



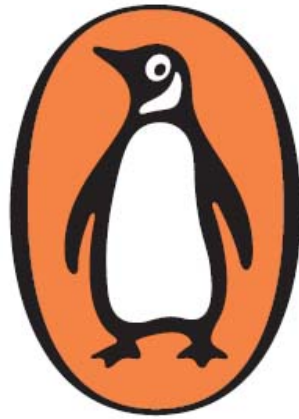
*The Wonderful Story
of Henry Sugar*

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Roald

Expect the Unexpected

Dahl



Penguin

ROALD DAHL

The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar
and six more



PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE WONDERFUL STORY OF HENRY SUGAR

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The Boy Who Talked with Animals

Not so long ago, I decided to spend a few days in the West Indies. I was to go there for a short holiday. Friends had told me it was marvellous. I would laze around all day, they said, sunning myself on the silver beaches and swimming in the warm green sea.

I chose Jamaica, and flew direct from London to Kingston. The drive from Kingston airport to my hotel on the north shore took two hours. The island was full of mountains and the mountains were covered all over with dark tangled forests. The big Jamaican who drove the taxi told me that up in those forests lived whole communities of diabolical people who still practised voodoo and witch-doctory and other magic rites. 'Don't ever go up into those mountain forests,' he said, rolling his eyes. 'There's things happening up there that'd make your hair turn white in a minute!'

'What sort of things?' I asked him.

'It's better you don't ask,' he said. 'It don't pay even to talk about it.' And that was all he would say on the subject.

My hotel lay upon the edge of a pearly beach, and the setting was even more beautiful than I had imagined. But the moment I walked in through those big open front doors, I began to feel uneasy. There was no reason for this. I couldn't see anything wrong. But the feeling was there and I couldn't shake it off. There was something weird and sinister about the place. Despite all the loveliness and the luxury, there was a whiff of danger that hung and drifted in the air like poisonous gas.

And I wasn't sure it was just the hotel. The whole island, the mountains and the forests, the black rocks along the coastline and the trees cascading with brilliant scarlet flowers, all these and many other things made me feel

uncomfortable in my skin. There was something malignant crouching underneath the surface of this island. I could sense it in my bones.

My room in the hotel had a little balcony, and from there I could step straight down on to the beach. There were tall coconut palms growing all around, and every so often an enormous green nut the size of a football would fall out of the sky and drop with a thud on the sand. It was considered foolish to linger underneath a coconut palm because if one of those things landed on your head, it would smash your skull.

The Jamaican girl who came in to tidy my room told me that a wealthy American called Mr Wasserman had met his end in precisely this manner only two months before.

‘You’re joking,’ I said to her.

‘Not joking!’ she cried. ‘No *suh!* I sees it happening with my very own eyes!’

‘But wasn’t there a terrific fuss about it?’ I asked.

‘They hush it up,’ she answered darkly. ‘The hotel folks hush it up and so do the newspaper folks because things like that are very bad for the tourist business.’

‘And you say you actually saw it happen?’

‘I actually saw it happen,’ she said. ‘Mr Wasserman, he’s standing right under that very tree over there on the beach. He’s got his camera out and he’s pointing it at the sunset. It’s a red sunset that evening, and very pretty. Then all at once, down comes a big green nut right smack on to the top of his bald head. *Wham!* And that,’ she added with a touch of relish, ‘is the very last sunset Mr Wasserman ever did see.’

‘You mean it killed him instantly?’

‘I don’t know about *instantly*,’ she said. ‘I remember the next thing that happens is the camera falls out of his hands on to the sand. Then his arms drop down to his sides and hang there. Then he starts swaying. He sways backwards and forwards several times ever so gentle, and I’m standing there watching him, and I says to myself the poor man’s gone all dizzy and maybe he’s going to faint any moment. Then very very slowly he keels right over and down he goes.’

‘Was he dead?’

‘Dead as a doornail,’ she said.

‘Good heavens.’

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘It never pays to be standing under a coconut palm when there’s a breeze blowing.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I’ll remember that.’

On the evening of my second day, I was sitting on my little balcony with a book on my lap and a tall glass of rum punch in my hand. I wasn’t reading the book. I was watching a small green lizard stalking another small green lizard on the balcony floor about six feet away. The stalking lizard was coming up on the other one from behind, moving forward very slowly and very cautiously, and when he came within reach, he flicked out a long tongue and touched the other one’s tail. The other one jumped round, and the two of them faced each other, motionless, glued to the floor, crouching, staring and very tense. Then suddenly, they started doing a funny little hopping dance together. They hopped up in the air. They hopped backwards. They hopped forwards. They hopped sideways. They circled one another like two boxers, hopping and prancing and dancing all the time. It was a queer thing to watch, and I guessed it was some sort of a courtship ritual they were going through. I kept very still, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

But I never saw what happened next because at that moment I became aware of a great commotion on the beach below. I glanced over and saw a crowd of people clustering around something at the water’s edge. There was a narrow canoe-type fisherman’s boat pulled up on the sand nearby, and all I could think of was that the fisherman had come in with a lot of fish and that the crowd was looking at it.

A haul of fish is something that has always fascinated me. I put my book aside and stood up. More people were trooping down from the hotel veranda and hurrying over the beach to join the crowd on the edge of the water. The men were wearing those frightful Bermuda shorts that came down to the knees, and their shirts were bilious with pinks and oranges and every other clashing colour you could think of. The women had better taste,

and were dressed for the most part in pretty cotton dresses. Nearly everyone carried a drink in one hand.

I picked up my own drink and stepped down from the balcony on to the beach. I made a little detour around the coconut palm under which Mr Wasserman had supposedly met his end, and strode across the beautiful silvery sand to join the crowd.

But it wasn't a haul of fish they were staring at. It was a turtle, an upside-down turtle lying on its back in the sand. But what a turtle it was! It was a giant, a mammoth. I had not thought it possible for a turtle to be as enormous as this. How can I describe its size? Had it been the right way up, I think a tall man could have sat on its back without his feet touching the ground. It was perhaps five feet long and four feet across, with a high domed shell of great beauty.

The fisherman who had caught it had tipped it on to its back to stop it from getting away. There was also a thick rope tied around the middle of its shell, and one proud fisherman, slim and black and naked except for a small loincloth, stood a short way off holding the end of the rope with both hands.

Upside down it lay, this magnificent creature, with its four thick flippers waving frantically in the air, and its long wrinkled neck stretching far out of its shell. The flippers had large sharp claws on them.

'Stand back, ladies and gentlemen, please!' cried the fisherman. 'Stand well back! Them claws is *dangerous*, man! They'll rip your arm clear away from your body!'

The crowd of hotel guests was thrilled and delighted by this spectacle. A dozen cameras were out and clicking away. Many of the women were squealing with pleasure clutching on to the arms of their men, and the men were demonstrating their lack of fear and their masculinity by making foolish remarks in loud voices.

'Make yourself a nice pair of horn-rimmed spectacles out of that shell, hey Al?'

'Darn thing must weigh over a ton!'

'You mean to say it can actually float?'

'Sure it floats. Powerful swimmer, too. Pull a boat easy.'