

NINETEEN



Dinner was chhole bhature at a lively dhaba at the end of a narrow lane, where a stout Sikh sang as he prepared the bhature. Out of tune, out of beat, he warbled unmindful of the dirty looks thrown his way.

‘What luck! There is live music to go with the food,’ commented Porky.

‘Tomorrow, we will dine in style,’ promised Sandy.

‘I don’t believe you,’ said Maachh, visions of mutton biryani and chicken legs haunting his mind. ‘I will go out on my own and eat whatever I want. I am sure I will not get a good meal if I go with you.’

His one-track mind was set on biryani.

‘Count me in,’ Porky said. ‘Don’t forget to call me when you go.’

The next day was hectic as we went to see the Kempty Falls, which was not as gorgeous as the brochures promised.

‘This trip will remain in my mind forever,’ remarked Zora as Sandy took pictures of the group.

‘Did you know that the Maharaja of Kapurthala has a bungalow here?’ Zora asked.

‘How do you know? Did he invite you to his bungalow?’ Maachh asked nastily.

He was in a foul mood ever since biryani had eluded him.

‘It is not necessary to be invited to a bungalow to know of its existence,’ Zora replied, smoothly. ‘By the way, my grandfather was often invited to his house by the current Maharaja’s father.’

‘Let’s go to Benog Hill,’ interrupted Sandy. ‘My pal had been raving about the view from the hill.’

‘Where is Benog Hill?’ asked Porky.

‘It is about eight kilometres from Library Chowk. We could take a cab.’

‘What a waste of money!’ grumbled Maachh.

‘It wouldn’t cost much,’ I consoled. ‘Besides, we must see all that the hill station has to offer. We are not likely to return to Mussoorie soon.’

The matter decided, we walked up to Library Chowk and took a cab from there. Climbing the hill, we paused for breath. The ancient Jwalaji Temple was a sight to behold, and stretched at our feet was a carpet of colourful wildflowers. It was a far better sight than the Company Garden. We sat on the grass and communed with nature.

The sun was calling it a day and we decided to catch the sunset. Although it was chilly, the sight of the orange orb doing its disappearing act behind the hills was enchanting. Awed by the beauty, we forgot all about the biting wind that was assaulting us from all sides.

The trek back to town was a silent one. Perhaps it was the spiritual experience at the temple that had a sobering effect on us. It was late when we finally walked into our rooms after dinner. The chilly mountain air was crisp and clear, a light breeze swept through the eucalyptus leaves, and a full moon added to the charm.

‘Let’s play a game of bridge,’ said Sandy, bringing out the cards.

‘Where is the bottle of rum you had brought along?’ asked Maachh.

‘I am saving it for a special occasion,’ teased Sandy.

‘At this rate, I don’t think we will ever see the bottle coming out of your bag.’

‘Chicken, chicken, my kingdom for some chicken...’ mouthed the Bong.

‘It’s always about chicks or chicken. Isn’t it?’ Zora pulled his leg.

Since only four could play the game, Maachh wandered out into the balcony. There he busied himself with dreams of whisky and chicken.

‘You will catch a cold, come inside,’ shouted Porky.

‘Don’t worry about me. I have the stars and the moon to keep me company.’

A couple of minutes later, he walked into the room and pulled out the white bedsheet from the foot of the four-poster bed. Wrapping it up around himself with only his eyes visible, he vanished again.

Suddenly, our ears were assaulted by loud shrieks from the adjoining room.

‘Someone is getting murdered,’ remarked Porky rushing towards the door. We joined him as he ran into a pair of middle aged Anglo-Indian ladies. Clad in their night clothes, they clung to each other outside the door of their room, screaming their lungs out.

‘G... gh... ghost,’ stammered one of them after Zora reached their side. ‘Th... the... there is a ghost in our balcony.’

By now, several heads were emerging from the half-open doors around us. Some of them had joined us in the corridor. Terrified faces peeped through a few windows.

‘Call the manager,’ suggested someone.

‘Call the police,’ said another. ‘It must be a thief.’

The women were high, we noticed. So did the others.

‘A drink too many,’ scoffed one of the men in the crowd. ‘I can smell alcohol.’

It was true. The women were not quite stable on their feet and they reeked of alcohol. As soon as word got around, people began disappearing into their rooms.

‘They must have imagined it. Drinks can speed up the imagination,’ remarked a lady who had rushed out in her nightgown. ‘They will be laughing at all this fuss when they wake up in the morning.’

‘Mind your words. We are not drunk,’ protested the stouter of the two screamers. ‘Both of us couldn’t be mistaken.’

‘We are from the IMA,’ said Sandy in his most authoritative tone. ‘Can we have a look at the balcony?’

‘We will drive away the ghost, if there is any,’ seconded Porky, gallantly.

The four of us, followed by the women, walked into the room and stepped towards the balcony. There was nobody.

‘Are you sure you saw someone here?’ asked Zora, looking doubtfully at the ladies.

‘But I am sure there was a ghost.’ The two of them were still clinging to each other for moral support.

‘Well, it has disappeared now. I suggest you both go to sleep. We are in the adjoining room. Give us a call in case the ghost decides to return,’ saying this, I latched the door that led to the balcony.

‘Selina, the bottle has disappeared,’ one of them pointed a shaking finger at the table. ‘The ghost has taken it.’

‘... and the food has gone too,’ said the other. The two of them turned to us – ‘You don’t believe us, do you? Well, where did the whisky bottle and the food go, if there was no ghost?’

Nonplussed, we stared at the two glasses with remnants of whisky in them, sitting alongside an empty plate. There was no bottle.

At that moment, the receptionist on night duty arrived along with a couple of waiters.

‘What happened, madam?’ he asked.

‘There are ghosts in this room.’ One of the ladies complained. ‘You must give us another room.’

‘I am sorry but it is not possible to give you another room as all of them have guests. I have been here for the past ten years and no ghosts have been reported. I assure you, there are no ghosts in this hotel.’

‘Are you trying to tell us that we are lying?’

‘No, I am not saying that,’ the receptionist replied. ‘It could be a trick of light.

Sometimes, the branches of the trees move in the wind and the mind plays tricks.'

'No tricks here. We saw the ghost.'

'One of us could be mistaken but not both of us,' retorted the stouter one. 'Melina, do you recall the ghost we encountered when we went to Shimla in 1969?'

'We seem to attract ghosts wherever we go,' sighed the sister.

'This one loves whisky and chicken,' tittered Selina.

By now, all of us were convinced that the two ladies were drunk.

'Well, I will post a guard outside your door,' promised the receptionist, winking at us. 'Just shout and he will rush in if the ghost reappears. Relax now and go to sleep.'

A sudden suspicion preyed on my mind as we entered our room. Something about the whisky and chicken combination gave rise to doubt. As indicated by my intuition, seated in the balcony was Maachh munching happily on a chicken leg. A half-empty bottle of premium whisky stood by his side. A satisfied sigh escaped the rogue as he threw away the bone and picked up another leg.

'Bloody scoundrel!' Zora jumped on him. 'So, you are the thieving ghost.'

'You are a disgrace,' spat Sandy. 'I never imagined I would see the day when one of my pals would stoop to steal whisky and food from old ladies.'

'This is un-officer like behaviour,' I joined them in berating the guy. 'I am ashamed of you.'

'Were you so desperate for daaru and chicken that you had to scare the women and steal from them?' For once, Porky sided with us.

'Those who don't approve of my behaviour can go to sleep and those who don't mind a bit of mischief can join me for the feast,' Maachh invited.

'I don't want to join you in eating stolen chicken,' I snarled.

‘Stop preaching and come here,’ said the unrepentant Bong, picking up another piece of chicken from the plate. ‘What is done is done. Your points are noted for future compliance. In the meantime, there is enough to go around.’

Tempted, we stared at the bottle. A few minutes of hesitation later, his shameful conduct was forgotten and we grabbed the bottle and took a swig each.

‘You guys are hypocrites. After all the abuses you heaped on me, none of you refused to enjoy the drinks and snacks.’

‘I can get drinks and chicken from the two ladies without stealing,’ claimed Zora.

‘Ha! Lofty words,’ scoffed the Bong.

‘You want a bet?’ challenged Zora.

‘Bet.’

‘A hundred rupees.’

‘Alright, a hundred rupees.’

‘Tomorrow evening, we will all be sitting with the two women, enjoying drinks and dinner,’ promised the Rajput. ‘... and this joker will pay me a hundred rupees for losing the bet.’

‘Buddy, make no mistakes, you will be paying me a hundred rupees,’ Maachh chuckled as he went to his room accompanied by Porky.

The next morning, before we left the hotel for sightseeing, Zora knocked on our neighbour’s door.

‘Good morning,’ he greeted them suavely.

Selina was surprised to see the young man standing at the door. ‘Come in son,’ she smiled. ‘You are up early.’

‘I am sorry to disturb you but I wanted to check if everything was alright. I hope you slept peacefully and the ghost didn’t make an appearance after we left.’

‘Thank you for your concern,’ she replied. ‘No, the ghost didn’t return and we slept peacefully. Why don’t you sit down?’

‘We are leaving for a bit of sightseeing. I thought I will find out if there is anything we can do for you.’

Impressed by his courtesy and concern, Melina replied: ‘No dear, we don’t need anything. Will you have some tea or coffee? We were just ordering our breakfast.’

‘Thank you, I don’t mind a cup of coffee.’

Twenty minutes later, the four of us peeped into the neighbouring room, and found Zora entertaining the ladies with tales of punishments and parades as he sipped his coffee. The half-empty plates of sandwiches and cupcakes that lay before him confirmed that his breakfast had been quite satisfying.

‘Scoundrel!’ Maachh spat contemptuously, drooling at the sight of the remaining cakes. ‘Feasting alone without comrades is not acceptable. He is breaking the basic rule of camaraderie.’

‘Watch out, buddy, you may have to shell out a hundred bucks tonight,’ laughed Sandy. ‘Zora is out to charm the ladies.’