

# Nimāi dāsa and the Mouse

A Fable

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami

Persons interested in the subject matter of this book are invited to correspond with our secretary, c/o GN Press, Inc., PO Box 323, Mifflin, PA 17058.

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*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne  
brāhmaṇe gavi hastini  
śuni caiva śva-pāke ca  
paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinah*

—*Bhagavad-gītā* 5.18

"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 [outcaste]."

"Some of Hans Christian Andersen's best tales are understood at two levels, by the child and by the grown-up person. Andersen himself once explained that his tales 'were told for children, but the grown-up person should be allowed to listen as well.'"

(from the Introduction to *Eighty Fairy Tales*, by Hans Christian Andersen)

To my spiritual master, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, who is not only the founder-*ācārya* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and also *jagat-guru*, as well as the author of the most important books for humanity (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Nectar of Devotion*, etc.) but who was also the most charming story teller. May he be pleased to accept this humble offering which was executed in his service.

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## *An Explanation to the Reader*

Fiction is something new to the members of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, but there are precedents in the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*. The most significant modern example is Bhaktivinoda Thākura's novel, *Jaiva Dharma*, which some consider to be also his masterpiece of philosophical dissertation. Sanātana Gosvāmī's great work *Śrī Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛtam* is also Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy expressed in novel form. And now a few novels have been written by followers of Śrīla Prabhupāda, and fictional satire has appeared in *Back to Godhead* magazine.

*Nimāi dāsa and the Mouse* is a fable in which the make-believe content is explicit and obvious to the reader. There is also a precedent for fables in Vedic culture. The *Hitopadeśa* is an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories, usually involving birds and beasts speaking, and filled with wise council in politics, religion and morality, similar to the sayings of Cānakya Paṇḍita. Apparently, *Aesop's Fables* are based on the *Hitopadeśa*.

There are also a few fables in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* is mostly *not* fable, and when "animals" like Hanumān, Garuḍa, and Gajendra speak, we understand that they are actual devotees in advanced spiritual consciousness. But in the Eighth Canto, King Yayāti tells a fable of a he-goat and a she-goat. He says, "The best of the he-goats, attracted by the many she-goats, engaged in erotic



activities and naturally forgot his real business of self realization." There is a similar story told by a *brāhmaṇa* in the Eleventh Canto, about a family of birds. The male bird returned home to the tree and found that his wife and children had been captured by a hunter. At first he thought to try to save them, but then he decided not to enter the trap. While telling this story one time, Prabhupāda said, "And so the male bird thought, 'Let me take *sannyāsa*.'" The devotees were charmed to hear Prabhupāda tell it that way, and no one was dull enough to ask, "But Prabhupāda, how could a bird take *sannyāsa*?"

There is even a fable of a mouse who approached a sage and asked for benedictions (*punar muṣika bhava*—"again become a mouse"). *Nimāi dāsa and the Mouse* is not a short fable, but novel length, and it is also not so pointed in its didactic moral as the ancient fables.

One may ask, "What is the place of fiction in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness?" Some devotees may be perplexed, but as the Kṛṣṇa conscious culture evolves and expands in the world, I think that devotees must realize that fiction is as fine a preaching technique as the essay. Fiction can give Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy an experiential quality that most nōnfiction cannot. As with diary writing, fiction centers on an individual's experience. But unlike the journal, it is not dependent upon the one view of the journal writer. The author can assume many voices. And as the point of view broadens, so does the possibility of a story. No longer is the writer restricted to literal experience, but can range as far as the imagination will take him.

Fiction can be a versatile preaching medium because of its ability to draw the reader in and permit him to experience a life he might not otherwise have access to. So in addition to conveying Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy, fiction can absorb the reader in the experiential potency of devotional life. One is reminded of Śrīla Prabhupāda's remark about Kṛṣṇa conscious theater: While watching a dramatic performance of a scene from the book *KṚṢṆA, The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, Prabhupāda said that watching the performance was better than reading the book.

Fiction also has potency to draw a class of non-devotees who have previously been difficult to reach. Fiction is subtle; it entangles the reader and forces him to walk in the shoes of the characters in the book, and in this way it can afford nondevotees a chance to look at devotional life, and ISKCON in particular, without prejudice. In this way we can depict the inexplicable mellows of spiritual life; and give nondevotees a chance to develop a taste for Kṛṣṇa consciousness. As for devotees, fiction can clearly instruct us in the art of taking association with devotees, developing friendships, and being more personal in our dealings with fellow devotees. All in all, fiction can be a vital form of preaching, and we may all look forward to the advance of Kṛṣṇa conscious novelists.

I would like to address some questions I have had to face while writing *Nimāi dāsa and the Mouse* and sequels to that story. I have already explained to some extent why we may create an imaginary character of a devotee in a fictional setting in order to



glorify Kṛṣṇa as we would in the essay, but with some new opportunities through fiction. In fiction, therefore, the characters are imaginary, but usually the situation is entirely based on realistic life. It should also carry conclusions of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. But, "Is it all right to describe something that didn't actually take place historically?"

This question had to be answered in the dramatic works recently produced by my Godbrother Tamal Krishna Goswami. In his plays about Lord Jagannātha and Śrīla Prabhupāda, he made some alterations in history. The author first did extensive research and questioned all available authorities in Vaiṣṇavism before he proceeded. The consensus he received was that a Vaiṣṇava author may sometimes depart from historical incident in telling his story or dramatic play, provided that the *rasa*, or the mood of appreciating Kṛṣṇa, is always proper in line with the authorities of *guru*, *śāstra* and *sādhū*. In the case of liberated Vaiṣṇava authors like Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura and Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura, we cannot say that their descriptions are "imaginary." When Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura describes an extended dialogue between Lord Caitanya and Haridāsa Ṭhākura, or when Viśvanātha Cakravartī, in his commentary to the Tenth Canto of *Bhāgavatam*, gives extended "new" dialogues between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and when Rūpa Gosvāmī does the same, we understand that they are actually meditating on the *līlā* of Kṛṣṇa, and it is being revealed to them from the spiritual platform. Because the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa are unlimited, when the pure devotee meditates upon Kṛṣṇa, that meditation is also

in the dimension of transcendental reality.

The subject of the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa is a deeper one than I need to get into in my present discussion. In the “Nimāi” stories, there is no treatment of *kṛṣṇa-līlā* per se. But I wanted to explain why I have taken so seriously the make-believe story of a devotee and a mouse. Many readers will not need this explanation and may even see it as a too-apologetic disclaimer. In a sense the explanation is anti-poetic. But because some devotee readers may be perplexed, and because one has to be very strict to follow the *sampradāya*, I wish to offer these further explanations.

One reason I have taken the character Nimāi so seriously is because his fancy or fantasy is similar to my own. In addition to a more public life that I share with co-workers in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, and in my interaction with nondevotees, I have a private life or “little world” of my own. And I think everyone is like this. Some of my private desires are to want to write and publish Kṛṣṇa conscious books. I also like to be alone, and I am also trying to pray to Lord Kṛṣṇa and my spiritual master, which is a very individual relationship I have with the Lord and His pure devotee. There are also very personal things I do, such as write poems. One hopes that his own little world is not a mere fancy, but that it has an objective importance. In fact, one usually feels that his individuality is something special, although the world keeps telling him that there is nothing special about him. Yet we all continue to think that there is something special about us. And spiritually, according to Vaiṣṇava philosophy, we are each very special persons to



Kṛṣṇa.

One hopes that he can improve his individual vision of specialness and purify it to the point where Kṛṣṇa and the pure devotee will accept it. In this case, I feel I am somewhat like my character Nimāi, who people think of as a little eccentric. Nimāi has a special fancy, a spiritual relationship "with mice." With this fictional character and his fictional relationship with Choṭa, I am able to express things about myself and the world which I could not express otherwise.

Authors and critics have also noted that a writer is responsible for "hidden messages" which may appear in his works. Even though he may not advocate certain activities, he does have a responsibility for how these may affect readers. So someone may ask me whether I am advocating that a devotee should try to communicate with animals, or am I asserting literally that the devotee Nimāi does talk to a mouse? Do I intend it to be taken as a hallucination? And if it is just make-believe, then what is the importance of it? My answer to these questions is that the Nimāi stories are fables, and they are not intended to be taken as reality. In the fable, imaginary things happen "normally." As explained above regarding the powers of fiction, it is my hope that this fictional form will capture the readers' attention, and through this medium I can express Kṛṣṇa consciousness in a very personal way for my own purification, and in a way I hope will affect the devotees and nondevotees.

I therefore take the story of the boy and the mouse very seriously. But it is not intended to be historical reality. My wish is that the readers will

sympathize with this character in their imaginations. What I am asking is nothing less than what any author asks of his readers. Perhaps in this case the difference is that the characters are not only fictional, but extraordinary—a boy with the ability to communicate and talk with mice. As far as that is concerned, it is possible. But it is a fable. It is fiction with Kṛṣṇa conscious themes. And therefore it has a Kṛṣṇa conscious *siddhānta*. More than this I cannot say. I am praying to purify this art, and present it for the pleasure of the readers in an attempt to serve my spiritual master.



# NIMĀI DĀSA AND THE MOUSE

## CHAPTER 1

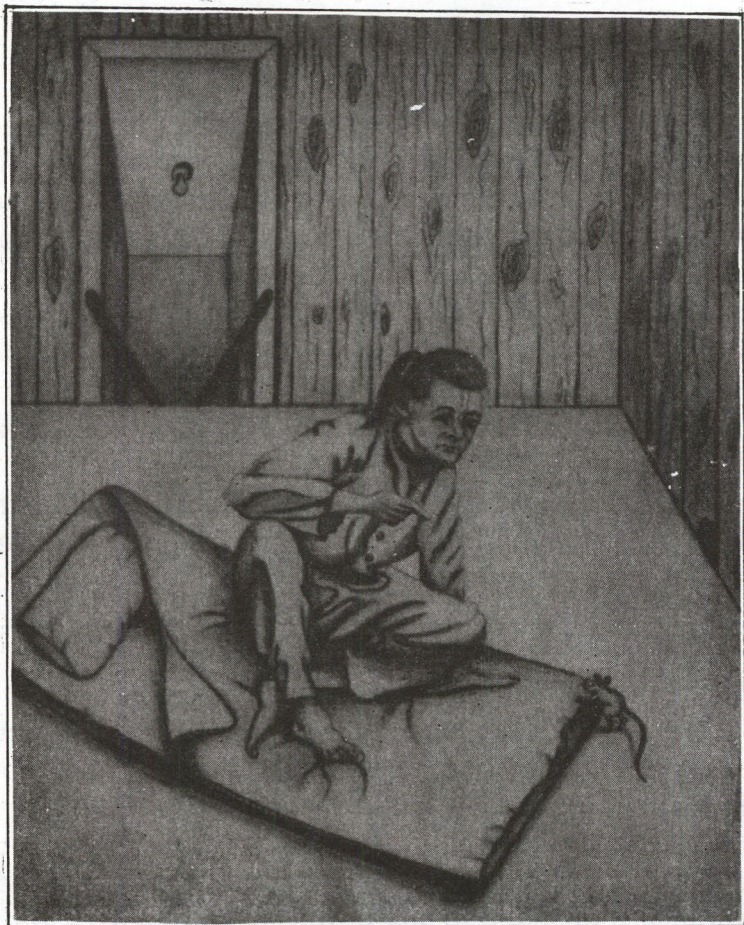
Nimāi dāsa was very surprised when the mouse began to speak to him in perfectly good English. At first he couldn't believe it. But in this strange material world anything is possible! And there was no doubt about it: the mouse had spoken.

Actually it was Nimāi dāsa who had spoken first to the mouse. He had been feeling dejected when he came up to his attic room. When the mouse appeared, Nimāi blurted, "Hare Kṛṣṇa! What are you looking for, *prasādam*?"

The mouse, who was small, gray, and nervous in its movements, had replied in a small squeaky voice, "What's *prasādam*?" Nimāi was startled; he looked around. Usually he had the room to himself. Had someone heard him speaking and answered as a joke? But no, the room was empty as usual.

Nimāi sat down expecting the mouse to flee. The auditory hallucination, or whatever it was, had snapped Nimāi away from his dejection. For the time being he forgot that Vibhu dāsa, the temple president, had just told him that he would not recommend Nimāi as a husband to any of the *brahmacārī*nīs. Vibhu said that Nimāi was too irresponsible to become a *grhastha*. When he heard that, Nimāi had walked away without a word and come up to the little attic space above the *brahmacārī āśrama* . . .

The mouse squeaked again, "What's *prasādam*?" and looked up to Nimāi with an earnest face.



Nimāi felt a stirring desire to preach. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he thought that he should answer what seemed like a bona fide inquiry.

"*Prasādam* is food that's been offered to Kṛṣṇa," said Nimāi. And he added, "The Supreme Personality of Godhead."



"How is it that you can talk?" asked Nimāi. Nimāi was now sitting on his sleeping bag on the floor and the mouse was poised respectfully a few feet in front of him. It twitched its whiskers and sniffed at the floor and replied, "I don't know."

Nimāi flashed on the idea that maybe this mouse, which was after all a spirit soul in a mouse body, had some unusual *karmā* and was therefore living in Rādhā-Dāmodara's temple in the association of devotees. Maybe . . .

Suddenly there were heavy footfalls on the stairs, the door swung open—and the mouse ran for shelter through a crack in the boards.

"Hey, Nimāi!" it was Bhīma dāsa. "I heard that Vibhu dāsa just gave you the sauce, huh?" Bhīma dāsa patted Nimāi on the shoulder. "What's the matter? You look like you saw a ghost or something."

Nimāi thought of telling Bhīma dāsa about the mouse, but he decided not to. Who would believe it? They would just laugh and call him crazy. In fact, they already did. They called him Nimāi the Gnome and "eccentric," and someone had said, "He is a sincere devotee, but a little strange."

"Just be patient, Prabhu," said Bhīma dāsa. "Smaller than a blade of grass, more tolerant than a tree, right? If you can't find a wife, that could be Kṛṣṇa's blessing." Bhīma then suggested that it was getting late and they should take rest in order to get up on time for *maṅgala-ārati*.

After Bhīma left, Nimāi kept the light on looking to see if the mouse would come back. But when

nothing happened after ten minutes, he turned out the light. Whatever had actually happened, he still had to get up at 3:00 A.M. to start his *japa* and morning duties.

When Nimāi dāsa woke the next morning, he wondered whether he had actually spoken with a mouse. Nimāi was not an initiated *brāhmaṇa*, but he assisted the *pūjārīs* in preparing the plates for Rādhā-Dāmodara before *maṅgala-ārati*. He then attended the *ārati kīrtana* with the other devotees, although as usual, they could not induce him to dance. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his hooded sweat-shirt and reverently looked upon Their Lordships.

During the *japa* period, his mind was filled with distractions, especially the temple president's rejection of him as a candidate for marriage. Neither could he forget the squeaky voice, "What's *prasādam*?" While circumambulating Tulasī and trying to chant *japa*, Nimāi prayed, "My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, my dear spiritual master, in a state like this, how can I pay attention to Your holy names?"

That morning the *Bhāgavatam* class was given by a visiting *sannyāsī*. In the course of his lecture he mentioned that Lord Caitanya could induce even the lions, tigers, and elephants to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. When the *sannyāsī* finished and asked for questions, Nimāi dāsa raised his hand.

"Mahārāja," Nimāi asked, "is it possible for an animal to become Kṛṣṇa conscious?" Nimāi had a reputation for asking "mental" or odd questions, although they didn't seem odd to Nimāi.

"Yes, in extraordinary circumstances," the



*sannyāsī* replied. "Lord Caitanya once blessed a dog that had also been favored by the Lord's devotee Śivānanda Sena. And that dog soon went back to Godhead. There is also the example of a snake living in the cave of Haridāsa Ṭhākura to whom the Lord in the heart spoke, and then the snake left the cave so as not to disturb Haridāsa."

"Can I ask more?" Nimāi asked hesitantly. "Your examples are of a great devotee blessing an animal. But could an animal take birth, say in a temple, and have remembrance of living in that temple before?" Some of the devotees in the audience exchanged looks, indicating that Nimāi was up to his old tricks.

"Yes, that's possible," the *sannyāsī* answered soberly. "Prabhupāda has said that those people who live in skyscrapers and try to "lick them up" in sense gratification may be born next life in the same building, not as humans, but as rats! He has also said that people who are very attached to their country, and who want to be Americans next time, may take birth in this land, but as cows to be slaughtered."

"But is it possible," asked Nimāi, "that the soul could continue his higher consciousness even in the animal's life?"

"Only if he was a great soul," said the *sannyāsī*. "The prominent example is Mahārāja Bharata, who had to take birth as a stag, but who kept the higher consciousness and associated only with *sādhus*." The *sannyāsī* looked around the room for other questions, but Nimāi spoke out again.

"Just one more question, Mahārāja," he said. A few of the women giggled and other devotees smiled

tolerantly, a bit embarrassed that the visiting *sannyāsī* was getting such a full dose of their Nimāi dāsa. "What if," Nimāi asked, "a soul was born in an animal's body because he deserved that lower species? Would it then be possible for him to have any relationship with a human devotee?" Devotees burst out laughing. Nimāi blushed.

"I don't think I can answer a question like that," the *sannyāsī* said. "We should not be so interested in animals, Prabhu. Our duty is to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the human beings. Those human beings who are like hogs, dogs, camels, and asses don't listen to the *Bhāgavatam* message, but we have to preach to them. We can give them books. We should try more to distribute Prabhupāda's books, and this would be better than speculating about the position of animals."

This remark brought a responsive "Jaya" from some of the men, and Nimāi took it as another dig at him. He suddenly realized how foolish he must have sounded.

During the rest of the morning program, Nimāi received a few more jibes for his unusual questions. In reply he nodded silently, although smiling. He was thinking, "There is another reference in the *Bhāgavatam* about this."

After breakfast he went up to his attic room and took down the Second Canto, where he seemed to remember something in the *catur-śloka* about animals receiving Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Wasn't there a purport which described Kṛṣṇa consciousness as so liberal that all creatures in the universe can take to it? He



finally found this:

Therefore the devotional service of the Lord with perfect knowledge through the training of a bona fide spiritual master is advised for everyone, even if one happens not to be a human being. This is confirmed in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa* as follows:

*kīṭa-pakṣi-mṛgānām ca  
harau sannyasta-cetasām  
ūrdhvām eva gatim manye  
kim punar jñāninām nṛṇām*

“Even the worms, birds and beasts are assured of elevation to the highest perfectional life if they are completely surrendered to the transcendental loving service of the Lord, so what to speak of the philosophers amongst the human beings.”

—*Bhāg. 2.9.36*, purport

As Nimāi closed the book and sat back thoughtfully, the same mouse came forward from the floorboards and crept slowly before him.

It squeaked, “Who is Kṛṣṇa?”

Nimāi was thrilled. He felt a rush of compassion.

“I’ll tell you,” he said. What Nimāi had asked in class and what the *sannyāsī* had replied seemed theoretical compared to this moment. To Nimāi, it no longer seemed urgent to know “who” the mouse was or why it was able to talk. It had asked a glorious question, and Nimāi dāsa felt obliged to reply.

Nimāi said, “You have asked a very wonderful question. It is stated in the scripture *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* that to answer this question is the perfection of speaking and hearing. I am not very qualified to answer, but I can tell you what I have

read in Prabhupāda's books, which are the perfect source of information about Kṛṣṇa. So try to listen with attention."

The mouse positioned itself comfortably on its haunches and tried to compose the movements of its claws and tail. Its ears were perked outward.

Although the mouse directly asked, "Who is Kṛṣṇa?" Nimāi dāsa thought it best to begin with the Lord's teachings in the Second Chapter of *Bhagavad-gītā*, regarding the identity of the self. This would be particularly relevant for the mouse. Nimāi was eager to use the verses he had memorized, beginning with *dehino 'smin yathā dehe . . .* And so he proceeded logically, describing the transmigration of the soul through the different species. With preacher's instinct, Nimāi dāsa tried to catch the mouse's attention and observe whether it was hearing submissively. Nimāi gave the analogy of a person changing garments that wear out, but then he thought the mouse might not be able to relate to that. So he stressed that all living beings are spirit soul and all are equal. Only due to *karma* do we have different situations where someone is in the body of a human, someone in the body of a dog and someone in the body of a mouse.

After about half an hour, the mouse lost its power of attention and began twitching its nose and running back and forth like an ordinary mouse, as if forgetting the purpose of life. Nimāi dāsa was alarmed at these symptoms. He wanted to nurture whatever trust he had already developed, and so he gently advised the mouse that they should end their discussion and take it up another time. The mouse did not



Speak further, but seemed to nod in agreement. Nimāi then suggested that they could meet for half-hour intervals twice a day, morning and night.

And so in the days that followed they continued to meet as before. The mouse appeared regularly and was always submissive and attentive, as far as was in its power. It continued to ask questions which were short and simple, and yet with a pure and penetrating manner. For example, at the start of the third session, the mouse asked Nimāi, "But how can a soul become free of the body's demands?"

Nimāi was accustomed to being the lesser in his relationships with people, and he took well to the fact that the mouse was subordinate and dependent on him. He tried to treat it kindly. By patiently inquiring, Nimāi dāsa gradually learned some personal details of his new friend. The mouse told him that he was a male, relatively young, and that he came from a large family. He would not say where he lived exactly, except that it was "somewhere in the temple." The mouse had no interest in the subject of his previous lives, nor did Nimāi care much about it. Nimāi thought of past-life research as Shirley MacLaine stuff, and anyway, what did it matter? Whatever this soul had been before, it was now in a mouse body and now he was interested in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

The mouse was reluctant to talk about his family and home life. But when Nimāi inquired about his eating habits, he admitted that most of their food came from the temple kitchen. Nimāi then explained the principle of eating *prasādam* rather than *bhoga*. The mouse was impressed and squeaked with joy when



Nimāi said that he would personally supply *prasādam* for the mouse. Since the mouse's relationship with his family seemed delicate, Nimāi did not pursue the idea that the mouse might bring *prasādam* to his family members.

Within a few days, the mouse was chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. Nimāi even gave him a name, Choṭa dāsa—"So I can call you," Nimāi said.

Nimāi kept the relationship a secret, but the devotees noticed a great change in him. He was usually morose and irritable, but now he was bright-faced and jolly. He even began dancing in the *kīrtanas*, and one time, when one of the *brāhmaṇas* was ill, Nimāi volunteered and gave the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* lecture. He became enthusiastic to describe the glories of the holy name and the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. While working at his temple duties or cleaning the grounds, he would spontaneously say to other devotees, "The glories of the holy name are so great we can't even imagine! Kṛṣṇa has such power to liberate us! We should all preach His glories!" This behavior was certainly surprising because Nimāi had a reputation for being a wallflower. He never liked to go out on *hari-nāma* and usually found some excuse to avoid it. He also avoided going to college lectures or speaking to guests who came to the temple. If he did speak to a guest, it usually turned out unfavorably, with Nimāi becoming irritable and argumentative.

But now he was a changed man, an asset to the community. Vibhu Prabhu asked Nimāi how he had become so inspired. Nimāi smiled and said, "It's just Kṛṣṇa's mercy."

Vibhu said, "If you keep on progressing like this, maybe I can recommend you to get married." Nīmāi laughed with shining eyes, "If I keep up like this, maybe I won't have to get married!"



## CHAPTER 2

Nimāi had twinges of conscience about the fact that no one knew what he was doing. It made him wonder whether his preaching was bona fide. Of course, he knew it was. His relationship with Choṭa dāsa was an unmotivated spiritual friendship. But because it was so unusual, it sometimes led Nimāi to speculate. Was he specially empowered? Should he tell others to try it?

The scriptures clearly state that if one has any doubt, he should approach his spiritual master. Even Lord Caitanya, when He felt ecstatic symptoms of love of God, thought that maybe He was going mad, and so He placed the matter before His spiritual master, Īśvara Purī. Nimāi therefore decided that he should confer with his initiating spiritual master, Śrīla Gurudeva.

Gurudeva lived in his own little house on the temple grounds. He was a senior disciple of Śrīla Prabhupāda, and he had initiated hundreds of his own disciples in different places of the world. He often traveled, but he was now observing *cāturmāsyā* at the farm, and so it was a good chance for Nimāi to go see him.

It took a few days for Nimāi to get an interview through his *guru's* secretary. The last time he had spoken with his Gurudeva was concerning a fight between Nimāi and some of the devotees. Nimāi knew that the temple president sometimes complained to Gurudeva about Nimāi, and that was why it took a long time for Nimāi to get initiated—why he hadn't



yet received second initiation, even though he had been a devotee for five years. And so their relationship wasn't perfectly harmonious, although Nimāi had an abiding faith that his spiritual master was a genuine link to Prabhupāda and the Gauḍīya-sampradāya.



The spiritual master sat on a cushion behind a low desk, and his disciple Nimāi dāsa sat on the floor, facing him. Gurudeva was almost fifty years old;

Nimāi was half that age, and, of course, Nimāi was a much less experienced devotee.

"What did you want to see me about?" asked Gurudeva.

Nimāi opened his mouth but then looked down at the floor. He realized this wasn't going to be easy. He began to bring it out gradually, so as not to cause a shock of disbelief.

"I have been having some unusual experiences lately," said Nimāi. "I mean, spiritual experiences."

"I see," said Gurudeva. "Do you want to describe them?" Gurudeva had already begun to categorize what Nimāi was saying. As spiritual master to over six hundred disciples, Gurudeva had had many dealings with his devotees, in person, by letter, and in hearing reports from their authorities. Gurudeva had already encountered many cases of "unusual spiritual behavior." One of his disciples had been put in prison, and when he was released he told Gurudeva that Lord Caitanya had visited him in his cell and smiled and encouraged him. Another devotee, a young girl, confided in Gurudeva that one day, while riding with the other devotees in a van, she had suddenly seen the Universal Form of Kṛṣṇa, and after that Kṛṣṇa had appeared before her as a small child with Mother Yaśodā. At first, Gurudeva had been completely cynical to these reports, and he even told one of the devotees that his experience was bogus. But as he dealt with more cases, Gurudeva became cautious. He decided that he should be careful not to commit an offense towards his own disciples, who after all were devotees of Kṛṣṇa. He didn't want to become a cyni-



cal priest as he had read about in the lives of the saints, a religious leader who disbelieves the miraculous visions of devotees who later turn out to be saints. He didn't want to go down in history as another fool and nonbeliever. So although Gurudeva didn't really have much faith in the visions reported by his disciples, he wanted to play it safe. He had developed some insight into how to deal with such situations.

"Let me just tell you straight, Gurudeva," said Nimāi, "and you can judge for yourself. I don't want to do anything that's not authorized. A few weeks ago, I said some things about Kṛṣṇa to a little mouse that stays in the attic above the *brahmacārī āśrama*. And he actually spoke to me."

Gurudeva suddenly felt thirsty. He reached for his silver drinking chalice and began drinking water the way Prabhupāda did, holding the chalice above his lips and letting the water pour into his mouth.

Nimāi stared fervently at his spiritual master, waiting for a response.

Gurudeva said, "Go ahead."

"So, since then I've been preaching to this creature, and he actually responds. I know it must sound incredible—and I probably would find it hard to believe if somebody told me—but it's actually true. And also there is some proof in Vedic literatures, like in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa*, that even creatures like worms and insects, and I suppose mice, can hear the message of Kṛṣṇa from a bona fide—ah... can hear the message of Kṛṣṇa from a devotee."

"What were you about to say just then?" asked

Gurudeva. "You were about to say a mouse can receive the message from a bona fide spiritual master?"

"Well, I don't think of myself as a spiritual master," said Nimāi. "I am just telling him what I heard from you and what I read in Prabhupāda's books." Since he was not completely sure of himself, Gurudeva decided to encourage him. He was also aware that in recent weeks his disciple Nimāi had much improved in his behavior.

"I'll tell you what I think, Nimāi," said Gurudeva. "I think you should keep this to yourself. I can't say for sure exactly what you are experiencing. Sometimes devotees have special experiences, and I think there is even a letter where a devotee said he thought he was having some special reciprocation with the Deity in the temple, and Prabhupāda advised him to keep it to himself. So the main thing I would advise you is to just be very humble and go on with your duties. Don't become too distracted by this special talking. Your main business is to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and to hear Vedic knowledge and to serve with the devotees." Gurudeva thought of adding, "And if it's some craziness, it may just pass with time." But he didn't say that. He began instead to advise Nimāi in a general way not to be puffed up about having special experiences. "If we think we are better than other devotees, we'll be guilty of false pride."

Nimāi dāsa nodded respectfully, taking in the instructions of his spiritual master. In one sense he felt that Gurudeva was avoiding the issue, but then he tried not to question the *guru's* authority. His Gurudeva no doubt had reasons for speaking in this way,



and Nimāi tried to hear what he was saying. "Actually," Nimāi thought, "my spiritual master is hitting on the heart of the situation by advising me to be humble."

When his meeting with Gurudeva was over and Nimāi was walking alone back to the temple, he began to feel even better about what his spiritual master had said. Gurudeva had not said that he believed and approved of his preaching to Choṭa dāsa, and in fact he hadn't even let him tell much more about it. But the important thing was he didn't forbid it. "So indirectly," Nimāi thought, "he has authorized what I am doing. And he put me in my place by telling me to be humble. He even spotted my mentality of trying to act as a *guru* towards Choṭa dāsa. I can't be a *guru*, except maybe something like a *vartma-pradarsaka guru*." As Nimāi walked on, his thoughts turned to his next meeting with Choṭa dāsa. He would try to be more humble, but at the same time, now that he had consulted with his spiritual master, he would try to be more responsible to take on this work. No one else took it seriously, and perhaps no one else could really understand. "It is somehow Kṛṣṇa's arrangement," Nimāi thought, "that I should do this humble work. Who knows, some time in the future, if I can develop this preaching more, I might convince Gurudeva to take it seriously, and I can even introduce him to Choṭa dāsa." By the time he reached the attic room, Nimāi dāsa was infused with the missionary spirit and eager to talk about Kṛṣṇa. He shut the door, sat down, and called softly toward the crack in the floor, "Choṭa dāsa! Choṭa dāsa!"

The relationship between Nimāi and the mouse was like nectar. In many ways, the mouse was an ideal disciple. Nimāi convinced Choṭa dāsa to bathe twice daily, which was more than Nimāi himself bathed. He also taught the mouse to count a quota (by a method of pushing pieces of straw) for chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*. Nimāi decided that four rounds daily was sufficient for a start. Nimāi continued to teach from the text of *Bhagavad-gītā*, and he also told whatever stories he could remember about heroes and devotees from the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. Nimāi liked to tell Choṭa about little creatures, such as the bird who tried to empty the ocean while looking for its eggs and the spider who helped Lord Rāmacandra to build a bridge to Lanka. Not only did Choṭa learn the rudiments of Vaiṣṇava philosophy, but he also began to manifest Vaiṣṇava-like traits.

One time, Nimāi had come to the attic in a grumpy mood, after having been teased by one of the devotees. It was easy to get a rise from Nimāi. This was done mostly by the school children and teenagers, who called him "Nimāi-fry" and "Nimāi knucklehead." But one day when Choṭa dāsa noticed his instructor's sour demeanor, he asked what was wrong. Nimāi confessed that someone had been calling him names.

"Be tolerant," said Choṭa dāsa. "Isn't that what Lord Caitanya said? 'Think yourself lower than the straw in the street, more tolerant than the tree, and in that way you can always chant Hare Kṛṣṇa.'"



Nimāi smiled on hearing the encouraging words from his own pupil. He is not merely a pupil, thought Nimāi, but a friend.

Despite occasional dips in his moods, Nimāi was happier since he had begun instructing Choṭa dāsa. Many of the devotees also opened up into more friendly exchanges with Nimāi. While he was chanting merrily in the kitchen one day, Sūrya dāsī glanced at Nimāi in a charming way. Unfortunately, this one glance melted Nimāi dāsa just as butter melts in a hot pan. He at once lost whatever resolve he had about not getting married. And he remembered how much he liked Sūrya dāsī. After that glance, he kept thinking of her, and when he saw her his affection grew. She was so pretty!

Sūrya dāsī was the girl that Nimāi wanted to marry, but he had been turned down by her parents and by the temple president. He never heard for sure what her opinion was. But as soon as she had shown him a friendly glance, he knew that his feeling for her had never changed. She was sixteen years old, recently graduated from the *gurukula*, and now working in the kitchen and also assisting the *pūjārīs* along with Nimāi. Out of all the girls and women, her *sārīs* always looked the best; she was most attractive, with her clinking bracelets, her youthful body, and especially her smiles.

Then Nimāi had a brilliant idea. He decided to tell Sūrya about Choṭa dāsa. He would bring her to the room and call out Choṭa and have him talk to her! She would really be impressed with Nimāi after that. She would be amazed and look at him with awe. She

was a sensitive person and worthy to be included in the secret. He and she could share it as their secret, and it would bind them together. Nimāi day-dreamed of Sūrya dāsī looking at him with deep admiration while he asked her if she would marry him. He imagined she replied, “Yes,” and then. . . .

When they were alone in the kitchen Nimāi asked her, “Excuse me, Sūrya Prabhu? I wonder if you could come up to the attic room for a minute to look at the Gaura-Nitāi Deities there. They could use a little touch-up with paint, and I thought you might advise me how to go about it.” Sūrya agreed. Nimāi dāsa rationalized that it was all right to take her up to the attic room because it wasn’t really part of the *brahmacārī āśrama*, where women were forbidden. The small attic was not exactly defined. Nimāi slept there because he didn’t like staying with some of the other devotees, and some of them also didn’t like staying with him. Anyway, Nimāi reasoned that he wasn’t going to do anything illicit. It was spiritual to share the wonderful secret with the girl who might become his wife.

As they entered the room, Sūrya dāsī asked, “Where are the Deities?”

“First I want to show you something else,” said Nimāi. He bent toward the floor and called, “Chota dāsa, Chota Prabhu.” The mouse scampered out of its hole and headed directly for Nimāi and Sūrya.

“Eeek!” Sūrya screamed. “A mouse!” and she backed up against the door. The scream aroused Bhīma dāsa, who yelled from the *brahmacārī āśrama*,





"What's going on up there?" Sūrya dāsī opened the door, revealing herself and Nimāi dāsa standing together. Sūrya felt flustered, and in a guilty mood she left Nimāi's company and went back to her designated place.

"What do you think you are doing?" said Bhīma, face to face with Nimāi. "You know women are not

allowed up here." Nimāi blushed and slammed the door.

Within a few moments, Nimāi was approached by Vibhu Prabhu.

"A *brahmacārī* is not supposed to be alone with a woman," said Vibhu. "As if you didn't know." Nimāi hung his head with sullen guilt.

"So, what was your intention? Why did you bring her up here?"

"I just wanted to discuss Kṛṣṇa consciousness with her."

"Don't try it again," said Vibhu. "It's a serious transgression. You better watch your step. I think I know now why they call you 'Nimāi-nonsense.'"

Nimāi was mortified—not so much by the reprimand from the temple authority as from his own inner shame. Now that his brilliant idea had exploded, he saw it for what it was. It was *māyā*! How had he lost his intelligence like that? He still felt that his sentiments for Sūrya dāsī were not wrong, but he had acted so stupidly, out of pride.

Nimāi felt especially bad that he had used Choṭa dāsa to show off before a woman. He coaxed the mouse out once again and made his prostrated obeisances. As usual, Choṭa was meek and forgiving. "We all make mistakes," he squeaked.

Nimāi resolved never to act like that again. He would be true and loyal to his friend. He would present Kṛṣṇa and not behave as an ass.

From that day on, Nimāi gave up his ebullient displays of joy. He tried to be sober, grave, and always tolerant. He couldn't do it, but he tried. It was



especially difficult when some of the teenage boys  
called after him in sing-song voices,

“Nimāi the gnome  
has got a crush on Sūrya,  
Nimāi the gnome  
has got a crush on a mouse,  
Nimāi the gnome  
has no home.”

## CHAPTER 3

Nimāi was just finishing his last round of *japa* before going up for a scheduled meeting with Choṭa dāsa. Even while chanting the holy names, his mind had raced ahead, preparing for what he would speak this morning. He decided to instruct Choṭa on the importance of attentive chanting. He would admit, "I am preaching to you, but I am also preaching to myself." Nimāi liked to keep his relationship with Choṭa open and honest. Their friendship continued to amaze him. He'd never heard, even in scripture, of an ordinary *brahmacārī* conversing with a subhuman creature and instructing him in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. "Why has Kṛṣṇa arranged it so this has happened to me?" Nimāi thought. And sometimes he wondered if it was really very significant. Many devotees were meeting hundreds of humans everyday. Although some of the humans were like animals, it was much more significant to preach to the humans. What about the injunction to "Tell everyone you meet about Kṛṣṇa"—did that include subhumans? When Nimāi thought like this, it bewildered and discouraged him, so he usually put it aside. "Even if what I am doing is not so significant," Nimāi thought, "still it's the preaching field assigned to me."

With a humble sense of his mission, Nimāi climbed the stairs to the attic, rehearsing in his mind the lecture that he would deliver in a moment. But his heart leaped when Butch, the temple cat, suddenly brushed past him, and streaked upstairs into the attic. Nimāi was only a few seconds behind the cat, but it



was too late. Choṭa had come out from hiding on hearing the sounds of Nimāi's approach, and no sooner did the white tomcat rush into the room than he saw the mouse and pounced upon it. Nimāi saw his beloved friend clawed and then popped into the mouth of the cat. Nimāi shouted and kicked the cat, knocking him against the wall and dislodging the mouse. Butch raised his back and snarled as if to attack Nimāi, who then kicked the cat like a football



across the room. With an agonized glance towards Choṭa, Nimāi saw that he was dead.

As the *brahmacārīs* were running up the stairs, the tomcat shrieked and streaked past them. Bhīma and several teenage boys entered the room where Nimāi was sobbing. Tears streamed from his eyes as he knelt holding the body of the mouse.

"The cat got the mouse!" said one of the boys.

"Nimāi's pet mouse!"

"Get out of here!" Nimāi yelled.

"Take it easy," said Bhīma.

"Why did you kick Butch?" The teenager who used to be called Kṛṣṇa dāsa, but who was now known as Carl, gave Nimāi a shove. "Hey Nimāi, why did you hit Butch?"

With blind grief Nimāi put the mouse aside and jumped to attack Carl. The two of them locked into wrestling grips and fell to the floor punching. Carl got in a good sock at Nimāi's eye before more men arrived, including Vibhu dāsa, who separated Nimāi and Carl. Vibhu demanded an explanation, but Nimāi picked up the body of Choṭa and pushed past the others out of the room. He was sobbing like one whose best friend has just died.

Gurudeva was reading *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* when the phone rang. It was Vibhu dāsa.

"Nimāi is on his way down to your cabin," said Vibhu. "He just created a big scene in the temple—kicked the cat and had a fight with Carl. He's bawling and won't listen to anyone but you. So you have to

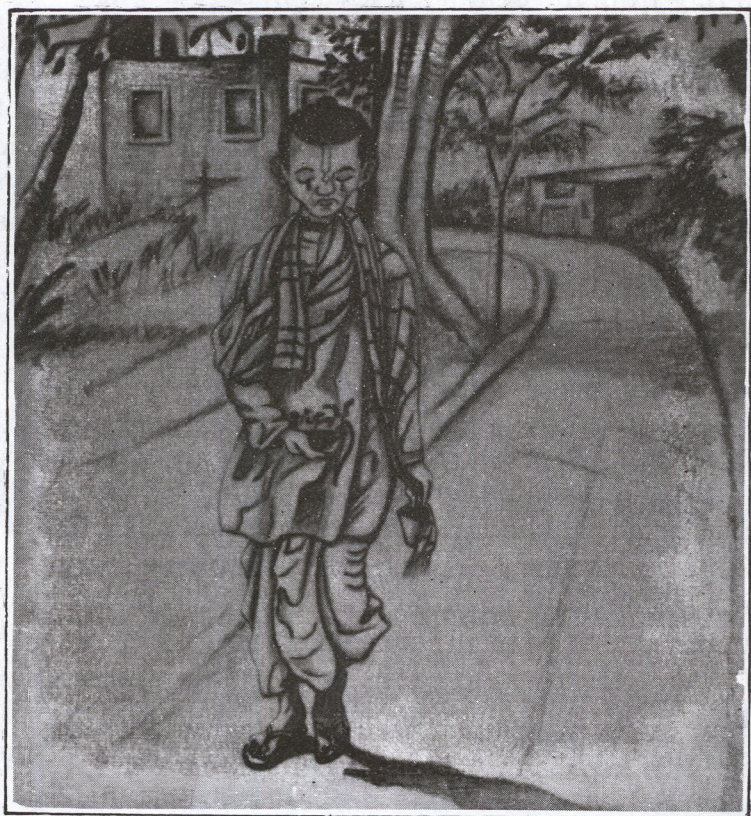


talk to him right now."

"All right," said Gurudeva. "Is there any more background you can give me?"

"That's all I know," said Vibhu. "I think Nimāi is not fit to live in the temple. If you want him to stay, you can take responsibility for him. I mean, he is your disciple."

Gurudeva saw Nimāi dāsa coming down the road, sobbing like a baby. He was carrying a small box.



Gurudeva opened the door to receive him.

"Come on, Nimāi. Sit down. Tell me what's the matter." Gurudeva took his usual position facing Nimāi and slid the box of Kleenex tissues towards his tearful disciple. Nimāi opened the box he was carrying and placed it on Gurudeva's desk. It contained the body of the mouse lying on its back, its four feet pointing upwards. Gurudeva was not fond of mice, but this was not the time to object to the presence of the corpse. He decided to honor Nimāi's grief and try to give him solace, just as he would to anyone suffering from the death of a loved one.

"What happened?" asked Gurudeva.

Nimāi bawled, "This is the mouse I told you about. He was called Choṭa. He talked to me for three months. I taught him Kṛṣṇa consciousness. He is a spirit soul as good as me, as good as the other devotees. Better! He was more submissive. No one understands!" Gurudeva coaxed his disciple to take a Kleenex. Nimāi blew his nose and wiped profuse tears.

Gurudeva came down from his cushion and sat beside Nimāi. He put his arm around him and gradually calmed him.

"I understand," said Gurudeva. "At least I want to understand. I know that you have loved this creature. And from what you told me, you have been feeding it *prasādam* and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa to it. I respect that. A devotee is supposed to honor all creatures." Gurudeva wanted to be sincere. He would have to go beyond formality if he was to give solace to Nimāi, and he wanted to. As far as Nimāi's claim that the



mouse could talk, that still seemed pretty crazy. But his being so touched by the death of the mouse was real. It was *bhakti*. Gurudeva had recently been reading that the *guru* is actually the servant of his disciples. If that was true, then Nimāi was definitely in need of his service and guidance. So Gurudeva wanted to try his best.

But he was also amused at Nimāi's *bhakti*. Nimāi was crying over the death of a mouse as if it was a tragic loss. The mouse was the only "person" Nimāi could love. That he could love only a mouse was unfortunate, and yet there was no denying that he showed genuine compassion for the humble creature.

Nimāi nodded and sniffled. Grieved as he was by the loss, Nimāi was also feeling satisfied by his Gurudeva's affection and counsel. He had never sat like this with his spiritual master or seen Gurudeva so personal. Usually theirs was only an official relationship. But now what Gurudeva was saying entered Nimāi's consciousness like light into darkness. "This is *guru*!" thought Nimāi. "He is saving me." With full trust, Nimāi listened for more. The pain of Chōṭa's death hurt his heart, but there was something beyond the pain. Gurudeva was speaking higher knowledge.

Gurudeva said, "On occasions in the *Bhāgavatam* where some person is sad over someone's death, great sages like Nārada give them important counsel. That counsel should be used by us in these times. It's not theoretical talk. Nimāi, the real person whom you loved has received the full benefit of your speaking to him about Kṛṣṇa, and he has gone on. It wasn't just

something that the cat did. Everything is arranged by *karma* and higher providence. 'Those who are wise lament neither for the living nor the dead.'

"So Nimāi, don't be like a foolish cow," Gurudeva tried to physically nudge his disciple into a lighter mood, "who cries and wants to stay by her calf's corpse." They both glanced at the body of the mouse whose mouth was partly open revealing its sharp teeth. But while they were looking, one of its feet twitched, and it gave a faint sigh.

"Choṭa! Gurudeva, do you hear that? He just said 'Rāma.' He is alive!"

Gurudeva had not heard "Rāma." But the mouse was alive. Nimāi gently picked him up and began feeling his body. "He appears to just have broken a couple of legs, and his body is crushed," said Nimāi. "But he's coming back to consciousness. He was unconscious." Nimāi was smiling joyfully.

"Just put him back and let him rest," said Gurudeva. He too was excited and concerned to give the mouse a chance to live.

"The best thing is to let him rest," said Gurudeva.

"Wow! Kṛṣṇa's mercy!" While they were talking, Gurudeva's servant entered and asked if he would take his lunch. Gurudeva said yes, and that a plate should be brought for Nimāi.

And so the *guru* and disciple honored *prasādam* together, talking about Kṛṣṇa's mercy and the unusual turns of providence. Choṭa dāsa was breathing slowly and evenly, although he could not move. Gurudeva even placed a tiny bit of curd *sabji* on his finger and put it to the mouse's mouth. Choṭa



gratefully accepted it.

When he saw that, Nimāi almost swooned with bliss. Here was Gurudeva, the most important person in his spiritual life, tending to Choṭa dāsa, who was also a very important person in his life.

Gurudeva had caught some of the contagious *bhakti* of Nimāi for Choṭa. He said that they should not bring Choṭa back to the temple, as he would be an easy prey for the cat. Gurudeva suggested that the mouse could stay at his cabin during its recuperation. Gurudeva was about to leave within a day or so for a three-month tour. Nimāi could come to the cabin once a day to see how the mouse was doing. But it should be kept completely confidential. They would say that Nimāi was looking after the cabin. Nimāi could give the cabin a paint job, and that would be his pretext for staying there during the day.

Gurudeva was always conscientious to follow his exact daily schedule. He had been caught up in the emotions of Nimāi and the mouse, but he still had to prosecute his regular duties. So he told Nimāi to take Choṭa dāsa into the next room and find a place where he could stay. Gurudeva then returned to his desk and to the page of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* that he had been studying. He read the verse and began making notes in his study book. But it was impossible to remove his mind from what had just occurred.

## CHAPTER 4

The first few days after the attack by the tomcat, Choṭa dāsa remained in critical condition. Nimāi personally bathed him with a wet sponge, spoon fed him *prasādam* and encouraged him back to health. The mouse was tolerant. As the days went by, he wanted to walk, and Nimāi fashioned two tiny splints for his broken legs. With hobbling steps Choṭa would walk a few feet and then collapse in pain and exhaustion.

"Keep trying," Nimāi urged him. But sometimes he urged him to rest.

On the pretext of painting Gurudeva's house, Nimāi spent hours daily near Choṭa dāsa and oversaw his recuperation.

Nimāi calculated for Choṭa's benefit how soon it might be before he would be well enough to return to his home at the temple.

The mouse said, "If possible, I don't ever want to return there." He then confided to Nimāi about his family situation. Choṭa said there were no secrets in the mouse community, and as soon as Nimāi had spoken with Choṭa, the other mice knew about it. Choṭa's parents became immediately disturbed when Choṭa told them that he had spoken to a man. First of all, they refused to believe that it was possible for a man to speak to a mouse. And just the thought that their son was on friendly terms with a human was madness as far as they were concerned. Humans were the enemies of mice. They set steel traps and took pleasure in poisoning whole communities. They encouraged the cats. So how could he trust a human?



When Choṭa had explained that this was not an ordinary human but a devotee of Kṛṣṇa, the parents of the mouse laughed at the pitiful naiveté of their son. Neither could they understand what he was saying about "a devotee." Choṭa explained to Nimāi, that his family observed a primitive form of religion, but the fame, form, and pastimes of Lord Kṛṣṇa were unknown to them. And when Choṭa had tried to sneak out from home to rendezvous with Nimāi, he had increased their anger. Except for the fact that his parents were very attached to him, Choṭa said he would have been completely disowned. "You're as good as dead," his father had said.

"But my younger brother likes Kṛṣṇa," said Choṭa. His tiny eyes sparkled, "and also one younger cousin." Nimāi was fascinated with the accounts of life in the mouse society, but troubled to hear them. It was just a miniature version of human society, with the same sectarian prejudices. Nimāi had an idea of how to deal with the situation, but he didn't want to force his idea on Choṭa. "What do you think?" he asked the mouse.

"I would like to rescue my brother and cousin, and bring them here," said Choṭa. Nimāi was thrilled with the bold spirit of his friend. He was just about to ask him if it was illegal, or if the mice in question were of legal age. But then he thought, "Why should I subjugate myself to the laws of mice?" Nimāi had no scruples about acting, but again he didn't want to push his little friend beyond his faith. Yet it was Choṭa who was pushing for action. He wanted to go back as soon as possible and tell his friends that they

had a new place where they could live in freedom and practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness without their parents' restraint. "Nimāi Prabhu, you can carry us all back to Gurudeva's cabin."

And so they hatched their plan in full detail and waited for Choṭa to recover enough to play the leading role. Choṭa told Nimāi that on one occasion, when his parents were chastising him, they threatened that they would get large rats to come and attack Nimāi at night. But both Nimāi and Choṭa doubted that the mice actually had any influence over the rats. "Anyway," said Nimāi, "whatever powers they may have, we will just act in the shelter of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa says, 'My devotee will never be vanquished.'"

Only a month after he had been attacked, Choṭa dāsa, although still not fully recovered, insisted that they should go and rescue his friends. They chose daylight hours when the mice were more timid in their movements within the temple. Nimāi released Choṭa in the attic room, and within a few minutes he had gone down into his old neighborhood and returned with the two "boys." They were bright-eyed, squealing fellows, full of young idealism. Nimāi was moved at how Kṛṣṇa consciousness had spread from himself to Choṭa and from Choṭa to these others. With full trust they allowed Nimāi to scoop them up and put them in a box. He then left the room and within minutes was back at Gurudeva's house, where they established what Nimāi called "a *brahmacārī āśrama*."

Things were more lively now. Because of the increased numbers and the more ideal circumstances,



Nimāi instituted a structured *sādhana* for the mice. He set a standard for early rising, performance of spiritual duties, and avoidance of unseemly behavior, like passing stool anywhere and everywhere.

Of course, Nimāi had established the *āśrama* without asking Gurudeva's permission. It was an emergency, and Gurudeva was now away on his tour. He definitely would inform Gurudeva about it, and if they had to move out, they would worry about that when the time came. But he hoped that Gurudeva would allow it. In fact, ever since that wonderful meeting where Gurudeva had consoled Nimāi and fed the mouse, Nimāi had begun to hope that one day the mice would actually speak to Gurudeva and that he would give his full blessings and authorization. That was Nimāi's fondest dream. Especially now that there had been success in his preaching, he began to harbor grand aspirations for spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness in the animal kingdom. He shared some of these ideas with Choṭa dāsa and the new "*bhaktas*," and quoted the verse "By the grace of the spiritual master, the blind man can see the stars in the sky, a lame man can cross the mountains, and a dumb man can speak. And," he added, "mice can become devotees."

They all cheered, "Haribol!"

These were happy days for Nimāi and his followers. He kept their activities carefully under cover and went on with his own duties, incurring a minimum of displeasure from his authorities.

But Nimāi dāsa had doubts. He worried that what

he was doing was small-time. It was certainly a miniature world that he was absorbed in. The mice were physically tiny (about five inches long including their tails and no more than an ounce in weight), and also their service didn't seem to amount to much. He seemed to be mostly training them to clean up after themselves, to chant a very small number of rounds daily, and to learn only the basic philosophy. And the two new mice, although sincere and happy to be living as *brahmacārīs*, were not of the same caliber as Choṭa. They were rather frivolous. So what was the preaching value of all these activities?

By contrast, the devotees at the temple were preparing themselves for the austerity of the Christmas marathon. Some of the men would be traveling for two months in a van, distributing books in the cities. And some of the householders were going out to sell paintings, in an effort to raise large amounts of money, both for their family needs and for meeting the year-end temple expenses. Vibhu Prabhu had asked Nimāi to go on the book distribution party, but Nimāi had refused. He hadn't accepted such austerities so far in his devotional career, and he didn't think he could begin now. Vibhu had then asked Nimāi to join with a householder couple to assist them in selling paintings, which would also require traveling for a couple of months. Again Nimāi had said he could not do it. He had agreed, however, to take on extra duties at the temple while most of the devotees were on the road. Nimāi admired the men who went out to preach. He was disappointed with himself and his inability to surrender. Nimāi thought, "Am I training



up Choṭa and the other mice in the same unsundered attitude that I have?" The small-time and inward nature of the mouse *āśrama* troubled Nimāi, and yet he did not see how he could express these thoughts to Choṭa. He didn't want the mouse to get an inferiority complex. Nimāi knew how depressing *that* could get.

Choṭa had become quite sensitive to the different moods of Nimāi. Sensing that something was troubling his teacher, he inquired about it.

Nimāi confessed, "Sometimes I think I am not qualified to lead you. I am not a preacher. Beyond what I can teach you, there is a whole realm of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, which is the bold missionary spirit. And this is the essence of Lord Caitanya and His disciplic succession. Nowadays there is also a pressure for devotees to take part in preaching, if they want to please their spiritual masters. But since I can't take that pressure myself, I'm afraid to put it on you. The result is I am not so enlivened when I think how none of us here are doing big service. Do you understand?"

"We mice are very little devotees," Choṭa said. "It's only by your kindness that you are willing to put up with us. It's a fact that we can't do much. But there is another way to look at it."

Choṭa then began to tell Nimāi the inside story of a mouse's existence. He said that the life of mice is very fearful and precarious. They are always living in fear of a predator. House mice, who usually live in close association with human beings, can come out only at night time, and even then they risk their lives

just to get their basic meals. They never know when they are going to be pounced upon by a cat, or when the next step they take will set off a snap trap that breaks their necks. And the most pleasing food, like oats or peanut butter, could often be mixed with deadly poison. If they manage to escape all these dangers, still they can only live for a few years.

"Even now," said Choṭa, "even though I have learned that life is meant for something more than eating, sleeping, mating, and defending, what kind of service can I actually render in this condemned body? But by your grace, we have learned the art of devotional service to the Supreme Lord Kṛṣṇa. Fortunately, from what you have taught—if I understand it correctly—it's not the bigness of the service that Kṛṣṇa appreciates, but the devotion in which it is done." Choṭa usually spoke in smaller bursts, and both he and Nimāi had been kneeling, but now Nimāi sat back, as in *Bhāgavatam* class, and listened with appreciation.

"Besides," said Choṭa, "by your words you have also instilled in us a preaching spirit. I simply repeated your words and now two of my kinfolk have joined us, and other mice at the temple are also chanting and talking about Kṛṣṇa. Maybe you think three is small. But if you desire, you could also introduce us to a more ambitious preaching program. There are mice everywhere!" squeaked Choṭa. "In every house, restaurant, factory, warehouse, and barn, as well as in the grain fields and sand dunes, you'll find mice. They are at least as numerous as human beings. Couldn't Kṛṣṇa consciousness be introduced everywhere?"



"I am not sure," said Nimāi. "I mean *yes*, we could expand our program. What you said about the spirit of devotion and the difficulties of devotional service in a mouse body—I never realized that. I think I have offended you by saying that you were small-time. Please accept my obeisances." Nimāi knelt down to make prostrated obeisances and the mice reciprocated.

"It is you to whom *we* must make obeisances," said Choṭa.

"Yes, you delivered us," said Choṭa's brother. "We were living in a dark hole."

"We were three blind mice," said Choṭa's cousin.

"We are eternally indebted to you," said Choṭa. "At least *we* think your activities with us are definitely not 'small-time.'"

"It is *not* small-time," said Nimāi. "That was just my foolishness. The service that we are doing right here in this *āśrama* is being seen and appreciated by Kṛṣṇa. There is no doubt about it! At the same time we can also increase it."

This discussion had a serious effect upon Nimāi. From that day on he began to appreciate more that the mice were undergoing rigorous austerities just to perform their basic *sādhana*. In his mind Nimāi began to liken them to the Hare Kṛṣṇa devotees in Russia, who risk their lives just to gather together and chant or distribute Prabhupāda's books. Of course, the mice were nowhere as great as the human devotees. But in their own way—just like the spider who worked for Lord Rāma—they could be very pleasing to the Lord. Nimāi sensed unlimited opportunity and benefit, for

the mice as well as for himself. He wanted to put aside his neurotic scruples and help them to the best of his ability. Their spunky spirit would help him to become more surrendered.

Nimāi changed not only in his dealings with the mice but also in his dealings with the devotees. He increased his efforts to surrender, at least in little ways that were within his power. When the teenage boys began to tease him and call him names, Nimāi thought of the bravery of the mice, and it enabled him to take this teasing as something sweet. By not becoming ruffled at the teasing, Nimāi could offer the austerity to Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Nimāi looked forward to opportunities where he could counter his pet peeves with an attitude of acceptance and devotion. He took a more submissive approach in exchanges with Vibhu and tried to see him as a representative of Kṛṣṇa and the spiritual master. As the winter progressed and he had to sometimes work outside in freezing weather, he endured the cold as pleasurable, thinking, "My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, please accept my service."

As the Christmas marathon approached, Nimāi had to do the work of several other devotees, spending extra time cleaning in the kitchen, mopping the temple floor, and staying up late to tend to the furnace. He also had to drive into town to buy supplies and help with milking the cows in the barn. But he did it all without grumbling. "The mice have taught me a great secret," he thought, "if I can only remember it. Kṛṣṇa just wants our devotion."



## CHAPTER 5

Vibhu Prabhu again asked Nimāi dāsa to go on traveling *saṅkīrtana* for the Christmas marathon.

"If you could just be the driver of the van," Vibhu requested, "and do back-up services for the book distributors, that would be a great help. It would free one of the other *brahmacārīs* to do book distribution. You could drive and do things like purchase and prepare *prasādam* and be the treasurer and do the laundry. What do you think?"

In his new mood of surrender, Nimāi agreed to do it. "I have never lived outside of the temple," he thought, "but that's what boldness is—to just try."

"Let me think about it overnight," said Nimāi. "I'll tell you for sure tomorrow."

In the evening, while distributing hot milk in tiny *loṭas* to the mice, Nimāi asked them what they thought of traveling *saṅkīrtana*. The two new *bhaktas* were goofing off and spilling their milk. It was actually only to Choṭa dāsa that Nimāi had asked the serious question.

"It sounds exciting," said Choṭa looking up from his milk with a white-stained snout. "But what would we actually do?"

"Well, I am supposed to be the driver," said Nimāi, "so most of the time we'd just be on our own. I suppose you'd have to all live in some kind of box or cage. I'll tell the other men that you are coming along as my pets."

From this initial description of traveling *saṅkīrtana* Choṭa's brother and cousin looked frightened.



Nimāi continued, "Sometimes we will park the van in a campground or a parking lot while the men are distributing books. I'll run errands during the day for them. And then sometimes we will stay at the homes of friends and life members of Kṛṣṇa consciousness."

"If we went to people's houses," said Choṭa, "then



maybe I could visit the mouse communities there and tell them about Kṛṣṇa."

And so Choṭa and Nimāi discussed all the managerial details and spiritual implications of their going on traveling *saṅkīrtana*. They also asked the newcomers to honestly speak their minds whether they wanted to go. The brother and cousin of Choṭa said that it sounded a bit "tough," but if Choṭa Prabhu thought that they could do it, they were willing to try.

"Well, that's exactly how I feel about it," said Nimāi. "If it gets too much for me or for any of you, then we can just come back. Although I don't think the other devotees will be so pleased with me for that."

On this occasion the new mice asked Nimāi if he could give them devotee names.

"The names I give," said Nimāi, "are not your initiated names. They are just like spiritual nicknames. Because you both came together, and because you seem to me like twins, I'll give you the names Yamala and Arjuna, which are names of twin trees that were directly touched by baby Kṛṣṇa." Nimāi and his group celebrated by drinking sweet milk, until the mice became intoxicated and they all fell asleep.

Nimāi made a wooden box, about three feet by two feet with caging and plenty of air holes, and he stuffed it with shredded paper, according to Choṭa's directions. This was the traveling *āśrama* for the mice. "You'll be a bit cooped up," said Nimāi, "but the men

will also be cooped up in the van. That's the austerity of travel."

Nimāi reported back to Vibhu and said that he was willing to be the *saṅkīrtana* driver on the condition that he be permitted to take his pet mice with him in a box. Vibhu's eyes rolled when he heard that, but he was desperate to get another book distributor out on *saṅkīrtana*. If this was what it took to get Nimāi, then why not?

But some of the *brahmacārīs* strongly objected.

Vīra dāsa said, "It's bogus! They're filthy creatures. I hate mice! I am not going to sleep in the same van with them."

Dhṛṣṭaketu dāsa, who was the leading book distributor, also objected. "What if one of them gets out of the box?" he asked. "I don't want one of those things running along my leg at night! It's weird and has nothing to do with Kṛṣṇa consciousness!"

Bhīma dāsa was the second biggest book distributor. He also thought that the pet mice were *māyā*. But he shared Vibhu Prabhu's reasoning about doing the needful, and he also had tolerance for Nimāi's eccentricities. Bhīma told the other men, "It takes all kinds of people to form a Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement." He reminded them how Śrīla Prabhupāda had tolerated so much when he first came to America, sometimes abandoning strict rules and regulations of a *sannyāsī* in order to preach. Prabhupāda had even lived for a while in an apartment with cats, and he had to put his *sattvic* food in the same refrigerator with meat. Why couldn't they also tolerate a little inconvenience to push on the *saṅkīrtana*



movement?

"Tell that to the knucklehead," said Vīra dāsa. "Why should we adjust to his madness? He should just drive and give up his stupid attachment to rodents."

"Of course you are right," said Bhīma. "But devotional service is voluntary. Nimāi said he'll come with us *only* if his pets can come also."

Eventually Bhīma dāsa prevailed, and the men accepted it for the ultimate sacrifice of *saṅkīrtana*. They were prepared to face hundreds of insults daily from the nondevotees when they attempted to give them Prabhupāda's books; they were already enduring freezing cold weather, threats of violence, and police arrests, so they figured they could also tolerate Nimāi dāsa, who was after all a kind of devotee.

And so the party of six men and three mice set out in the Dodge Ram van for a scheduled month and a half of traveling *saṅkīrtana*.

The first day away from the temple was difficult for the whole *saṅkīrtana* party, but Nimāi and the mice were particularly unaccustomed to it. They all slept overnight in the van at a national park. Early in the morning they took cold showers in an unheated bathroom where the temperature was below freezing. Bhīma dāsa was in charge of the party, and he arranged a morning schedule that allowed two hours for *japa*, half an hour for *Bhāgavatam* class, after which breakfast was to be served immediately, and then the men would go out to distribute books. Since Nimāi was the cook, he had to spend most of *japa* period as well as class time preparing a full meal of *dāl*, rice, and

*sabji* for six men. He had to cook outside the van, setting the Coleman stove, vegetables, and pots of water on a picnic table. The first morning, his fingers became so cold he could hardly feel them. Nimāi's mind was screaming to him, "I can't do this! This is too hard!"

Ever since Nimāi had met Choṭa, he had been able to find solace in their talks, especially at difficult moments. But now that wasn't possible. Although the





men had reluctantly agreed that the pet mice could come along for the ride, none of them realized that these mice were actually practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness and that they often talked with Nimāi. It remained a mystery to both Nimāi and the mice why the mice could communicate only with Nimāi and not with other humans. For the most part Nimāi and the mice preferred it this way. But even if they had wanted to include others, it was not possible. At least for now, theirs was a confidential relationship, known only to themselves—and it was their fervent hope that their relationship was also known to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Because of the confidentiality of their friendship, Nimāi could not speak with the mice, either to help them out or to derive benefit from their friendship. He was allowed to be with them only in ways that would not seem too outrageous to the other men. He could perform only minimal maintenance of their needs and show minimum affection, or else he would risk incurring the disgust of devotees like Vīra and Dhr̥ṣṭaketu. But when Dhr̥ṣṭaketu saw Nimāi cleaning out the mouse *āśrama* while singing Hare Kṛṣṇa, even he made a remark of begrudging approval.

"I guess they are not ordinary mice," said Dhr̥ṣṭaketu. "Otherwise, how could they be hearing Hare Kṛṣṇa and taking Kṛṣṇa *prasādam*?"

"Yeah," chuckled Vīra, "maybe they were human devotees in their last life, and they had some big fall-down."

"You better be careful," said Bhīma dāsa to Nimāi. "If you think too much about these mice, you will think of them at the time of death, like Mahārāja Bha-

rata, and then you could come back as a mouse and go out on traveling *saṅkīrtana*."

In this way, the men derived some comic relief from the otherwise ridiculous and inconvenient presence of the "mouse *āśrama*." But as long as Nimāi performed his austerities along with them, they respected him and did not push their teasing too far. And they appreciated Nimāi's simple but decent cooking, especially his hot buttered *capātīs* and strongly spiced *dāl*.

Nimāi was happy to be with such highly qualified devotees and to be accepted by them. Although he was suffering, in another sense he was experiencing the highest state of Kṛṣṇa consciousness he could ever remember. The book distributors were very dear to Lord Caitanya because they took all risks to carry the message to the conditioned souls, as desired by the Lord and His pure devotees. They were like front-line soldiers in the battle against *māyā*. Even when they teased him, or if they sometimes behaved not exactly like pure devotees, Nimāi always tried to remember their exalted position. He took great pleasure in serving them.

After breakfast everyone was very busy, and Bhīma dāsa gave Nimāi a list of his duties for the day. It took Nimāi over an hour to wash all the pots and clean up from breakfast, and no sooner was that done than they had to immediately break camp and drive into the city. Nimāi had to drop each man off at his designated spot, either a busy parking lot or in front of a supermarket or shopping mall, where they would distribute books all day. Nimāi had to remem-



ber where each spot was because, after dropping the men off, he would have to come back in a few hours to see if they needed books or any other assistance. And then he would have to come back again and bring them a lunch of juice and fruit. After making the lunch rounds, he would somehow have to find time to do bookkeeping, tallying the numbers of Prabhupāda's books distributed, and count the money collected. He also had to wash everyone's clothes at the laundromat. Carried along in a swift current of his duties, Nimāi had no time to spend with the mice and hardly any time to think of them.

Nimāi had hurriedly purchased groceries for the next morning's cooking and he was driving on a highway to deliver more books to the *sāṅkīrtana* men when he thought that he had better stop to see how the mice were doing. So he pulled the van off to a rest area and opened their box. The little ones, Yamala and Arjuna, were shivering together in a far corner. They seemed to have reverted to animal consciousness, and they cringed when Nimāi reached to touch them. Choṭa said, "Hare Kṛṣṇa," on seeing his friend, but he looked wan and cold. Only by Choṭa's talking to the other mice in their native mouse language did Yamala and Arjuna gradually look up and assume a slightly receptive position for greeting Nimāi.

"How is it going?" he asked.

Choṭa admitted it was difficult, and Nimāi admitted that it was difficult for him too. They spoke of

how they might improve things. Nimāi had bought some little woolen pouches to be used as sleeping bags. The mice laughed at the idea, since they were always used to accommodating themselves with whatever nature had provided. But maybe the pouches would help. They especially liked the fact that Nimāi had thought of them. After all, their Kṛṣṇa consciousness depended on encouragement from Nimāi. He sensed once again the responsibility he had taken on in convincing these creatures to dedicate their lives to self-realization. At first he had thought that it would be a simple thing: convince them that they were not actually mice but pure spirit souls, and then the rest was up to them. But since they were so limited, it seemed he would have to guide them closely for a considerable while. "Sooner or later," thought Nimāi, "they will have to get fixed up to be able to serve on their own, in separation."

Nimāi revived the mice with the warmth of his Kṛṣṇa consciousness so that they became more cheerful and joking. Then suddenly he remembered his own difficulties.

"This is too much," he sighed. "I'm on the go all day long, and I haven't even finished chanting my rounds. I don't think I can last. It's too much."

"Just keep trying," said Choṭa. "It's very important for you to do the back-up work for the *saṅkīrtana* party."

"Yeah," said Nimāi, "it's ecstatic. I finally feel like I'm part of Lord Caitanya's movement. Those book distributors are like great heroes. Do you realize that if somebody takes a book, Prabhupāda said that his



life could become perfect by reading one page? Now I can better see that the *karmīs* are just rushing back and forth, completely in *māyā*. At any moment, somebody could die and then descend to a lower form of life. The book distributors are tossing them a lifeline."

"But how are we part of the *saṅkīrtana* movement?" asked Yamala dāsa. His question expressed doubt, but because it was the first thoughtful question he had ever asked Nimāi, Nimāi was very pleased.

"You are also part of *saṅkīrtana*. Don't you feel that Choṭa? Tell Yamala."

"Yes I do," said Choṭa. "By supporting the front-line preachers, Nimāi Prabhu feels that he is part of the *saṅkīrtana*. So if we can serve him, then we are also connected."

Arjuna, who had seemed the most fearful of the three, moved into the midst of his brothers and asked, "But how are we serving you?"

"To be honest," said Nimāi, "I need your association, especially Choṭa's, because he helps pick me up when I'm about to fall into *māyā*. It's a mutual loving exchange. And it's not that you have to serve me. I am just trying to help you to serve Kṛṣṇa. Your austerity, or *tapasya*, is to remain in higher consciousness, even when you are in the dark and the cold of this box, when there is nothing else to do but chant. So far you haven't been able to do that, have you?"

The mice all looked down shyly, admitting that they had seriously reverted to lower consciousness



ever since they had come into the van. But they would try again. Nimāi had to cut their meeting short. He closed the box, drove back onto the highway, and soon reached Lakṣmaṇa dāsa, although he was fifteen minutes late.





## CHAPTER 6

By 7:00 P.M. Nimāi dāsa had picked up the last book distributor. He then drove the van out of the city to a national park. While the men sat close together on the wooden platform in the rear of the van, talking over the day's experiences, Nimāi carefully served each of them bread, *sabjī*, and cups of hot milk. As they took *prasādam*, Nimāi tabulated the number of books each man had distributed. It had been a good day, especially for Dhr̥ṣṭaketu Prabhu, who had distributed fifty *Bhagavad-gītās* and ten *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatams*.

"I met this far-out couple today," said Dhr̥ṣṭaketu. "It happened as soon as I got out there. I stacked about ten *Bhāgavatams* on a newspaper stand outside the store and went to the bathroom in one of the restaurants. When I returned I saw a man and woman looking at one of the *Bhāgavatams*."

As soon as Dhr̥ṣṭaketu began talking, Nimāi reached down, picked up the mouse *āśrama*, and placed it on top of the platform.

"What are you doing?" said Dhr̥ṣṭaketu.

"Nothin'," said Nimāi, ignoring the fact that the mouse cage was now in the midst of the men.

"You're not going to let them out are you?" asked Vīra dāsa.

"Of course not," said Nimāi.

"He just wants the mice to hear the *saṅkīrtana* nectar, right Nimāi?" said Bhīma.

Nimāi said, "According to Prabhupāda, even a cockroach in the wall of the temple can benefit by

hearing Hare Kṛṣṇa."

Bhīma Prabhu allowed Nimāi his whimsy, and the other men let it go.

Dhṛṣṭaketu resumed his story. "So this couple had taken one of the books and had walked a distance away from the stand. The man was wearing a blue pin-striped three-piece suit, and the woman was also wearing a business suit. They both were carrying briefcases. They looked like they were feeling a little guilty about picking up such a nice hardbound book.

"So I approached them and said, 'The book you are holding in your hand is the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. It's one of the first volumes in a sixty-volume series.'

"Do you know anything about it?' the man asked me. And she was looking.

"I said, 'Yes, a little bit. This *Bhāgavatam* begins with Mahārāja Parikṣit, who was at one time the emperor of the world. He got news that he was going to die in a week's time. So he approached a great saintly person, Śukadeva Gosvāmī, and asked him, 'What is the duty of a person who is about to die?' 'I then showed them the picture of Mahārāja Parikṣit with his folded hands in front of Śukadeva Gosvāmī. 'And this *Bhāgavatam* is what Śukadeva spoke,' I said. 'He spoke continuously for seven days, and it's all recorded here.'

"So then the woman asked me, 'And what did he say?'

"I told them, 'Well, you would have to read it for yourself! But to cut it short, Śukadeva Gosvāmī told Parikṣit that the goal of life is to render devotional service unto God. And in these pages of the *Bhāga-*



*vatam*, it is elaborately explained how to render service to God. It has been presented very nicely by the author, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. He is a renowned scholar.'

"Then they asked me who I was. I told them that I was a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which was founded by Śrīla Prabhupāda. I encouraged them to read the books, and if they had any questions, they could write to me. I wrote my name and address on the inside of the book. They wanted to talk more, but I knew they had to rush. Then the man said, 'I hope you don't mind if I offer you something for this book.' I said I didn't. And he said he wanted another copy."

The men in the van were delighted. Nimāi was not only delighted but thrilled to be in their company.

Dhr̥ṣṭaketu continued, "So I was about to go back to the newstand to get another book, but the guy beat me to it. In the meantime, I was telling the lady how we live a monastic life and we have temples around the world, and I asked her to visit one of the temples and showed her the addresses at the back of the book. The man returned and paid me for both books. Then before he left he said, 'What do they call you?'

"I said, 'My name is Dhr̥ṣṭaketu dāsa.'

"He said, 'What is your title?'

"I was a little embarrassed but I said, 'His Grace.'"

Bhīma guffawed, "His Divine Grace! Śrīman Dhr̥ṣṭaketu Prabhu!"

"So listen to this!" said Dhr̥ṣṭaketu. "The man took my hand and he bowed down from his waist a few

times and said, 'Thank you, your Grace, thank you, your Grace.' And the woman did the same thing!"

"That sounds like one for the 'believe it or not' book," said Bhīma dāsa.

Nimāi went around with second cups of milk and more bread, and everyone took.

Vīra said, "I met three Catholic Fathers today, dressed in black with little white collars. They all seemed to be about forty years old, but the short one in the middle seemed to be a little more hip. I greeted them like I usually do, 'How are you doing? I consider you to be gentlemen of God, servants of God,' and I folded my hands. Right away the middle one said, 'Yes, yes we are servants of God. What are you doing?' He was antagonistic from the beginning. I said, 'We're passing out our books. Are you familiar with them? This is the *Bhagavad-gītā*.' He said, 'Oh! You are Hare Kṛṣṇas? No, we don't want that.' But the father on the right said, 'Oh! *Bhagavad-gītā*? Yes, I am interested in that book. I have been interested to know what you believe in.' I said, 'As you know, God is the Supreme Person, and we all have a relationship with Him. The *Bhagavad-gītā* explains how that relationship has to be taken up by everyone, whether he be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or whatever. In this book, Kṛṣṇa is speaking to His pure devotee Arjuna and explaining to him how he is not this body but the soul within the body. The duty of every individual is to surrender to the Supreme and go back to the kingdom of God.' The other two Fathers walked off. They didn't want anything to do with it. But this one on the right side, he was quiet, so I was really just



talking to him. But that short one was bitchy. He kept saying, 'No, no, we don't want that!'

"I concentrated on the quiet one and said, 'Different scholars have praised our books, and we simply try to encourage people to read them.'

"He said, 'Okay, thank you.'

"As you know we don't sell them. But we do take contributions, so that we can continue distributing our books."

Vīra continued, "It was a difficult show because the one guy was really upset. I mentioned our regulative principles to the quiet one, and the short one snapped back, 'Well! We are celibate too!' But then he took out a cigarette and bit it defiantly. I couldn't believe it, right there he took out a cigarette! Anyway, the friendly one was smiling, and he took the *Gītā* and gave a donation."

"*Haribol!*" cheered the *saṅkīrtana* devotees.

Nimāi glanced furtively to the cage behind him. They could say what they liked, he knew the mice were hearing. It wasn't the duty of the *saṅkīrtana* men to know or believe that the mice could actually hear and understand, and Nimāi didn't resent it. But at least they should give them the chance to hear.

Bhīma dāsa said, "A man approached me today and straight off asked me for a *Bhagavad-gītā*. I started explaining to him that it was the science of the soul and the relationship of the soul to God, who is the Supreme Soul. But he was in a real hurry. He was with two other business people, who were women. They were dressed very professionally. I was sad to think that he had shown some interest in the

*Bhagavad-gītā* but that he didn't have time to talk. In fact the two women were already walking ahead. He offered me ten dollars. And then he said, 'You know, I was a devotee years ago. My name is Nārāyaṇa. I want to present this *Bhagavad-gītā* to them. I'm sorry I can't talk with you, but good luck. *Haribol!*' Then he rushed back to the two women, and while I looked on from a distance, he presented the book to one of them, opened it, and apparently explained what it was about. It all happened so quickly. It made me think that devotional service never stops. Once our devotional spirit has been awakened, then no matter what we do, Kṛṣṇa makes arrangements for us to keep rendering service unto Him. I mean, what nondevotee would think of giving someone the valuable gift of Kṛṣṇa consciousness? But this man still wanted to distribute books to his friends."

As soon as Bhīma dāsa finished, Rañchor Prabhu began talking. Nimāi served more helpings of *prasādam*, but most of them refused to take more. He kept trying until the men forcibly put their hands over their plates to stop him.

"I was standing in a busy corner of the shopping mall," said Rañchor, "distributing a book to an old soldier. Along comes this guy; I think he was a pilot or something. He looked official anyway, walking between another man and a woman. He just shouted out, 'Don't take that book! He's ripping you off!' I said, 'That's not true!' He said, 'He's not allowed to be here!' I said, 'That's another lie! I'm not ripping him off; I am just presenting him with one of my books. How dare you stand and say that!' He said, 'I said



that because I felt like saying it.' I said, 'Well, you're a liar!' "

"Wow!" said Dhr̥ṣṭaketu. "Fired up! You really let him have it."

"You are lucky he didn't punch you out for talking like that," said Bhīma.

"I couldn't help myself," said Rañchor. "The guy said, 'Anyway, you didn't make that sale.' I said, 'Actually you are afraid to see what's in these books.' He said, 'I know what's in those books. I've seen you guys ripping people off for years.' I said, 'No, actually you are afraid to see what's in these books. If you just stand there, I'll tell you what's in these books.'"

"So then this pilot, or whatever he was, said, 'You are just into it for the money!' That really got me mad, and so I laid into him. I said, 'We're not into it for money, but we're not shy to ask people for a donation. It costs us to print these books. But *you* are afraid to discuss these books because you're envious of what we are doing! But inspite of all that, I'm still willing to be your friend. Just take a moment, and I will tell you what's in these books.' So he said, 'Nah, I have to go.' He started to walk away. But before he left, I asked, 'What's your name?' He said, 'My name is John.' And I said, 'My name is Hari.'"

"Ten minutes later the same man came back, walking between two women. As he passed he called out to me, 'Hey Hari, did you get anymore books out?' 'Not yet,' I said, 'but it's going to happen. So are you ready to talk to me yet? Or are you still afraid?'"

Nimāi laughed with appreciation. He was trying to remain very quiet, but he couldn't help himself. "I

didn't know you were so strong," he said to Rañchor.

Rañchor continued, "So the lady says, 'Go on John; talk to him. Talk to him.' He says, 'Nah,' and they walked on down the other way and into a bar. About half an hour later, they came back by me again. John came over and said, 'Actually, you know, I'm sorry.' I said, 'I'm sorry too. I didn't want to speak to you harshly, but I felt that what you were saying was wrong and if I didn't speak up, you would just go on thinking the way you did without clearing up your doubts. But I can tell you're a nice person.' Then the lady came up and began asking me about Prabhu-pāda's books. I said, 'You've seen us around. We are here to tell people to become lovers of God. We believe in the simple truth that everyone is a servant of God, and it's our duty to take up our relationship with Him. Whether we like it or not. That's the purpose of life: reestablish our relationship with God. So I am going to stand on this corner and pass out these books to anyone who will take them. If no one takes them, I'll still be here, because that's my duty.'

"Then the woman said, 'Let me see that book.' So I gave her a *Gītā*. Then John said, 'You know, I like what you guys are doing. I met a bad guy here once. But in general you don't give anyone trouble. I have been watching you. It's just been a bad day, and I figured I'd let off some steam.' She says, 'These pictures are beautiful, John! I want this book!' The guy says, 'No, come on!' 'No,' she says, 'I want this book!' He said, 'Hari, can you believe it? She wants this book! What are you going to charge me for this book? I can't believe it. I can't buy this book!' I said, 'I can't



sell you this book. I'm glad she likes the book, but I can't sell this book to you. Even if you gave me a million.' He said, 'No, no, what do you get for these things? I see you ripping off the soldiers, what do you get, five? Ten?' I said, 'Well, we get a lot of tens.' He says, 'I'll give you five.'"

*"Haribol!"* again arose from the devotees.

Bhīma ended the talking by 8:30 P.M. The only light was the dim interior bulb of the van. They sat on their sleeping bags and read silently. Nimāi placed the mouse cage back under the platform, trying to avoid making the slightest noise. But as he pushed the box out of sight, they could hear lively squeaking.

## CHAPTER 7

Gurudeva was at the ISKCON center in Puerto Rico, where a two-day conference of animal rights groups was being hosted by ISKCON. Two hundred international animal rights delegates were attending, living in tents on the twenty acres of the ISKCON property and receiving pure vegetarian *prasādam* from Govinda's restaurant. The devotees were blissful, but they had to work hard to make the program run smoothly. Gurudeva had been invited as one of the speakers. ISKCON's public relations minister and other interested devotees, including special cooks, had also flown in for the event.

The devotees had constructed an outdoor stage, installed a sound system, and spread hundreds of folding chairs on a lawn. This was the scene for the main lecturing. Different groups had also set up tables with their books and propaganda. On the first day of the event, after several persons had delivered lectures, the leader of the coalition for animal groups announced, "So far we have heard the facts and statistics about cruelty to animals and some suggestions for political action. Now let's hear the spiritual side." That was how he introduced Gurudeva.

Gurudeva began with obeisances to his spiritual master and then quoted the *Bhagavad-gītā* verse:

*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne  
brāhmaṇe gavi hastini  
suni caiva śva-pāke ca  
pāṇḍitāḥ sama-darśināḥ*



"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-cater [outcaste]."

—*Bhagavad-gītā* .5.18

He pointed out the need for analytical knowledge as a basis to animal rights. The animals were as much living beings as the humans, and *all* living beings are pure spirit souls, equal in their nature. If a human being unnecessarily tortures or kills any living creature, he will be subject to the laws of *karma*. Gurudeva gradually injected the idea that there should be a theistic basis to animal rights and not just well-intentioned but vague sentiments. The ultimate reason for recognition and protection of the rights of all living beings was that we are all sons and daughters of the Supreme Father, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The Supreme Father will not allow His so-called intelligent sons and daughters to slaughter innocent creatures on the plea that they are "less intelligent" or that "they have no souls." Gurudeva had gathered whatever he could find from Prabhupāda's preaching on this subject as well as from the verses of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, and he presented it in a form that he hoped this audience would accept. When he finished, there was strong applause.

Being one of the senior devotees, Gurudeva was expected to socialize as much as possible. Most of the devotees were engaged in the logistics of the big event. Some had been engaged nonstop in driving to the airport to pick up guests; others had been working all night setting up the tents and making sure that

water and other necessities were available. Many were cooking, and some were acting as stewards to conduct guests. Only a few devotees were expected to meet with animal rights representatives for more extended talk.

Gurudeva had done his share for a few hours, but then he had retreated to his tent, which was a bit secluded. The preaching was rewarding, but tiring. Gurudeva was sitting on his cot chanting to reach his minimum quota of *japa*, when his secretary came and informed him that his disciple Nimāi dāsa had phoned from somewhere in Pennsylvania. Nimāi said it was urgent that he speak with Gurudeva and asked for an appointment so that he could talk, "just for five minutes." Gurudeva's secretary said, "I advised him to write a letter, but he said, 'I don't know if I can last that long. Why can't I speak to my spiritual master?' He sounded a little bit hysterical."

Gurudeva sighed but agreed and told his secretary to try to arrange a time when he could speak on the phone. That would not be very easy to do, since there was only one phone, located in the temple president's office, and it was always swarming with delegates making long-distance calls. It was Gurudeva's practice to avoid such phone calls, even when disciples threatened that they might bloop unless their *guru* spoke to them personally. But by coincidence, Gurudeva had just been thinking of Nimāi at the moment when his secretary said that Nimāi was phoning. And so he thought he should respond.

He had thought of Nimāi earlier in the day also, while speaking to an animal rights' representative



from Santo Domingo. Her name was Flora. She had been telling Gurudeva that she appreciated his lecture, especially when he said that animals are as good as humans and that we should consider material bodies to be just like clothing of the real self. Flora had considerable knowledge of the ability of animals to communicate with people, which she thought was a proof that there is an intelligent self within all creatures. She told him about a dog named Strongheart, who had been able to communicate with people through telepathy and inform them how they in turn could communicate with him. She said she knew a man who lived in a desert who used to have all kinds of animals coming and staying with him. He told her that the way to communicate with animals was to stop thinking about them as dogs or pigs and to understand that "somebody is there inside."

Flora had spoken to Gurudeva in Spanish, and so he wasn't sure if he was getting all the details right through the translator. Also, Flora was very effusive and fluttery, and Gurudeva hadn't been so comfortable during the chat, although he was interested. Flora had gone on to say that if people would stop being so arrogant and cocky, they could actually allow the "channels" to clear and then they could receive messages from animals. Flora had said, "It's a very rewarding experience. It convinces you that there is a further dimension of intelligent life. If you can actually communicate with them, then you know that this is a living entity with a soul standing in front of you, although it may be wearing an animal suit."

The alliance between the animal rights people and

the Kṛṣṇa devotees was intriguing. But, Gurudeva reserved his judgment as to whether Flora's telecommunications were actually true. It *could* be true, and he especially liked it when she said humans were too puffed up and therefore not interested in communicating with lower species. But Gurudeva thought, even if this were true, it didn't seem to be of such crucial importance. We already know from the Vedic literatures that animals *are* spirit souls, and therefore they shouldn't be killed. They should be left alone to live out their natural duration in their own habitats. They can be given *prasādam* if possible. But devotees are more interested in establishing relationships with other humans. It's the human race which is the main target for the distribution of Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana*. In Kali-yuga the human beings are hard enough to reach, and it almost requires a mystic potency to be able to communicate with someone who is in a human body but who is acting like an animal. For example, when Śrīla Prabhupāda heard from his devotees that a fashionable clique of people in Manhattan were eating human fetuses, Prabhupāda replied, "Then we are preaching to animals."

"Hello, Gurudeva?"

It was Nimāi on the phone. After several unsuccessful attempts, Nimāi and Gurudeva were finally connected on a long distance line. Gurudeva had gone to the office several times only to find the phone busy, and even now the room was filled with talking people.



"Please accept my humble obeisances, Gurudeva," said Nimāi. "I've been out on *saṅkīrtana* for four days, and I don't think I can take it any longer. What should I do?"

"Did you speak with Vibhu Prabhu?" said Gurudeva. He put his hand against his left ear so that he could hear Nimāi better.

"Yes, I spoke to Vibhu on the phone. He said that he was disturbed with me. He said it would mean a loss of hundreds of books distributed and hundreds of dollars that wouldn't go to the book fund. He also said I should talk to you. He also said that maybe I shouldn't be a *brahmacārī*. So I don't want to disturb you, Gurudeva, but I just don't think I can go on. I like it, but it's too hard on my body and mind. It's too cold, and I don't have any time to myself. I am sorry to admit this."

"Can't you just stick it out a little longer? It's only for about a month and a half," said Gurudeva.

Gurudeva tried to concentrate despite the noises in the room. He couldn't help overhearing a man arguing with a devotee about milk. He was saying that milk produces cholesterol and is dangerous to health, and the devotee was making a counter-argument about a balanced-protein diet. Gurudeva tried to focus on Nimāi's predicament and to decide whether to ask his disciple to stay out longer and do the austerities or go back to the temple. Sometimes in the past Gurudeva had used the full force of his authority as spiritual master to insist that a disciple continue to do *saṅkīrtana*, and as a result, a few of them had left Kṛṣṇa consciousness and later blamed him. On the

other hand, if he was soft, Vibhu would criticize him. What was best?

On his end of the line, Nimāi wasn't thinking very clearly. He just presented his insistent plea that he be allowed to return to the temple. But when Gurudeva asked him to explain more about it, there were many things Nimāi wanted to say. He was agitated by Vibhu's remark that maybe he shouldn't be a *brahmacārī*. But why did Vibhu say that since Vibhu wouldn't *let* him get married? Did Nimāi have to get married just because he couldn't live in a van? Nimāi also wanted to tell Gurudeva something about Choṭa, how he had fully recovered from his attack and that he was a good devotee. And now there were two new mice who had become devotees. But how could he bring up such things in a conversation like this?

"It's hard for me to know what's best Nimāi," said Gurudeva. "Let me think about it. Can you hang on for a few more days at least?"

"I guess so," Nimāi answered.

"Good," said Gurudeva. Now the pressure was off for an immediate decision. Gurudeva and Nimāi shared the line in silence waiting and thinking if there was something more they wanted to say. Gurudeva flashed on other things Flora had said. She had talked about autistic children who played with dolphins and somehow picked up on the noises which dolphins made to each other. There was also a gorilla who had learned sign language and for its birthday had asked to be given a pet. And chimpanzees had become so accustomed to associating with humans that they were later unable to associate normally with other



zoo chimps. She also spoke about Diane Foster, who had intimately learned the ways of gorillas, and a woman named Joy Adamson, who lived with lions. She had said, "Right now there are a lot of people experiencing these kinds of things." Gurudeva thought of asking Nimāi about the mouse. But he hesitated.

Nimāi also wanted to say at least *something* about Choṭa, at least mention his name, before hanging up. If anybody could understand, it was Gurudeva. He had already been kind to Choṭa, and Choṭa thought him to be a very advanced devotee. He wanted to tell Gurudeva how the mice were on *saṅkīrtana*, and they too were having great difficulty. That was another reason Nimāi wanted to come back. In fact it was a very important reason, and yet Nimāi couldn't bring himself to say it.

"So then I can call back in two or three days Gurudeva? Will you be there?"

"Yes, I'll pray to Kṛṣṇa to help me know what He wants you to do, and you pray also to try to be able to follow His will. All right?"

"Yes, Gurudeva. Thank you very much. Please accept my obeisances."

"All glories to Śrīla Prabhupāda."

The day after Nimāi phoned Gurudeva, it snowed all over Pennsylvania. Nimāi had great difficulty in driving the van, and the outdoor cooking seemed ridiculous. He couldn't believe that Bhīma was going to keep them all out on *saṅkīrtana* in such weather! Even a few of the *brahmacārīs* complained that it was

too cold in the van. More snow was predicted.

In between a run to the bank and the laundromat, Nimāi stopped to talk with Choṭa.

"I feel bad for you guys," said Nimāi. "I would like to take you somewhere warm."

Choṭa admitted that it had been a very difficult night. "My Godbrothers have some serious doubts," said Choṭa. "So they agreed that I could present our situation to you." The two new mice stayed packed together in a corner of the cage, twitching their whiskers and looking exactly like two ordinary house mice in a bad situation.

"They were thinking of some things that our parents said to us. They feel like they have committed a mistake by submitting to you. Because here we are now in a prison, just as if we had been trapped by some human being who wanted to kill us or torture us. Last night Yamala dāsa said to me, 'What's the difference between what Nimāi is putting us through and what we've heard about mice being captured by humans and kept in a cage to run in a treadmill until they die? Who knows that he won't get tired of us or think that we are in the way and just kill us?'" Choṭa looked up at Nimāi imploringly. Nimāi was about to ask him, "And what do *you* think?" But he didn't want to insult his friend's loyalty. No doubt Choṭa had preached to them, and yet he also was feeling strained.

"There is no question of force," said Nimāi. "If you want, I'll just bring you right back to the temple, and you can go to your old home. But I don't think you really want that, do you? It's just this austerity. I



think it's too much myself! And I can understand that it's too much for you. My Gurudeva asked me to wait just a couple of days—but I don't know now. At least I could bring you all back to Gurudeva's house."

"The problem with that," said Choṭa, "is that we are not yet able to sustain ourselves in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We can't read on our own, and unless we see and hear from you regularly, I can't even chant my rounds. So bringing us back to our home in the temple or leaving us at Gurudeva's house without you being there would be just about the same. We'll all fall into *māyā*."

"Maybe not," squeaked Arjuna. "At least we would be warm."

Nimāi wanted to speak some high inspiring philosophy to them. He remembered how Gurudeva would give the example of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. No one was asked to do as difficult a task as was Arjuna. We don't have to kill our relatives on the battlefield, do we? Arjuna didn't want to fight, but Kṛṣṇa convinced him. So we have to do the same. But Nimāi didn't have the conviction to say such things. How could he tell them to forget their bodily pains and their mental agitation when he himself almost agreed with what they were saying? He was torturing them by keeping them out here in the cold, confined to a dark box, and he wasn't spending adequate time with them to see to their *sādhana*. Since the mice had been out with him, they had had no regular classes of philosophy and no *japa* or *kīrtana* together. The two new mice hardly even knew what Kṛṣṇa consciousness was about, so they naturally judged things by

how they were being treated. All they could see was that they were being abused. Nimāi felt abused also, although he was supposed to know better.

"It's difficult for me to decide," said Nimāi, "whether to ask you to stay out on *saṅkīrtana*, or whether to tell you to go back. If it was up to me, I'd just bring you back immediately, and I'd go back myself. So what if they don't distribute as many books without me? I have to consider your survival. I heard that Prabhupāda once said, 'Most important of all is to save yourself.'"

"I think we could wait two more days," said Choṭa, "till you call Gurudeva again."

"But what if he says to stay out?" said Yamala.

Nimāi thought to himself, *These mice are no dopes.*

"All right," said Nimāi decisively. "I won't wait to call Gurudeva. He wants me to use my own intelligence. I'll tell him there was a snow storm, and I just had to go back. He just wants me to stay fixed in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, not to go crazy trying to do some impossible austerity and then fall down."

Choṭa made no objection, and the other mice didn't change their looks, although Nimāi guessed that they felt relief from what he'd said.

So he drove the van straight to Bhīma's *saṅkīrtana* spot and told him that he couldn't take it any longer and he was going back to the farm.

"You don't have to do that, Nimāi," said Bhīma. They both stood outside in the parking lot of the supermarket. Snow was falling again, adding to the already fallen six inches. "I just phoned my old *saṅkīrtana* buddy Keśava Prabhu," said Bhīma. "He's got



his own house in the suburbs. He said that we could stay there and use it as our base of operations for *saṅkīrtana*. Most of the time you can stay indoors. It will be a break for all of us. Okay?"

Nimāi felt badly that he was complaining, since he had so little austerity to perform compared to Bhīma and the other men. Still....

"When can we go there?" asked Nimāi.

## CHAPTER 8

Keśava's house was in the suburbs on a block where the houses weren't too tightly packed together. Keśava, who was a large man, and his wife, who was wearing a *sārī*, greeted them at the door. Their two young daughters, about five and six years old, were wide awake, although it was about 9:00 in the evening. Keśava said their baby boy was sleeping, so the *saṅkīrtana* party tried to enter the house quietly, although that wasn't possible. Keśava knew all the devotees, and so they sat together telling *saṅkīrtana* stories. Keśava told a few of his own from the old days, while Nimāi carried in the travel bags, groceries, and other paraphernalia, including the mouse *āśrama*. The *saṅkīrtana* party was given the guest room, and Nimāi claimed a large closet within that room as the exclusive domain of the mouse box. He also planned to take rest there, if no one objected.

By 10:30 P.M. the excitement had quieted, and almost everyone was ready to take rest for the night. Nimāi was in the closet. He had just phoned Gurudeva's secretary and asked him to tell Gurudeva that they had "made some new arrangements" and so he would be staying out on *saṅkīrtana*. He would write to Gurudeva. Nimāi relished the comfortable, warm temperature and thick rug. He had cleaned out the cage and fed the mice, but there had been no time to speak with them while moving in. Now in the semiprivacy of the closet, he opened the box and whispered.

"Choṭa are you awake?"

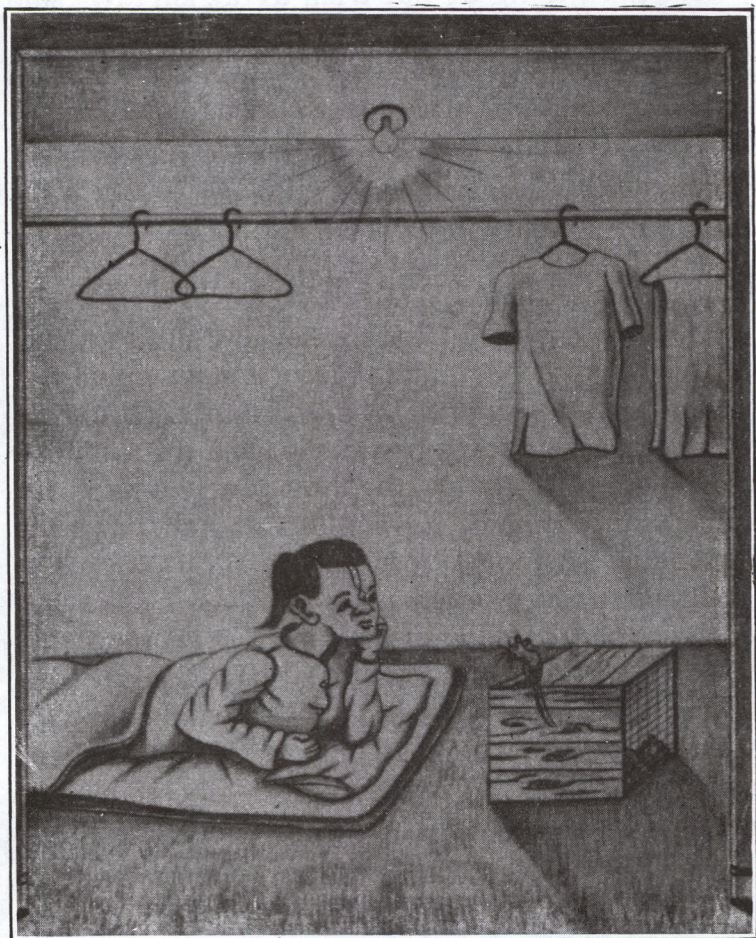


"Hare Kṛṣṇa."

"Prabhu," said Nimāi, "just see how Kṛṣṇa is taking care of us. But we should have had more faith."

"You mean, we shouldn't have quit?" said Choṭa.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't think we could have lasted



another day out there. But... I just wish that Kṛṣṇa had made this nice arrangement without our being so weak-hearted."

Nimāi was lying down in his sleeping bag, his head resting on his hand and elbow. Yamala and Arjuna were sleeping peacefully. Choṭa had crawled up to the top of the box to be able to speak quietly without being overheard. They were only inches apart.

"It's hard to figure out what to do, isn't it?" said Choṭa.

"If we had only held out a little longer," said Nimāi. "Austerity is good for us. If we tolerate a situation for Kṛṣṇa, then He will make arrangements one way or another."

"What did we do wrong?"

"I think we should have prayed more and just chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa. We forgot. At least I forgot."

"Nimāi Prabhu?" Choṭa asked. "Could you tell me how to pray? I don't think I understand."

Nimāi often forgot that he was supposed to be a preceptor and not just a friend. He liked the feeling of being honest, at least with Choṭa, and he liked the benefit of the equal friendship. But after all, he was in the superior position.

"Prayer is..." Nimāi paused. "Prayer is when you very sincerely call out to Kṛṣṇa. The Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* is a prayer, but you really have to put yourself into it. Prabhupāda said it's like a child crying for its mother. So you have to ask Kṛṣṇa, who is like our mother and father, 'Please accept me. Please engage me in Your service.' "

"Is that all?" Choṭa asked.



"Yes," said Nimāi. "It may seem easy, but it's not. We get distracted. We forget that Kṛṣṇa is actually there and He is our only friend. I wish I could just believe and remember that I am a tiny soul and sometimes just talk to Kṛṣṇa as my protector and friend. Just like we are talking together. Kṛṣṇa is the *Supreme Friend*."

"I think I can remember doing like that once," said the mouse. "But not in the last few days, when I really needed it."

"Hey, Nimāi!" Bhīma banged on the closet door. "Did you do the laundry?"

"Oh! I forgot." Nimāi resolved not to get agitated by extra austerities. "I'll do it right away," he said. And he got up singing a Hare Kṛṣṇa tune.

The next morning, by 10:00 A.M., Nimāi was on his own. Bhīma had asked Nimāi to stay back and get the treasury books in order and prepare a deposit for the bank, while Bhīma dāsa drove the men to their *saṅkīrtana* spots. Nimāi dāsa tried to finish his business quickly to be able to read the *Bhagavad-gītā* to Choṭa and the boys. So he was a bit exasperated when Keśava Prabhu stopped in to chat before going to his place of work.

"I hear you've got pet mice," said Keśava. He sat down, and his two daughters sat by him, one on his lap and one holding his hand.

"Yes, they're in a box," said Nimāi, fearing that Keśava might object.

"Sītā dāsī, would you like to see the mouses?" said

Keśava.

"Yes! Yes!"

"We have a rabbit of our own," said Keśava. "My wife, Pārvatī, really loves animals. Don't worry, we won't let the rabbit up here."

Nimāi was usually reluctant to show the mice. Most people thought they were repulsive. But Keśava seemed different.

As Nimāi went to get the mouse box, Keśava called his wife in. Nimāi became so much at ease that he began speaking to the mice. "Prabhus," he said, tapping on the mouse box. "There are some devotees who would like to see you."

The whole family seemed delighted as they peered in and exclaimed.

"They seem so friendly," said Pārvatī. "That's very unusual." She confidently reached in and picked up Yamala. Then, carefully supervising her two girls so that they would not be rough, she directed them to lightly pet the mouse's head. In the same way she picked up Arjuna and Choṭa and then put them back.

"If you like," said Mother Pārvatī, "I can fix up their box a little bit and put in some new stuff for their nests."

Nimāi was deeply moved; he could hardly believe it.

"I used to keep a hamster," said Pārvatī, "and I still have his cage. You can put your mice in there and let me take your box, and I'll make some improvements on it. All right?"

Nimāi thought, "This is a real mother," and he submitted to whatever she said.





Keśava Prabhu then lingered a few moments alone with Nimāi.

"I've got to talk with Bhīma," said Keśava, "but maybe I'll mention it to you too. I think there's going to be a problem with you all staying here."

"I'm sorry I broke the washing machine," said Nimāi. "It was really Rañchor's fault for insisting that I put his sneakers in."

"No, that's not it," said Keśava. "Or, maybe that's just a little part of it. There is just like a basic conflict between the *brahmacārī* and *gṛhastha* ways of life. Some of the men were up at 2:00 A.M., and they woke up the baby. I guess we could adjust.... But partly it's a matter of attitudes. Like this morning Bhīma was preaching to me real heavy, telling me that household life is *māyā*."

"He said that?" asked Nimāi.

"Yes. But that's not what Prabhupāda says. It's *māyā* if you live like a *gṛhamedī*, but Prabhupāda didn't expect everyone to live in the temple. Sometimes devotees think that because you're married and have a family and you move out of the temple that you've blooped or you are not a devotee anymore."

Nimāi wondered why Keśava was saying all this to him, since most people considered Nimāi too inconsequential for serious words.

"I don't think householder life is *māyā*," said Nimāi. "But I suppose you have to expect someone like Bhīma to be a little bit defensive or whatever. I used to think that the *brahmacārīs* were too fanatical for me. But since I have been out with them, I have grown to really appreciate the tremendous austerities they are doing."

"I know that," said Keśava. "I was on traveling *saṅkīrtana* for ten years. Maybe I am just feeling guilty. But I guess we all like to be encouraged. It's not easy doing business all day long. But I see it as service to Prabhupāda and Kṛṣṇa. I just wish Bhīma and the others could see it that way too."

Nimāi felt flattered that Keśava Prabhu was talk-



ing with him in a confidential way. He made a few suggestions how the *saṅkīrtana* party could adjust their behavior so that they would not cause disruption to Keśava's home. Nimāi also expressed his genuine appreciation for the friendly Kṛṣṇa conscious atmosphere.

"I feel more Kṛṣṇa conscious here," said Nimāi, "than I did freezing outdoors in the park. And it's not just the heating in your house; it's the nice warmth in your whole family life. It just seems very spiritual and good to me."

Keśava laughed and gave Nimāi a hug. "Watch out Nimāi, if you get too enamored you may become a householder yourself. But it's really not so wonderful. The best thing is to remain *brahmacārī* if you actually can."

Before he left for work, Keśava gave Nimāi a cable knit sweater, "to keep warm on *saṅkīrtana*."

"I don't even go on *saṅkīrtana*," Nimāi mumbled.

"Sure you do," said Keśava.

By late morning, Mother Pārvatī returned Nimāi's mouse *āśrama*. The wood part was stained with preservative, and it now had a carrying handle as well as a lock. The inside had separate rooms and fresh nesting paper. The little girls had even drawn color pictures of Nārada Muni and some animals with devotees, and these were now pasted on the walls. In one of the pictures some small animals were looking up to Nārada and saying, "Hare Kṛṣṇa. All glories to Prabhupāda."

"I hope we didn't make it worse," said Pārvatī. But Nimāi thought it was just great. "I am sure they'll



like it," he said. He was very pleased but embarrassed to be talking to such a chaste, affectionate mother.

"Mice eat anything," she said, "but there are some things they especially like. I'll show you later." With



Pārvatī's assistance, Nimāi put the mice back into the refurbished cage.

He had been standing respectfully while she was present, but then he sat back on the floor and opened his treasury books and spread out the money.

"I've got to get to work now, Choṭa," said Nimāi. But after no more than ten minutes, he was asleep on the rug.

Nimāi dreamed that he had become a householder. His beautiful wife, Sūrya dāśī, was offering incense to their household Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities. Nimāi saw himself sitting playing a harmonium, and he had several sons and daughters beside him ....

Bhīma had to shake Nimāi several times before he woke. When Nimāi gained consciousness, he began telling Bhīma how Keśava Prabhu was somewhat disturbed by the party's behavior and by some things that Bhīma had said.

"I'll have to apologize," said Bhīma. "I shouldn't be so puffed up about being a *brahmacārī*. I don't think I said anything that's not in Prabhupāda's books, but it wasn't right according to time, place, and person."

"But doesn't Prabhupāda make a distinction," said Nimāi, "between *grhamedī* and *grhastha*?"

"Sometimes. But sometimes he says the same for *grhastha*. If you take to the *grhastha āśrama*, your spiritual advancement is almost nil."

"That doesn't sound right to me," said Nimāi.

"I don't want to argue with you, Nimāi," said Bhīma. "I'll talk to Keśava though. He's my old friend. So get to work on these treasury books."

Nimāi knew that the mice were happy in the warmth of the house, but he did not have much chance to talk with them during the day. Only at night when the lights went out did he speak to them in a whisper within the closet.

"You got some nice *prasādam* today," said Nimāi. Mother Pārvatī had made chocolate-chip cookies and peanut butter and almond pies, just for the palates of the mice. This was in addition to a big feast she cooked for the men. The mice were visibly plumper.

"We are very satisfied, by Kṛṣṇa's grace," said Choṭa. Yamala and Arjuna were sleeping, faintly snoring.

"I am feeling pretty good too," said Nimāi. He couldn't think of anything he wanted to say, and so he was prepared to sleep. But Choṭa had something to say.

"Nimāi? I would like to take Yamala and Arjuna and try to do some preaching to the mice within this house."

Nimāi was shocked to hear it. His first reaction was disappointment. How could Choṭa think of something like that on his own? How could he go preaching without Nimāi? What would Nimāi do without them? Nimāi felt hurt, but he realized such emotions should be controlled. "Really?" he asked. "Do you think it's safe?"

"Sure," said Choṭa.

Nimāi could see that Choṭa had thought about it a lot and that he was intent.

"Mice are pretty much the same anywhere," said Choṭa. "I know their mentality. Me and Yamala and



Arjuna can go and see them and bring them some of the delicious *prasādam* we got today. I kept a stash."

Nimāi was just about to say, "But can you preach?" but he held his tongue, realizing his words were ill-chosen. Maybe they weren't the greatest preachers, but they could do something, even if only to go and chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and to distribute *prasādam*. Why should he doubt them or hold them back?

"I'm mostly concerned for your safety," said Nimāi. "If you really think it's not dangerous."

"We'll be all right. Kṛṣṇa will protect us. Can we leave in the morning? We want to stay out for two days."

"Two days!"

"I think it would take that long to visit all the mouse places. I can hear them even now in between the walls. But we can only go with your blessings." Nimāi muttered a consent, and Choṭa returned to his *āśrama*, his head filled with plans and the spirit of adventure.

By morning, Nimāi accepted that Choṭa was actually going off to preach. But Nimāi requested that one of the little ones stay back. So Arjuna was selected. Nimāi wanted to give the preachers last minute instructions and practical advice. He tried remembering something that he'd read by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī when he sent preachers off to Europe. Didn't he tell them to be very humble, thinking themselves lower than the blade of grass, and not to feel superior to whomever they met? Nimāi told them they should be very dedicated and not fall into *māyā*. He then mentioned Śrīla Prabhupāda's brave preaching, how

he came to the West all alone on the *Jaladuta* with only a few hours spending money and no patrons. Choṭa's work was pioneering, so it would catch Prabhupāda's merciful attention. Nimāi said he was very impressed that just when the mice were being comfortably treated and feasted, they were ready to go off for preaching with detachment from sense gratification. Yamala, who had been selected to go with Choṭa, had mixed feelings. He didn't want to leave the new, comfortable situation, and neither was he delighted at the prospects of visiting unfamiliar mice to tell them about Kṛṣṇa. But both he, Choṭa, and Arjuna were from a particularly aggressive breed of mice, and so he looked forward to the idea of roaming and assisting Choṭa in "attacking the *māyā*" of the mouse communities. Nimāi also had mixed feelings, but he managed a good send-off for the preaching party. Again and again he emphasized that they should come back, no matter what, after no more than two days. Choṭa packed up his stash of *prasādam* for distribution. He said he had also hidden some in the walls. "This is only a beginning," said Choṭa. "Maybe some day in the future there could be something like books for mice." Nimāi felt proud of his student, but he was also feeling somewhat distant. He was sad to see them disappear into a hole in the wall, which he had never before noticed.



## CHAPTER 9

Choṭa and Yamala proceeded for a few minutes without meeting any life in between the floorboards. Then they saw a mouse coming toward them.

"Excuse me, sir!" Choṭa called out in his native mouse tongue. The other mouse stopped, indicating that he had heard, but then hurried on his way.

"Want me to catch him?" asked Yamala.

"No, there's plenty more," said Choṭa. But as they explored the house, they did not find any other mice, although they saw their droppings. When they reached the kitchen, they met a mouse coming in their own direction. "Excuse me, sir," said Choṭa, while Yamala discreetly blocked the path.

"What is it?" asked the mouse, who was darker than they.

"We are new to this house," said Choṭa, "and we want to know where the main mouse community is located."

"You will find them in the barn," said the dark mouse. "Only one family lives in the house. Most others live in the barn and commute here everyday through a passageway. Where are you from?"

"We live in the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple, which is about one hundred miles from here. We're traveling on a mission to help others, and we wanted to share some of the nice things we've learned at the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple. If you have a minute I'd like to explain."

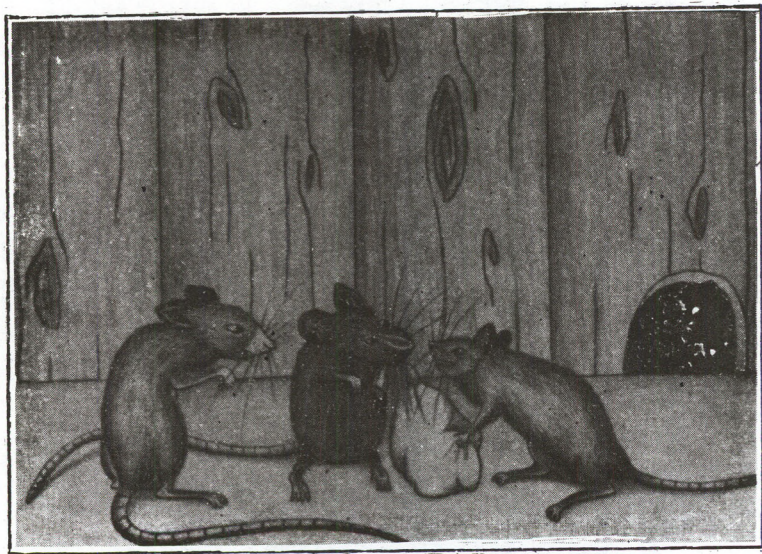
But the mouse was in a hurry. He asked Yamala to step aside. Yamala first offered him a piece of *pra-*

*sadam*, which the mouse sniffed at and then immediately devoured. He then tried to devour their whole stash, but Choṭa and Yamala prevented him. When he saw that he couldn't overpower them, the dark mouse ran away.

"What a jerk," said Yamala. "They are all like that. Simply interested in eating. Stupid fools."

"It's not his fault," said Choṭa. "We were in ignorance too. Remember?"

They proceeded to the barn, but Choṭa began thinking, "This isn't going to be easy." He sensed that he was out of touch with his animal instincts, and that was good, but on the other hand, he would have to approach the mice not from an elevated consciousness but as mouse-to-mouse. He thought of the big, strong, reassuring form of Nimāi Prabhu. But now they were on their own.





Yamala dāsa, who trailed close behind Choṭa, tread on even thinner spiritual ground. All he could think about was eating. "My teeth keep growing," he thought, "and so I need to eat. And my belly wants food." He knew theoretically that he was supposed to be above just eating, sleeping, mating, and defending. But he needed to hear constantly that there was something else to life. What kept him going was that he liked Choṭa better than anyone else, and he had come to see other mice as stupid and useless, in illusion. Mainly, Yamala thought of the delicious peanut butter, almonds, and cookies, and he hoped they would go back soon and have more feasts. Yamala couldn't help thinking, "Why are we running in the opposite direction of the feast?"

As Choṭa and Yamala entered the passageway between the barn and the house, they saw the busy traffic of mice. Some of the mice were carrying bits of food in their mouth to bring back to their nests, and some were carrying nesting material. Choṭa positioned himself slightly to one side of the thoroughfare and had Yamala stand behind him guarding their *prasādam*.

"Excuse me, sir," said Choṭa, gesturing with his front paw. Most of the mice paid him no attention and kept going on their course. Occasionally he was able to draw one out of the path, usually because of the aroma of the *prasādam*. But it was the same exchange that they had had with the first mouse they met: a mouse would take a tiny bit of offered *prasādam* and then attempt to steal the whole cache. Only by Yamala's strong defensive postures were they

stopped, and there were even a few scuffles in which Choṭa had to help push off a greedy mouse.

"If these mice could only use their natural aggression in Kṛṣṇa consciousness," said Choṭa, "they'd be great devotees."

The rejections and scuffles began to exhaust the preachers. What was the use of it?

"At least they are all taking a little *prasādam*," said Yamala. "That in itself gives them spiritual benefit, doesn't it, Choṭa?"

"Yes, indirectly," said Choṭa. "But so far none of them know what it is, and they don't appreciate it."

After a fight in which three mice almost overpowered the preachers to take the *prasādam*, Choṭa decided they should try a different tactic. They would perform *hari-nāma* for the benefit of the passersby.

So they began to chant the sound vibration they had learned from Nimāi, "Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare." They made a little tune of their own and swayed and danced sedately by the side of the busy road. Those mice who had things in their mouths continued hurrying by, although even they glanced with great surprise at the unusual phenomenon. But soon other mice began to gather around. The response was mostly hostile. "What's this? What's going on?" some mice asked the chanters and then asked each other.

"Stop that stupid singing and tell us!" said a big mouse who had already fought with them.

"I know what *that* is!" said another. "They've been hanging around humans!"



"It sounds awful! You don't even sound like mice!"

"They don't even *look* like mice. They are traitors!"

"Look at all that food. Ask them where they got that food." The preachers were encircled by about fifteen squeaking and chattering mice, some of whom displayed threatening bodily postures. Choṭa noticed that one or two in the crowd were quiet, perhaps even thoughtful. But the threat of attack seemed so imminent that Choṭa told Yamala to take up the *prasādam* and get ready to withdraw. Continuing to sing the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*, Choṭa moved forward, and the mice parted, letting him out of their circle. The crowd jeered after them but eventually dispersed and continued their work in the busy to and fro traffic of the passageway.

"Maybe mice as a species can't take to Kṛṣṇa consciousness," said Yamala. He and Choṭa had found a secluded place in between the walls that was only a few minutes walk from the main passageway. They had calmed themselves from the threatening encounter and were finishing chanting their quota of *japa*.

"Don't say that," said Choṭa. "What about us? We are mice, and we have taken to Kṛṣṇa consciousness."

"Well, maybe we're rare exceptions," said Yamala, but he laughed out loud at the suggestion that he was something special. "I suppose if I have taken to it," said Yamala, "anyone could."

"Kṛṣṇa is testing us," said Choṭa, "to see how sin-

cere we are about helping others to spiritual life."

"But even Nimāi said something about preaching where it's favorable," said Yamala.

The two continued discussing their situation from the philosophical point of view and eventually agreed that they had done enough for one day, but that they must try again in the morning. They decided to try a nest-to-nest approach to avoid a mob scene where the antagonistic mice took advantage of their numbers. At least they had discovered that all mice were willing to "take" *prasādam*. But *prasādam* was also risky because it agitated their senses and awakened their instinct to steal.

"Nimāi," said Choṭa, "even said that in Sanskrit the word for mouse is *musha*, which means thief." They decided they would distribute *prasādam* in a more civil, controlled way and at the same time talk to mice in their nests.

In preparation for the next day, Yamala went off to gather the *prasādam* stashes that they had hidden in several locations. They wrapped the *prasādam* in tiny cloths after eating a bit and then closed their eyes to sleep.

In the middle of the night the preachers were attacked by six or seven *mushas* emitting high-pitched cries. The thieves jumped on the bodies of the sleeping mice and began clawing and biting at their faces and necks. Overcoming slumber, the preachers fought back. Choṭa and Yamala were both good fighters, but they were overcome by the concerted efforts of the thieves, who were all fighting to kill. Yamala fought back so furiously that one of the



thieves bled profusely from his nose, and the others temporarily backed off. But they regrouped, and three more joined them leaping out of the darkness onto the backs of the preachers. Choṭa signalled Yamala that they should run for their lives, and so they both fled, while the thieves seized the *prasādam*.

The attack was a great shock for Choṭa and Yamala. They both considered returning to Nimāi a day early. Their faces showed gashes, and Yamala's eye pained him where a mouse had tried to scratch it out.

"It's not unusual," said Choṭa, "for devotees to be attacked. Even Lord Nityānanda was hit in the head when he tried to preach to Jagai and Mādhai."

Although they were dispirited, neither of them wanted to give up.

"Let's try something else," said Choṭa. "I have an idea." They spoke together in a hideout they had discovered in the basement of the house.

"Remember when we were regular house mice?" said Choṭa, "How our community used to go outside and invade the field mice in their nests? We overpowered them because they are less aggressive. Now we can use that same advantage, but in the service of Kṛṣṇa, and not to hurt them."

"Yeah!" Yamala sat up erect. He was soaking his injured eye with water, but he grinned, baring his incisor teeth. "And some of them are hibernating now. So they will be slow, I mean, more receptive."

At dusk the two left the shelter of the house and made tracks across the snow. They darted into the open spaces only when they were sure there were no

cats, rats, or other predators lurking about. By instinct they quickly uncovered a nest of Meadow Jumping Mice, whom they knew were hibernators. Removing the entrance to an underground nest, they found a closely huddled group of small yellowish mice. Most of them were lying dormant, with their heads rolled between their hind legs, and their tails curled around their bodies. But a few disengaged themselves from the huddle. Choṭa and Yamala





entered. The preachers recognized the breed by their long hind legs and oversized hind feet. They also knew them to be docile creatures.

"Hare Kṛṣṇa," said Choṭa. "How are you?"

"Can't you see we are hibernating? Don't bother us," said one of the meadow clan, stretching his body and squinting his eyes in the darkness.

"We just want to tell you something that will help you. It will help you to be less fearful. Just spare a minute and let us share with you some spiritual knowledge."

"No," said the Meadow Mouse, "just go away. If you want to be kind to us, leave us alone."

"All right," said Choṭa reluctantly. "Hare Kṛṣṇa."

The Meadow Mouse turned back to his group but stopped to ask, "What's that you said?"

"It's called a *mantra*," said Choṭa. "It can protect you from snakes and birds."

"Hmm," the Meadow Mouse said. "Hare Kṛṣṇa," and he returned to sleep.

Choṭa and Yamala proceeded through the snow to find other nests.

"We've so much to learn," said Yamala. "I'm sure there are better ways to approach them to make it sound more interesting. But at least he chanted."

They next visited a nest of Oldfield Mice. They were smaller than house mice and of a docile nature. The Oldfield Mice were in fact favorite pets of humans because they didn't bite and they got on well even in captivity. Yamala found their nest by noticing mounds of soil at the entrance to an underground tunnel. He removed the plug and then entered. When

the mice understood that the visitors had no malicious intentions, they received them well and offered them some food in the form of insects. But the preachers refused it, explaining that they were vegetarians.

"Vegetarians? Why is that?" One question led to another, and soon the preachers found themselves explaining Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The Oldfields didn't seem to understand spiritual teachings, but they remained sociable and even sang the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* with their visitors, finding it a pleasant way to spend a cold evening underground.

When they left the Oldfield community after several hours, Yamala and Choṭa were jubilant. They had forgotten their wounds and wanted to go visiting nest-to-nest without stopping to eat or sleep.

Their other visits were not as productive, but they were at least received by the Deer Mice, who talked fearfully about their predators—skunks, foxes, weasels, hawks, owls, and snakes. Even if the field mice couldn't understand much of what the preachers were saying, they seemed to respect the calm and confident attitude of their visitors, and they sensed their nonviolent intentions. In each of these places, the preachers made sure to chant and give an explanation of the *mantra*. They left each nest with hopes that maybe someone would remember, perhaps at a time of danger, or at the time of death. Most of the mouse species lived only for a few years, so the preachers tried to emphasize the urgent need to understand the purpose of life and how to be spared from rebirth in lower species.



In a bold mood they even entered the nests of the Cotton Mice, who were larger than Yamala and Arjuna. Despite their size, they were a fearful, endangered species, preyed upon by many birds, snakes, and carnivorous mammals. With confidence, the preachers spoke of overcoming fear in all situations, and they recommended chanting. Staying up all night preaching, Choṭa and Yamala returned from the woods at sunrise. They had to wait outside for several hours, while a cat prowled nearby, before they finally darted back inside, taking a new route through the garage.

In the rafters of the garage, the preachers came upon some Albino Mice. As Choṭa began to explain his mission, one of the white creatures became quite interested.

"Some of my brothers," he said, "used to be pets of humans. One of them even returned to live with us. So I have heard different things, but never *this*. You learned this from the humans?"

"Yes," said Choṭa, "but this is not human culture. Spiritual culture is for all living beings. All living creatures are equal as spirit souls. The difference is in the bodies. Bodies are just like coverings of the real self."

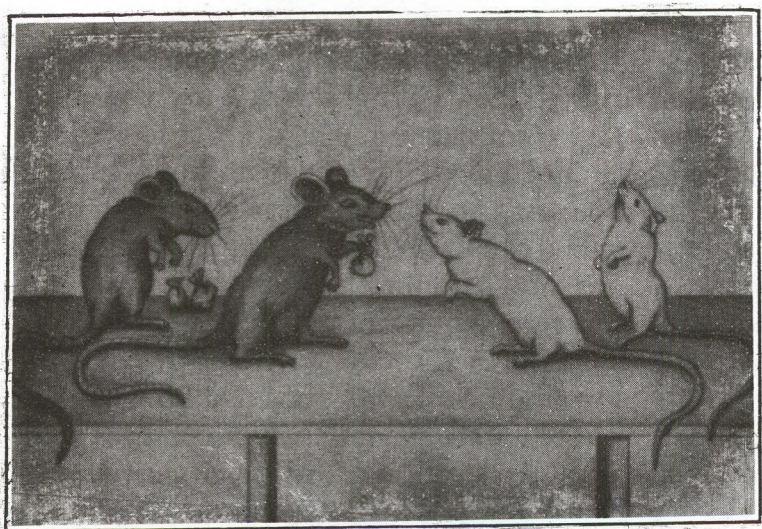
"What do you mean?" the albino asked. "How can a creature be different from his body? All I know is the instincts of a mouse, whereas the cat, our enemy, knows the instincts of a cat. So how can you say we are the same?"

"What you are describing," said Choṭa, "is material consciousness. And that's all most creatures know. But there is higher knowledge. Certain ad-

vanced human beings have received this knowledge, but it can be understood by any creature, because we are all spirit soul within. Only in ignorance do we live out a life just thinking of mating, sleeping, eating, and defending. When we die without any other knowledge, the purpose of life is defeated."

Another Albino who had overheard the talk moved closer with friendly curiosity. He said, "But how can this help us in a practical way?"

Choṭa was thrilled by the intelligent inquiries. He had never imagined that mice could be so receptive, although he had heard that the Albinos were an advanced race. Yamala was also feeling blissful and he tried to contribute with an occasional intelligent remark. Mostly, however, he left the preaching to Choṭa. But he knew that his demeanor was being





carefully watched by the others, so he tried to remain composed and controlled.

The discussion with the Albinos continued all morning. Several of them seemed quite impressed with the philosophy spoken by Choṭa, and with the preachers themselves. The Albinos were sorry to see their friends go, and before they parted they made promises to try and meet again sometime. The Albinos agreed to practice the chanting.

"If you simply practice the chanting every day, even a little bit," said Choṭa, "your consciousness will change from material to spiritual, and you will feel so many other good benefits."

"Thank you very much for visiting us. I think this is a very important day in our lives," said the Albino leader, and he personally escorted the preachers to the exit of their hidden nest.

Tired as they were, Yamala and Choṭa scampered with joy across the roof beams, into the house, in-between the walls, and back to the closet, eager to report their results to Nimāi.

## CHAPTER 10

Nimāi sat anxiously in the closet hoping that Choṭa and Yamala would soon appear. They were three hours late. Nimāi had not been able to converse much with Choṭa's little brother, but Arjuna had managed to suggest that he could go off and look for the other two. Nimāi was considering what to do, when he heard the familiar sounds of tiny feet. And then they appeared from the hole—their ears were a bit ragged, their bodies bore gash marks, but both Choṭa and Yamala were beaming with bliss. Nimāi went to embrace them, but before he could reach them, they leaped into his arms. Nimāi and Arjuna were sorry to see their friends' wounds and immediately began to clean the preacher's bodies.

"What happened?" asked Nimāi.

"We got attacked by the mice in this building," said Choṭa. And he began to tell the whole story of their adventures, while Nimāi heard with rapt attention. He knew better than anyone how difficult it was for the mice, and he knew their limitations.

"What you are doing," said Nimāi, "is just as important as the *saṅkīrtana* men. And you are no less heroic. You are no less dear to Kṛṣṇa than any human devotee!" The mice were jumping with glee, but then they became embarrassed at the praise.

"You guys must be hungry," said Arjuna. "We've got a feast ready."

"Oh, I might be able to nibble at something," said Yamala.

Nimāi brought forth a spread which Mother Pār-



vati had prepared for them including their favorite seeds and grains, oat-and-peanut-butter balls, almond pies, and different varieties of raw vegetables.

While the mice feasted, Nimāi asked further questions until they had given him an hour-by-hour account of all their deeds, words, and thoughts from the preaching tour.

That afternoon Nimāi went out shopping and returned in the early evening with the *saṅkīrtana* men. The mice had spent the afternoon resting and recuperating. By late evening, Nimāi was alone again with Choṭa, while the others slept.

"Choṭa Prabhu," Nimāi said, "I would like to tell you about my activities while you were gone. I hope you will approve what I am about to say. I think ... I think I am going to get married."

"I am not sure what that means," said Choṭa. Choṭa had trouble distinguishing ordinary mating from "marriage," and so Nimāi had to explain.

"It means taking a wife. I confided in Keśava Prabhu and Pārvatī Prabhu that I had been thinking of getting married. So they phoned the parents of this young *matajī*, Sūrya dāsī—the one who screamed when she saw you. But her parents said they would definitely not let her marry me. I don't blame them. Then Mother Pārvatī had this idea that I could marry a *brahmacārīṇī* from Guyana. Guyana is a country in the Caribbean thousands of miles south of here. Keśava Prabhu has a brother who is married to a devotee from there. Keśava also sends profits from his business to Guyana so they can distribute books and *Back to Godhead* magazines. Devotees from the

North sometimes go to Guyana to get wives because the girls there are simple, and they're raised in Hindu families."

Nimai was speaking rapidly and most of it was going over Choṭa's head. So Nimāi slowed down and described the complexities of marrying in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, and what "Hinduism" was, and what it would mean to them in a practical way. The immediate result of these decisions was that Nimāi—and the mice—would be going soon for a trip to the Caribbean, where Nimāi would meet a potential wife, and if all went well, he could even get married while down there and then come back with his wife.

Because Choṭa was an intelligent mouse, he soon grasped the concepts, although much of it remained abstract. He couldn't comprehend distances of thousands of miles or what it was like to travel there. And marriage, the way Nimāi described it, was baffling. But he had implicit faith in Nimāi, and as long as he was going to be able to go along, it sounded just fine.

"I'm glad you approve," said Nimāi. "I wouldn't want you to think I am in *māyā*. Keśava Prabhu said a wife could help me in my Kṛṣṇa consciousness. But I don't want to stop working with you and the other *prabhus* in our *āśrama*. To me that's still the most important thing, especially now that you have started this preaching. I think you could continue preaching even in the countries we visit. There are plenty of mice there! I may not be much good for preaching myself, but if I can assist you in missions like the one you just performed, maybe that's my niche."



Bhīma dāsa couldn't help but show his disappointment to Nimāi.

"Why are you getting married?" he asked.

"I figured it would happen sooner or later, so why not sooner?" said Nimāi.

Why *am* I getting married? Nimāi thought. And he answered himself, "Because sometimes I am agitated. Because I am lonely." He also had an idea that maybe it would be nice to have a wife like so many devotees did and just go on doing devotional service, but "with double strength." Nimāi had no deep illusion that marriage was the answer to all problems, but it was something he probably should do. People often told him that some of his habits were not those of a strict *brahmacārī*. Even keeping the pets, one of the *saṅkīrtana* men had said, was an indication of that. Nimāi knew his willingness to marry was a symptom of being less spiritually advanced, but he accepted it and was willing to see the bright side. The idea of marrying a simple, chaste Hindu girl was appealing to him. He didn't like disappointing the *brahmacārīs*, but what could he do?

Keśava phoned Nimāi's temple president and explained it to him, and Vibhu reluctantly accepted. He had been just about to tell the *brahmacārī* party to go out again on the road, and he knew that Nimāi wasn't up to it. He agreed that Keśava could take Nimāi down to the Caribbean and try to find him a wife.

Nimāi prayed to Kṛṣṇa, "Please don't let me be in

*māyā* about this." He wanted to convince himself it was all right, and yet he knew it wasn't the highest standard. "But since when," thought Nimāi, "have I ever conducted devotional service at the highest standard?"

"What do you think?" Nimāi asked Choṭa.

"We can at least go to that place, Guyana," said Choṭa. "You don't have to absolutely decide now."

"But if I go, it's expected I'll do it," said Nimāi. "I wish I could just be a pure devotee and not have to worry about such things. But I am not."

Choṭa couldn't imagine anything like Kṛṣṇa conscious marriage among mice. For he and the other mice, becoming Kṛṣṇa conscious meant giving up association of the opposite sex.

"From what you've told me," said Choṭa, "there is no big objection to a human marrying in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. As you said, Kṛṣṇa was married, Lord Śiva was married, Lord Brahmā was married..." And so Nimāi consoled himself, with the assistance of his friend.

But the incident had raised some doubts in Choṭa's mind. Choṭa was usually very simple, and he didn't doubt Nimāi's decision, but he began to wonder again whether mice could get married in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It made him more aware that there were many unsettled areas in regard to the mouse species and spiritual life.

"How am I supposed to figure these things out?" Choṭa asked.

"We can't figure everything out at once," said Nimāi. "This is all new. Your preaching has never



been done before. At least I don't know the answers. Even the human beings in the West have only been taking to Kṛṣṇa consciousness for about twenty years, since Prabhupāda came. So there are still unsettled questions, like how to develop the social system of *varṇāśrama*. Don't trouble yourself about it."

"But there is one thing that *does* trouble me," said Choṭa. "A mouse only lives for a year or so. As young as I am, me and the other boys are more than two thirds finished. What if . . . What if we have to leave our bodies before any other mice become interested?"

"That's also a speculation," said Nimāi. "Everything is in Kṛṣṇa's hands. But thinking like that is good. We should all think that we don't have a minute to spare."

With Nimāi's permission, Choṭa made another visit to the favorable mouse communities, the Albinos and the Oldfield Mice. He took Arjuna with him and distributed *prasādam* and chanting.

Nimāi was busy preparing to leave with Keśava for the Caribbean, but he also thought of what Choṭa had said, and of the reply he had given as a dutiful preceptor. It was true: Not a moment should be wasted. His seeking for a wife should also be undertaken in that spirit. It was all right to get married and to travel for that purpose, but they should always remember the goal of life, Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

On the evening of their journey, Nimāi felt sad and somewhat fearful to be leaving his native land and his home temple. He prayed to Kṛṣṇa for protec-

tion, for himself "and for my devotee friends, and for the short-lived mice, and for everyone. Please engage us in Your service."

Mother Pārvatī said that she would take care of Nimāi's mice while he traveled abroad. "It would be difficult to pass through immigrations and customs with the mice," she said. But Nimāi flatly refused. "It may not be so difficult getting into those countries," said Keśava Prabhu, "but getting back into the U.S. could be a problem."

Nimāi said he was willing to take his chances. And so he fashioned a lunch box into a mouse carrier, punching small air holes in it and draping a shirt over it as camouflage. He briefed the mice on how they should be quiet during the travels and of the risks that they would encounter.

"A mouse's life is nothing but risks," said Choṭa. "If we are in our nest, or if we are in the field, at any moment, without our hearing it, a cat or owl could strike. So why shouldn't we travel with you?"

"Kṛṣṇa is our protector," said Arjuna. Nimāi noticed that the mice had become increasingly fearless since their preaching tours. Choṭa had been making remarks that "death can come at any moment," but he didn't say it in a morbid way. He said it as a means to remind himself, and whomever he spoke to, that everything depends on Kṛṣṇa. As he liked to tell everyone he met, "Life is short. Just chant Hare Kṛṣṇa."

"It only appears that I am taking care of you," said Nimāi. "Your association is what keeps me going."



Keśava was aware that Nimāi was very fond of his pets, and he made no objection. To him, Nimāi was a child, like one of his young daughters. He was aware that "Nimāi the gnome" was a bit of a laughing stock in the movement, but he saw him as innocent.

During the five-hour flight to Santo Domingo, Keśava told Nimāi what he could expect on entering householder life.

"You should consider how to make money," said Keśava, "what kind of work is suited for you. That might even mean getting further education." Nimāi didn't want to admit it, but he had never even thought of such things. His own mother and father were 1960's hippies, and he himself had dropped out of high school. When he joined the Movement, he assumed that he would be a full-time devotee and not be involved at all in "materialistic life." But as he listened to Keśava, it seemed like all that might have to change.

"Couldn't I get married," asked Nimāi, "and just live in a simple way with my wife in the temple?"

"Yes, you could be a poor *brāhmaṇa*," said Kesava. "That's one way. But to do that you and your wife would have to agree to accept whatever the temple gave you. What if you needed some money? And what about when you have children? What if you or your wife wants to have an apartment? And besides, the temple authorities might tell you that they couldn't maintain you even as a poor *brāhmaṇa*."

Nimāi felt bewildered. It sounded almost as bad as living in the freezing van.

Keśava was traveling with Nimāi in order to help him find a wife as well as to do some business in the Caribbean countries. He had brought devotional paintings and jewelery with him, and he would show the devotees how to sell them. Nimāi would also try to learn by assisting Keśava.

"Didn't Prabhupāda say that selling his books was the best business?" asked Nimāi.

"Yes," said Keśava. "if you can live off a percentage of the profits. I did that for ten years, but then I couldn't keep it up. Do you think you could become a book distributor?"

Nimāi didn't think he could. Whenever he had tried to distribute books, he had found it very difficult to face people's rude remarks and constant rejections. Even when he stayed out all day, he had not made any profit.

Nimāi was grateful that Keśava was introducing him to the realities of householder life in a gentle way. But Nimāi still wasn't completely convinced that he'd have to become a businessman. He preferred not to think about it and looked out the plane window, softly chanting on his beads.

After a few hours in the air, once Nimāi had covertly slipped *prasādam* to the mice, and while most of the people were watching the in-flight movie, Nimāi began to write a letter:

"Dear Gurudeva,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to



Śrīla Prabhupāda and to you. I want to keep in touch with you about my devotional life because unless one pleases the spiritual master, he cannot make advancement in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

I think I am getting married. I hope you approve. I know this means I am less intelligent. I haven't gotten married yet, though.

Kṛṣṇa consciousness is still most important to me. Please tell me what to do.

I would like to tell you about the mouse that I started telling you about. I think you remember how he almost died, but then in your room he came back to life and you fed him some *prasādam*.

Now there are two more mice. Do you remember what I told you, how I was having a spiritual exchange with them and talking to them about Kṛṣṇa consciousness? You never really said definitely what you thought about that, except that I should be humble. I have not told anyone else about this. No one knows it or understands. But I thought that I should tell you. I want to let you know everything I do so that you will approve, or else it is useless.

But the mice actually go out and preach to other mice. I know it sounds crazy, but it says in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa* that they can be given Kṛṣṇa consciousness too. It is all happening by Kṛṣṇa's grace. Let me know what you think, Śrīla Gurudeva.

Trying to be your servant,  
the most fallen, Nimāi dāsa

P.S. Is it all right that I write to you like this? I will write to you again from Guyana where I am sup-

posed to meet a wife. Keśava Prabhu is taking me there and teaching me about *grhastha* life. You once told me that if I thought I should get married I should go ahead. Is that right?"





## CHAPTER 11

They sat on the roof of the ISKCON temple in Santo Domingo. To Nimāi, the tropical dawn seemed more relaxing than other skies he had seen, especially because the weather was so warm and everything was so new. Although he could hear an occasional motor scooter and cars in the distance, he felt as if he were way up on a solitary mountain top. It was a small, flat roof which he had reached by a metal ladder, and no one had noticed him. Nimāi let the mice out of their cage and they ran about for exercise and to satisfy their insatiable curiosity. But after a few minutes, they sat close to Nimāi and asked him to tell them Kṛṣṇa conscious stories.

Over the months Nimāi had discovered that the mice were more receptive to stories than to straight philosophy. Memorizing Sanskrit verses was *very* difficult for them. But stories! He had told them all the pastimes he knew of Hanumān and the monkeys and had begun to study the *Rāmāyaṇa* to find new ones. They especially liked stories involving how God and God's pure devotees showed kindness to the animals, or narratives in which animals displayed higher consciousness. Hanumān and the Vanara soldiers were subhuman, but they were great fighters, eloquent speakers, and staunch devotees. And then there was Garuḍa, who appeared to be a bird, but of whom Prabhupāda had written, "Garuḍa is the greatest of all Vaiṣṇavas." Nimāi liked to tell them about the old bird Jaṭāyu from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, because that was one of his favorites. Devotees were usually victorious in

their fights with demons, but Jaṭāyu was defeated by Rāvaṇa. Even in his defeat, however, he was glorified by Rāma, who performed his funeral ceremony. Nimāi had even heard Prabhupāda mention Jaṭāyu in a lecture. Prabhupāda said that even if the devotees are sometimes overcome by demons, like Jaṭāyu was, they are never defeated. Nimāi liked that because he himself felt that he was often defeated, and yet he could still be a victor in Kṛṣṇa's eyes.

"Tell us again," said Choṭa, "about the dog that was sent back to Godhead by Lord Caitanya."

"Śivānanda Sena was a devotee," Nimāi began, "who used to escort all the other devotees when they traveled from Bengal to see Lord Caitanya in Jagannātha Purī. So one time he allowed a dog to go with them, and he supplied it food and took care of it. Once when they were crossing a river, the boatman would not allow the dog, but Śivānanda Sena paid its toll."

"That's like you Nimāi," said Arjuna, "you taking us on the plane even though it's risky."

"I'm not Śivānanda Sena," said Nimāi. "So one time Śivānanda Sena was detained by a toll man, and he forgot to feed the dog its cooked rice, and the dog disappeared. Śivānanda Sena stayed up all night fasting and unhappy, but he couldn't find the dog. Śrīla Prabhupāda has written a very interesting purport on this. I have it written down in my notebook:

"There are many other instances in which the pet animal of a Vaiṣṇava was delivered back home to Vaikuṇṭhaloka, back to Godhead. Such is the benefit of somehow or other



becoming the favorite of a Vaiṣṇava. Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Thākura has also sung, *kītājanma, ha-u yathā tuyā dāsa*, in *Śaraṇāgati*. There is no harm in taking birth again and again. Our only desire should be to take birth under the care of a Vaiṣṇava . . . . We may conclude that even as dogs we must take shelter of a Vaiṣṇava. The benefit will be the same as that which accrues to an advanced devotee under a Vaiṣṇava's care."

When Nimāi read passages like that, both he and the mice felt completely confirmed. Even if no one else understood or believed that *jīva* souls could become devotees while in their animal bodies, Śrīla Prabhupāda knew it, and he had written about it in his books.

"Prabhupāda says," said Choṭa, "that there are many other instances in which the pet animal of a Vaiṣṇava went back to Godhead. What are some others?"

"First let me finish the story of the dog," said Nimāi. "When all the devotees got to Jagannātha Purī to meet Lord Caitanya, He was taking His lunch *prasādam*. And there with the devotees they saw that same dog, who was sitting a little apart from the Lord. Lord Caitanya was throwing him remnants of green coconut pulp and saying to the dog, 'Chant the holy names of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Hari.' The dog was eating the pulp and chanting, 'Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa,' again and again, to the great surprise of all the devotees. Then when Śivānanda entered, he humbly offered his obeisances to the dog just to counteract his offenses

to it. And the next day no one saw the dog because it had obtained its spiritual body and left for Vaikuṇṭha. There is another purport to this that I have written down. Here:

“This is the result of *sādhū-saṅga*—constant association with Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu and promotion back home, back to Godhead. This result is possible even for a dog, by the mercy of a Vaiṣṇava. . . . It is therefore requested that all our devotees in the ISKCON community become pure Vaiṣṇavas, so that by their mercy all the people of the world will be transferred to Vaikuṇṭhaloka, even without their knowledge. Everyone should be given a chance to take *prasāda* and thus be induced to chant the holy names of Kṛṣṇa and dance in ecstasy. By these three processes, although performed without knowledge or education, even an animal went back to Godhead.”

“Is that possible for us also?” asked Yamala. “Yes, definitely,” said Nimāi. “Even though I am not really a Vaiṣṇava myself, by telling you what Prabhupāda said and by our chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa, you are getting the association of the topmost Vaiṣṇava. There was once a rat who went on the altar looking for food in a Viṣṇu temple. He saw the flame on a ghee lamp before the Deities. He mistook the flame for some food and went to eat it. Now, that ghee wick was buried in the candle, and it was just about to go out, but when the rat touched it, the



flame burned his whiskers and the wick flared up brightly again. So the Lord recognized that as favorable service to Him, and the rat was liberated. That shows how the power of devotional service can work even on animals."

"He was liberated!" cried Choṭa. "And are there mice stories?"

"I don't know all the stories," said Nimāi. "The one I know of a mouse is not so favorable. It's called 'Again become a mouse.' A mouse went to a *yogī* who had mystic powers, and the mouse asked that he could be transformed into a cat. Do you know why he asked that?"

"So he wouldn't be attacked by the cat," said Arjuna.

"Yes, so the *yogī* turned him into a cat, but then a big dog chased him. So he went back again and asked to be changed into a dog, and the *yogī* changed him. But then a tiger chased him. So he asked to be changed into a tiger, and the *yogī* did it. Then once he was a tiger, the former mouse looked at the *yogī* and wanted to attack him and eat him. So the *yogī* said, 'Again become a mouse!' And he turned him back into an insignificant mouse. Who knows the point of that story?"

All three mice raised their tails and Nimāi pointed to Arjuna.

"We shouldn't approach Kṛṣṇa or His devotee for material things," said Arjuna.

"It also shows," said Choṭa, "what will happen to us if we misuse the benedictions that you are giving us in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. If we forget and become

puffed up, we'll again be reduced to mindless mice."

"Can you tell us more about animals in Kṛṣṇa consciousness?" asked Arjuna.

"Not only animals can receive Kṛṣṇa consciousness," said Nimāi, "but even plants, which have lower consciousness. Lord Caitanya wanted all fallen souls to be delivered. He asked Haridāsa Ṭhākura how the nonmoving living entities could be given Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Haridāsa said that when a devotee loudly chants Hare Kṛṣṇa and there are trees around, it sounds like an echo comes from the forest. But actually that's not an echo. That's the chanting of the trees and plants and creepers. Therefore Haridāsa was describing how human beings can bless the lower creatures and give them Kṛṣṇa consciousness by the loud chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa."

"Mostly humans," said Choṭa, "think it's useless to help animals. They think we have no souls. Little do they know."

"But the great devotees know," said Nimāi. "And that's why Lord Buddha came just to protect the animals who were being slaughtered by the priests of the *Vedas*. All devotees are meant to be nonviolent to animals. Prabhupāda used to say we should offer respects even to an ant."

As they spoke, the soft rosy hue of the sky changed into bright sunshine.

"We should go down now," said Nimāi, "and take *prasādam*."

Nimāi liked the devotees in Santo Domingo, al-



though he couldn't converse much with them, since he didn't know Spanish and they didn't know English. When they saw that he was carrying pet mice, they laughed, but it wasn't malicious, and Nimāi laughed with them. They called him "*Raton Bhakta!*" ("mouse *bhakta*"). Nimāi wasn't sure whether "*mouse bhakta*" was a name for him or for his mice devotees. The Dominicans were also more curious about the mice than the North Americans, and Nimāi allowed them to handle them gently. They warned Nimāi that there were rats in the temple, and so he should not let the mice out. But they told him that there was a special mouse that had been living in the temple building ever since the devotees had been there. This mouse, whom they called "*Raton Devoto,*" had some unusual habits. He would come out in view of the Deities but would not climb on the altar or attempt to take food from the Deities' plates. Therefore they had spared its life and allowed it to move somewhat freely, especially during the *kīrtanas* and *āratis*. Nimāi saw it for himself when, during a *maṅgala-ārati*, a dark house mouse, the "*raton devoto,*" ambled into view near the altar, stayed a while, and then disappeared.

Keśava had scheduled their stay for only three days in Santo Domingo, and then they were planning to fly to Trinidad. Keśava wanted Nimāi to assist him and learn some of the tricks of the jewelry selling trade. He had asked Nimāi to assemble some jewelry, placing stones into earrings, but the work was too fine and detailed for Nimāi. He knocked over a box containing small pieces of ornaments, and it took him an hour to place them all in their right order again.

Keśava then asked Nimāi to accompany him on wholesale purchases from dealers in the city, so Nimāi tagged along, watched, and tried to help. The dealers were not supposed to know that they were devotees, but in one shop Nimāi took off his cap and the man saw his *śikhā*. As blunders like this added up, Keśava began to wonder whether Nimāi could actually become a businessman. This led to more talks about *grhastha* life. "We are not just on a holiday spree," said Keśava. "Getting married doesn't mean just picking out a pretty girl. You will have to learn to be responsible in many ways." Nimāi listened and didn't say much.

As for the mice, they wanted to preach.

"Let us go out," said Choṭa. But Nimāi was worried about the rats in the building.

"Maybe you shouldn't be so bold," said Nimāi. "You can't exactly imitate the human preachers. It is difficult enough to go out as a human, but *we* are not being preyed upon by murderers on every block. Why take such chances?"

"If we stayed at home," said Choṭa, "we would be equally in danger. Did you ever see a cat sitting without moving in front of a mouse hole? A mouse can hear very well, and he can see movements, but the cats just sit there quiet and without motion. We come out and don't even know they are there. And if we are outside, owls suddenly come down on us. They have wings that we can't hear flapping. Sometimes a killer comes right into our nest. So we might as well preach while we can."

Nimāi had mixed feelings, as he had had when the



mice went out for the first time. He was supposed to be their protector, but he didn't want his own lack of boldness to affect them. After keeping them in the cage for two days, he relented and agreed to a twelve-hour preaching tour. Within minutes, the three chattering mice scampered out of the cage and into the nearest crevice in the wall.

Choṭa had Yamala and Arjuna drag along some *prasādam* in a cloth, because the *prasādam* was the most immediate way to attract a spirit soul, especially among the animals. But it presented the same problem as before. A mouse would approach them and try to accost them and capture the *prasādam*. They wanted to give him just a little piece, but it usually turned into a scuffle. Now there were three preachers, and by making defensive postures and stamping their feet they could chase away the intruders. But they had not come out for that. They wanted to distribute mercy.

But it was very difficult. Just the fact that three male mice were wandering into the territory of other mice was bound to bring them an unfriendly reception. Choṭa was well aware of the mouse habit of marking out a border by placing urine markings. According to the law of the mouse kingdom, a male mouse would never cross the urine-marked border of another "buck." For preaching, they did it. But when their attempts became continuous angry encounters, Choṭa abandoned the *prasādam*.

And then they were discovered by a rat. He was

huge and mangy and leaped at them when they were pausing for a breather in the corner of the room. The mice scattered in three directions. The rat chased Yamala who went up a potted palm tree like an acrobat and jumped onto a window ledge and down the outside wall. The rat couldn't follow, and when he turned to chase the others, they also had escaped. But it had been a close call, and the rat continued sniffing their trail.

The three preachers regrouped in between the walls. They stayed undercover, still looking for a chance to spread the holy name. But how was it possible? Walking and walking, they approached a wall near the Deity room. There they met an old dark mouse who stood near an opening that led right onto the altar of Gaura-Nitāi.

"Who are you? Where are you going?" asked the old mouse. He was slightly bigger than the preachers, but his dull coat, slightly arched back, and lumpy skin indicated he was aged.

Choṭa briefly explained their mission, but the mouse couldn't seem to understand. They were attracted, however, to his peaceful movements. "Don't go out this opening," said the old mouse. "The altar is here."

"And the rat?" asked Yamala. He was still shaking from the chase.

"No, the rat doesn't go on the altar," said the old mouse. "They would kill him if he did. Only I go."

"What do you mean?" asked Choṭa.

"They allow me to go because I don't crawl on the altar or eat the Deities food."



"Do you know about Kṛṣṇa?" asked Choṭa.

"Not much," said the old mouse. Choṭa was surprised. He had thought that he was the only mouse who knew *anything* about Kṛṣṇa.

"All I know," said the old mouse, "is that I don't want to crawl on Their altar or eat Their food. I like it that way, and the humans do also. And I come to see the singing."

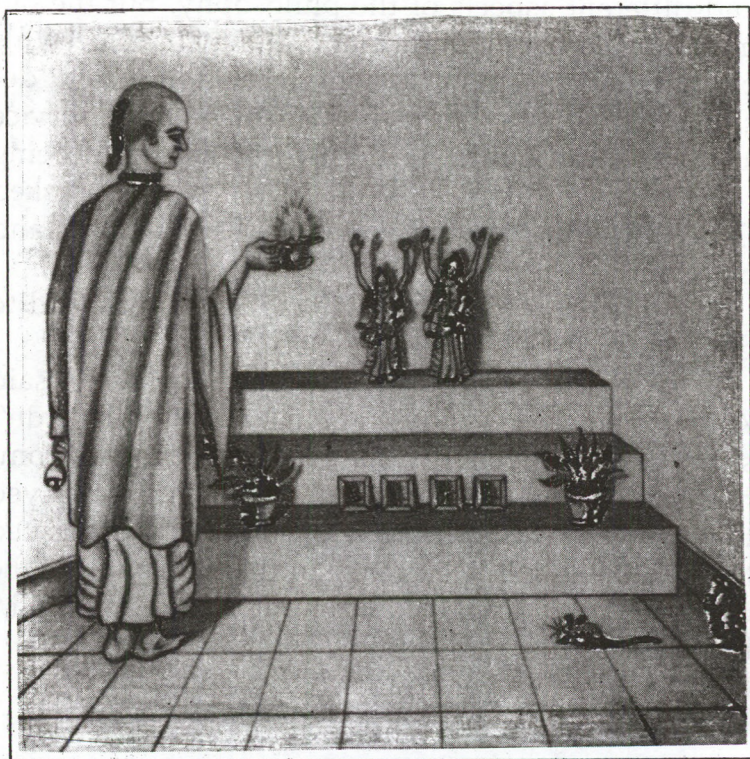
"You are a devotee!" said Choṭa. He tried to explain as simply as possible that all living beings were actually servants of God, spirit souls. All three preachers were so eager to share their knowledge that they began to speak at once, telling bits of stories and different aspects of the philosophy. But the old mouse could barely understand. It may have been his old age, but he was also somewhat dull. Choṭa decided that he was definitely a devotee with a service attitude about guarding the temple altar and being reverent to the Lord and the devotees. Choṭa asked the old mouse, "Would you come back with us and meet our teacher?"

"I'll just stay here," he said. "There is no need to go anywhere else. This is my place."

"At least let us bring you some *prasādam*," said Arjuna, and the old mouse agreed, although he didn't seem excited even by that. Despite limited communication, the preachers and the old mouse stayed together for two hours. The old mouse then invited them to come to the entrance of the hole and see the next *ārati*. "But don't try to run out or take any food," he said.

"We would never do that," said Choṭa.

It was a *sundara-ārati*, and very few devotees were in the temple room. As the *pūjārī* methodically performed his *ārati*, he glanced down and saw the old mouse come out, but he did not notice three other mice pressed eagerly at the entrance to the hole watching the holy offerings and the golden forms of Gaura-Nitāi.





## CHAPTER 12

Their plane left for Port of Spain, Trinidad, at 7:00 P.M. Nimāi tried sleeping through the in-flight movie, but Keśava woke him to explain the immigration card and what they should say when questioned at the immigration desk.

"It's a bit complicated," said Keśava, "so listen to me carefully." Keśava said that Trinidad was an easy country to enter for American citizens. The government had no objection to devotees of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, but there were particular bureaucratic formalities which had to be observed. Since a devotee was considered to be a preacher or a missionary, he was expected to obtain a preacher's permit. Keśava had phoned the temple and told the devotees to get the permits, but that usually took two weeks, and so he wasn't sure whether they would have them. If they did have the permits, the devotees would be standing behind the immigration officials and would come forward at the right moment and present them. But in order to use a permit, the country required that the preacher also have a visa, although ordinarily Americans didn't need visas. But that wasn't so important either, because you could just fill out a visa-waiver form and pay ten dollars. But if they knew you were a devotee, and if you said that you were going to preach, *but* you had no permit, then you could actually be denied entry.

"So the simplest thing," said Keśava, "is just to go in as tourists. Say you're going to the carnival, or that you're going to see your girlfriend." Nimāi said that

he couldn't grasp all the rules, but he would do as Keśava suggested. Keśava then filled out the cards while Nimāi went back to sleep, his camouflaged mouse box held securely on his lap.

It was past ten o'clock when they landed. Nimāi was groggy, and the unknown country made him uneasy. They stood on a long queue facing advertising billboards while officials in tropical uniforms questioned the passengers and stamped passports. Nimāi's main concern was the mice and his fear of what might happen to them. There were no devotees from the Trinidad temple present with permits, so Keśava signalled to Nimāi that they should just go through without mentioning they were devotees.

After half an hour it was Nimāi's turn to face the immigration man.

"Why you comin' to Trinidad?" The man gave him a quick but penetrating look.

"To see places," Nimāi said, and he suddenly became flustered.

"What places?"

"Like museums and churches," said Nimāi. He recalled Keśava's advice to say he was going to see a girlfriend, but it seemed too crude.

"Churches?" asked the man. "What religion are you?"

"Hare Kṛṣṇa," said Nimāi. "We're going to visit our temple."

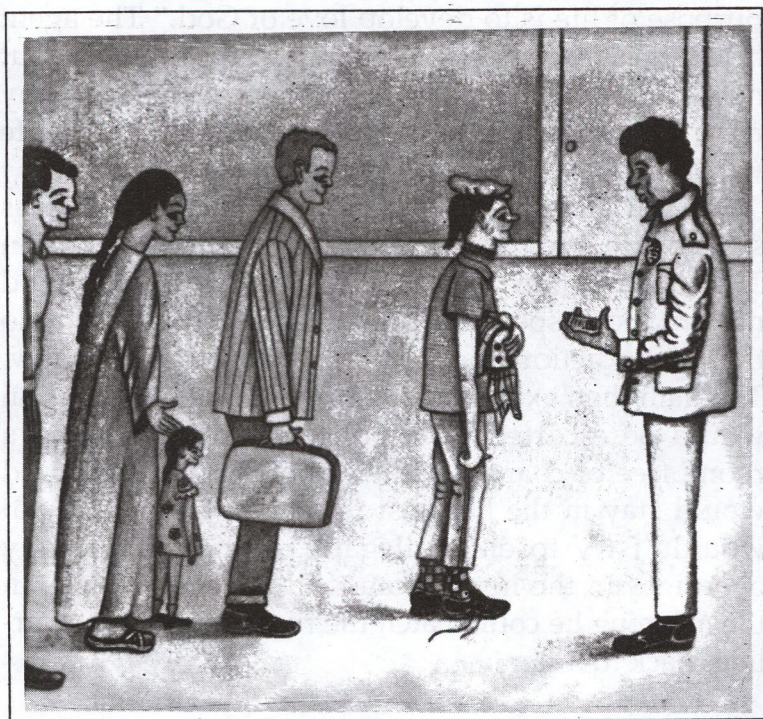
Nimāi was aware that he had just shifted his identity, but he didn't think it would be any harm to speak the truth. He saw Keśava Prabhu get his passport stamped and go through into the luggage area.



"Do you have a speaker's permit?" asked the man.

"They said they would get one," said Nimāi, "but I don't see them."

Nimāi sensed that his interview was going poorly, but he decided not to care. He wasn't a clever talker, so there was no use trying to make up stories. The man asked Nimāi to go into an office for another interview. There he was told that as a missionary worker he should have had his friends in Trinidad secure him a preacher's permit. The man at the office desk was polite with Nimāi but very official. There



were rules to be followed, and he had not followed them.

At one point the head agent seemed to waver, as if he might let Nimāi enter. He then asked, "If you go into the country without a speaker's permit, would you preach?"

Nimāi wasn't sure exactly what he should've said according to Keśava, but he said, "Yes." Although he didn't usually preach, he knew that he should preach, and after all maybe the mice would do some preaching at least.

"You see," said Nimāi, "even if we don't preach as an official speaker, a devotee of the Lord should always tell people something about God. Because the purpose of life is to develop love of God." The agent heard these words politely, almost approvingly, but now he had decided the case. There were too many contradictions, and so Nimāi could not enter. He would have to return to America on the next flight.

Nimāi could hardly believe what the man was saying. He tried explaining that he had friends in Trinidad and they were waiting for him. But he could not produce a speaker's permit, and he couldn't undo the contradictions he had spoken in the interview. The man then explained what would be done. Nimāi would be escorted by a police guard and given a room, free of charge, at the airport hotel. The guard would stay in the hall just to make sure that Nimāi wouldn't try to enter illegally. Nimāi would stay overnight in the hotel room, and at seven o'clock in the morning he could catch the flight on the same airlines back to Miami.



The immigration and policemen were sympathetic with Nimāi's dilemma, but they had made their decision, and it would stick. A police guard, not much older than Nimāi, escorted him in a taxi to the nearby airport hotel. As they rode, Nimāi asked the guard if he had ever seen the Hare Kṛṣṇa devotees in Trinidad. "Ya man," the guard replied, "I seen dem shantin' in Port o' Spain."

Nimāi locked the hotel door from the inside and let his mice out of the lunch box. At least *they* had entered the country without any difficulty.

"What demons!" squeaked Yamala. "Why don't they let you in like everyone else?"

"If they send you away, will you come right back?" asked Choṭa.

Although Nimāi was as anxious as the mice, their agitation aroused his paternal feelings.

"Whatever Kṛṣṇa desires," said Nimāi. He had packed a few *samosās* for the flight, and he broke them and shared them with his friends. He then began reading and explaining from *Bhagavad-gītā* As It Is.

Nimāi was surprised at how well he was making the best of a bad situation. If he could keep on talking about Kṛṣṇa, it would be all right. But he was nervous in the unwholesome surroundings. A calypso band was playing in the garden of the hotel. Everyone Nimāi had met in the lobby seemed drunk, and the whole place was in a party mood. At least he had his own police guard.

Despite the loud music, Nimāi fell asleep on the hotel bed. But soon he was awakened by a knock on the door. He thought it was the police guard, but when he opened it, it was a young woman. She was a





Trinidadian Hindu.

"Are you de guy dats bein' deported?" Nimāi could tell that she was drunk.

"Yes," said Nimāi. He wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible.

"De guard left," she said and laughed. "So I thought you might want to come out and have some fun."

"No thank you," he said and began closing the door.

"How old are you?" she asked.

Nimāi didn't want to shut the door in her face so he paused and said, "I'm twenty-four."

"Me too!" she said.

They both heard sounds of persons approaching. She took this opportunity to push Nimāi's door open and step inside. Her quick move surprised and frightened Nimāi. In the light of his room, he saw her for what she was. She was slightly built, and wore gaudy lipstick and a cheap blouse and short skirt. Nimāi was used to seeing Hindu ladies as chaste mothers, dressed in *sārīs* with *tilaka*. Whenever he saw one like this, he felt disgust and pity.

"My friends at de bar," she said, "said 'tell dat guy why don't you join us?' If you have to leave the country, you might as well have some fun first."

"I don't go into bars," said Nimāi. "I'm a devotee of Kṛṣṇa." Nimāi felt confident, partly because she was so young and a Hindu.

"You are a Hindu?" he asked.

"Ya," she replied, changing her tone. "But I don't believe in dat anymore. So you're a Hare Kṛṣṇa. Dat's

why you had trouble with immigration. So come to de bar and have some fun."

"That's not my idea of fun," said Nimāi. "Just to get intoxicated and have a big headache in the morning; that's no fun. What do you mean you don't believe anymore? I bet no one ever taught you about Kṛṣṇa. Did you ever read the *Bhagavad-gītā*?"

"No," she said. "Do you want to teach me?"

Nimāi saw she was in no condition to hear *Bhagavad-gītā*.

"You're a funny lookin' boy," she said smiling. "What is your name?"

"Nimāi," he said. "What's yours?"

"My name is Mina," she said.

Nimāi felt that she was getting the upper hand. There was no use trying to preach to her or tell her of Kṛṣṇa, so to talk too long was dangerous. He suddenly thought of his mice and how they were listening to all this.

"If you don't want to go to de bar," she said, looking around the room, "maybe I can bring you somethin'. Would you like a cold beer?" She then sat down on the edge of his bed. The calypso band was so loud that the bass notes were vibrating the walls.

"I think you'd better go," said Nimāi. "I don't want anything. I'm a *brahmacārī*. Do you know what that is?"

Mina said she didn't know what a *brahmacārī* was, and by now Nimāi didn't feel like telling her. He knew he was vulnerable—there was no devotee around, and he was thousands of miles away from home. If he *were* to desire sinful activity, this would



be the place to do it; no one would know. But he didn't *want* to. He thought again of Choṭa and the other mice. It wouldn't be possible to do any nonsense, he realized, because he could never do it in their presence. He also thought of Gurudeva, who seemed strongly present. "All I have to do," thought Nimāi, "is be firm and get her out of the room." He knew what he wanted, but she was taking advantage of his politeness.

"You should go now," he said, "please," and he indicated the door.

"What's the matter, Nimāi? Are you afraid to have some fun?"

Her words seemed so stupid to Nimāi that he regained confidence.

"Yes, I'm afraid of *māyā*," he said. "You should also be afraid. Look at you. You're a mess. You can hardly think straight because you drink so much. Don't you know that human life can end at any moment? You say you have forgotten Hinduism, but you probably never learned the right thing. In *Bhagavad-gītā* Kṛṣṇa says that the material world is a dangerous place. But a human being can use his life to understand he's eternal soul. And if we understand *that*, then at the time of death we can go back to Godhead for a life of real happiness, with God, Kṛṣṇa. If you just waste your life drinking, partying, and hanging around with people who really don't care for you, then you're wasting your life. *You* should be afraid."

The girl made a bitter expression with her mouth and got up to leave. "OK, Mr. Preacher," she said,

"you're no fun." Nimāi knew he had been heavy, but she was a Hindu and could probably understand under all the nonsense that she was wrong. As he let her out the door, he said, "Hare Kṛṣṇa." In a mocking tone she replied, "Hare Kṛṣṇa, Nimāi," which sounded like the old "Nimāi the gnome" cracks from the temple boys.

Nimāi locked the door, turned off the light, and went back to bed. He was proud that he protected his *brahmacārya*. But then he felt his heart pounding loudly. He grew afraid and began praying in his mind, "Kṛṣṇa, please save me." From the concert, he heard the announcer shout, "Let's have a big round of applause for the Mighty Sparrow!"

Nimāi dozed fitfully until he was wakened again by a knock on the door. It was Keśava Prabhu. Nimāi embraced him with a cry, and Keśava hugged him warmly.

"What happened?" Keśava asked. "What did you say that they didn't let you in?"

Nimāi explained that he told the man he wanted to enter Trinidad to see the museums and churches, but then he had admitted that he was a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee. "And then he asked me for a speaker's permit."

"But actually a devotee doesn't *need* a permit," said Keśava.

"But I told him I was going to preach."

"Why?"

"He asked me."

Keśava shook his head and said, "Nimāi." He had guessed as much. Like a foolish moth Nimāi dāsa had



become caught in the web of immigration bureaucracy, because "he asked me."

"Anyway," said Keśava, "Mr. Persad, who's a good friend of the temple, is an officer in the immigration department. We think we'll be able to get your passport back, and you'll be able to stay in the country for a week. I have to go now to see Mr. Persad and either bring him here or get him to write a letter. But if anyone else asks you, say that you're coming to *visit* the temples; you're not coming as a speaker. Do you understand? Don't say you're coming to preach."

Nimāi thought, "But I have already been preaching." And he told Keśava about the girl who had come to his room. Nimāi said, "It was a close call—but Kṛṣṇa saved me."

Keśava restrained his own exasperated feelings and remembered that Nimāi was just a simple child who had been through a difficult night. So Keśava sat down with him and spoke in a more relaxed way. He asked about the mice and Nimāi brought them over for Keśava's perusal. They both began to speak about Mother Pārvatī as a well-wisher of Nimāi's pet mice. Both Keśava and Nimāi praised her ways with children and animals. Keśava said that Nimāi's "close call" was another proof that he would be much better off in the security of a marriage relationship.

"In the *Bhāgavatam*," said Keśava, "a wife is described as protection. She's like a fortress. One sage says that as a fort commander easily conquers invading plunderers, so by taking shelter of a wife one can conquer the senses, which are unconquerable in other

social orders. Prabhupāda says that the householder is on the safe side."

Nimāi admitted that he certainly didn't feel on the safe side. They shared some fresh *prasādam* which Keśava had brought from the Trinidad temple, and then Keśava left. Nimāi's deportation time was only three hours away.

The letter which Keśava fetched from Mr. Persad was convincing enough for the immigration officials to waive Nimāi's deportation. They had no serious objection to Nimāi, except that he kept failing his verbal interviews. Nimāi was spared a further interview, so that when Keśava came back to the hotel, everything had been accomplished. They left to go straight to the temple.

On their way out of the hotel lobby, the girl who had come to Nimāi's door approached him in the lobby. She was dressed more modestly and was sober. "I want to apologize," she said, "for how I acted last night."

"That's all right," said Nimāi. He couldn't help showing that he was moved and pleased with her regret.

"Why don't you come out and visit our temple?" he said. "We have a feast every Sunday." He wrote down the address in a note pad and gave it to her.

"Will you be there?" she asked shyly.

"Yes," said Nimāi, but he thought, *That's not the point, Mina. The point is to see Kṛṣṇa and the other women.* "But I'm just visiting," said Nimāi, "for a week." And so they parted nodding and showing respect with their folded palms.



## CHAPTER 13

As soon as they arrived at the Trinidad temple, the temple president drew Keśava Prabhu into his office for a private conversation. Nimāi was considered a very junior devotee, and so he was excluded from the serious talk, but he managed to listen from the hall-way. The temple president asked Keśava Prabhu if he could help by talking to two different groups of devotees who were engaged in a controversy. One group was the black Trinidadians, and the other was the Hindus. Their differences were similar to the differences of the nondevotees. The Hindu devotees were saying that one couldn't be a Kṛṣṇa conscious leader if he was a non-Hindu. And the other devotees were saying that the Hindu Hare Kṛṣṇas were like other hodgepodge Hindus. And so for the next few hours, Keśava was engaged, behind a closed door, in talking to first one group and then another, trying to settle their differences. Nimāi wasn't much interested in it and he also had other duties to perform, but occasionally he would come to the door and hear Keśava's preaching. Nimāi was inspired to hear him speaking so strongly, saying that there should be no bodily differences in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Devotees were on the spiritual platform; they should not think in designations like Hindu or non-Hindu. When he overheard the devotees speaking back to Keśava, Nimāi heard mostly character assassinations and tales of how one group was prejudiced against the other. They politely heard what Keśava had to say and admitted that his argu-

ments had good logic and śāstric evidence. But when they left the room, they seemed to maintain their old opinions.

As for the mice, they all wanted to go out preaching. This time, Nimāi was surrendered to their request. He began to see himself not as their proprietor or grand protector but as a training coach. He knew he couldn't expect to keep them in a cage all day. Even the devotees who did not know Nimāi's real spiritual relationship with the mice sometimes remarked that he was cruel to keep the mice in a cage. They also thought that keeping pets was whimsical sense gratification. Of course, Nimāi knew that wasn't true. But if *all* he did was keep them within a cage, then it *would* be foolish. They were not his pets, they were devotees; and that is why he cared for them.

As the mice increased in their own convictions about Kṛṣṇa consciousness, Nimāi began to feel that he was becoming an anomaly. He didn't want to mention it to Choṭa, because he knew that Choṭa would say no, they all depended on Nimāi. Nimāi could see, however, that they were becoming motivated by the simple desire to mix with other mice and give them an introduction to spiritual life. And although they would never say to Nimāi that they resented his treatment of them, yet they had openly said that their life-duration was short and they wanted to spend it not in a cage but out on *saṅkīrtana*. Nimāi saw that despite his own good intentions, he was too often playing the role of a benevolent jailer.

And so rather than regret their request to get out, Nimāi shared their enthusiasm.



"Come back with some good news, Prabhus," he said, as they ran off single file into a hole in the temple wall.

The Trinidad temple mice were brown but of the same house mouse species as Choṭa.

"Where are you from?" asked a temple mouse. Just by sniffing and feeling the sound vibrations, Choṭa and his brothers sensed that these mice were not vicious. But neither were they very friendly.

"We come from up north," said Choṭa. "We're visiting temples."

"Well, you can't serve here," said the temple mouse. "Only mice born in the temple can serve." Choṭa was glad to at least hear the mouse speak of service and of "the temple," since most mice had no such conceptions.

"Jaya," said Choṭa. "You know then, that this is a temple? Do you know the purpose of a temple?"

"Of course," said the temple mouse. "It means ... we are special. Other buildings don't have incense and statues or a big kitchen and a big hall. Only we who live here have these."

"A temple is more than that," said Arjuna. "It's where God is worshiped."

"Yes, exactly," said the mouse.

Choṭa and his brothers didn't know whether to jump for joy or scratch their heads in puzzlement. This first temple mouse that they had met was obviously concerned with something more than eating, mating, sleeping, and defending. But they had never

before met a mouse with such pride.

"You worship God?" asked Yamala.

"No," the temple mouse said, "the humans do that. We are the temple mice."

"We have heard from our teacher," said Choṭa, trying not to be proud of *his own* learning, "that in *Bhagavad-gītā*, the book which is kept in all the temples, God is the Supreme Person and all living creatures, including humans as well as mice and other animals, differ only in their outer dress or bodies. We're all equal as spirit souls." By now several other brown temple mice had stopped to talk. One of them, who was older and plumper, smiled to hear Choṭa's spirited words.

"You can't know," said the plump mouse, "anything about a temple. Because, as you said, you come from the north. Only a temple mouse born here can know the activities of the temple. And you cannot stay here or eat the food. It's only for temple mice."

Choṭa assured them that they had their own food and were only visiting. Without mousy shrewdness, Choṭa and his boys began to size up the situation. They did not feel the threat of physical attack as they had encountered in Keśava's house in Pennsylvania. But at the same time, these temple mice were certainly different from the humble old mouse in Santo Domingo. They were civil but quite unreceptive to hearing *Bhagavad-gītā*.

The temple mice brought Choṭa and his brothers to see their leader. He was a large mouse and sat on a raised nest surrounded by female mice as well as male attendants. The temple mice explained who the



visitors were to the leader, who then asked, "What do the visitors want?" He didn't ask Choṭa directly but communicated through the attendants.

"Tell him," said Choṭa, "that we would like to chant the holy names of Kṛṣṇa for your pleasure."

The leader agreed that they would listen if the singing wasn't too long or loud. The temple mice told Choṭa that he should also consider it a great honor to sing for their leader and for the assembly of temple mice.

The mice "from up north" then began singing the holy names in earnest, as they had learned from Nimāi, and which they knew to be the same chanting that had been handed down from Lord Caitanya. Af-



ter a few minutes, the brown mice said, "That is all, please stop now."

As the visitors were escorted from the chambers, a few younger ones went with them to the door. Pressing close to Choṭa, they spoke softly, "That was wonderful!" "We never knew that mice could chant like that." "We thought it was only for humans."

"It's for everyone," whispered Choṭa. "That's the whole point. We are not actually mice, neither northern nor temple nor gray nor brown. We are spirit souls, and everyone should chant to develop love of Kṛṣṇa."

"Thank you, thank you," whispered another young mouse. "But I don't think they will ever do such chanting here. We listen through the walls when they chant."

"That's also good, just to hear," said Choṭa. "But chanting *and* hearing is best. At least you can chant in private for your own benefit."

The temple mice had made it clear that Choṭa and his friends should return to where they came. Choṭa decided not to disobey that request, because the politeness with which they had been treated seemed thin enough. So they returned to Nimāi Prabhu and asked his permission to go out into the fields to find less puffed-up mice.

But Nimāi wanted to hold an *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī* with himself and the mice. Many things had happened recently, but they had not been able to have heart-to-heart talks about them. An opportunity came when almost



all of the Trinidad devotees went into town to distribute books at a Hindu festival. Nimāi volunteered to stay back to maintain the temple.

"We will make an agenda for an *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*," said Nimāi. "Do you have any topics?" They sat in a second-story back porch of the temple building. It was evening, and the sound of frogs filled the air.

Choṭa said, "I would like to hear you discuss, Nimāi, how a devotee can develop humility." Nimāi wrote the topic down and asked for others. Arjuna asked if Nimāi would tell them about upcoming travel plans. Yamala said he would like to give a report on their preaching.

"I have a couple of topics also," said Nimāi. "I would like to speak a little bit about *grhastha* life, at least my own plans for it. And also I would like to have a discussion and hear from you about the topic of our relationship."

It was actually this last subject which had prompted Nimāi to hold the open meeting. He felt that his relationship with the mice was going through a significant change, and he wanted to face the truth of it.

"What do you want to say about humility?" asked Nimāi.

Choṭa cleared his throat. "I just wanted to say," he said, "that I have been guilty of great pride. When we met that old mouse who watches the *āratis* in Santo Domingo, I saw that he was actually a devotee. I was shocked because I thought that I was the only devotee among all mice in the world."

Nimāi and the mice laughed at Choṭa's realization.

"Even Lord Brahmā," said Nimāi, "once thought that he was the only Brahmā, or controller of a universe. But Kṛṣṇa showed him that there are trillions of Brahmās, and in fact the four-headed Brahmā is the smallest of all."

"I realize a little better now," said Choṭa, "that Kṛṣṇa can reveal Himself, and does, to many different mice and to any creature He wishes, anywhere in the world."

"But that should not diminish your desire to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness," said Nimāi.

"Oh no!" said Choṭa intently. "I can see that there are very few devotees. For example—Yamala Prabhu, why don't you tell Nimāi about our *saṅkīrtana* in this temple?"

Yamala then told of the mice within the temple. "Just because they live here," said Yamala, "they think they are superior to everyone and that they know everything about temple life. Actually they didn't know anything about higher consciousness. But when we tried to tell them, they said whatever we knew was unimportant."

Nimāi was no longer amazed to learn that whatever strange phenomenon existed in human society, a similar version was carried on in the lower kingdoms. But the mice wished to tell Nimāi all the details, and he was eager to hear from them.

When it was Nimāi's turn to talk about *grhastha* life, he no longer felt inclined to say much. He mainly wanted to explain what had happened in the hotel room the other night, and how it was very dangerous. Keśava Prabhu had said that marriage would



protect one from temptations. The mice were respectful of Nimāi's personal plans for *gṛhastha* life, but it was not a subject that interested them very much. So he dropped it.

"As for our travel plans," said Nimāi turning to Yamala, "I'm just following Keśava's schedule. We're supposed to leave here in a week and go to Guyana. That's a country in South America. It's mostly a big jungle, but there is a large Hindu population, and the people are very pious and receptive. It will be an exciting place to pioneer your preaching."

"And the last topic on the agenda," said Nimāi, "is about you and me." He took a deep breath and sighed. He didn't know exactly what he wanted to say.

"I am pleased that you are preaching," Nimāi began, "and I don't like to keep you so much in a cage. When we first began to speak to each other, you were so helpless... I thought it wasn't wrong to keep you in the cage and sometimes take you out and give you a class or *prasādam*. What I mean to say is that I'm sorry that you now spend most of your time in 'jail.'"

"It is difficult," said Choṭa, "especially staying in this small travel box. But that doesn't mean our feelings toward *you* have changed!"

"Maybe we could live," said Yamala, "like we used to in Gurudeva's cabin. We were on our own, but we came to see you every day."

"Or maybe even *that* isn't necessary," said Nimāi thinking out loud.

"We're always very grateful to you," said Choṭa. The mice waited in silence to hear what else Nimāi

wanted to say. But Nimāi decided to stop groping. The mice were no longer completely dependent on him, but he certainly wasn't telling them that he wanted to get rid of them.

"Maybe we can keep things as they are," said Choṭa.

"We'll see," said Nimāi. "Whatever Kṛṣṇa desires."

Keśava sold necklaces with locket-pictures of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa to the Hindu villagers. He gave half the profits to the temple. Nimāi helped by assembling the jewelry. He was slow, but Keśava said, "At least don't sabotage." Then on the last day when a shipment of expensive silk paintings arrived from India, Nimāi slashed open the box with an exacto knife and ruined the six top paintings. He also lost a receipt on that day. Keśava began yelling at him, but then Keśava stopped and took a long walk to chant his *japa*.

While attending the Sunday festival in the temple, Nimāi was surprised to see Mina, the girl from the hotel, sitting with the other women. He said "*Haribol*" to her and she smiled back. There was no need to talk further because she was mixing and talking with some of the initiated women. They had even placed a *hari-nāma cādar* around her head and shoulders.

The next morning Keśava and Nimāi were scheduled to leave on an early-morning flight to Guyana.



Usually Nimāi walked through the security check with his "lunch box," but this time they asked him to open it. When the man saw the mice, he said they couldn't go. The only way they could *possibly* be allowed to travel was if they were medically examined, put into the luggage hold, and then re-examined at the port of destination.

Nimāi said, "Then I'll just leave them behind with a friend." He walked back into the airport terminal and returned ten minutes later smiling. He showed the guards an empty lunch box, and they waved him through. Not even Keśava noticed that Nimāi had put one mouse in each of his *kurtā* pockets. And Choṭa hid under his T-shirt at the waist.

On the plane Nimāi returned them to the lunch box. The transaction was very upsetting to Nimāi as well as to the mice and Keśava, who kept saying, "It's too much." Since Nimāi had made it through several times without detection, he decided that the Trinidad capture was a fluke, and so he kept the mice in the lunch box. He tried to disguise it to look like he was carrying, not a box, but an extra shirt and *cādar*.

But they caught him again in Guyana. This time Nimāi was sent to an office. The agent said that the mice must be confiscated, but when he left his room for a minute Nimāi popped them into the hidden places on his body. He then began crying out that the mice had escaped and run into a hall. The ruse was successful. But they kept the mouse box.

After these ordeals, they were relieved to get through customs and meet the devotees. Nimāi was anxious to find a new box for the mice. Keśava was

wondering whether he should keep traveling with Nimāi.

"Guess who's here?" beamed Viṣṇu dāsa, the Guyana temple president. He gave his own answer: "Gurudeva is here!"

"Really?" Nimāi replied, although at first he couldn't really think about it. But then his inner voice told him, *He's your spiritual master; ask him what to do.*



## CHAPTER 14

Gurudeva had come to Guyana to take part in the *pada-yātrā*. Modeled after the *pada-yātrā* in India, it was a walking tour of devotees, village to village. Gurudeva loved the simplicity of it: far away from the pressures of North America, he could walk behind an ox-pulled cart and chant Hare Kṛṣṇa with simple devotees. And every evening hundreds of Hindus, sometimes thousands, gathered in a makeshift tent and attentively heard Gurudeva speak from *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. And there was massive *prasādam* distribution. The plan was to stay out on the road for a month. During this time, Gurudeva preferred to sleep in a tent, which took only a few minutes to set up in a field at night, and which he dismantled in the morning.

Gurudeva's secretary informed him that his disciple Nimāi had arrived and hoped to get an appointment for a private talk. Gurudeva had already seen him join the *pada-yātrā* with Keśava Prabhu. He was the same gawky but likeable Nimāi dāsa, only now instead of one mouse he had three. He had smuggled them into the country, and for want of a better cage, he kept them in a cardboard box. But while an ordinary mouse would quickly gnaw its way through the cardboard, these unusual mice stayed quite content within and responded to all sorts of gestures from Nimāi.

Gurudeva thought that Nimāi probably wanted to talk about what he had written in his last letter, about marriage and his "spiritual experiences" with the

mice. Coincidentally, in the same mail in which Nimāi's letter arrived, Gurudeva had received another letter from a disciple who said Lord Caitanya had begun to speak to him and was sometimes even speaking through him. At least Nimāi's claim was more modest. Rather than believing that the Lord was talking to him, he thought he was talking to mice! Still, it was an extraordinary claim. Gurudeva knew Nimāi's reputation as a blunderer and as not being very surrendered, but he liked the boy's homely sincerity and frankness. Whenever Gurudeva spoke with him, he felt that he wanted to protect Nimāi and guide him. Maybe someday, Gurudeva thought, Nimāi could travel with him, and they could get to know each other better. It was hard to penetrate into someone's heart in such short meetings, especially when such mysterious topics as talking animals were the items of discussion.

From his side, Nimāi was very pleased to see his spiritual master once again. He could tell that Gurudeva was happy and satisfied to be leading the *padayātrā*. It was also encouraging for his disciples to see him away from his office computer and walking barefoot on a country road, singing, dancing, and lecturing. Nimāi thought, "Maybe someday I can travel with him." Seeing Gurudeva engaged in *sādhū* life also made Nimāi aware that he was sadly lacking in dedication to his spiritual master. He wished he could more closely follow what the *ācārya* Viśvānatha Cakravartī had said: "Make the order of the spiritual master your life and soul." Nimāi thought, "I'm too independent. And I'm acting like a 'guru' with my



mice." But if Gurudeva could authorize him, he could work with the mice in a more surrendered way.

But what had especially struck Nimāi, as soon as he heard that his Gurudeva was in Guyana, was that he should ask him *what to do* with the mice. He had serious doubts whether he should continue to keep them at all. Traveling with the mice was becoming extremely difficult; only by Kṛṣṇa's grace had he escaped from the last two international borders. If he didn't free the mice, they might be confiscated. Besides, what good was he doing them to keep them most of the day in a cage, which they humbly accepted? But Choṭa, Yamala, and Arjuna were devotees, and so it wasn't just a matter of "letting them free" like wild beasts. Maybe they should stay with him for more training. In order to fully present this for Gurudeva's consideration, Nimāi wanted to explain it more, but that was difficult. And even if Nimāi could *explain* it, would Choṭa ever be able to communicate with Gurudeva?

They met in Gurudeva's tent, where there was just enough room for the two of them to sit on opposite sides of a small trunk. Gurudeva looked relaxed and tanned, and although he was thinner than usual, he beamed with well-being.

"Did you get my letter, Gurudeva?" Nimāi asked.

"Yes. I've been thinking about it. So you've come to Guyana with Keśava to find a wife?"

"What do you think, Gurudeva?"

"I think it's good that you're facing it as a respon-

sibility," said Gurudeva. "But do you think you're ready for all that marriage entails?"

"Keśava Prabhu has been training me," said Nimāi. "I'm not so good at business. But Keśava said it is possible to live as a simple *gṛhastha* within a temple."

"Yes, if you can do it, do it," said Gurudeva. "And if your wife agrees." Nimāi thought to ask if there were a way that he could avoid marriage. But he knew the answer himself, so why bother his spiritual master? Gurudeva had once told him, "Just the fact that you talk so much about marriage indicates that you're not a strict *brahmacārī*." "If I want to escape it," Nimāi thought, "I would have to become a very staunch celibate, not someone who chats with loose girls in a hotel room."

"I really wanted to see you," said Nimāi, "not to talk about marriage, but about my mice. What did you think of my letter?"

"Honestly, I don't know what to say," said Gurudeva. Gurudeva knew that he was supposed to be very definite when talking with a disciple, but Nimāi inspired his candor. "It's a very personal thing," said Gurudeva. "Therefore I told you to keep it to yourself. Other people won't believe you, and then you'll get disturbed by that. I will go so far as to acknowledge that some kind of spiritual telecommunication between you and the mice is possible. I looked up the *Garuḍa Purāṇa* verse, and there are others too. Here's one from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, in the purport to Kapiladeva's teachings in the Third Canto. Prabhupāda is discussing how a *sādhū* is merciful and friendly to all



living entities. He does his preaching despite all obstacles. Then Prabhupāda writes as follows:

One of the qualifications of a *sādhū* is that he is very tolerant and is merciful to all fallen souls. He is merciful because he is the well-wisher of all living entities. He is not only a well-wisher of human society, but a well-wisher of animal society as well. It is said here, *sarva-dehinam*, which indicates all living entities who have accepted material bodies. Not only does the human being have a material body, but other living entities, such as cats and dogs, also have material bodies. The devotee of the Lord is merciful to everyone—the cats, dogs, trees, etc. He treats all living entities in such a way that they can ultimately get salvation from this material entanglement.

So things have happened. But usually it's by the influence of an empowered devotee. So that's all I will say. Is that enough for you? I honor you and your intentions."

Nimāi's first impulse was to want to say, no that's not enough. But Nimāi was also afraid of his own motives. Maybe he only wanted to take credit. If Gurudeva believed in what Nimāi was doing, he would be more pleased with Nimāi—and he would see that Nimāi was responsible for brilliant, earth-shaking preaching. Who had ever done what he had done except great saints? But Nimāi knew that direction was spiritual suicide. Why should he want his Gurudeva to think that he was a great preacher? Gurudeva was already accepting him even if he didn't know about the mice. He should be content that Gurudeva

didn't forbid him from talking and acting with the mice and let it go at that.

"Whatever you say, I accept," said Nimāi, "because you're Kṛṣṇa's representative. But I need your advice. The mice are very dear to me and they're devotees. However, I'm thinking that maybe I shouldn't keep them in a cage anymore, but let them free."

"Yes, do it," said Gurudeva. "Even accepting that they are devotees, it is better to let them go. Don't be attached. You are not their protector. Don't be like Nārada's mother, who bound him to her by the knot of affection." Gurudeva felt confident to speak "as if" the mice were devotees. "That's what I think," he said, "but the decision should be left up to you." Gurudeva had still not heard from Nimāi how the mice were preaching. And had not heard Nimāi's concern, "How will the *paramparā* preaching to the mice be continued?" But Nimāi sensed that he would sound like a crazy man if he brought up such topics. Gurudeva had already said enough. Nimāi bowed down before his spiritual master.

As Nimāi stood, Gurudeva was smiling. "Try to stay with us on *pada-yātrā*," said Gurudeva, "as long as you can. It's very purifying."

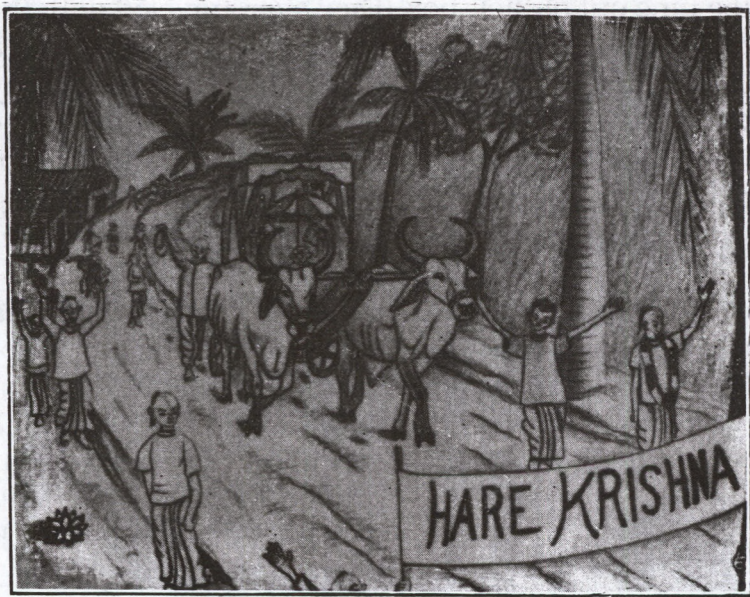
"I hope I can," said Nimāi. "I need it."

Nimāi loved the *pada-yātrā*. He thought, "This is just what I needed!" It was easy because all you had to do was walk along and sing Hare Kṛṣṇa. The weather was nice, and the sides of the road were



filled with coconut trees. When they passed houses or small towns, people would come to their front yards and wave or look on at the parade of about twenty devotees and two carts. One cart held Gaura-Nitāi Deities, and the second cart carried luggage. The devotees also held a banner with the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. And that was the *pada-yātrā*. They were fulfilling Lord Caitanya's desire that the holy names of Kṛṣṇa be heard in every town and village.

Almost every evening they had a program, sometimes in a tent set up by villagers and sometimes in a Hindu temple. For the first time in a long while Nīmāi felt inspired to dance during the *kīrtanas*, and he even went into the middle of the circle and spun around



while the others laughed. Although it was his custom to fall asleep during *Bhāgavatam* classes, Nimāi felt quite alert during Gurudeva's evening lectures along the *pada-yātrā* route. Some people said *pada-yātrā* was difficult because of so much walking, and because there was nothing special to do, but Nimāi liked it fine.

Keśava Prabhu mentioned to Nimāi that he had arranged for a likely marriage. It was with a fifteen-year-old girl who was as yet uninitiated, but who was a serious devotee. When they returned from the *pada-yātrā*, Nimāi would have an interview with her parents. Nimāi thanked Keśava and accepted the arrangements, but he didn't feel very excited about it. He was having too much fun walking and chanting to think much about married life.

The mice were also blissful. They spent most of the time out of their box. They even traveled with the *pada-yātrā*, staying undercover in the meadows on a path parallel with the devotees. Or sometimes, if they were too tired they would sneak onto the luggage cart for a ride. Nimāi was relieved to allow them more freedom, and they took it to the limit, running frenetically and jumping in acrobatic leaps after their long confinement in the lunch box.

Choṭa told Nimāi that the preaching in Guyana was the best ever. Whenever the devotees had stopped for their *kīrtana* and lecture, Choṭa and his brothers would seek out the mice of that locality. In one place, while the humans were all attending the meeting in a tent, Choṭa had gathered a whole village full of mice, who patiently heard him in the sounds which





can be heard only by mice. The Guyanese mice were already accustomed to gathering at Hare Kṛṣṇa tent *kīrtanas* and eating the *prasādam* remnants. For many generations, the mice were used to attending religious ceremonies held by the Hindu priests. But they found them dry compared to the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, which was well known for its feasts and *kīrtanas*.

Nimāi was happy for the mice. Sometimes both

he and the mice were so busy on *pada-yātrā* that they exchanged only a few words all day long. Neither did Nimāi prepare special meals for them, because they foraged a little *prasādam* on their own.

One morning Nimāi was left to guard the luggage cart while most of the devotees went bathing in a river. He happened to meet Choṭa and his brothers, who were also just returning from a dip in a roadside pond.

"Nimāi Prabhu, this is the best preaching ever," said Choṭa. "I think it's also good that we are *living* with them. They see that we're not any different from them, and then they listen more when we tell them about Kṛṣṇa."

Nimāi had been waiting for an opportunity to tell Choṭa about his talk with Gurudeva. Now seemed the time to do it, as they sat together leisurely outdoors.

"I spoke more to Gurudeva about us," said Nimāi. "He had a very definite opinion that I should not keep carrying you around in boxes but that you should go on your own."

"But he does not know," said Choṭa, "how much we mean to each other. Does he?"

"He knows something," said Nimāi. "We can't try to read the mind of the spiritual master. He spoke as if he did know everything about us, and he said, 'Even if you and the mice have a spiritual relationship, don't think that you're their protector. Kṛṣṇa is the protector.'"

"So is this Gurudeva's order?" asked Choṭa.

"Not exactly an order," said Nimāi.



"What do you think, Nimāi?" asked Choṭa.

Nimāi drew in his breath and gave a heavy sigh. "I think it's best," he said.

"Then so do we," said Choṭa.

"I know Yamāla and Arjuna like to day-dream," said Nimāi, and he touched them affectionately on the backs of their necks. "They dream that we could just all live together in a place like Gurudeva's house. But it never seems to work out that way. Instead I'm stuffing you into my pockets or keeping you in a dark box for twenty-four hours."

Nimāi was afraid that the mice might think he was rejecting them, but they trusted his word. *He* didn't think he was rejecting them. Yet it seemed that they should separate. Nimāi suggested that when he left in a few weeks for the United States, they could stay on in Guyana, which seemed an ideal place for them. The mice accepted his decision without objection. They all observed a sad silence, but then the mices' natural liveliness overcame them, and they began chattering about the big tent program scheduled for that evening.

"It will be so much fun!" said Choṭa. "Especially after the humans go home, hundreds of mice will come out, and it will be a perfect occasion to tell them about the mercy of *prasādam* and to engage them in some service."

"What kind of service will they do?" asked Nimāi.

"I don't know," said Choṭa. "At least we can clean up all the crumbs from the feast."

Like all things in this world, the two-week *pada-yātrā* came to an end. But not a *permanent* end, because the devotees intended to do it again within a few months. Returning to the temple, Nimāi went with Keśava to meet the parents of the girl that he might marry. The father was a factory worker, and he had six other children. He did most of the talking, asking Nimāi how he intended to support a family and what were his plans and ambitions. Nimāi gave simple replies and emphasized his transcendental aspirations for himself and his wife, both in this life and the next. Later in private, the father told Keśava that he was not very impressed with Nimāi. But he was frankly interested in the opportunity to marry his daughter to an American so that she could escape her limited fate in their own country. Nimāi was in high spirits from the austerity of the *pada-yātrā*, and so he did not feel emotionally attached to the marriage. To him, the girl looked similar to all the devotee girls in Guyana. They all reminded him of the roadside lotus flowers which grow everywhere in Guyana and which look like the lotuses in the pictures of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana. The girls were like that.

Since his daughter was very young, and since he was not over-impressed with Nimāi, the father decided that it should be an engagement rather than a marriage. As Keśava explained it to Nimāi, "We can come back in a year or in half a year, and you can meet with her and with her parents. In the meantime, maybe you can get your act more together."

Nimāi agreed, and he felt almost relieved that everything wasn't finalized at once.



Nimāi brought the mice for a last meeting with Gurudeva. He carried them in an empty *Back to Godhead* box. The mice always cleaned themselves carefully, but for this occasion Nimāi had also washed them himself. They were shiny.

Gurudeva looked down into their box and tried to



think what it might be like for a mouse to be a devotee. He had heard from Flora, about the art of telecommunications between humans and animals. She had said the important thing was to identify with the animal and try to understand what it was like to be that creature. In the case of the man who owned the intelligent dog Strongheart, the man said that one day he suddenly saw the dog not from the human perspective, but from the dogs' point of view.

Gurudeva thought, "If a mouse *were* a devotee, what would he be like?" He tried removing some of the more immediate barriers, such as his repulsion for mice, which he was sure he derived from his mother, who was terrified of mice. Gurudeva looked at the mild but twitching creatures and noticed that they were alert and cautious. They had delicate large ears. They were nervous and timid. He also knew that they could fight if cornered, and they could subsist in difficult conditions.

Gurudeva reached in and softly stroked their heads. They were extremely tame, he thought, as he touched them and as they lowered their bodies and touched their heads to the floor.

"They look like they're making obeisances," said Gurudeva.

"They *are*," said Nimāi. "They know who you are."

Nimāi then dared to try what he had always hoped for—a communication between Choṭa and Gurudeva.

"Choṭa Prabhu," said Nimāi, "would you like to speak to Gurudeva?"



The mouse looked up and made a small sound.

"Did you hear, Gurudeva?" asked Nimāi. "He said Hare Kṛṣṇa."

"Yes, I think I heard," said Gurudeva. And then Gurudeva spoke to the mice, "Hare Kṛṣṇa, Chōṭa, and Prabhus. So now you go and spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness to your own group. Nimāi has been very kind to you. You be kind to others. Kṛṣṇa will be pleased."

Nimāi was satisfied and he took the mice back while making repeated obeisances as he left the room. Nimāi knew that Gurudeva had not only approved of the mice, but had recognized the service of his eccentric disciple Nimāi.

Nimāi wanted to avoid any mushy sentiments in his last meeting with the mice. He read to them from his notebook where he kept relevant scriptural passages about animals receiving Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

"This is from a lecture," he said, "by Prabhupāda in Vṛndāvana in 1972:"

(A devotee is reading from *Nectar of Devotion*):  
"Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī has given a definition of auspiciousness. He says that actual auspiciousness means welfare activities for all people of the world!"

Śrīla Prabhupāda: "Yes. Just like this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. It is welfare activities for all the people of the world. It is not a sectarian movement. Not only for the human beings but also for the animals—birds, beasts, trees—everyone. This discussion was made by Haridāsa Thākura with Lord Caitanya. In that

statement, Haridāsa Ṭhākura informed Him that by chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* loudly, the trees, the birds, the beasts—everyone will be benefited. This is the statement of *nāmācārya* Haridāsa Ṭhākura. So when we chant Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* loudly, it is beneficial for everyone."

"... If we chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*, it benefits everyone, not only human beings. My Guru Mahārāja used to say if somebody complained that 'we go and chant and nobody attends our meetings,' Guru Mahārāja would reply, 'Why? The four walls will hear you; that is sufficient. Don't be disappointed. You go on chanting if there are four walls, they will hear. So chanting is so effective it benefits even the animals, beasts, birds, insects, everywhere. . . . This is the best welfare activity in the world. . . . Spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness."

"How will we be able to hear these things when you are not here?" asked Choṭa.

"Hear as many classes as you can. Go to the place where they are speaking and hear the *kīrtanas*. Just teach whatever I have told you," said Nimāi. "You know better than I do how to preach to mice. But repeat what I've said. Don't invent anything."

"And what if we just want to hear from you?" asked Yamala.

"I'll be back in six months," said Nimāi. "I don't know where you'll be traveling then, but you might come back to the temple when I come."

"Might come back?" said Choṭa. "We will."

"Another thing," said Nimāi, "is that you might try speaking to other human devotees. I don't know



how this works that we were able to talk. It just happened by Kṛṣṇa's grace, so maybe you can talk to others too."

After speaking for a last time, Nimāi went down and got into the car with Keśava Prabhu. It was time to drive to the airport. Choṭa and his brothers were alone again, just as they had been many times when they went on their preaching tours. But this time was different. They climbed up to the window sill and watched Nimāi's car leave. Nimāi waved toward the building in the direction of all the devotees. The mice continued to stand on the window sill stretching forward to see the street until finally the car disappeared in the distance of the dusty road. The mice began to cry in the grief of separation from their teacher and longtime protector.

After a desolate silence, Choṭa took the lead, "All right Prabhus," he squeaked. "Let's go out on *saṅkīrtana*."





## GLOSSARY

### A

*ācārya*—a spiritual master who teaches by example.

*ārati*—a ceremony for worshiping the Lord with offerings of food, lamps, fans, flowers, and incense.

*āśrama*—the four spiritual orders of life: celibate student, householder, retired life, and renounced life. Also, a dwelling place for spiritual shelter.

### B

*bhakta*—a devotee.

*bhakti*—devotional service to Lord Kṛṣṇa.

*bhoga*—foodstuffs not yet offered to Lord Kṛṣṇa.

*brahmacārya*—celibate student life; the first order of Vedic spiritual life.

*brahmacārīni*—a female celibate student.

*brāhmaṇa*—one wise in the *Vedas* who can guide; the first Vedic social order.

### C

*cāturmāsya*—the four months of the Indian rainy season (from mid-July to mid-October), during which special vows for purification are recommended.

*caturśloka*—the four verses of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (2.9.33–36) spoken by Lord Kṛṣṇa to Brahmā, which summarize the entire philosophy of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*.

## D

*dhāma*—abode, place of residence; usually referring to the Lord's abode.

## G

*Gauḍīya sampradāya*—the chain of spiritual masters coming from Lord Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu.

*grhastha*—regulated householder life; the second order of Vedic spiritual life.

*gurukula*—school of Vedic learning; boys begin at the age of five and live as celibate students, guided by a spiritual master.

## H

*haribol*—literally, "Chant the holy name of Hari." Used as a greeting or exclamation among devotees.

*hari-nāma*—congregational chanting of the holy names of the Lord.

## I

*iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*—discussions among Vaiṣṇavas about spiritual topics and the instructions of the spiritual master.

## J

*jagad guru*—a great spiritual master who can deliver the whole universe.

*japa*—soft private chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa.



## K

*kali-yuga*—the Age of Kali, the present age, characterized by quarrel; it is last in the cycle of four ages and began five thousand years ago.

*karma*—fruitive action, for which there is always a reaction, good or bad.

*kīrtana*—chanting the glories of the Supreme Lord.

*kurtā*—a simple style of man's shirt extending approximately to mid-thigh.

## M

*maṅgala-ārati*—the first auspicious worship service of the day, early in the morning.

*mantra*—a sound vibration that can deliver the mind from illusion.

*māyā*—(*mā*—not; *yā*—this), illusion; forgetfulness of one's relationship with Kṛṣṇa.

## N

*nāmācārya*—Śrī Haridāsa Ṭhākura; literally, "teacher of the holy name."

## P

*pada-yātrā*—a walking festival to distribute Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

*paramparā*—the chain of spiritual master in disciplic succession.

*pūjārī*—a priest who serves and worships the Deity.

## S

*sabji*—a spiced vegetable dish.

*sādhana*—regulated spiritual practices.

*sādhū*—a saintly person

*sādhū-saṅga*—association with saintly persons.

*saṅkīrtana*—public chanting of the names of God, the approved *yoga* process for this age.

*sannyāsa*—renounced life; the fourth order of Vedic spiritual life.

*śāstric*—instructions from the scriptures.

*śāttvic*—in the mode of goodness.

*śikhā*—the remaining tuft of hair on a Vaiṣṇava's shaven head.

*sundara-ārati*—the beautiful evening worship.

## T

*tapasya*—austerity; accepting some voluntary inconvenience for a higher purpose.

*tilaka*—auspicious clay marks that sanctify a devotee's body as a temple of the Lord.

*tulasī*—a tree sacred to worshipers of Lord Viṣṇu.

## V

*varṇāśrama*—the Vedic social system of four social and four spiritual orders.

*vartma-pradarśaka-guru*—the person who initially



shows one the path of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.  
*Vedas*—the original revealed scriptures, first spoken  
by the Lord Himself.

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