

**TWENTY-TWO**



It was a Sunday afternoon, and we had made plans of visiting our ailing pal before we went to town to catch a show at the cinema.

When Maachh heard the plan, he declared that he was going to join us.

‘There is no way I will be chained to this bed with the awful nurse watching over me.’

The previous evening, he had taken an out-pass and gone to the barrack to get some essentials.

‘More than getting the essentials, it was the need to get out of this prison that made me ask for an out pass,’ he clarified. ‘I feel stifled here.’

‘Forget it, buddy,’ Sandy chuckled. ‘You went out last evening. It is not likely they will give you another out pass so soon.’

‘I know I won’t get an out pass, but that doesn’t mean I can’t leave without it.’

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘You bet!’ Maachh challenged.

The guy was up to mischief once again. The Bong couldn’t resist a challenge.

‘You can’t go out to town without your mufti clothes,’ declared Porky.

‘Then you bring them for me,’ snapped Maachh. ‘I will get dressed and we will sneak out.’

‘What if the hatchet-faced nurse finds you missing?’

‘I did a bit of investigation and found out she’s not on duty tonight,’ chuckled Maachh.

That evening, an hour before our rendezvous at the movie hall, Porky delivered the mufti to Maachh.

It didn’t take much effort for the joker to escape undetected from the hospital.

We were not surprised to see Porky and Maachh, their arms linked, whistling as they walked towards the movie hall at the appointed hour.

‘Congrats! You made it,’ greeted Zora.

‘Was there any doubt about it?’ Maachh replied in a supercilious tone.

‘The challenge lies in getting back to your bed, undetected. Also, there will be a price to pay if they discover you missing.’

‘Don’t worry, I am carrying the old out pass as a safety measure. As for discovering my absence, they would assume I am somewhere on the campus.’

The guy was cool as a cucumber.

We were in high spirits after enjoying the film, and Maachh was on a supreme high. He indulged in a hearty meal at a fancy restaurant, despite the dietary restrictions imposed on him.

‘It’s been the most unpleasant experience, living on boiled veggies. I was dying to enjoy chicken curry and naan,’ he said, burping after the huge meal.

‘The after-effects of the chicken curry on your jaundice will be evident very soon,’ warned Sandy.

Happy after the outing, the Bong donned the regulation striped pajamas and flip flops behind a bush near the gate of the hospital. Thereafter, waving us off, he made his way towards his ward. As he walked down the driveway, he prayed that he would not come across any of the nurses till he had reached the ward.

That was not to be. The unlucky chap spotted the headlights of an approaching car. He considered jumping into a bush, but it was too late. He stood like a rabbit pinned in the headlights of the car, and was clearly visible to the driver. The car screeched to a halt just short of hitting him and an officer stepped out. To his misfortune, Maachh realised it was none other than CoCo. Fate had handed him a lemon, but the joker decided to make himself some lemonade.

‘Why are you loitering?’ CoCo barked angrily.

‘Sir, I had taken an out pass and am going back to my room,’ mumbled Maachh

tragically.

‘Show me your pass,’ demanded the instructor. CoCo was unrelenting when it came to discipline and rules.

With trembling hands, Maachh pulled out the old pass. He held his breath as CoCo peered at it in the dark, praying that the dim light would make it impossible for the officer to decipher the date on it.

‘Hmmm,’ grunted CoCo. ‘Run back to your ward, on the double,’ he ordered handing the pass back to the clown. Minutes later, he had driven off, leaving the Bong sighing with relief.

Only later did he learn that CoCo had gone to the hospital for treatment for an eye ailment. His eyes were red and bleary with conjunctivitis so he had not been able to read the details on the out pass.

Back in his room, Maachh faced an irate nurse. The battleaxe was back on duty, much to his dismay.

‘Where were you?’ she demanded, her hands on her more- than-ample hips.

The guy cowered like a truant child, while his brain thought of a suitable reply.

‘I was feeling homesick so I went out for a small stroll. Fresh air makes me feel better,’ replied the Bong in a lost-child voice.

When the occasion demanded, the Bong could put up a good performance. Wearing an expression of unhappiness, he stood before her. The woman’s matronly concerns surfaced.

‘Did you have your dinner?’ she asked.

Images of the boiled carrots and beans danced around his brain and Maachh winced. ‘Yes,’ he lied.

‘Tell you what,’ she threw him a million watt smile. ‘I will demand some sugarcane juice for you. It is good for your jaundice.’

Tenderness oozed from every pore of the sturdy nurse’s body. Maachh was taken

aback. The affectionate look on her face dealt him a hundred kilowatt jolt. Bubbles burst and stars twinkled. Everything was alright with the world as Maachh nodded his head.

It had been a miraculous day. First, he had managed to hoodwink the flu-eyed CoCo, and now the dragoness was mothering him. Maachh couldn't believe this turn of fortune.