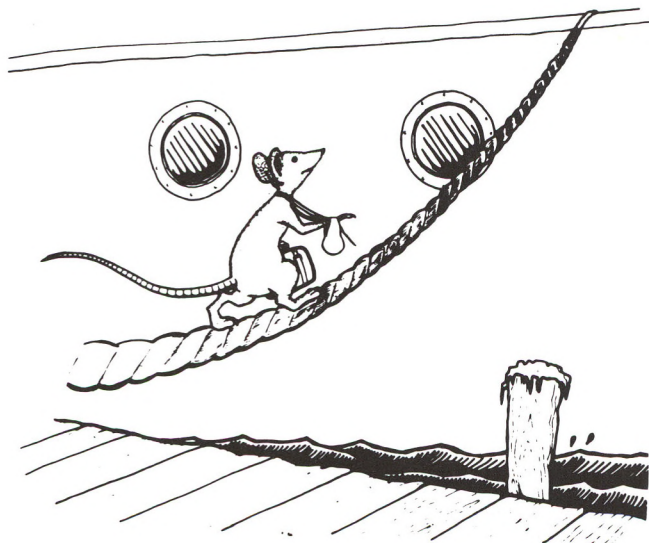
My feature of four-handed Nārāyaṇa is not so pleasing or dear to me as is a *brāhmaṇa* Vaiṣṇava.

As Choṭa understood it, Lord Kṛṣṇa was saying, "Śrutadeva, you have praised Me, but what about these great devotees who are with me? Your attention has been exclusively for Me and not for these sages. Do not neglect them. Just consider their greatness." Since Choṭa had identified so personally with Śrutadeva's mood, he began to rethink whether something was wrong with that mood. Choṭa thought, "Have I neglected the sages? But what sages do I know? Does he mean the sages in *Kṛṣṇa* book or all devotees, big or small? How should I honor them?"

My dear Śrutadeva, you may therefore accept all these great saintly persons, *brāhmaṇas* and sages as my bona fide representatives. By worshiping them faithfully, you will be worshiping Me more diligently. I consider worship of My devotee to be better than direct worship of Me. If someone attempts to worship Me directly without worshiping My devotees, I do not accept such worship, even though it may be presented with great opulence.

Choṭa realized that he himself was supposed to be a sage, or a representative of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa was saying, "Don't just stay in seclusion and worship Me, but be like the sages who are with Me, and

travel to give Kṛṣṇa consciousness to others." That was why the Lord was diverting Śrutadeva's attention from Himself to the sages. One should praise the devotees and realize their greatness, which is that they go everywhere, to purify places and deliver others. They're not interested only in going alone for their own deliverance. Choṭa recalled that Nimāi Prabhu had also said this—the will of Kṛṣṇa is fulfilled by preaching. And now Lord Kṛṣṇa was also saying it as He held the hand of His pure devotee, Śrutadeva, and told him "something special."



The message began to come through in whatever Choṭa read in the *Kṛṣṇa* book. It made him more desirous to read and also increased his desire to share

it. He began to think of all the preaching that he could do in Guyana when he went back. He remembered how his evening classes had been well-received at 26 Second Avenue, and he resolved to speak like that everyday to the devotees wherever he was. Choṭa also prayed to Kṛṣṇa that his periods of solitude would give him strength to do it. No one was going to rob him of his right to be alone with Kṛṣṇa, but he should share what he had learned with others.

When the week of solitude was finished, Choṭa reported to the boat bound for Guyana. It was another freighter. This time, however, he boarded as an ordinary mouse and not as part of a tour group. He didn't have to go incognito.

Glossary

A

ācārya—a spiritual master who teaches by example

anāṛtha—unclean thoughts of the heart

ārati—a ceremony for worshipping the Lord with offerings of incense, ghee lamps, flowers, fans and other paraphernalia

āśrama—the four spiritual orders of life: celibate student, householder, retired life, and renounced life; a dwelling place for spiritual shelter

B

bābājī—one who retires from society to practice solitary prayer and meditation

Bhagavad-gītā—literally, "Song of God"; a discourse between Lord Kṛṣṇa and His devotee Arjuna in which Kṛṣṇa explains devotional service to the Supreme Lord as the ultimate goal of life

bhajana—devotional song glorifying Lord Kṛṣṇa

bhakta—a devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa

bhakti-yoga—linking with the Supreme Lord through devotional service

brahmacārī—celibate student; member of the first order of Vedic society

Brahman—The Absolute Truth; especially the impersonal aspect of the Absolute
brāhmaṇa—a member of the priestly order wise in the *Vedas*, who can guide society

C

Caitanya-caritāmṛta—Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's biography of the life and philosophy of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu

Caitanya Mahāprabhu—the incarnation of Lord Kṛṣṇa who appeared in West Bengal during the 15th century to teach love of God by chanting His holy names, the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra

D

Deity—an authorized form of the Lord made according to regulations in bona fide scripture in order to accept our worship

E

Ekādaśī—a special fast day for increased remembrance of Lord Kṛṣṇa on the eleventh day of both the waxing and waning moon

H

haribol—literally, "chant the name of Hari (Kṛṣṇa)"; often used as a greeting or exclamation among devotees

Haridāsa Ṭhākura—great devotee of Lord Caitanya known as "Nāmācārya" or chief instructor of

chanting the Lord's holy names: Hare Kṛṣṇa
Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare
Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare

J

japa—chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra individually on 108 beads

M

mahāmantra—the great chant for deliverance; the
Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra

maṅgala-ārati—the first auspicious worship service
of the Deity performed at the beginning of
the day (usually 4:15 A.M.)

māyā—illusion; the external energy of the Supreme
Lord which allows the living entity to forget
his original position as a loving servitor of
the Lord, due to his own desires to enjoy
separately from God

P

paramātmā—the Supersoul or the form of the Lord
who resides in the heart of all living entities

paramparā—the chain of spiritual masters in
disciplic succession

prasādam—literally, "the Lord's mercy"; food or
other items which have been sanctified by
being offered to the Lord

prema—pure love of God

pūjārī—priest who serves and worships the Deity

purī—deep-fried bread

R

Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa—Lord Kṛṣṇa and His eternal consort,
Rādhārāṇī
rasa—mood or "mellow" of service between a
devotee and Kṛṣṇa

S

śāstra—revealed scripture
śravaṇaṁ-kīrtanaṁ—the devotional processes of
hearing and chanting about the Lord
Śrīla Prabhupāda—His Divine Grace A.C.
Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, founder-
ācārya of the International Society for
Krishna Consciousness
Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam—Vedic scripture composed by
Vyāsadeva to describe and explain Lord
Kṛṣṇa's pastimes
Śukadeva Gosvāmī—sage who originally
spoke *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* to Mahārāja
Parikṣit just prior to the king's death

T

Tulasī—sacred plant dear to Lord Kṛṣṇa and
worshiped by His devotees

I would like to thank the following friends and
disciples who have helped to produce and print this
book:

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