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Chapter 1 A Total Shock: Hill Mynahs Assisted the Serpent Eagles with an Attack on Me

rasping the swaying rope ladder which was fixated around a stub on the cliff by Qiangba, my Tibetan guide, I descended to the halfway up the mountain. I seized grassroots and branches of trees and held on to crevices and edges of the rocks, approaching inch by inch my destination, the Big Green Tree of exuberant foliage standing high and alone on the cliff.

In the crown of the Big Green Tree, there was a large basin-shaped nest among several branches interwoven as a grid. The nest belonged to a pair of serpent eagles. Serpent eagles, also called *spilornis cheela* and crested serpent eagles, fall into the category of a rare large bird of prey. Spring is the right season for the serpent eagles to lay and hatch eggs. So the aim

of my adventure was to observe closely the whole process of serpent eagles' reproduction and raising offspring, and to unravel the mystery of their domestic life. Earlier, I did my investigation on the terrain, only to find out a stone pit in the rock which could hold only one person, not too big or too small. The stone pit was on the cliff, about thirty meters from the Big Green Tree. About two meters higher than the nest of the serpent eagles, it provided the commanding height and a perfect point view to watch every single move of the serpent eagles.

I climbed towards the stone pit with great caution. As the morning mist was gradually dried up by the warm sunshine, the sight became better. When I was about fifty meters away from the Big Green Tree, the female serpent eagle which was hatching the eggs stuck its head out of the nest, looked around uneasily and screeched a sharp cry like "ah." Although I hid in the bushes and grass, the female serpent eagle was literally eagle-eyed and must have spotted me with its superb vision. I could care neither how to keep my head down to lay low, nor how to avoid making a sound. I used both my hands

and feet to move faster to the stone pit in the rock. At the moment the female serpent eagle was all alone in the nest while the male went out on a hunting trip. As an expert specializing in animal behaviors, I knew very well the nature of birds. When the female bird is hatching the eggs, even if there is unusual noise nearby, it will not step out its nest to take defense until out of absolute necessity. For the female bird, the top priority is to guard the precious eggs with its life. Usually the female responds to the anomaly of the situation with continual cries to call the male back. Before the male came back, I had little time to take the shelter in the stone pit which was relatively safe. Otherwise, I did not dare to imagine what would happen if the serpent eagles attacked me halfway up the mountain which was steep and precipitous by any standard.

I was discovered by the female serpent since there was neither wild grass nor bush on the cliff which was seven to eight meters away from the stone pit. For nesting birds, anything foreign around the nest is rather suspicious. With that foreign object fifty meters away from the nest,

hustle and bustle will arise since they consider thirty meters as alarming distance. When that foreign object is thirty meters away, which is regarded as dangerous, flight or attack will be their go-to-response. The female serpent eagle jumped out of the nest and perched on the horizontal branch in front of the nest. Screeching continuously and anxiously, it struck a pose to be well prepared to take off and execute a raid at any second, its plumage in a motley of black, white and brown colors shivering in disturbance, its neck stretching, its feathers standing on the end, its wings half-opened. Just as I had expected, it did not dart at me although it had an air of threat in every way. Its maternal nature to guard the nest and protect the eggs superseded its impulse to attack me.

A resounding cry of serpent eagle came from the sky faraway. The male serpent eagle thrust into clouds of various hues like a brown meteor across the sky. I quickly rushed for the last few feet and jumped into the stone pit in the rock.

First the male serpent eagle circled the crown of the Big Green Tree, probably checking

out whether the eggs in the nest were stolen or not. It then outstretched its wings high up in the air, straightened two claws and completed the maneuver of perfect landing. It perched right next to the female one, one wing on its body, patting gently. It sany solthy as if it were comforting its wife who was in shock, saying, “Don’t worry. I am right here with you. I will take care of you no matter what happens.” The female’s out-stretched neck and standing-on-the-end feather turned to normal state. It was less nervous than just now, but it still screeched towards me continually, seemingly urging the male to attack me in order to kick me out because I was an intruder in their territory.

Crying sharply, the male serpent eagle took off and darted at me directly. I know that Serpent eagle, unlike little birds, will not shun and hide immediately at the sight of human beings. Serpent eagles, especially the male, are strong and brave enough to fight against human beings and even to kill when necessary in order to protect their wife and offspring. A confrontation was unavoidable since I had to stay in the stone pit for long. So I prepared several plans to

cope with any possible attack from the serpent eagles. From my backpack, I took out a little electronic trumpet. At the moment the male serpent eagle flew nearly right above my head, I blew the trumpet really hard, thus ambushing the male with the loud sound. Woo... The tone of the trumpet was husky and bleak as if a wounded leopard was roaring, its moans and groans resonant throughout the vast and tranquil mountain valley. The sound of the trumpet gave the male serpent eagle a fright. It tilted its wings, jerked away, stroke a fine curve just above my head, and flew back to the tree. I put down the little trumpet at once, squatting in the stone pit without a single move. Here was my thought. I would defend myself against it by taking advantage of the noise of the little trumpet; when it initiated a cease-fire, I would stay put and make no move at all. So on, and so forth. After several rounds, what would be imprinted on its mind was a stimulus-response mechanism that I would not be driven away, that I was willing to live in harmony with the male if it stopped to attack, that I would neither do any harm to them nor pose any physical threat.

Watching its husband faihue, the female serpent eagle was greatly irritated, hopping on the branches around the nest in sheer paranoia. It screeched a series of low cries, seemingly complaining, “You pathetic loser, you are absolutely useless!”

The male serpent eagle flapped its wings and took off in the air once again. Meanwhile I put the little trumpet on my lips, took a deep breath and got ready to blow. Just that mornent, what happened was really uncalled for. From the crown of the Big Green Tree, two birds with dark plumage bustled, flew out, followed the male serpent eagle, and darted at my direction. At the first sight, I just assumed it was another two serpent eagles came out of nowhere. I couldn't help getting nervous since the two serpent eagles had kept me really busy. Considering another two serpent eagles joining the force, I would certainly be torn into a million pieces! But when I observed carefully, I found that the two newcomers were relatively small in size, only one third of that of the serpent eagles. Their cries were soft and pleasing to listen ear, with most of the plumage in black, beak in amber,

two golden wattles noticeable above the neck close to eyes. Weren't they the hill mynahs? In a second, my thought was blown up by logic, and my mind was in a vortex of entropy. Hill mynahs and serpent eagles belong to completely different species. How could they join forces and attack me together! What made me even more amazed and stunned is that serpent eagles, born to eat snakes to live up to their name, also hunt small birds and animals for food when there is a lack of snakes. It is stated clearly on textbooks of zoology that serpent eagles are the predators of birds of a various kinds. That is to say, hill mynahs are on serpent eagles' menu. The relationship between the hill mynahs and the serpent eagles can be simply described as the former is food enjoyed by the latter. How could serpent eagles and hill mynahs live in the same tree? I was totally befuddled and completely confused. In the twinkling of an eye, the male serpent eagle arrived at the position right above the stone pit, extended one claw covered with brownish feather and tried to grab me. The claws of the serpent eagles are so strong and so sharp that they can pierce the spine of rabbit ef-

fortlessly or break the neck of a rat snake. If I were scratched by their claws, I would be cat and craned. I hurried to put myself together and blew the trumpet. No sooner half a note was out in the air than the claws of serpent eagle loomed large on my face. I had no choice but hold up the little trumpet to defend myself. The male serpent eagle used its claws to grab my trumpet and flapped its gigantic wings to cause gusts of high wind to blow. I had to play tug-of-war against a great power, with the little trumpet as the trophy. I was pulled up and almost lose my balance. I determined that I could not let it go not because I loved that little delicate electronic trumpet, but because I was afraid that the male serpent eagle's vicious behaviors would escalate into more frequent and ferocious attacks once it was grabbed by the male. With one hand holding tight the little trumpet and the other hand grasping the crag nearby, I managed to steady myself. Just then, two hill mynahs also arrived right above my head, screeched sharply a few times and plunged towards me. Tugging their tails, as if little bombers aircraft dropped bombs, they made two watery droppings right

on my face. My face immediately turned into a filthy public toilet. Although bird droppings are less odorous than dog feces, they are repulsive and disgusting. My face was covered by bird droppings. I could not open my eyes nor breathe. As a reflex of human instinct, I threw away the little trumpet and used sleeves to wipe away the filth on my face.

Ah ... The male serpent eagle screeched in great excitement and flew back to the Big Green Tree with the little trumpet in its claw. The female came up, gave it a warm welcome and sang high praise for its gallantry by pecking gently the feather on the male's neck. The two broke the little trumpet as if they were tearing a poisonous snake apart with their powerful claws and sharp beaks. A short while later the little trumpet was shredded into tiny pieces, littered here and there.

When all this happened, the couple of hill mynahs perched on the other side of the crown of the tree, hopping among branches as if they were celebrating a great victory. Once in a while they gave the two serpent eagles a glimpse in utter admiration and offered a series of clear and

pleasant notes. It seemed that they made the bravery and courage of the male serpent eagle into ballads.

Two idioms flashed in my mind. Play the jackal to the tiger. Help a villain to do evil.

Once having claimed the possession of the little trumpet, the male serpent eagle took off again, hovered above in the sky, and attempted to attack me again. I took out a starter's gun of sports games to threaten it. This kind of gun cannot shoot real bullets, but make a loud bang out of the powder. The starter's gun could do the trick to bluff and drive the male serpent eagle away.

The male serpent eagle flapped the powerful wings and took off. The pair of hill mynahs followed suit and flew in front of the male serpent eagle, crying their little cries as if they were trying to be the first on the battlefield and offer their tributes to their lord. A little bit annoyed and yet amused, I was in no way afraid of those hill mynahs that, feeding on insects and fruits, had gentle and feeble claws. If they dared scratch or peck me, I could crash them although I, as an intellectual, was in no way near a master

of martial arts. I guessed that the best they could do was to lay waste on my face, as they had done. Having emptied their bowels, they could not make droppings in such a short time without a due process of digestion. They simply would not throw their own guts at me like they use the weapon to attack me.

I stayed in the stone pit and just let those two hill mynahs fly over my head. Just as I had expected, they had no bird droppings to lay and could do nothing but leave behind a series of curses in short cries. Regarding those curses as bird songs in a tranquil valley, I responded with no comment. That male serpent eagle still circled in midair, seemingly lurking for the right angle to dive at me. With utmost caution, I kept my eyes fix on it and followed its route. Suddenly I heard rustles above my head and looked up, just to find that those two bloody hill mynahs, placed themselves on the cliff about 10 meters above me, were peddling rapidly on the sand and dirt in the fissure of the rocks. Gravels and dirt, disturbed to form a mist of smoke and dust, fell down like a small waterfall and dust and gravels right on my face and body. I was not in-

jured but could not open my eyes. Hearing the air flows caused by the flapping of the powerful wings, I came to realize that the male serpent eagle would seize this opportunity to dive. Fortunately, I had the starter's gun ready and would not hesitate to pull the trigger.

Bang! The gunshot was so resounding that it almost deafened my ears. The noise of the flapping of those powerful wings went away and the shower of the sand and dust on my head stopped to a halt. The serpent eagles as well as the hill mynahs were terrified by the explosion of the gun powder and repelled by the distinct smell.

Covered in sand and dust as if I just had a bath of mud, I could barely open my eyes. It never occurred to me that those little hill mynahs were full of tricks and could play me.

Frightened by the gunshot, the male serpent eagle and the pair of hill mynahs flapped their wings anxiously to escape and took shelter somewhere the opposite side of the mountain. In the crown of the Big Green Tree, the female serpent eagle that shouted and cried like a cheer leader now screeched a sharp cry and flapped wings to fly far away. Soon the images of those

birds were more blurry and became black specks in the sky, disappearing into the clouds.

I did not worry that those serpent eagles would leave the nest behind unguarded. I saw quite clearly that in the basin-shaped serpent eagle nest there were two eggs in light gray. Those two eggs served as invisible strings that pulled tight on the hearts of the two serpent eagles. They would not go too far away from the nest. I was pretty sure that they would come back before the dark.

Just as I had expected, when the dusk was about to deepen in the valley, those two serpent eagles flew back to the Big Green Tree. They retreated into the basin-shaped nest and huddled together, possibly showing support to each other and cheering up. After a short while, the pair of hill mynahs sneaked into the branches of the Big Green Tree, hid behind clusters of leaves, stared at me with their small cunning eyes and spied on me through the leaves. Like a rock, I squatted in the stone pit and kept still.

Chapter 2 One Pointed-scaled Stone Pit Viper as Good Will to the Serpent Eagle in Trouble

Two days later the pair of the serpent eagles got used to my presence and would not take initiative to strike an attack at will. Their security alert yet rose to the highest level. Whenever I made a move, the female serpent eagle would make a sound and the male would get alert and circle above the nest, ready to fly above and fight fiercely against me. At noon every day, I stepped out of the stone pit and took food and water from the bamboo basket hoisted by my guide Qiangba from the top of the mountain. Except that, I managed to keep quiet. In the daytime, I dwelled in the stone pit like an animal in hibernation in winter while not until the darkness enveloped the world, did I crawl to the platform nearby to stretch my arms and legs, change clothes or empty my bowels.

Hardworking and solitary as I was, the reward was awesome.

This was the first time I observed the serpent eagles at such a close distance. Like the most of the species of birds, the male serpent eagle is much more robust in physique than the female. The color of the plumage of the male is far brighter than the female. In the aspect of physical appearance, the biggest differences between the serpent eagle and other species of eagles are its white stomach and horizontal crest to which it is born with. The male serpent eagle had a crest as black as ink, bent sideways in both directions to form a semi sphere. The dark brown feathers on its wings gave out a hue in purple bronze and the stomach in milky white. The colors on its body had such a great visual impact that it seemed to have both a majestic air and a natural grace. I call the male Handsome Boy. The female had long and wide feathers, covered with something fluffy and golden, dotted with little white specks. With long stripes and tiny bits, the female was born to be unique, swift, noble and graceful. I called it Her Ladyship.

Having observed this pair of serpent eagles

for two days, I found out that the serpent eagles took seriously the responsibilities of their family. As early as dawn, the male went out to hunt. Getting any prey, it would not gobble it down all alone. Instead it took the prey back to the Big Green Tree and shared it with the female. In the evening Handsome Boy, perching on a horizontal branch to rest, kept the nest safe and was on duty like a loyal guard. On that afternoon out of the heavy fog enveloping the whole earth, Handsome Boy flew back to the grid-shaped crown of the Big Green Tree, with a little white snake in its beak. When Her Ladyship hopped out of the nest to have its share of the prey, Handsome Boy went into the nest at once, slightly extended its wings, and placed its warm soft belly against the two eggs, just as the female would do. Not until Her Ladyship ate up the little white snake did they switch their places. It is different from what it is said in the textbooks that the male serpent eagle protects the nest while the female hatches eggs, assuming their roles respectively. Actually in special situations such as foggy weather, when the female steps out of the nest to feed itself, the male will hatch the eggs in the

nest just as the female usually does in case the eggs suffer from the chilly humid air.

The heavy fog lasted for the whole night. On the next morning the mountain was still enveloped in the dense fog that obscured the whole world. The fog on Mountain Gaoligong was notorious for its super density as if the fog was made from cheese. Strings of fog begot balls of fog; ball of fog begot lumps of fog; lumps of fog begot a mountain of fog and a metropolis of fog; then the fog in the heaven and the earth merged into a chaos, with visibility a dozen paces away were impossible. With the feather on its whole body soaked wet by the humid fog, Handsome Boy was dragged down on its usual hunting trips. Due to the low visibility, it unavoidably became more difficult for Handsome Boy to hunt food. It could not see clearly what was happening on the ground even though it had good eyesight. As a result, it did not have any luck in the two hunting trips that it flied in the heavy fog. It had no food to provide for its family. Naturally Her Ladyship was seemingly quite disappointed; it turned its head away and did not look at Handsome Boy. Handsome Boy

could do nothing but crouch under a cluster of leaves, depressed and low-spirited.

I assumed that this was a good opportunity for me to show good will to the pair of serpent eagles. “A half dead poisonous snake. ASAP.” I wrote this on a note to my guide Qiangba and put it in the bamboo basket in which he brought food and water to me at noon. About an hour later the basket was hoisted down from the top of the mountain. In it, there was a pointed-scale stone pit viper, about one meter long. The spine broken and the pressure point bound tightly with a thin vine, the viper opened its mouth wide, exposing its two hook-shaped fangs.

Born and raised in the local mountain area, Qiangba was so experienced in the jungle that capturing a bird or a snake was just child play. He was of greatest help to me during my field trip in the Mountain Gaoligong.

I picked up the viper with a twig and put it on a rectangular stone outside the stone pit. Being still alive, the viper which had fine scales and colorful spots on its body twisted and swung on the rectangular stone. Handsome Boy, a short distance away, spotted the viper despite the

heavy fog and flew over to fetch it. When it almost arrived at the stone pit, it hesitated for a while, tilted its wings and flew away. It went back to the crown of the Big Green Tree, screeched to indicate its inner conflict: it desired the viper as good food whereas it was afraid that it would be a trap. Now Her Ladyship stuck its head out of the nest, checking out the viper near the stone pit. The two serpent eagles exchanged cries with each other as if they were having discussions about whether they should take away the food placed in front of me. I did not make a sound and squatted in the stone pit with full patience. I knew it was commonly acknowledged that a bird dies in the pursuit of food. They were starving and could not resist the temptation of the food. Just as expected, after a while, Handsome Boy took off in the misty air, ascended to about twenty to thirty meters right above the stone pit, closed its wings gradually, descended softly like a leaf from a tree, and extended a claw to take the viper. Perhaps due to such a short distance between me and the viper, Handsome Boy still had doubts in its heart, which clouded its judgment and influenced its accurate

cy of grabbing the snake. Or perhaps it was still frightened by its unfortunate encounter with my starter's gun last time. So it can't use its hunting skill well. Right at the moment its claw was to claim the viper as its victim, that viper struggled desperately as death came near by rolling over. The claw of the male serpent eagle grabbed nothing but air, leaving several scratching marks on the rectangular stone with its sharp nails. Handsome Boy was vexed, crying once and circling in the sky. I then placed the viper on a three-meter long twig and poked it outside of the stone pit, making the viper dangling right in front of Handsome Boy. I wanted Handsome Boy to remember me like this: it was me who gave them the viper as a present when they were in great need of food! Watching the viper swaying in the air, Handsome Boy's eyes lingered on the body of the viper and desired it eagerly. It finally twirled in the air, plunged high from the sky, grabbed the neck of the viper, pulled with great strength, thus taking away the viper from the branch I held. This time its grabbing maneuver was done in extreme dexterity.

Although offering food on a foggy day could

not be compared with providing timely help, yet this gesture of good will let the other party feel one's sincerity and honesty.

Ever since then the pair of serpent eagles changed their attitude toward me since they no longer stared at me as if I were an enemy. Nor did they cry in panic or flap their powerful wings with hardened neck to get ready to attack me when I stepped out of the stone pit to fetch food and water from the basket hoisted by my guide Qiangba from the top of the mountain.

Chapter 3 Why Did the Meek Hill Mynahs Choose to be the Neighbor of the Ferocious Serpent Eagles?

I kept detailed records of the time the pair of the serpent eagles went out to hunt, the time they came back to the nest, the time they rested, the kinds of snakes they preferred, the way they tore the game apart, and different cries they screeched driven by a variety of moods. Frankly speaking, what caught my attention and made me quite intrigued, however, was the pair of hill mynahs that literally laid waste right on my face and cast dust on my head.

Two-day's observation offered me some general information of the pair of hill mynahs. I came to know that they built their nest right beneath the nest of the serpent eagles, only about ten meters away on a Y-shaped branch on the west side of the crown of the Big Green Tree. The pair of the hill mynahs was well past the

prime years of their youth. The two wattles behind the eyelids of the female were in deep yellow while that of the younger ones should be in apricot. That was why I called the female hill mynah Middle-aged Beauty, considering it was still pretty despite its aging years. The colors were in great contrast on the male since it was covered in black plumage, tinged with a trace of purple metallic light, highlighted by several white feathers on its two wings, foregrounded the amber beak to complete its fantastic visual impact. In the eye of the experts on bird keepers, the male was fairly old. That was why I gave it the nickname “Old Guy.” This pair of hill mynahs was also in the phase of laying eggs and hatching in the nest. Middle-aged Beauty stayed all day in the glass-woven nest that looked like a shoe-shaped gold ingot while Old Guy was busy with its frequent hunting trips in the forest. In terms of behaviors, the hill mynahs and the serpent eagles had something in common for both the female was in charge of domestic affairs while the male took responsibility of hunting for food.

It was the first time the ordinary birds such

as hill mynahs and the birds of prey such as serpent eagles were witnessed to share the same tree as the sites of their nests.

What first came to my mind was whether there was simply a mistake in the textbook on ornithology which states that hill mynahs and serpent eagles are natural enemies on the food chain, the former, the prey and the latter, the predator. Perhaps hill mynahs and serpent eagles should be living in harmony like friends with a fact aggression and evil will. It is not news that human beings had many blind spots, even uncharted waters in the exploration over the world of wild animals and always make common mistakes. For thousands of years, people have mistaken hyenas for humble scavengers that usually do nothing but sneak out behind lions and follow the king of the African savanna wherever they go. When the robust brave lions succeed in landing a prey, fed enough and then left, the hyenas are more than happy to taste any left-over. That is why the hyenas get their nickname as the sweepers on the savanna. It was not until 1950s did some zoologists, having explored deep into the African savanna for a long

period of time, come to find out that hyenas could not fall into the category of scavengers that fed on body parts of dead animals despite their grotesque physical appearance and unpleasant tenor of cries. Surprisingly they are the one of the best hunters on the African savanna, which places them almost on the same rank as the lions on the food chain. Any animals that the lions can hunt will not escape from the sharp paws of the hyenas. Any animals that the lions can eat will find their way into the mouths of the hyenas. More than eighty-five percent of their food resources count on their hard work in every hunting trip while only fifteen percent comes from body parts of dead animals. Even more surprisingly, the findings of those zoologists help to prove that the hyenas usually do not follow the lions begging for charity. On the contrary, it is the lions that follow the crowd of the hyenas, hanging and lurking until the hyenas make a kill with great efforts, to spring suddenly out of bushes or high grass to drive the crowd of hyenas away and claim the prey as their own. There is another case in point. For a long period of time, people have taken it for granted that the

great hornbill, whose habitat is in the subtropics, had great affection toward their mates and would remain faithful for the rest of their lifetime. It was said that after the decision over companionship, one pair would cherish and hold till death does them apart. It was also said that the female, when hatching eggs, usually sealed the tree cavity with clay and saliva and left only a tiny opening for the male to offer food. The female was more than willing to be confined in the tree cavity to hatch eggs while the male took the trouble to search for food for its wife and offspring without halt unless accidents happened. Based on what they saw with their own eyes, people regarded the great hornbill as the epitome of unflinching love. At wedding ceremonies in many areas, the toasts dedicated to the bride and the bridegroom were as follows: May you two always be true to each other, show respect to each other, love each other and live to old age just as the great hornbills do! Recently several institutes of zoology did the same experiment simultaneously. They did DNA paternity testing on the young birds and the parent birds from the same nest. Their findings were beyond

people's expectation. Over about thirty percent of the young birds and their parent birds were not related in blood ties. That is to say, the great hornbills are of no difference from other morally loose birds since they are not loyal to their mates. The so-called bird of epitome of love is nothing but embellishment arbitrarily imposed by human beings. There are other examples of similar significance, but I here just mention a few. If the hill mynahs were not born to be eaten by the serpent eagles, if the serpent eagles were not born to be predators, if the two kinds of birds were not natural enemies but friends living in perfect harmony, then my observation would be something valuable to fill in a gap between humans' understanding and the real wild animals. At least a certain argument in the textbooks on ornithology would be modified correctly.

The key is to clarify the cause why the pair of hill mynahs and the pair of serpent eagles in particular cohabit in the same tree. Is it a common phenomenon or a special case?

It did not make me wait long before I got an opportunity to clear the clouds over this ques-

tion. Early this morning as a blazing red sun just arose on the horizon in the eastern sky, Old Guy hopped out of its ingot-shaped nest, pecked some dew drops on the tree leaves, kept its feathers tidy, flapped its wings and got ready to leave the nest for food hunting. No sooner did Old Guy's tracks cover half a circle in the sky than it uttered a sharp cry suddenly. It jerked its wings and flew back to the Big Green Tree in a great hurry. I grabbed my telescope and looked through it at the sky, only to spot a dark shadow darting at Old Guy in the clear morning sun light. I shifted the focus of the telescope, and looked carefully at it again. The combination of huge body size, black feathers, big wings and powerful claws demonstrated that it was a serpent eagle, a perfect stranger tagging along just behind Old Guy. I had not a clue of where that new serpent eagle came from. Perhaps the new one hid in the clouds waiting to ambush any prey. Perhaps it perched in the crown of a tree nearby. Anyhow, when Old Guy detected the danger of the natural enemy, the serpent eagle was not far away. Since serpent eagles fly faster than hill mynahs, in a blink of the eye, that ser-

pent eagle's shadow loomed large on Old Guy. Fortunately, Old Guy flew back at the Big Green Tree at that moment. Out of the instinct to protect its own nest, Old Guy did not fly toward the ingot-shaped nest. To keep the danger away from its own home and to avoid the damage on the precious eggs that Middle-aged Beauty was hatching, Old Guy flew right to the basin-shaped nest in the crown of the Big Green Tree instead. That serpent eagle was just a dozen meters away from the crown of the Big Green Tree, with a purple gold claw extending from the white feathers on its belly just like an airplane lowering its landing wheels. The claw curved in great tension, which meant that it was ready to grab and seize. Apparently, the serpent eagle had planned to take the poor male hill mynah as delicious food and make the best use of its sharp claws to hunt for a tasty breakfast. The claw of the serpent eagle almost touched the back of Old Guy. Suddenly two heads of serpent eagles popped from the basin-shaped nest. Of course, Handsome Boy and Her Ladyship were there, staring at the new serpent eagle angrily with their sharp eyes, crying loudly and continuously

probably to condemn the new one for its rude intrusion in their sweet dreams. At the first sight of Handsome Boy and Her Ladyship, the stranger serpent eagle got definitely frightened, flapping its wings with great amount of force to climb higher in the sky rapidly and leave the range of the Big Green Tree. Old Guy squatted behind the basin-shaped nest, probably too scared to move. With its wings shivering, it was totally in shock and there would be a while before it could calm down. That stranger serpent eagle hovered over the crown of the Big Green Tree, uttered several cries toward the male hill mynah. It must be hungry and was reluctant to give up the delicious food so near. The serpent eagle Handsome Boy stepped out of the basin-shaped nest, perched on a horizontal branch, flapped its powerful wings, and blew gusts of high wind. With the feathers on its neck standing on the end, it struck a pose to be prepared to attack and kill at any second. It held its head high and screeched several resounding cries, apparently showing off its robust body to the stranger sliding in the sky. At the same time, its posture served as a warning. If you are really

smart, get out of here at once. Or I will do it in the hard way! I know very well that the serpent eagles are territorial preying birds, and will not allow any other serpent eagles to come near their own nest. The female serpent eagle Her Ladyship stood up in the basin-shaped nest and screeched short yet loud cries rhythmically to support its mate. The stranger serpent eagle probably thought that if it really came to the point of fighting, it alone, outnumbered, would be no match for Handsome Boy and Her Ladyship. Disappointed, the stranger cried several times, flapped its wings, and took off. Pretty soon it became a black speck and fade away in the brilliant sunrays.

At least it was verified that all the serpent eagles hold a friendly attitude towards the hill mynahs.

The same afternoon, another incident happened, which proved from another angle that my assumption:right the hill mynahs and the serpent eagles are born to live in harmony as friends in the natural world was false.

The warm sunshine spread over the world. While the male serpent eagle went out to hunt

for food, its mate Her Ladyship was guarding the eggs in the basin-shaped nest and the female hill mynahs was doing its fair share of duty in the ingot-shaped nest. A nice piece of oil painting seemed to be distilled from the tranquility of the mountain and the wild life. That there was nothing new to capture my attention at the moment. I had nothing better to do than sit there reading. Suddenly I heard a series of melodious notes of bird chirping reached my ears. Apparently the bird managed to express its sentiments very well. Only the master of language among birds was capable of this kind of singing which could strike a cord in my heart. I laid aside my book and took a look at the Big Green Tree, only to find that my vision was blocked by the dense foliage. The singer was out of my sight. At first I had thought that it was the male hill mynah Old Guy which had returned from its forage trip. Then I listened more carefully and came to realize that it was not Old Guy. I sat there making observations for a few days and was familiar with the cries of Old Guy. Although singings of hill mynahs sounded identical, yet distinctions in style and melody could be

detected. The bird singing of Old Guy was on low key and flattered with each sound pronounced clearly and a touch of bleak sentiments whereas the bird singing at the moment was characterized by blurred syllables and passions that the bird singer seemed on roller coasters with the whole universe, warm-hearted and hot-blooded. The sound can form an image and this is equally applicable for singings in the world of birds. My curiosity was aroused and I lied in the stone pit in the rock. I focused on the Big Green Tree and kept watching. The leaves were swayed by the wind and only a small part of the vision was cleared. Then I caught a glimpse of the shadow of a hill mynah. The combination of black feathers like ebony, tender beak like ivory and bright eyes like diamond helped me to come to a conclusion that it was a young hill mynah that just leached puberty. Of course, it should be a male hill mynah. Otherwise, it would not sing with such emotions toward Middle-aged Beauty in the ingot-based nest. The young male hill mynah went on singing and hopped from one branch to another. It slowly came close to the nest with three steps

forward and then two steps backward. It was not difficult to figure out what was on its mind. The desire for food and mate is the essence of human nature. In the world of wild animals food and mate are the ultimate concerns of their lives. Spring was the time for reproduction. The mid-spring had passed. That is to say, for the hill mynahs, the season for reproduction was coming to an end. In other words, most of the hill mynahs had found their mates. With the phase of courtship completed, they moved on to the core process of reproduction. However, fortune did not strike every hill mynah. There are some young unlovely males. Partly because of the lack of experience in courting, partly because of being unskillful in nest building and food hunting, those young males remained single and all alone. Some members in human societies choose to remain single and to be a free spirit free of the yokes of family duties and burdens, living a stylish life. Remaining single in the world of wild animals means to be a pathetic loser, a failure in survival, and is lower than nothing. Therefore, those single hill mynahs in the season for reproduction were so worried to

be rurvons that they did not hesitate to come down the high pedestal and lower their requests in order to locate a mate before the end of the season of reproduction. Bear the only idea on their mind, those young males looked around for any sign of opportunity and desperately barged into other male hill mynahs' families just to check any chance for a mate. Apparently, this particular underdog was one of those unlucky males. It saw Middle-aged Beauty alone in the nest and decided to come to hit on it to see if there was any chance. Although Middle-aged Beauty was not attractive and well past its prime, yet having one bird at hand was better than nothing, that is, meandering in the woods like a lonely haunted ghost. Theoretically since Middle-aged Beauty had had a mate and was now guarding the eggs, it would not hesitate to condemn any unexpected proposal from other young ruthless males and kick them out to clear the room for its proper duty with grave attitude and sharp cries. However, to my surprise, confronted with the preposterous behaviors of the young male hill mynah, Middle-aged Beauty showed no sign of condemnation or repulsion.

On the contrary, it tilted its head slightly, looked at the younger one with appreciation, narrowed its eyes sometimes, leaned on the inner side of the nest, and enjoyed the enchantment with its heart carried away. I guessed that with Old Guy out on its forage trip, Middle-aged Beauty stayed all alone in the nest to hatch the eggs, which was a great cause for the survival of the species. However, to spend a whole day lying on the eggs without a single move was unavoidably mundane for Middle-aged Beauty. Being accompanied by a young male mynah with a nice voice to sing a few tunes of love could be an intriguing entertainment. The young male hill mynah was under the impression that the magic of bird singing worked, that it was singing its way into the heart of Middle-aged Beauty. So it made even greater efforts to launch an enormous impact. It shook its wings, extended its tail, swayed its neck, and swirled the whole body. Singing and dancing, it made itself quite busy. The hill mynahs fall into the category of songbirds. They are so good at singing that they are able to master seven to eight different tones. They can sing in high volume, just as folk musi

cians blow their trumpets. Perhaps the bird singing of the young male hill mynah disturbed Her Ladyship's nap. Perhaps the serpent eagles disliked the cries of hill mynahs by nature. Her Ladyship stood up abruptly in the basin-shaped nest, and swept away a cluster of leaves on a branch with its hooked beak. It tilted its head with one sharp eye having a brief look at the Y-shaped branch at the lower level of the Big Green Tree. Its claws grabbed the branch once, and screeched a cry, "What the hell are you crying about? You are pushing my buttons. Cry again, and I am going to break your neck!" Through the telescope I saw quite clearly that the young male hill mynah, at the moment the female serpent eagle cried, shook all over its tiny body, swallowed a series of notes back into its throat, kicked both its feet with great efforts, and flapped its wings desperately to get away to a place faraway. Probably it was beyond the wildest dream of the young male hill mynah that a couple of vicious serpent eagles lurched in the same tree where the couple of the hill mynahs built their nest. The young male would never come back to visit this Big Green Tree even

though the youngest and the most beautiful female hill mynahs asked for a date. Middle-aged Beauty watched the young male fly away and was not willing to let go the enchanted moment of that day. Alas! Middle-aged Beauty could not enjoy hearing those love songs of the young male and give back nothing. What a waste of the youth and those notes of love!

The situation was clarified once for all. There were no mistakes in the textbooks of zoology: on the food chain in nature, the serpent eagles and the hill mynahs are still the hunters and the hunted.

Chapter 4 The Serpent Eagle Caught the Cobra That Tried to Devour the Hill Mynahs

I was yet intrigued by the behaviors of Old Guy and Middle-aged Beauty although the evidence proved that the situation that the hill mynahs cohabited with the serpent eagles in the Big Green Tree was a rare exception, not a generic phenomenon. It was an undeniable fact that both the frail hill mynahs and the vicious serpent eagles built their nests on the same Big Green Tree and the distance between them is only over ten meters. To say the least, even though it was a special phenomenon, researches did have a certain value. It is universally acknowledged by researchers and scholars of natural sciences that behind those special phenomena there usually are governing laws of nature that have not been studied to its full extent. Many a time those special phenomena serve as

the keystone to the gates of the mystery of the unknown world and as the passport to the magnificent palace of science.

A big doubt lingered in my mind all day long. What on earth made the couple of hill mynahs Old Guy and Middle-aged Beauty live nearby with the couple of the two big preying serpent eagles, Was that a rare form of symbiosis that had evolved in a specific environment?

It is behiened with common sense that bloody struggles of survival permeate all the species in the realm of the wild world. Tigers eat leopards. Leopards eat bears. Bears eat fish. Big fish eat small fish. Fish eat shrimps. Shrimps eat plankton. Plankton eats algae. Those species at lower level of the natural food chain are consumed by those at the upper level. One level leads to another, thus forming the natural food chain in the world of wild life to its fullest sense. In fact it is just one side of nature. These also exists another living status which is just the opposite of the bloody competition among species, namely symbiosis. The so-called symbiosis refers to the natural phenomenon in which two different species live and develop in

interdependence. For example, ferocious moray eels feed on small fish in the ocean, but they never attack wrasses, about one inch in length, that come closer because wrasses feed on parasites on the skin of moray eels, alleviating the pain of the suffering moray eels. One kind of ground pecker in Tibet has the habit of laying eggs in the ground. This particular kind of ground peckers usually shares a cave with rodents such as mice and rabbits. Mice or rabbits dig holes for ground peckers and ground peckers perch on the back of mice or rabbits to peck parasites. This is symbiosis in the textbook. Yunnan snub-nosed monkey live on tree leaves and berries and from time to time enjoy bird eggs of various kinds, including those of owls. However, within its territory, it never snatches eggs of owls or harm any owl. Their cooperation dynamics works like the following. Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys as diurnal animals sleep at night and have poor eyesight in dark, which makes them vulnerable when attacked by beasts of prey, namely good climbers, such as wild cats, golden cats, lynx, clouded leopards, and cougars. Meanwhile owls are nocturnal animals,

and have excellent vision in the darkness. When owls detect any abnormality in the environment, they screech sharp cries. That is to say, owls keep watch for Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys at night. Owls are willing to keep Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys as neighbors since those monkeys waste much of their own food. Sometimes snub-nosed monkeys chew kernels and throw away pulp. Sometimes they prefer pulp over kernels. Lots of left-over under trees certainly attracts mice to come for a feast. The habitat of snub-nosed monkeys is usually the place for large crowds of mice, thus making the spot a perfect hunting ground for owls. Therefore, although snub-nosed monkeys and owls are the hunters and the hunted, they share some common living space.

The possibility of forging a symbiotic relationship between hill mynahs and serpent eagles had not been mentioned in any textbook of zoology or in any field trip report by experts and researchers. If I could offer enough evidence to prove that the symbiotic relationship under certain circumstances in a specific environment, it would be a new discovery in the study of animal

behavior as well as a lovely surprise in my field trip.

Being rigorous and precise is essential in natural sciences. I cannot make speculation that there was a symbiotic relationship between the couple of hill mynahs and the pair of serpent eagles simply based on the ground that those two pairs built nests in the same tree. To make sure that those two pairs are in symbiotic relationship, three prerequisites hold the key. Firstly, both of the parties can benefit from each other by living together. Secondly, once separated, both parties will find their survival in deep trouble survival in the wild world. Thirdly, both parties will not fight or kill each other since they are in need of each other.

I had to keep tracks on those three requirements to find enough and persuasive evidence to support my argument.

Although the basin-shaped nest was hidden by clusters of leaves nearly beyond my vision, I, with the help of the telescope, was able to observe clearly the movements and postures of the pair of hill mynahs from time to time once winds disturbed tree leaves. I found that every

single time the male serpent eagle Handsome Boy passed the nest of the hill mynahs on its way to hunt for food or back, the male hill mynah flipped its both wings and made unusual cries. A syllable “ew” was added to the cries repertoire of “jow” and “ur,” making the sound like the cries of little serpent eagles. This is not unheard of in the world of birds. The hill mynahs are famous for their abilities to imitate human voices. Once domesticated and well trained by human beings, they can mimic a few words in human languages, such as hello and welcome. The hill mynahs in question lived near the nest of serpent eagles, got familiar with the style of cries of those preying birds, and seemed to be capable of mimicking the cries of the serpent eagles. Then take a look at the female hill mynah Middle-aged Beauty. Whenever it caught the sight of the female serpent eagle Her Ladyship, it would pop its head out of the basin-shaped nest, fluffed the plumage and cried a few times in adulation as if it were a little bird anxious to be fed or protected by its parents. I had a feeling that They are not exchanging greetings to express good will, like friendly neighbors and I did

not know why. It seemed to me that those two hill mynahs were trying much too hard to please the couple of serpent eagles. When it came to that, Handsome Boy appeared to be hearing nothing or seeing nothing, flipped its wings and flew away abruptly while Her Ladyship turned its head, cast a glimpse at Middle-aged Beauty in a condescending manner, and went on its own way without paying any more attention to the female hill mynah. I am afraid that I never saw Handsome Boy looking at Old Guy as a friend, nor did I hear Her Ladyship utter a cry gently toward Middle-aged Beauty.

There was one thing for sure: the relationship between the couple of hill mynahs and the pair of serpent eagles was not equal, at all let alone intimate.

One episode on one afternoon further elaborated my opinion and supported my argument. The male serpent eagle was tearing a red snake to prepare a proper meal for its family at the grid of branches. All of a sudden, half of the red snake, for no good reason at all, slipped through the claws of Handsome Boy and fell in the cluster of leaves at the lower level of the tree crown.

Handsome Boy took off to fly in the air, circled the Big Green Tree for several times, and looked for crevice to retrieve its prey, the other half of the red snake. There happened to be not many branches near the basin-shaped nest of the hill mynahs and a horizontal branch bridged the nest and the location where that red snake fell. When Handsome Boy landed on the horizontal branch near the nest of the hill mynahs, Old Guy blocked the view of its nest with its body. Although the male hill mynah was mimicking the clear sharp cries of little serpent eagles, it kept its neck quite straight, made the feathers on its neck stand on the end, opened its wings and then closed for a few times as if it were ready for a struggle or a fight against Handsome Boy and were not afraid of a bite. Middle-aged Beauty hopped out of the nest in a hurry and fluffed the plumage on the back. Sometimes it cried in adulation like a little bird that saw its parents once again, and sometimes it scratched the bark of the Big Green Tree and screeched a few sharp loud cries as if it were threatened and cornered by its predator. Old Guy was utterly disturbed by the threat of their natural enemy, since its body

language posed contradiction against its oral messages. Middle-aged Beauty was petrified at the bottom of its heart because two distinct attitudes of taking defense and being nice were displayed in its gestures. If the relationship between the couple of the hill mynahs and the pair of the serpent eagles was ultimately close in symbiosis, when one party approached the nest of the other, the latter should not feel tension or panic. Handsome Boy ignored the existence of the hill mynahs, passed the basin-shaped nest in such a narrow distance, went along the horizontal branch, found the other half of the red snake that fell there before long, went back to the lower level of the crown, and flew back to one of the branches in the grid of the Big Green Tree. No sooner than that moment, did Old Guy and Middle-aged Beauty relieve in a sigh. Beak to beak, they mumbled a few cries. Perhaps they were comforting each other in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Perhaps they were celebrating a narrow escape from the shadow of death.

I could feel strong fear toward the hill mynahs the serpent eagles that they had to prepare with great precaution against any ambush or-