

# Chapter 2

## The Scrimshankers

Venu, George and Swami soon became inseparable friends. They called themselves “The Three Musketeers” at first, but later unanimously agreed that they needed a name that was more unique.

“How about The Bangalore Boys?” Venu asked.

“No, that’s too simple,” said Swaminathan. “What about something like The Tigers or The Lions?”

“That’s too common,” said George. “We have to find a name that no one has ever used before. Let’s all think about it and have a meeting tomorrow. Each person can pick only up to three names. We’ll meet in the Graveyard after school tomorrow and decide which one is the best.”

The Graveyard was an old British army cemetery that had been abandoned years ago. It stretched out for about half a mile and was flanked by the Bangalore Reserve Police Headquarters on one side and a lake in the other. Because of its location and for the fact that the last burial there had taken place over a hundred years ago, it was always completely deserted. The boys had discovered it one day by accident on their way back home from school and made it their special haunt. They loved playing all sorts of games there and roaming through the rows of un-kept graves reading the epitaphs engraved on the tombstones.

They selected the grave of one unfortunate Captain John Saunders of the British Army, who had died in Bihar on October 13th, 1764, during the Battle of Buxar at age 34, as their regular meeting spot. It was their usual routine to go home after school,

change out of their school uniform, get something to eat, and then meet at the Graveyard from about 5 to 7 every evening.

According to the plaque on Captain Saunders' tombstone, his family in England had erected the fine structure in his honor. It was a large monument about 8 feet long, 5 feet wide and 6 feet high built of white marble that the years had turned into a pale shade of brown. One side of the structure was covered in darker marble and had the lines, "*He lived with honor, he died with valor,*" engraved on it. The other three sides were open and had round pillars on the four corners that supported the marble roof of the monument. It was a perfect venue for the three boys to meet because it provided shelter from the elements, as well as a secluded spot where they could be on their own.

Assuming that he didn't mind the intrusion at his final resting place, the departed Captain Saunders may have been pleased that someone had finally cleaned up the bushes that had overrun his fine mausoleum. While the rest of the graves in the cemetery were neglected and covered in dirt and weeds, the three boys had carefully cleared the ground in a two-foot perimeter around their little hideaway. They did this, not out of any obligation to the late captain, but because they feared that a snake or chameleon might sneak up on them from one of the surrounding bushes.

The next evening, the three boys met once again above the mortal remains of Captain Saunders. Venu was the first to arrive. He broke off a twig from a nearby bush and cleared away the dirt that had gathered inside the engraved letters of the gravestone. Then, he dusted it with his handkerchief and lay down on it with his hands behind his head.

George arrived next. He crept up silently behind the tomb and said in his deepest voice, "Venugopal, this is your dead friend Captain Saunders speaking. You must buy your friends Swami and George one apple cake each from the tuck shop in school tomorrow."

"George, you scoundrel," said Venu without rising. "I know it's you. I can make out your phoren accent anywhere."

Swaminathan came a few minutes later. In his hand he carried two sliced cucumbers doused liberally with salt and green chilli sauce that he had bought from a vendor on his way. George reached into his bag and pulled out a packet of Marie biscuits. Venu put

his hand inside his pant pockets and extracted three ripe polly-mangoes. The boys sat cross-legged on the tombstone, divided the food, and quickly polished it off.

“Okay,” said George, wiping his hands on Venu’s handkerchief. “What names have you got?”

“Ooo... let me go first,” said Venu raising his hand. “My three names are: Sputum... Cholera... and Tetanus.” The only printed matter that he could find for reference in his house had been a folder with pharmaceutical catalogs belonging to his father.

“What kind of names are those? What does Sputum mean?” Swaminathan asked.

“I think it means spit,” said George.

“Who’d have a club with a name which means spit?” asked Swaminathan. “And Cholera or Tetanus. Your names are useless, Venu. Wouldn’t you agree, George?”

Venu made a face at Swaminathan. “Okay, let’s see what you have then.”

Swaminathan pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and read, “Proposed names for our group, by V. Swaminathan: Number one, The Djangos. Number two, The Warriors. And number three, The Yanks.”

His source of reference was a ragged collection of cowboy and war comics he kept under his bed.

“I don’t like any of your names,” said Venu. “I think mine are better. What about you George?”

“I am submitting only one name for your consideration, but I think you’ll like it,” said George. “The Scrimshankers!”

“Shimshahwhat?” Venu asked.

“Scrimshankers.”

“What does that mean?” Swaminathan asked.

“I found it in the *World Book Encyclopedia*. It means people who don’t like to work,” George replied.

“Well... it’s much better than Swami’s names,” said Venu.

“It’s two times better than your rotten diseases names,” retorted Swaminathan.

So, by unanimous consent, it was decided that, henceforth, they would be known as The Scrimshankers. Although Swami and Venu had their doubts if such a word actually existed, they nevertheless agreed that if it did, they personified it exemplarily.

“Let’s make a pact with our blood,” said George, who had read *Huckleberry Finn* recently.

“What is that?” asked Venu nervously.

“We’ll write an oath on a piece of paper and sign it with our blood. This means we have to keep all of each other’s secrets and stay friends forever. Here, I have a notebook and a pen.” He tore out a piece of paper, unscrewed his pen and started writing.

*“We (Swami, Venu and George) have formed a secret club called The Scrimshankers today, the 4th of February, 1973. We promise to never betray each other. If we do so, may we die at once.*

*Signed: Swami, Venu, and George.*

*Witnessed by Captain John Saunders (Died 1764).”*

He then removed his geometry box from his bag and took out a compass. He pricked his right index finger with the sharp point and signed his name in blood under the oath he had written. He wiped the point on his shirtsleeve and passed it on to Venu who did likewise. Swaminathan hesitated when it was his turn. He was very scared of blood, especially his own. But he didn’t want his friends to think he was afraid so he closed his eyes, pricked his finger, and did as they had done. He felt quite faint afterwards but strangely also elated that he had overcome his fear and sealed friendships that would last forever.

George folded the paper carefully and buried it in the corner of the tomb. For a moment, the boys thought they felt the earth move. It may simply have been Captain Saunders turning over in his grave.



The Shimshankers got a chance to prove their solidarity and live up to the oath they had signed over Captain Saunders’ grave during the second term of the next year. It involved C.K. Ganguli, a prefect in the eleventh standard at Baldwin Boys’ School.

CK, as he was known, was a sadistic young man whose main purpose in life appeared to be that of tormenting the juniors in the school. He had been a boarder since his early years and had become almost a fixture in the school because he had failed a few times. He was older than the other students and had a bad