

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS- WITH A DIFFERENT SPECIES

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"I have brought you the bottle, sir". I was aroused from my usual post-lunch catnap by the harsh voice of Mr. Sreedharan Nair, an ex-military man who had come the previous day to collect some medicines for his poultry farm. "Why such a big bottle?" I enquired "You could have brought a smaller one". "We don't get small bottles in our defence service canteen" he grunted, visibly upset at the thought of my asking him to go back and get another one. I opened the wrapper covering it and was surprised to see a bottle of rum staring at me.

"I am a government servant and am not expected to accept such gifts from my clients", I said. "Well you asked for it yesterday and why are you backing out now", he replied gruffly not in any happy frame of mind. The whole incident suddenly came back to me. I couldn't control my emotions, I leaned against the wall and using the hind legs of my chair as fulcrum, exploded into a bout of laughter. My sudden outburst of hilarity surprised my client who hastily took the seat opposite me, as I waved for him to be seated between my spells of laughter.

"See here, Mr. Sreedharan Nair", I tried to explain "I had asked you to bring an empty bottle for collecting medicines and not for a bottle of liquor" His facial muscles seemed to relax, I could read an expression of guilt on his rough mustachioed face. He took a long contemplative breath. "I am sorry sir, but we ex-servicemen take such harassment for granted wherever we go. The last time I went to the village office to collect a nativity certificate and to the electricity office to enquire about excessive billing, I had to dish out two bottles".

"I have not yet got into the habit of accepting such gifts and you must take it back", I told him. It was after my repeatedly coaxing him that he finally agreed to do so but on the condition that I join him and his

friends for the coming weekend bout of drinking. He did not forget to collect the medicines and dewormers for his calves.

"Poultry medicine is in the liquid form" I told him "and so you have to mix it in drinking water and the birds need have access to the medicated water only for a week". "Dewormer is a powder and has to be mixed with a lot of jaggery and sugar to make it tasty, sprinkle a little water and roll it into lemon sized balls then push it down the throat of calves", I concluded. He listened to me with portentous concentration.

A relieved Sreedharan Nair left the dispensary expecting to see me at his home next Saturday evening. Thus began a good friendship that lasted the full tenure of my good old days at Veterinary Hospital, Cheriyankil. The many happy evenings I spent with his family and friends is still engraved in my memory.

Of all the farmers I have encountered the ex-military men were the most dedicated. They are punctual, hard working, and take no nonsense from anybody. Military discipline is strictly imposed at home and in the farm.

Staying away from her husband for long periods in her youth, while bringing up the children, had made Mrs. Sreedharan Nair a silent workhorse and a strong willed, stubborn woman. I have seldom seen her smile. The only occasion when I saw her laugh was during one of the evening sessions. I told her that old veterinary joke of why middle aged women never laugh in front of a vet, because we are experts at judging age by the teeth.

Weekend evenings spent at Sreedharan Nair's house are funtimes. Like most well to do farmers he has an open courtyard attached to his cattle

shed. Furnished with a large round table and surrounded by equally old and heavy wooden chairs spread around. Reminders of his military days hung proudly on the walls.

A few pairs of green uniforms, a peacock cap, his military belt, a pair of boots and photographs of him in uniform. In the glass almairah there was a display of; some empty cartridges, a few medals and of course a set of playing cards, a bottle of liquor and a few glasses.

The courtyard came alive on Saturday evening when he and his middle-aged friends got together to play cards and share jokes over a few drinks. It was customary for his wife to bring in snacks, in between drinks.

That evening, my first one of the many with them was no different. First it was a plate of banana chips followed by a plate of 'Avulose Podi' a local delicacy - powdered rice fried and sweetened with sugar was delivered to the courtyard by her grandson a ten-year old. Although it tasted a bit different it was well near consumed by all, during the monotony of a long drawn out drinking session.

Sreedharan Nair seemed drift away into a world of his own, his eyes were fixed on his uniform and a proud smile swept across his mustached face. "When I was serving as a Commanding Officer in the Military Engineering Service", he began with long thoughtful pauses in between. There were hushed sniggers all around - ignoring that he continued, "I was entrusted with the job of building a railway bridge across the Dal Lake in Kashmir".

"This is the tenth time we are hearing the story why don't you tell us somethings different this time", the others tried to pull his leg. "Please continue, I said by way of pulling him out of the embarrassment and yet I must confess, party eager to hear of his adventures, though I had my own doubts. "But, Mr. Sreedharan Nair", I said "you retired as a Subaidar from the Army then how come you were a Commanding Officer of a unit".

Sreedharan Nair, caught offguard, soon regained his ground "You see, I had this huge mustache extending from ear to ear, rolled up to just below my eyes, a rough voice and the most muscular frame" he said. He pointed to a photograph that hung on the wall as if

to add proof to his statement. "So I was made commanding officer of the unit".

All of us nodded our heads in agreement waiting to hear his apocryphal anecdotes. We had no option but to agree, I was earlier told that a drunken Sreedharan Nair was worse than the enemy, at point blank range with a fully loaded sten gun.

"We were given only 24 hours to build a railway bridge across the Dal Lake and there were but twenty people under my command". "I briefed them on the orders and told them that the bridge was to be readied in eighteen hours".

Two large rails were placed in parallel across the lake then a cross-piece was laid across them and fixed by fishplates and nuts". "When one of the nuts slipped and fell into the river I commanded for it to brought up and secured in place. A second crosspiece was placed across, there was some disparity in the size of the plate". "I commanded that it be replaced". A fresh piece was fixed with bolts on either side". "One of the bolts had a wrong thread and I commanded that it be flung into the lake".

As if to add authenticity to the tale the pauses, in between commands on the crosspieces, seemed to lengthen. "Then the third crosspiece was placed across", continued Mr. Sreedharan Nair after a long pull at his undiluted Rum. He seemed to gain inspiration from this well-behaved audience, which he was unused to.

"There was a disparity in the size of the fish plates I commanded that fresh fish plates be brought". Then the fourth cross piece was brought and the holes were not of the same diameter I comm....." Some-one, I don't quite recall who it was, managed to put in a few words and there was a foul outburst from Mr. Sreedharan Nair, who turned his blood shot eyes in the direction of the interruption, there was hushed silence broken by subdued laughter.

Consensus was almost reached that Sreedharan Nair was not to be interrupted till he completed his bridge, when I managed to marshal my wits "Mr. Sreedharan Nair if you proceed the way you are doing the bridge will not be completed by the next millenium. You either require more manpower

to start work from both ends of the bridge or need you to bargain for more time.

I was having a tough time keeping a straight face, he seemed agreeable to the latter option but grunted something in Hindi that none of us followed. We parted late in the evening promising to meet up the next weekend to resume the bridge building exercise. Back home, I spent a disturbed night struggling like a horse in colic.

Perspiration and reverse peristalsis of the intestines seemed to work simultaneously inside me. I had to frequent the toilet quite often. Some bad taste seemed to linger in my mouth. I was lucky in that there were no night calls for me since, nature's call continued at regular intervals. It seemed to be one of the longest nights of my life. By morning I was exhausted and dehydrated and decided to take the day off.

It was ten in the morning when my wife upset over my night's performance shook me awake and told me there was a stone-faced woman at the door, asking to see me immediately. I struggled to the door and was surprised to see the work-hardened face of Mrs. Sreedharan Nair staring at me with panic written in her eyes.

Without exchanging pleasantries she dropped into the chair and started weeping. "Doctor, something terrible happened last night. It was not 'Aulose Podi' that you

ate last night, it was the deworming medicine for the calves, that you had sent. I had given clear instructions to my grandson that it was to be evenly administered to the five calves in the shed. I had mixed it with jaggery and sugar like you instructed but that naughty boy left it on your table and ran away to play.

"My husband spent more time in the latrine than in our bedroom last night. It was the same with the rest". "I am no better" I said as I tried to console the poor woman. When I realized that it was an over-dose of piperazine adipate, the white powder, that had done the damage relief in the form of a smile swept across my face. I remembered by medicine professor Dr. Paily's words, that even a very high dose of piperazine adipate is harmless except for a mild form of gastritis.

I consoled Mrs. Sreedharan Nair that her husband would be feeling better by evening and fit as a fiddle to resume the bridge building the next weekend. She laughed the second time in her life when I told her that the effect of the piperazine adipate would be passed on for at least five generations to come and they would never have to take deworming medicine in their lives.

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BOOK REVIEW

Basics of Livestock Production

C. Ibrahim Kutty, Sheeba Khamer

The authors have presented in a lucid and concise manner the essentials of livestock production. The book, with 18 chapters explains the common livestock species and goes on to elucidate the essentials of management, breeding, housing, feeding and health care. This book would be highly useful as a reference book for technical personnel in the area of livestock production besides professional students and vocational higher secondary students. Dr C Ibrahim Kutty is a postgraduate in the subject of animal reproduction and is presently holding the post of Assistant Professor at the College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Thrissur. He has more than 30 research papers to his credit published in international and Indian Journals. He has authored three textbooks, many popular articles and chapters in other textbooks. Smt. Sheeba Khamer is the wife of Dr Ibrahim Kutty and is a holder of B.Tech. in Dairy Science and Technology. The book, which has 161 pages, has been published by Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi, and is reasonably priced at Rs.150.

