

TWENTY-FOUR



As rumoured, the Peacock was on the prowl. Creeping in the dark, he scouted the premises, peering behind each bush and tree, inspecting each shadow. Premonition told him that tonight was a night of windfall. The dark, moonless night was thick with possibilities. He marched back and forth, listening for movement. An owl hooted overhead, startling him, and then there was silence. Absolute, deathly silence! Not even the sound of wind or the faint rustle of dry leaves disturbed the stillness. His sixth sense had let him down. At the end of a long and futile hour, he finally decided to give up the watch.

Just as he reached the corner, he heard the tell-tale crunch of dry leaves. Walking silently was an art that many cadets had successfully mastered. With practice, they had perfected the art of stealth. But things are bound to go wrong at some point.

Peacock sensed that something was amiss. Rubbing his hands gleefully, ears cocked, he waited till he saw a figure jump down with a thud on his side of the wall. The intruder must have stubbed his toe on a stone. A curse followed the cry, which rang through the silence but was stifled promptly.

Chuckling over the sudden bounty, Peacock stepped towards the prowler. Barely had he gripped the trespasser by the collar when another body landed with a loud thud a hundred metres away. All of a sudden, the forested area was buzzing with action as cadets jumped into his waiting arms.

The timing was just right. It was the season when Confidential Reports were being penned and signed, and expectations of ambitious officers were on the rise. This was the time to stand up and be noticed or remain a loser.

Capturing the two renegades as they made an illegal entry through the forested parts of the campus was plain good luck for the Platoon Commander.

Sprinting out of my room with Porky at my heels, I caught sight of Peacock grinning evilly while the captured fugitives shuffled their feet sheepishly by his side. Hands locked behind his back, the Peacock performed a quick circumambulation around the two. Helplessly, we watched from the shadows. Soon after, we heard him inform the unfortunate Maachh and Blanket about their fate.

‘Be ready to be marched up to the Commandant, tomorrow morning.’

No amount of pleading from the duo could melt the frozen heart of the ambitious Peacock.

Everyone in the academy knew the result of being marched to the Commandant. The forbidden word bobbed in our minds. The unfortunate chaps would be relegated.

The next morning, we wore the expression of pall bearers while the two guys on death row went to meet their fate. Relegation in the academy is a very formal affair, carried out with military precision. It is customary for a bugle to be sounded when a GC is relegated by the Commandant and all ears were cocked up at 11.00 AM, which was the hour set for the condemned to appear for the verdict. Unable to concentrate on the lessons, we waited for the bad news.

The sound of the bugle hit our waiting ears loud and clear, but it sounded only once. Surprised, we exchanged puzzled glances. There were two cases and the bugle had sounded only once, which meant that only one of the two cadets had been relegated. Which one of them had been relegated was a question worth a million crisp rupees. With pals of both the chaps rooting for them, tension hung heavy in the air. The suspense was unbearable!

Come lunchtime, we rushed to the barracks. There we found Maachh lolling in his bed with a grin that could have won him a crown at a beauty pageant.

‘He has not been relegated.’ Porky ran excitedly around the room. He hugged his pal and matched his grin.

Poor Blanket had bought it, we were told. There was jubilation at our end of the barracks but the other end was wrapped in gloom with Blanket’s pals consoling him. Porky began the celebratory dance. He jumped and hopped on his feet in a pantomime of a war dance.

Prancing around the veranda, Maachh shook hands with everyone. He was the uncrowned hero of the day. We felt sad for Blanket, but knowing him, we expected him to bounce back to his normal self soon. He wouldn’t pass out with us, but it was just a matter of six months before he did the passing out.

That evening, celebrating the event over platefuls of mutton chops and

hamburgers washed downed with colas, Maachh narrated the story of his misadventure with a liberal sprinkling of salt and pepper to his wide-eyed audience.

‘After I said goodbye to Porky, I had no intention of calling it a day,’ he began. ‘As he has already told you guys, I spotted the pretty girl who has been haunting my dreams for the past couple of weeks. She was with her friends.’

We waited impatiently while he sipped his cola and let out a loud belch.

‘They bought tickets for a movie and entered the hall. I also rushed and bought a ticket and followed them inside. As luck would have it, I found myself sitting just two seats away from her. From my vantage position I could watch her profile and hear snatches of their conversation, too. What luck, I tell you!’

‘Which movie?’ asked Porky as he munched on his seventh cutlet. He was most relieved to have his pal back. His day had passed in agony. The guy had almost had a nervous breakdown while waiting for the verdict.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You mean you sat through almost three hours and don’t know the name of the movie.’ Porky was unconvinced.

‘That is what love is about... the eyes see nothing but the person you love, the ears hear...’ we stopped Maachh before he could launch into his dissertation on love.

‘Well there is not much to tell, actually,’ he sighed. ‘I watched her as she laughed and cried with the heroine. I caught her expression of sorrow as the hero was thrown out by the heroine’s father. I tell you, her expressions were better than those of the movie stars.’

‘Proceed with the story, the details of your stalking can wait,’ I interjected.

‘Well, the movie finished at around midnight and I made my way back to the academy. Imagine my surprise when I literally jumped into Peacock’s arms.’

‘Much ado about nothing,’ I concluded. ‘You didn’t even speak to her nor introduce yourself to her and you risked getting relegated.’

‘What did you tell the Commandant?’ Porky raised the question troubling all our minds.

‘I told him the truth,’ Maachh grinned evilly.

‘Told him the truth and he didn’t relegate you?’ Sandy asked.

‘Partial truth, if I may say so. I told him that I was returning to the academy when there was an accident. By accident, I meant my running into the girls, but he was not to know that.’

‘Then...’

‘I said a boy got hit by a motorcyclist and I was the only bystander so I hired an autorickshaw and took the boy to the hospital. Once there, I got him checked into the emergency and called his parents. Only when they arrived did I leave the hospital.’

‘He believed you?’

‘All this is not a lie actually. There was an accident and a boy did get hit by a motorcyclist as I was crossing the road. Some people carried the boy to the Doon Hospital. If the Commandant checks back with the hospital, he will find that there indeed was a boy who was hit by a motorcyclist. My grey cells have never let me down,’ he boasted tapping his forehead.

Once again, the Fish needed to be steered on course. Before he could start on his favorite topic about the benefits of a fishy diet on the brain cells, we turned his attention back to the narration.

‘What did the old man say?’

‘Well, he had no option but to thump me on the back for my selfless deed. I told him that it was useless trying to help the accident victims lying on the road in their last throes of life. “Sir,” I said, “I will never again help anyone if I am relegated for my good deed. In fact, hereafter, no cadet in the academy will ever take an accident victim to the hospital.”’

‘That was a terrific angle! I guess the Old Chap must have been stumped by your logic,’ Porky’s voice sounded reverential.

‘Of course he was,’ agreed Maachh. ‘Noble gestures can’t be punished, they need to be rewarded.’

‘And did he reward your lies?’ I asked sarcastically

‘He shook hands with me and patted me on my back. Coming from him that is reward enough, I guess.’

For his bravery, Maachh was anointed the undisputed champion of the evening. But only after I made him promise to never stalk girls again.

Just as the bonhomie was reaching the critical point, and we were cheering each other with the cola glasses, we spied Blanket entering the café with his pals. He seemed in a celebratory mood, too. The guy was totally unrepentant.

Eager to hear his story, we extended our invitation to his group. Plates of cutlets and glasses brimming with cola were passed around as the hero warmed up to his tale.

‘My story is very different from that of Maachh,’ Sammy began. ‘I came to know from reliable sources that Zeenat Aman was shooting at Sahastradhara on Sunday morning. From the same sources, I learned that the day’s shots would require her to sing and dance under the waterfall. This was to be followed by a scene of altercation as the villain and his henchmen arrived at the spot. Now, you all know that she is my favorite star and nothing... NOTHING... could have prevented me from reaching Sahastradhara. I hiked for a distance and then took a lift in a truck and managed to reach on time.’

We all nodded in agreement. Not just Blanket, but quite a few gentlemen cadets would have given their lives to be there, relegation be damned. The loss of a term is nothing compared to the priceless opportunity of watching Zeenat Aman live and in the flesh.

‘So, there I was, one amongst the thousands of spectators jostling for elbow space. Zeenie was under the waterfall in a white sari. All of a sudden, I found myself in the spotlight. My towering height and crew cut had attracted the attention of the director. He singled me out of the crowd and asked if I was willing to stand before the camera. You can imagine my delight. I almost fainted with joy.’

‘You lucky dog!’ Porky thumped him on his back. ‘How I wish I had been there.’

‘Your being there wouldn’t have helped, Porky,’ said Sandy. ‘The director was looking for a handsome guy and not a toad.’

We waited for Sammy to continue, our breath arrested by the suspense of his story.

‘I was willing to do anything in order to get close to Zeenat. The director inspected me from head to toe, ordered the assistant to hand me some clothes and within moments I was geared in the garb of the villain’s henchman. Things just got better after that. The director instructed me to whistle at the drenched Zeenat and pass some silly remarks.’

‘Did you do that?’ asked Maachh, plainly jealous of Blanket’s good fortune.

‘No, I couldn’t,’ Sammy’s voice sounded regretful. ‘One look at her and I found myself shivering from top to toe as though a sudden attack of malaria had seized my body. I strode up towards Zeenat with trembling innards, but the cat got my tongue the minute I stood before her. I froze. I just couldn’t speak. The director hollered and the crowd hooted but my tongue remained frozen. Not a word emerged from my parched throat. I tried and tried but all that came out of my paralyzed throat were some strange sounds. Zeenat giggled, and the director fumed as he shouted “Cut”. A couple of attempts later, he threw me back into the crowd.’

There was regret in his tone. The guy had come within an inch of making a fleeting appearance on screen with his favorite star, and lost it all because of his disobedient vocal cords. We tut-tutted sympathetically. It was a shame really.

‘Don’t worry. At least you got the opportunity to be with Zeenie baby and stand in front of her for a couple of minutes. That is what matters pal,’ consoled Sandy. ‘And what story did you tell the big man?’

‘I told him as much of the truth as possible, without getting into details. Perhaps that made him madder and he relegated me for a term.’

‘A term lost is a term gained,’ spouted Maachh philosophically. ‘I wouldn’t mind it if I were in your shoes except that my father would die of a heart attack. He is

just waiting for me to wear my stars.'

'Look at it this way,' I consoled. 'We will wear the rank of a brigadier only after slogging on different war fronts for twenty-five long years, while you have already become a brigadier.'

The logic here being that a cadet relegated for a term is automatically crowned a 'brigadier' by his coursemates.

'By God! I had never thought of that. You are right. It has not been a total loss.' The thought cheered the Blanket. 'On that note, let us all have another round of soft drinks.'

From that day, no one addressed him as Blanket any more. He was respectfully addressed as Brigadier Sammy. Before him, many cadets had earned the rank of brigadiers in the academy, but none had the distinction of being relegated for having taken part in a shooting with Zeenat Aman.