

Read some excerpts from “*Peacock Feathers*”

Extract from Chapter 2:

.....
Nimal followed Rohan out of the compartment and on to the platform, tripping over pieces of baggage and a large Alsatian dog, who was seated on the platform, its tongue lolling out of its mouth.

The dog wagged his tail and gave Nimal a sticky lick. The boy, who was crazy over all animals, immediately fell in love with this dog. It was quite young, jet-black in colour, had an intelligent face, loving brown eyes, and a long, beautiful tail. Nimal patted it and gave it a biscuit, which he found in his pocket. The dog gobbled it up and pranced around Nimal, whining enthusiastically, his tail wagging fast. He was extremely friendly.

Nimal looked around for the owner of the dog, but could not see anyone nearby.

‘Nimal! Nimal!’ shrieked Gina, the youngest of Rohan’s sisters. Nimal turned just as Gina ran up and flung herself at him.

He gave her a big hug, lifting her up into the air. ‘How are you, Gina?’ he gasped. ‘Boy! You nearly knocked me down, and you’ve become *so fat!*’

‘No, I haven’t,’ squealed Gina excitedly. A tiny, little girl of eight, she was four feet six inches tall, with masses of short, thick, black, curly hair which framed her pixie like face and wide awake hazel eyes. She was strong and wiry, despite her fragile looks. ‘Whose dog is this?’ she exclaimed, kneeling down to hug the dog, who was dancing around them, and getting her face well washed with sticky licks.

‘I don’t know,’ said Nimal, ‘but I sure wish he were ours.’ He turned to greet Anu who had just come up with Rohan.

‘Hi, Anu,’ he said, giving her a bone-crushing hug.

‘Ouch – my ribs,’ groaned Anu. ‘Huh, I see you’ve finally beaten me in height, Nimal.’ Her hazel eyes, so like Gina’s, twinkled in an oval face that often held a dreamy expression. Unlike Gina, her hair was straight and reached her shoulders.

Rohan laughed. ‘He’s actually an inch taller than you, sis. He’s been putting himself on the stretch rack at school for the past three months. Hello,’ he added, spotting the dog, ‘and whom do you belong to, sir? What a nice dog you are.’

The children fussed around the dog, which enjoyed all the attention. Just then their favourite porter came up to help the girls load their suitcases into their compartment.

‘Hi, Kishore,’ chorused the children.

‘Hello, kids! So, you’ve finally finished with school for the summer,’ he said, smiling at the excited children. ‘And what are you planning to do for fun these holidays? Any trips to the “Pink City” or the “Taj Mahal”?’

‘Not this year,’ said Rohan, grinning at him. ‘We’re hoping to do some camping instead. Our parents said we could spend as much time outdoors as possible since it is not hot enough to get sunstroke this summer. Plus, it’s always great to be out in the open and learn more about the animals and birds that come to the waterholes.’

‘True enough,’ said Kishore, who also loved animals.

The four children had a deep love for the Conservation, and had grown up on it, learning all about the importance and necessity of conserving the animals and forests. They were an

independent group, but enjoyed being together and got along excellently. They ragged each other mercilessly, but let any outsider dare to try and hurt or unfairly criticize one of them to the others, and they would rise up in immediate defence.

Nimal and Gina were still patting the dog, which did not seem to want to leave them.

‘Do you know whose dog this is, Kishore?’ asked Nimal. ‘He’s so friendly.’

‘He belongs to me now, but there’s a sad story behind him,’ began Kishore, as he put the girls’ suitcases into their compartment. Rohan, Nimal and Anu helped him, while Gina kept her arms around the dog, which licked her lovingly.

‘His name’s Hunter, and he’s just a year old,’ continued Kishore. ‘He belonged to a family who lived here until two months ago. They had two children who loved Hunter and he adored them, too. Unfortunately, the children’s father got a job in Canada and they had to leave Hunter behind since they weren’t allowed to take him with them. They gave him to me knowing I would take care of him, but he hasn’t been very happy. In fact, this is the first time I’ve seen him prance around and wag his tail so much. I think he misses the children a great deal.’

‘Poor old Hunter,’ said Gina, with tears in her eyes. She hugged the dog and he gave a tiny bark and wagged his tail as if he knew they were talking about him.

‘I wonder,’ began Rohan, and then trailed off with an embarrassed cough.

‘Carry on, Rohan,’ said Kishore. ‘I’ve a feeling you and I are on the same wave length.’

‘Well,’ continued Rohan hesitatingly, ‘you know we’ve been longing to get a dog, but felt that since it would be with us the whole time we were on vacation, it would miss us terribly and pine for us when we were in school. But next year my school’s starting something new. We can take our pets with us and house them in a special menagerie they’re building this summer. That means we can get a dog. Do you think...?’ He paused, looking hopefully at the porter.

The others held their breath in anxious anticipation. Hunter seemed to know what was happening. He trotted solemnly up to each of the children and licked them, then he went up to Kishore, wagged his tail, and looked pleadingly up at him.

Kishore knelt down and took Hunter’s face between his hands.

‘Yes, old boy, I know you love children and miss them a lot,’ he said. He looked up at the children and continued, ‘Well, would you like him to be yours? I’m sure he’ll be much happier with all of you than with an old bachelor like me.’

‘Oooh, yes!’ squealed Gina, throwing herself at Kishore and Hunter, and trying to hug both of them at the same time.

The others jumped for joy and crowded around Hunter, Kishore and Gina, banging Kishore on the back in thanks, and patting and hugging Hunter. The Alsatian barked his head off as if he couldn’t agree more with the decision.

The train whistle blew loudly; the children – and Hunter – jumped hurriedly into their compartment, leaning out of the window to say goodbye to Kishore.

‘Thanks a ton!’ said Rohan gratefully, shaking Kishore’s hand vigorously. The others all shook his hand, too, including Hunter, who put out his paw. ‘We’ll take good care of him, we promise.’

‘I know you will,’ said Kishore, beaming with satisfaction. He patted Hunter’s head, which was sticking out of the train window, too, and Hunter gave him a loving lick. ‘I’ll write to his old family – I know they’ll be relieved to hear that he’s happy again. Goodbye, Hunter – I’m sure I’ll see you often. By the way, kids, he’s an exceptionally well-trained dog, but he does a few funny things – watch out for them.’

‘Like what?’ began Anu, but just then the train began to move slowly out of the station.

The children waved to the porter and Hunter sent him a farewell bark. Then they all moved away from the window and sat down, Hunter in their midst. It was plain to see that every one of the five was pretty pleased with life.

‘Gosh!’ exclaimed Nimal, breaking the silence. ‘A real dog of our own!’ He knelt down and put his arms around Hunter, who immediately licked his face. ‘This is superfantabulous!’ he continued. ‘It’s almost too good to be true. Hunter, do you like belonging to us?’

Hunter barked, wagged his tail vigorously and tried to climb up on to Nimal’s lap. He seemed to feel that Nimal was his particular buddy since he had seen him first. Also, all animals seemed to have a strange fascination for Nimal, and would let him touch them willingly, while shying away from anyone else.

‘I’m sure the APs will love him,’ said Rohan, ‘since they were quite willing for us to have a dog if we could look after him during school term, too. Boy, life is pure bliss just now. Exams over, summer hols, we’re all together again, we’ll see lots of animals and birds, and best of all, we now have a dog that belongs to us.’

‘We can be like the “Famous Five” now that we have a dog,’ said Anu brightly. She was a voracious reader and her expression turned dreamy as her imagination took over. ‘We can have adventures, catch crooks, visit conservations all over the world and, maybe one day, someone will write a book about us. Wouldn’t that be fabulous?’ Her eyes sparkled as she contemplated this happy future.

‘Whoa! Slow down, Anu. Your imagination’s running away with you again,’ laughed Rohan, and the others chuckled.

They were all used to Anu’s vast flights of imagination, and often teased her about it.

Anu smiled. ‘One day *I’ll* write a book about all of us,’ she said, ‘and you can bet it’ll be a bestseller. Yes, Hunter, you’ll be in it, too

.....

Extract from Chapter 3:

.....

Gina slipped her little hand into Peter’s and sobbed, ‘We *won’t* go back to school till we catch those crooks. They are mean and wicked.’ She was most distraught.

‘What’s up, Gina?’ asked Jacob, as he returned with their second order of food and looked at the little girl in concern.

‘She’s upset because of all those peacocks which are being killed, Jacob,’ said Peter, giving Gina a consoling hug.

They told Jacob what was happening on the Conservation and he was most indignant.

‘But why peacocks?’ asked Jacob.

‘Because,’ explained Rohan, ‘these beautiful birds – especially the “Indian Blue” peacock – are often caught and exported to traders looking for exotic birds to sell; or they’re killed for their feathers. There’s an enormous market, both in India and abroad, for ornaments, fans, decorations, jewellery, masks and head dresses, which are some of the things made out of peacock feathers. They fetch great prices and anyone who can supply the dealers with these feathers will make a lot of money.’

‘It’s wicked to *kill* them just because people want to decorate their homes with feathers,’ said Anu angrily. ‘If they want feathers, they should collect the ones that drop off.’

‘But why don’t the birds fly away?’ asked Jacob. ‘Is it because they’re too big?’

‘No, they can fly up into very tall trees if they want to,’ said Nimal. ‘But some of them are so tame that they even come into the areas where our guest bungalows are. They love cars – especially new and shiny ones – and will stand on top of them with their tail feathers all fanned out, and dance. They love human attention.’

‘I’ve heard that they’re very noisy,’ said Jacob, interestedly. ‘Is that true? They’re so beautiful that I can’t imagine them being noisy.’

‘Actually, they make the weirdest sounds,’ said Rohan, ‘almost human sounding at times. Sometimes the peacocks call out “Helllp! Helllp!” or shout “Ohhh! Ohhh!” The peahens sound a bit different, almost like a “Helll-o!”’

‘And when the males dance, with their feathers fanned out – especially if there’s a full moon – they call out, “Aaahhh! Aaahhh!”’ added Nimal with a grin. ‘They do this to attract the females so that the peahens will come and admire them.’

‘Well, I sure hope you catch the crooks fast,’ said Jacob.

‘We’ll do our best,’ said everyone.

Jacob went off and Peter turned to the children again. He raised his cup of coffee and said, ‘Well, here’s to all of you. And, may you solve the case of the “Peacock Feathers” really fast.’

The children cheered and Hunter joined in with a bark.

.....

Extract from Chapter 4:

.....

‘Wow! Here we go! A mystery to solve – on our very *own* Conservation,’ said Anu, breaking the silence at last. ‘You know, I think we should start a group.’

‘What kind of group, Anu?’ asked Gina curiously. ‘A club that solves mysteries?’

‘No, Gina – not really – though we could do that, too. I mean a group to make others aware of environmental and conservation issues – a junior group,’ said Anu. ‘We could be the founding members, and then at school, we could try and get others to join in and create awareness among the people they mix with. What do you think?’

‘Brilliant, Anu,’ exclaimed Nimal at once. ‘We could get some more ideas from the APs, and perhaps that way we could start a new generation of folk – eager to save our world.’

‘I agree entirely,’ said Rohan thoughtfully. ‘We have, as far as I know, no junior group like that in India. And, maybe, via the internet, we could start inviting others to join us.’

‘Wow – can I belong, too?’ asked Gina eagerly.

‘Of course you can,’ said Anu promptly. ‘Anyone who loves animals, birds and nature, and is concerned about the environment, can join. Now, what shall we call ourselves?’

‘The “Young Environmentalists” something or other?’ queried Rohan.

‘How about the “Junior Conservationists”?’ said Nimal.

They tossed around a few other suggestions, but nothing clicked.

‘I know,’ said Anu suddenly, ‘let’s use a combination of the first two ideas – how about – “The Junior Environmentalists and Conservationists”? We could call ourselves “The JEACs” for short.’ (She pronounced it, “The Geeacks”.)

‘Perfect, just perfect,’ agreed the others happily.

‘So, JEACs, whenever we get a chance, probably once we’ve solved the problem of the peacocks, we’ll ask the APs for some ideas, and put together a mission statement and goals and objectives,’ continued Anu.

They were all familiar with the way in which groups were set up since Mrs. Patel had started up a conservation group for adults. They discussed plans eagerly for a while.

‘Okay, this is great,’ said Rohan. ‘I’m sure the APs will be only too pleased to hear our news. Now, perhaps we had better think about the peacock case.’

‘Yeah,’ said Nimal. ‘That’ll be an adventure to say the least.’

.....

Extract from Chapter 7:

.....

They went inside the house, up to Haren’s room, and knocked on the open door.

‘Come in,’ called Haren.

‘How are you, Haren?’ asked Rohan, peering into the room. ‘Do you feel like a few visitors?’

‘Hey – how are you guys? Come on in,’ said Haren smiling broadly. ‘It’s great to see you again, and,’ he added, noticing Hunter, ‘whom do you have here?’

Hunter was introduced, and Haren was very impressed by the dog; naturally, Hunter’s story was told all over again.

‘We heard what happened to you and Bill, Haren,’ said Anu, ‘and we thought you might like some fruit and things.’

‘Thanks a ton,’ said Haren, gratefully, ‘that was thoughtful of you. Actually, I get very bored at times. There’s only so many times I can feed the baby animals, and I think it’s more of a problem for the DeSouzas to bring them up to me, rather than do the feeding themselves. However, they’re really nice about it all, and once I’m able to walk a bit, it won’t be too bad. Also, your Dad and Mike have been bringing me books and movies.’

‘I bet Mum was really glad of your help with her fundraiser,’ said Anu tactfully. ‘Uncle Ben told us you had helped her, and Auntie Yvette, a lot.’

They chatted for a while, telling Haren about their term at school, and the new group they were planning to start. Gina recited her limerick, and Haren chuckled over it and praised the little girl. Then Nimal told him about the trick they had played on Mohan, and Haren laughed till he cried when he heard the story.

‘You lot certainly cheered me up,’ he said wiping his eyes. ‘Wish I could have seen Mohan’s face.’

‘Haren,’ asked Rohan a little later, ‘did you get a glimpse of the poachers at all, or was it too dark? We’re hoping to do a bit of sleuthing over the next couple of days, and a few clues would be useful.’

‘Unfortunately, it was too dark to see much,’ said Haren, frowning angrily. ‘That was one of the reasons we lost them so fast.’

‘Oh – that’s too bad,’ said Rohan in disappointment. ‘We hoped you might have noticed something, even a bit of their clothing.’

‘Wait a second!’ exclaimed Haren, staring into space, his eyes half closed as he tried to recall something.

The youngsters held their breath.

‘I do remember seeing a red scarf,’ said Haren slowly. ‘I think it must have been when I first saw them emerge from the bushes and my torch picked up one chap. Yes,’ he said excitedly, ‘now that I think of it, I’m *positive* I saw a red scarf.’

He looked at them eagerly, ‘Do you think that’ll help you at all?’ he asked.

‘It’s a beginning – the first real clue we have,’ said Nimal.

‘Well, good luck with your hunt,’ said Haren. ‘Those chaps make me really mad, and I sure wish I could go with you to capture them.’

.....

Extract from Chapter 8:

.....

Off they went. They followed a narrow trail, which was invisible to the untutored eye, and unless a person was very familiar with the jungle, they would never find it. Ashok led the way and Hunter was with him so that he could sniff out any strangers, and warn them; Nimal followed, with the girls next; and Rohan and Vijay brought up the rear. It was very quiet at this time, since most of the animals were resting and would only go down to the waterholes at sunset, to refresh themselves.

The group made good progress, despite the heavy sacks, and there was no sign of anyone else moving around. As they neared the waterhole and their cave, Ashok called a halt and cautioned them to speak quietly.

‘I’m just going to scout around with Hunter, to make sure there’s no one near the entrance to your cave,’ he murmured softly.

He left the sack with the others and set off. Hunter seemed to know instinctively what they were doing, and he walked without a sound, his nose and ears alert for any danger. They returned in ten minutes.

‘All clear,’ said Ashok quietly, ‘but let’s make it quick and soundless.’

They moved swiftly to the cave entrance; Rohan and Nimal uncovered the large hole in the tree, climbed in, and first took the sacks from Ashok and Vijay, piling them in a corner of the tunnel. Then, they collected all the knapsacks and put them with the other things, but kept their binoculars, which they hung around their necks; Anu kept her camera handy.

‘I think it would be better if Hunter didn’t come with us just now,’ said Rohan, thoughtfully. ‘The animals may sniff him out and get scared away; they’re not yet used to dogs wandering around the HP. Also, he’s sure to bark if anyone other than us entered the tunnel. What do you others think?’

They agreed with him; so Nimal called to Hunter from inside the tunnel. The dog jumped in and looked up at the boys.

‘On guard, Hunter,’ said Rohan, pointing to their stuff.

Hunter looked at the pile and immediately sat down in front of it. He wagged his tail as if to say, ‘Don’t worry. No one will be able to take anything while I’m here.’

The boys climbed out, after patting Hunter and praising him. They gave him some biscuits and he watched them wistfully as they left, but did not budge from his post.

Quickly covering up the entrance once more, the JEACs moved away silently, till they were at the opposite end of the waterhole. Ashok and Vijay wished them good luck, and made their way back home. Chattering loudly to one another, the children went down to the waterhole.

‘Here’s a good spot from where we can watch the animals,’ said Rohan to the others. ‘We’ll sit on this log, behind the trees.’

‘Good idea,’ agreed Anu, as she and the others moved to join him.

‘Use your binoculars to look around,’ whispered Rohan, once they were all seated on the log, ‘but make comments as if you’re looking for animals.’

‘Aye, aye, Captain,’ mumbled Nimal softly. He put his binoculars to his eyes and looked up towards their cave. He would not have been able to guess it existed if he didn’t know about it; it was so well hidden. He looked towards the big tree which hid the entrance to their cave, and scanned the area closely. ‘No signs of any animals coming down yet,’ he said loudly, ‘I wonder what time they’ll be here?’

‘Oh, not till sunset,’ said Rohan, looking carefully at another area near the waterhole. ‘We still have half an hour to wait, but keep your eyes peeled – you never know what birds or animals may come early.’ He didn’t see anything suspicious either.

Anu was looking back into the jungle. She suddenly saw something red in a bush slightly to her right, about fifteen metres behind them. Although her heart raced, she kept her cool; casually turning her binoculars away as if she hadn’t noticed anything she said loudly, ‘I don’t see a thing either, but, Rohan, please change places with me; I’m tired of looking behind – it’s so boring.’

Rohan looked at her in surprise, but changed places. As she brushed past him she whispered, under pretext of wiping her face with her handkerchief, ‘In the large green bush to the right, next to the big tamarind tree – something red – check it out! I think we’re being watched.’

Rohan sat down casually and looked up into the treetops for a few moments. ‘I think some of the monkeys are waking up,’ he said loudly to the others. ‘We should see some action shortly.’

Then, looking through his binoculars, he turned his head very slowly, carefully examining the bush Anu had told him about, without lingering on it for too long. ‘Nothing else,’ he said to the others. ‘Maybe we’d better talk softly though, in case we scare away any animals on their way here.’

He turned back and whispered to the others. ‘Don’t turn around – Anu noticed us being observed – here’s the plan. Lie down on your stomachs behind this log, as if we’re engrossed in watching the waterhole. Excellent! There are a few deer coming down now.’

The others obeyed him quickly, and he continued softly. ‘There are two men in the bush – one in a brown shirt with a red scarf, and the other in a dull, yellow, shirt – I can’t see their faces, but they must be the crooks. They don’t seem to have any binoculars with them at the moment. Once a few animals come down, and we’ve watched them for a bit, I’ll get up and say it’s time to go home. We’ll move away from the waterhole and then, just follow my lead. Got it?’

‘Yeah,’ muttered Nimal excitedly. ‘I’m sure those chaps won’t move.’

They watched the waterhole in silence, and after a while, a few more small animals, monkeys and birds came down to the water. Once they had drunk their fill and dispersed, and before any other creatures came down, Rohan stood up.

‘Okay, gang,’ he said loudly, looking at his watch, ‘we’d better head for home before Mum sends out the search party – let’s wrap it up.’

‘But, can’t we stay a bit longer?’ cried Gina, pretending she was very keen on hanging around.

‘Gina, your Mum did tell us not to stay out too long,’ said Nimal. ‘We can always come back another day. I’m just going to check if there are any more creatures coming down to drink.’ He put his binoculars to his eyes once more and covered the entire area of the jungle around them. ‘Nothing to be seen,’ he said, and as he bent to give Gina a hand up he whispered to the others, ‘They’re still there.’

‘Let’s follow the old trail,’ said Anu, ‘you know, the one opposite us – it leads right back home.’

‘Good idea, let’s move, JEACs,’ said Rohan.

They set off, chatting to each other, and using the animals as an excuse to keep looking through their binoculars every now and then.

‘We’re not being followed,’ said Rohan softly, as they reached the big tree leading to their cave. ‘The men are still in that bush so we’ll carry on up the trail for a bit. They won’t be able to see us, but they may be able to hear our voices, and if they see the bushes shaking on the trail, they’ll think we’ve gone.’

So they went up the trail, deliberately talking loudly and shaking the bushes, and then stopped and hid in the undergrowth close to the entrance of their cave.

‘I’ll slip back to the tree,’ said Rohan softly, ‘and if they’re still in the bush, I’ll give the “owl” signal, and you can get into the tunnel as fast as possible. I’ll join you shortly. Only, don’t let Hunter make a sound.’

The others nodded, and Rohan crept back to the tree quietly. Finding a safe spot, he used his binoculars to look at the bush, which was right opposite him. He saw the two men, still in hiding, but they were no longer watching the trail – they were looking at the creatures coming to the waterhole. They obviously thought that the children had gone and were not at all threatened by the fact that they had been so close to them.

.....

And so on and so forth! Read the book and participate in their adventures!