

## **MISSION JUNGLE AND GUINEA PIG** (Translation of Mission Jungle and Guinea Pig)

He had been an idealist when he came to be associated with 'Mission jungle'. As a Biotechnologist, working with a Defense Laboratory, he became part of many research projects. He was so involved in his work that he had no time for anything else, and within two years he was given independent charge of a particular assignment.

Then a girl came into his life. Usha! Yes, that was her name, like a waft of fresh air. She was a colleague, and they were working on mice. Their experiments related to changes in the nervous system and hormones of these rodents. The nervous system would be activated, after rendering parts of the brain dead, in order to study its effect on the rest of the body: for example the fear instinct would be nullified, and the mouse would dare to take on the cat; similarly, after changes in the hormones, the male would try to evade the female. In a particular experiment he was injected with such a hormone that the moment he saw a female he turned aggressive, and rested only after he had killed her.

Usha was not interested in research or the project that was considered extremely important. She didn't go near the cages or do any practical work. She kept loitering around, reading books and papers, and would soon get fed up. He did all her work, and continued to be busy night and day. He was obsessed with the project, and the Director was happy at the pace of its progress.

After an absence of three months, when Usha came to meet him, he was overjoyed. He brought out all the documents, practical work, and results, asking her to go through them quickly because they had a meeting with the Director. She just smiled. Then, pulling out pages from the file, she began flinging them around, blowing at them to make them fly.

He got upset, and ran helter skelter to collect them. "What are you doing? All our efforts will go waste. Don't you know how important and significant this work is!"

"Of course I know! But there is something even more important. I've come to fetch you."

"What will become of my mice? The research is vital to our society and nation. In this world we have to..."

Usha interrupted, "No, we don't require guinea pigs. We have other preoccupations beside mice! I'm aware of the reality behind this project."

"Don't you like this work... our contribution towards the development of the nation? These are the only roads to progress."

"There are other ways also. I love the blue sky! The cool morning breeze is as important to life. All right, tell me, have you seen the waves playing at sea? Explain to me the effect of raindrops falling, and the pleasant smell that emanates thereafter....what mysteries of life do they reveal?"

She was saying things that seemed strange and eccentric to him, then

petulantly added, “And tell me when did you last leave your Lab? Since when have your feet not touched the morning dew? You are looking pale and wan!”

“You know... Actually, the past few months have been very hectic. My mice have to be monitored so I even sleep with them in the room next to the Lab. But, come on, try and catch up with all that has been accomplished...” he spread out all the papers on the table, and while trying to explain the results through tables and graphs, he got so engrossed in numericals and figures that he didn’t realize when Usha got up and left.

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On the successful completion of his research project, he was inducted into the secret service of the military wing. The Commander-in-Chief complimented him, and patting him on the back, said, “We need diligent and dedicated research scientists like you. Except robots, it’s difficult to find honest and assiduous people now. I’m glad that you are part of our team.”

Usha had wryly said much the same thing on an earlier occasion, “I sometimes suspect that you are not a man but a robot.”

“Usha, I’m telling you about a new project. We are having a meeting to discuss the prospects of human cloning in the military. We are going to...”

“Please, I don’t want to hear anything about in! I’m rather apprehensive... you may even dupe me, and use my D N A to make a clone that would be your slave... like the mutant mice... ‘Usha The Slave’ ... My research... My clone!”

In her naivety she had given him food for thought... It was not a bad idea, after all. These women... personifications of stratagems and tantrums! They are the cause of half the problems of the world. We only go by outward appearances and stereotyping thereby rubbishing man’s rationality and spirit. The key to man’s brain will soon be in our hands, and then the lab-made Usha will be mine! She will obey my commands! She dare not go out and enjoy the rain. She’ll be so terrified of the open, and fresh air that...! He was lost in the world of imagination.

His Commander, his Chief, was appreciating his work and discussing the significance of Bio Engineering whereby the human brain and biological functions could be mutated. He was an interesting man in that he drank heavily, but was extremely serious about his profession. As the alcohol began to take effect, his complexion became flushed, his cheeks puffed out, his eyes had a dazed look, and he started talking as if he had transcended space and time... exploring unfathomed caves and ravines, he would launch forth and reveal undisclosed mysteries of life. At such crucial moments, he would be extremely alert, not knowing when his boss would come up with a difficult proposition or give him a clue to some mind-boggling question. That day, during the course of his rambling, Commander suddenly invited him to come closer, and whispered that he would have the privilege of accompanying him on the next secret mission to see the wonderful achievement of the Secret Service, and the success of their research project. He would go as second in command which would give him the opportunity to do further research. Commander reiterated that all the research projects being

undertaken by the Defense Wing were dedicated to the nation.

He had never imagined that such a momentous instance would come his way. He was thrilled, and knew that the rare honour was being bestowed upon him on account of his diligent, quiet, obedient attitude to work. He had never made enquiries pertaining to the department of the project or utility of the data obtained. His only aim was to work and get results for the security of his country and destruction of the enemy... how was this to be achieved... who the enemy was ... where he was... he knew nothing about it, and neither was he concerned. Moreover, after Usha's departure, there was nothing left beside his research and the rodents. All his needs were attended to, and everyone took care of him. His mice ... his research ... his results ... discussions pertaining to the data ... indeed, there was no scope for anything else. Sometimes, however, Usha's face would swim before his eyes ... an elongated face ... large eyes looking into the distance ... lips about to utter something ... But, he would shake it off, and if ever he missed her, got more involved in his work.

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At the appointed date and time, they moved out with two escort vehicles.

Commander, who was in-charge of 'Mission Jungle', had said that he wanted to brief him about the project, so prior to departure they spent two hours together in his office. There were maps of different countries and various regions of India with certain blue and red markings, and indications of particular roads. Chief seemed worried, and began talking about threats to the nation from without and within. He said that for the last many years our forces had been stationed in Kashmir, and our boundaries extended from east to west meeting those of many countries be they in the desert, snow-covered mountains or jungles. The police, army, officers were all under tremendous pressure and the explosion would prove disastrous. "Terrible stress! We are living under extreme pressure ...," and he suddenly fell silent. He had finished his food, and began tapping the table with his fingers as if he were an accompanist in some musical performance. He then smiled and continued, "Military service is a ..." Whenever Commander was in a light mood, he resorted to vulgar language and expletives as on this occasion.

Chief was concerned about the daily reports reaching headquarters, and he wanted to share his anxiety. There was dissension and in-fighting which often led to suicides and firing. Last month, a B S F Jawan, frustrated on not getting leave to go home, had shot his superior officer. Later, on realizing what he had done, he began firing indiscriminately, injuring four people who were trying to restrain him, and finally shot himself. Commander was terribly upset about these incidents. He believed that a person joining the army should acquire detachment because the heart and mind cannot operate together. Brains are required on the battlefield, and every soldier in uniform should think he was at the frontline. Uniform implied frontline, and frontline implied brains. Brains implied nation ... and nation implied frontline ...nation implied war ... be it at home or outside, at the borders.

"Where is your heart, my dear? If there is a Queen of Hearts somewhere,

you had better forget her! It's only the King of Spades that will get you anywhere. The Ace or king of Spades, that's Ha ... ha .... ha... ha..." The room resounded with guffaws.

He felt uneasy. The Queen of Hearts ... must be out in the rain somewhere.

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The escort vehicles each had an officer and armed soldier. They had come a long way, and when they stopped, the sun was going down. He got down and looked around. White clouds had donned grey and orange robes of dusk from which peeped naughty little children with pink cheeks. He wanted to stand there and just keep gazing ... it was ages since he had seen such a glorious sunset.

The officers had alighted and were saluting Commander. He returned to reality ... he had to go ahead with his boss. Meanwhile another big car had come to pick them up and an officer and driver in military uniform were waiting at the door. They moved through dense forest with headlights lighting the way.

Night had fallen by the time the jungle thinned, and they emerged on a narrow tarred road. They stopped in front of a building with a spacious portico and five steps. There were military personnel on guard duty and to receive them. Beyond the outer gate there was a watch tower, and he could almost feel the scrutinizing gaze of the sentries. After ascending five steps and then descending another five, they entered a hall where there were five high-ranking officers decorated with wheels and stars. What is the mystery behind five? Could it be the occult? These days the entire country is being governed on the basis of prognostication, and with the aid of spells and necromancy. Maybe someone had suggested that the number five was lucky for this particular research project!

Though the hall gave a very modern appearance, its high, ornately carved ceiling, was proof of older architecture. Commander and Officers, all spoke in whispers. Perhaps that was the tradition of the place, he thought. At dinner he met the same people, and they were eating and drinking heartily. Commander departed after having finished his meal, but he knew he would not go to bed yet; he would drink a few pegs more; however, excessive drinking did not affect him much except that his moustaches began shaking of their own.

Though he was tired after the long journey, he couldn't sleep. This building and the entire ambience seemed mysterious. He peeped out and saw a sentry standing guard outside Commander's room.

Rarely does one see an important, secret mission from such close quarters ... or become part of it... he was shaken to the core. He was a scientist and researcher, interested only in work, that implied results, and nothing more. Generally, people are concerned not only with the work; rather, its application and utility are the things that matter. What, how, and where depend on the individual and no one else. His Project Director had once instructed, "We want results ... only results ...".

He was regular and industrious, getting satisfactory and exciting results that he handed over to his boss. He never tried to become inquisitive about why

something was being done or for whom it was being done; perhaps that was the reason behind his success. He convinced himself with the idea that he was working in the interest of his nation which required modern weapons, bombs, rocket-launching missiles; after all, a country's progress depends upon its scientific discoveries and technologies. In medical science everything seemed possible so much so that a man's heart, brain, liver, kidneys, everything could be transplanted. A robot could be made into a man, and a man could be turned into a robot, the knave of Spades. He recalled the guffaw of Commander ... not just the Ace and King of Spades, but the jack as well! He smiled, and soon drifted off to sleep.

Next day, he got ready on time. Two officers came to escort him; one of them had big moustaches like Commander, and was a carefree sort of fellow, while the other was very fair, and his flushed face had a set and sadistic expression. Anyway, it was none of his business; he simply had to stay with Commander and observe the scientific achievement of 'Mission Jungle'. They set off in two cars, and were silent all through the two-kilometer journey.

After traversing a narrow, tree-lined avenue, when they stopped at a building, he was astounded to see that it was a facsimile of the one left behind, the only difference being that whereas that had been at the end of the forest, this one was in the middle of a big *maidan*. Everything was the same, leading him to wonder if the structure too had been cloned! He laughed. Perhaps it was a decoy. It was a double-storey building, the first floor housing the laboratory. They crossed a spacious hall, and walked down a long verandah that opened onto a huge field, at one end of which were barrack-like rooms, at the other was hospital as Flushed Face had indicated. He spied a radar station at a corner. He now had a feeling that this was another world altogether shrouded in layers and layers of mystery and secrecy. He became curious.

The entire programme had been chalked out. They were welcomed by two army personnel; Flushed Face having returned from the verandah, there were five people present. As they moved forward, the situation became clearer. Right in the middle of the field, a contingent of thirty soldiers stood at attention, facing their Commandant, guns slung over their shoulders, faces blank, and stony eyes gazing into the distant vacuum.

Moustaches whispered something to Commander, and the latter shook his head, moving it closer to hear better. He felt that he shouldn't be left out; after all, he was going to be associated with this significant programme, and that was why he was here. He drew closer to the speakers, and stood behind them to hear what was being said.

Moustaches said, "This is 'Project Mountain', and it is a part of 'Mission Jungle'."

"Is this the pioneering team?"

"Yes."

"How many more are there?"

"Two. But they are not ready yet. It will take another two years."

“How long have you been working on this team?”

“For the last five years.”

“What about their Group Commandant?”

“At first he was normal, and we wanted him to be a part of the project. But then he started creating trouble so we had to intervene and perform surgery on him.”

“Does he know?”

“No.”

“And now?”

“Everything is under control. They are all alike\_ you can check for yourself.”

“Wonderful!”

Commander shook his head in approval, and Moustaches drew back. He also returned to his place.

Commander then moved forward and stood beside the Commandant. He and Moustaches also followed.

Commander roared, “Mr. Commandant, is this your entire group?”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Have they all been recruited here?”

“No, Sir. They have come from the South.”

“And the boys from here?”

“They have been sent to the South.”

“Who is the trainer of this Group?”

“I am, Sir.”

“Have they all had medical treatment... I mean, have they all been through a medical check up?”

“Yes, Sir!”

Commander looked at Moustaches who tacitly reassured him. He again asked, “How do you rate their obedience?”

“Hundred percent, Sir!”

“Any doubts? Any problems?”

“No, Sir.”

“Is there any limit?” Can you give a demonstration?

Moustaches stepped forward and whispered something to the Commandant who replied, “Yes, Sir.”

The young Commandant marched his contingent round the field, and ordered them to stand at attention. He then shouted an order, “Jawan Number One! March to the flagpole.”

A youthful, blue-eyed soldier, standing right in front marched to the pole, a metre ahead.

“Company, ready to attack! Target Number One!”

The Jawans, who were all in their early teens, ran forward and formed a semi circle, ten metres short of Number One. He now observed them carefully.

The Commandant roared, “Number One, you are going to be eliminated. These people are going to kill you. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Drop your weapon, One!... Two...”

He had been observing the proceedings with interest, but shuddered to see that Blue Eyes, without so much as an expression, removed the gun from his shoulder, and put it down. This may be a mock battle, but such a bizarre drama was enough to send shivers up the spine.

Just then, the Commandant shouted, “Fire! Attack Number one! Go! Go! Target Number One! Finish him!”

The Jawans did not hesitate, and instantly fired on their comrade in unison ... the field resounding with sounds of bang ... bang ... bang ...!

He held his breath though he knew these were bogus bullets that just created a lot of noise. As the Jawans returned to their positions, he was petrified to see Number One lying in a pool of blood, his body riddled with gunshots. Commander and Moustaches were beaming with a sense of victory.

He began trembling. He suddenly realized this was no pantomime, and the bullets had been real. This was an exhibition of brains that had been engineered upon to show absolute servitude, and it was cent percent successful. He was confused... were these beings of flesh and blood or the mice bred in his laboratory? He too had succeeded in conducting much the same experiments on his mice, destroying their nervous system and making interventions in the brain, mutating them to behave as he wanted them to. Similar operations had been performed on human beings here, and he had been brought to observe and gauge the achievement of applied science. He would have to take a decision pertaining to the future of his work and the expansion of this project. Would there now be young boys in his laboratory instead of mice? Would his mice be mutated into youth now ...?

His legs began to give way. His eyes alighted on the Commandant who was standing with his android contingent, as before, waiting for the next command. It was an ambience of absolute calm as if nothing untoward had occurred. Number One lay covered in blood, his blue eyes glued to the firmament.

He suddenly felt that his temperature was shooting up, and he was cold; his body shook with rigours, and he looked around for some kind of support.

Commander’s feeble voice seemed to come from a distance: “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

He was feeling dizzy. The whole field seemed to be infested with mice ... white mice ... with pink and red eyes ... pink snouts ... sniffing around ... They began running all over him.

He collapsed. There were cramps in his body. He felt that he too had turned into a mouse, and Commander was striding over his chest, branding him on the forehead. Would he too be taken for surgery now ...?

There was heaviness in his chest and he couldn’t breathe. “There’s nothing in this nonsense called the heart, my dear! You had better block it ...!” Commander’s guffaw rang in his ears. He wanted to open his eyes, but everything

around seemed pitch dark. He wanted to move his hands and feet, but his body was numb.

“Excellent, Officer! Excellent! Your project is perfect. I’ll send a report to Headquarters.” Commander must be back-slapping Moustaches.

He wanted to get up and return with Commander. He was not a guinea pig, after all. He just got entangled in this jungle. No, he would not go to the flag-pole ... You are going to be killed ... You coward ...

As he started losing consciousness, he could hear the rumbling of thunder, and feel the raindrops. All of a sudden, Usha emerged on the scene, and began dragging him away, “Leave all this! Forget about the mice. The weather is lovely ... and rain in the jungle can be simply wonderful ... Come, let’s race ...”

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