

Article: The Case of the Vanishing Marigolds

By Sarah Fathima

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The sky had dark clouds. I heard the distant call of a koel. I could see flocks of mynahs and parrots noisily retiring to their nests. This calm, tranquil, and peaceful scene was abruptly interrupted by an anguished cry. It was the *maali*.

“Good heavens! Not again!” I looked at him quizzically and questioned the reason for his panic. “This morning, just this morning, I watered the marigolds which will be put up for display at the Lalbagh Flower Show. And now, when I go to see them, a large number of them have disappeared! Vanished! What am I to do now? I’ll be held responsible for any wrongdoing. And this has been going on for the past couple of days!”

Calming down, he concluded, “Well, there’s just one thing to do. I’ll go and inform Director Sir about this...this theft. Rest, I’ll leave it for the Almighty to deal with.”

I went to see all the flowers and just couldn’t decide which of them were the best—the heavenly hollyhocks with their rich colours, the royal roses, the dainty dahlias, the pretty pansies, the asters that were so arresting, those petite petunias, and oh yes, the oh-so-charming, colourful cockscombs. Phew! Talk about tough competition! Oops, I missed out the magnificent marigolds!

So, when the Director heard of this disappearing affair, he told the *maali* to keep an eye on the flowers and watch passersby like a hawk. So, anyone even in the nearest vicinity of the marigolds was dutifully scrutinised by the *maali*. And the first one on this list was an old beggar woman who used to sit by the marigolds in the same place every day.

But the beggar woman denied the *maali*’s charges. “I may be poor, but I’m not a thief! Besides, what would I do with a bunch of flowers?” she grunted. I went to revisit the flowers in hopes of finding a clue to the ‘crime’, and what did I see? A dishevelled, scruffy-looking young boy plucking and throwing the cosmos flowers, totally not bothered!

My stern gaze and the *maali*’s long wooden stick were enough for him to flee from the spot. But before that, the *maali* caught hold of him and retorted, “How dare you! So, you were the scoundrel robbing the marigolds!” “Huh? No, I didn’t rob

any marigolds! I didn't even see them, I swear!" "Don't lie, you brat! Scram now!" the *maali* said.

"Hmm, he seemed to be telling the truth..." the *maali* reflected. I agreed with him, too. I really wondered who the thief could be. But not wanting to waste time over this puzzle, I went to see all the flowers in their natural beauty.

Finally, when I came to the marigolds, what an astounding sight met my eyes...! A small, playful squirrel was seated comfortably near the pots, busy nibbling away at the marigolds! Yes, you read that right!

The squirrel held the marigolds in its little paws and ate mouthfuls of them at a fast pace. When I crept closer, it stopped eating to watch and judge my intentions.

As I stood still and silent, it continued feasting contentedly. It looked so cute while eating, I wanted to give it a warm hug! But the squirrel had other plans. It briefly glanced at me and then bounded away.

I left the place in a quite amused daze. So, all this while, the marigold 'thief' was not the old beggar woman, not the pesky boy, but a squirrel! To think that such a little creature was responsible for so much fret and worry for the *maali*!

But hey, don't reveal the truth to the *maali*, I too haven't for a simple reason: if the *maali* finds out that the squirrel is the thief, we nature lovers wouldn't get such sweet sights to see!