

Cricket 177

Chapter 177

The lunch break concluded under a sky that now looked brighter, but the tension in the air remained unchanged—thick, taut, and quietly ominous. The scoreboard read 72 for 1. Shubman Gill, standing tall at 45*, was the first to emerge, his helmet secure, gloves fastened with care. His bat tapped lightly against his pad as he walked with purpose toward the pitch. Beside him, Aarav, ever the calm anchor, followed with a quiet confidence. His white sweatband, untouched by dirt or worry, gleamed on his wrist as he tucked his bat under his arm and jogged forward.

The crowd, returning from their lunch and snacks, roared back to life with a rolling wave of excitement. The hum of thousands of voices began to swell into rhythmic chants, rising and falling like tides.

"Welcome back to this gripping Test match," Morne Morkel's booming baritone resonated through televisions and radios across the globe. "India need 242 more runs. Gill on 45, Aarav on 21. The session ahead promises drama, tension, and possibly, a shift in the tide."

Isha Guha's voice followed, composed but with an undercurrent of anticipation. "The key here will be partnerships. If Gill and Aarav can stitch together a big one, India will truly start to believe they can chase this down. But Lyon's got the ball in hand. This is his time."

From the commentary box to the crease, all eyes turned to the pitch. Nathan Lyon stood at the top of his mark. He rotated the ball in his fingers like a magician preparing for his next trick, eyes locked in on Gill.

The first delivery after lunch—wide outside off, teasing Gill into a drive. Gill moved across his stumps, attempting a powerful slog sweep. But the ball dipped and spun, evading his bat and thudding harmlessly into Paine's gloves.

"That's a warning," Sunil Gavaskar remarked, voice edged with caution. "He needs to settle back in. You can't go after Lyon this early without gauging the pitch."

But Shubman Gill had made up his mind. He wasn't going to sit back.

Second ball—flatter, quicker, but fuller. Gill saw it early. He crouched low, swept hard, and the ball flew across the turf like a tracer bullet, finding the square leg boundary with precision.

"Now that's intent!" Harsha Bhogle exclaimed, excitement rising in his voice. "Gill isn't just looking to survive—he wants to dominate. That's a statement shot!"

Lyon wiped his brow, adjusted his field, but Gill wasn't done.

The third ball came in slightly slower, floating temptingly into the slot. Gill stepped forward, offered the full face of the bat, and launched it with sublime power straight back over the bowler's head.

The ball soared high, spinning lazily in the air, before crashing into the sight screen.

"What a shot! Straight as an arrow!" Morne Morkel bellowed. "And that brings up the fifty for Shubman Gill! His very first in Test cricket. What a moment, what composure!"

Gill raised his bat high, face beaming, the grin of a young man who had just etched his name in history. The crowd roared, erupting into a celebration that vibrated through the ground.

Aarav walked up with a proud smile. The two bumped fists, and Gill pulled him into a hug.

"I did it! I did it, man! My first fifty!" Gill's voice trembled with joy and disbelief.

Aarav, always the older brother figure on the field, clapped his shoulder. "Yeah yeah, no worries. You've got plenty more to come. This is just the beginning, Subh. Come on now, stay focused."

But as the crowd's cheer died down, a familiar voice rose from behind the stumps.

Tim Paine, cheeky as ever, decided it was time for a little banter.

"Nice fifty, mate. Hope you've already chosen your Instagram caption. Something like 'Rising Star Shines in Melbourne'? Don't forget the filter when you post your stumps flying."

Gill turned back with a smirk replied something to Tim Paine.

"Bit of spice out there," Harsha said. "This is what Test cricket's all about. Not just bat and ball, but wit and will too."

But the game has a cruel sense of timing.

Lyon, calm and unreadable, delivered the fourth ball of the over. It was subtle—disguised perfectly as another off-spinner, but this one was a googly. The revolution on the ball was different, but barely noticeable.

Gill, riding high on confidence, misread it. He stepped forward, attempting to repeat his drive. But the ball dipped, turned sharply inward, and sneaked between his bat and pad.

Crash!

The off-stump was sent cartwheeling.

"Oh no! What have you done, Gill!" Gavaskar groaned, as the stadium gasped in unison.

Lyon didn't over-celebrate. A small nod, arms raised calmly. He had set the trap, and Gill had walked right into it.

"And just like that, commentator's curse strikes again," Isha said solemnly. "Gill was in sublime form. But it's Lyon's genius. He senses moments, and he seizes them."

Gill stood still. He stared at the shattered stump, heart sinking. The crowd, moments ago in jubilant uproar, had fallen eerily silent.

He began the slow, reluctant walk back. Aarav met him halfway, placing a comforting arm around his shoulder.

"Keep your head up. That was a brilliant fifty, man. They'll remember it. And there's more where that came from. Trust me."

Gill nodded, jaw clenched. "Damn it..."

India now stood at 80/2. The scoreboard told a story of brief joy and sudden heartbreak.

Back at the crease, Aarav stood alone. He looked around, scanning the field, tapping his bat into the turf. He adjusted his gloves, took a deep breath, and focused his eyes on the bowler.

Captain of the team, Ajinkya Rahane walked in.

With Gill's wicket still fresh in memory, the weight of the match began to shift. Silence hung over the stadium for a heartbeat longer than usual, and all eyes turned toward the middle. Ajinkya Rahane, India's dependable No. 4, made his way to the crease. The scoreboard read 80/2. The sun glared down, and the tension simmered on the pitch like heat rising off asphalt.

Rahane tapped gloves with Aarav, who nodded quietly, his face unreadable beneath the helmet. There was something unspoken between the two—an understanding of the battle ahead. Two warriors not just defending a total, but the pride of a billion.

"Alright, let's build. One ball at a time," Rahane murmured, eyes fixed on the pitch.

"Let's make them work," Aarav replied, gripping his bat tighter.

In the commentary box, Harsha Bhogle's voice rose with energy. "And now it's over to experience and youth. Ajinkya Rahane joins Aarav—who's been anchoring the innings beautifully. These next few overs could define the session."

Sunil Gavaskar followed, "They'll need patience. Australia will smell blood after that wicket."

The Australians certainly did. Pat Cummins steamed in, his eyes narrowed and his line sharp like a scalpel. But Rahane was calm, precise. His defense was like a metronome—unwavering, consistent, and reassuring. The bat met the ball with a quiet assurance. Aarav, at the other end, was beginning to flourish again—rotating the strike, nudging singles, gliding the ball past fielders like a seasoned artisan painting with a brush.

Eight overs passed, but they weren't silent overs—they were filled with grit, with whispers of belief, with the rhythm of a rebuilding act. Every dot ball was a challenge overcome, every single was a seed of hope.

Then came the moment that reignited the stadium.

It was Nathan Lyon again. Aarav, ever watchful, danced down the track to a full delivery outside off. With a smooth flow of the bat, he caressed the ball through the cover region. The timing was immaculate—it split the fielders perfectly and raced to the boundary like a bullet with purpose.

"What a cover drive! That's pure class!" Morne Morkel's voice boomed. "Aarav raises his bat to the dressing room—he knows the value of this knock."

From the balcony, his teammates applauded. Heads nodded. Claps echoed. The dressing room lit up not just with noise but with respect. Aarav didn't celebrate wildly. Just a quiet nod, a small raise of the bat. Composed, focused, rooted in the moment.

The game wore on. Over after over, Rahane and Aarav weathered the storm. Cummins, Lyon, Hazlewood—they all tried. Line after line, angle after angle. But the Indian pair stood firm, blades drawn like swords against a raging tide.

For 15 overs, the scoreboard ticked with a comforting regularity. The crowd, sensing the rhythm, clapped in synchrony. No fireworks, but plenty of substance. Fifty runs came up between them. Each run was earned. Every movement deliberate. The Australians chirped louder, fielded harder, but they couldn't break through.

Until Cummins returned.

It was his second over in a new spell. Something about his run-up suggested renewed venom. The first ball angled in toward Rahane—a length delivery that looked simple enough. But just as Rahane leaned forward to defend, the ball straightened wickedly, kissed the outside edge, and flew toward Paine.

For a split-second, it looked like Paine was beaten. Wrong-footed. Off-balance. But reflexes took over. The Aussie skipper dived low to his right, stuck out one gloved hand—and held on.

"A stunner from Tim Paine!" Isha Guha called with awe. "What reflexes! What presence of mind! Rahane has to go."

Rahane stood frozen. Time slowed. His bat hung in mid-air, disbelief etched across his face. He had played the ball like hundreds before it—but this one betrayed him. He finally turned and began his slow walk back.

Gavaskar added, "Cummins has changed the complexion of the game in his last two overs. That delivery was magic."

India 130/3.

Aarav jogged across to his partner, gave him a quiet pat on the back. A silent thank you. Then turned and walked back to his end. As he tightened his gloves again, his face hardened. His eyes flicked up—focused, unwavering.

From the pavilion, Hanuma Vihari emerged. Calm, compact, quietly determined. He took long strides to the pitch, his bat tucked under his arm like a soldier reporting for duty.

The two batsmen exchanged a brief nod, just enough to pass on intent. No words. But the message was clear: this wasn't over.

Australia regrouped. They smelled blood again. The slip cordon stood taller. The field tightened. The energy spiked.

But India, scarred yet unbroken, stood ready for the next wave. Vihari tapped the pitch, Aarav marked his guard again.

This wasn't just cricket. This was character. The next chapter of resistance was about to begin.