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CHAPTER 6

Passage to India (1942)

All ranks were issued with Kiplingesque solar topees, which we never wore. We officers also received revolvers, which we never fired either in anger or calm. After we had noted the number on the butt they were withdrawn for safekeeping. We hardly saw them again and were never taught how to use them. Apparently we were going to the tropics; where else could our Japanese phonetics be of use? The sea voyage, which turned out to be to Bombay via Freetown, West Africa and Capetown, was a pleasure cruise for the officers but it must have been hell for the other ranks. We officers, even sprog P.O.s, were in comfortable cabins with hot baths at hand; we ate in an air-conditioned dining room dousing our ice-cream in South African liqueurs, drinks being duty-free. And there were 400 nurses to dance with - an irresistible temptation even to a new bridegroom. But every so often we were orderly officers, charged with inspecting the men's quarters, which went down into the bowels of the vessel as low as H deck. Conditions there were enough to turn any man into a rebel, especially since the officers' way of life was no secret from the men. They slept in the holds at three levels, one lot on tables, one on the floor beneath and one in a hammock above. Washing facilities were grossly inadequate and there were always queues for the washrooms and toilets. Yet somehow the men remained cheerful, singing ribald songs to the ATS (the Women's Auxiliary Service) and generally maintaining that celebrated British grin-and-bear-it humour which is such an obstacle to progress.

We anchored off Freetown, not far north of the equator, where the heat if not the humidity was eased by a fierce downpour in which for once even Other Ranks could take a shower. Then on towards Capetown and cooler weather. Despite this many of the men - and women - slept on deck, not always in strict segregation, to the fury of the puritanical O.C. Troops who prowled the decks at night with a torch. At last we reached Cape Town, where we stayed for five days, taking on supplies of fine food and drink not available in rationed Britain.

The first night ashore officers and men descended on the well-stocked fruit shops like hordes of locusts and left them after a few minutes with the shelves stripped. The well-to-do local whites except for the Afrikaners

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offered hospitality to the troops, entertaining them with drives round local sights and to sumptuous meals in their homes. My favourite story about this - probably apocryphal - is an American one. One family issuing its invitation added a P.S. "No Jews please". At the appointed time five soldiers arrived at the house and the butler opened the door to five Blacks. The lady of the house said there seemed to be some mistake. "Oh no," said the men. "Our colonel never makes mistakes. Not Colonel Cohen."

I did not sign up for an invitation until the last of our five days in port. Going ashore the first day I bought a paper. It turned out to have an anti-racist and even leftish line, so I found my way to its office. There I explained that I would like to learn something about local life, of the people rather than of the planters. The journalists were delighted, showed me round, introduced me to people, including "Coloureds" (people of mixed race). One of these, a doctor, told me that his children grew up playing with white kids but at the age of ten he forbade them to do so any more. He wanted to be the first to say "Don't play with those kids". My new friends provided me with a knowledgeable guide who took me to a fascinating museum showing the different racial types in realistic models of their habitats: the Pygmies, the Hottentots, the semi-nomadic San people (whom the South Africans called Bushmen) who are said to store food in their fleshy buttocks. The scientific and artistic arrangement of the exhibits made me think that some folk in South Africa have respect for the culture of people with non-white skin.

That is not to say that in Cape Town I did not run up against apartheid. On board ship was a group of skilled industrial workers and engineers. They were "colonials," returning home from the U.K. where they had received further technical training under a scheme sponsored by Ernie Bevin, the Labour party Minister of Labour. I had become friendly with one of them, a Parsee, and had looked forward to having a meal with him ashore, which we could not do in the officers mess on board. My Cape Town friends told me that the only place where the two of us, with our different colours of skin, could eat together would be in District Six. This was the very part of the city which we had been expressly ordered not to enter. It was dangerous, dirty and disreputable, we were told. We ate there anyway, without mishap.

I had come to know my Parsee friend in the course of my work as Education and Welfare officer of my unit. This was a voluntary job - more work without more pay - generally taken on by Liberals, Socialists and

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especially Communists. I held it during my three years tour overseas. On board ship I gave lectures and led discussions with the airmen about India, its people and history. I was of course no expert on this subject but was perhaps less ignorant than most of those on board. Still I had to get all the help I could from books, including Nehru's autobiography, and from the Indians on board. I took on the job because though British people have at times fought against racism, they are certainly not free from it. I was introduced to the word Wog during my course at SOAS, where there were learned linguistic disputes as to its origins. Was it short for golliwog? Or did it stand for "Worthy Oriental Gentleman"? Whatever its derivation it was a contemptuous term for non-whites used by the British forces in the East. I was to hear and hate it throughout my three years stay there.

I heard it more than ever once we landed at Bombay, along with a slogan I had not expected to hear on the lips of British servicemen: "India for the Indians!" This was not an expression of anti-colonialism but another bit of British irony which translated meant, the sooner we get out of this bloody country the better. The sentiment was echoed in the well-known song:

They say there's a troopship just leaving Bombay
Bound for old Blighty's shore
Heavily laden with time-expired men
Bound for a land they adore.
There's many an airman just finishing his time,
There's many a twerp signing on.
You'll get no promotion
This side of the ocean,
So cheer up my lads
Bless 'em all. (the word bless was a euphemism. It started
with the letter f.)

Such songs, with their mock disaffection, are very British and should not be taken too literally, as every Englishman knows.

In Bombay I explored the crowded markets, intrigued especially by "use once and throw away" plates made of banana leaves - no time wasted on washing up. I was even more amazed at the calmness with which these poverty-stricken people allowed the sacred cows right of way even to the extent of overturning their stalls and trampling on their pitiful wares. Still, I mused, was it any more irrational than some of the Jewish rites with which I had been brought up?

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By way of contrast with this ancient superstition, in a shop window I saw a paperback entitled Lenin on Literature. I went in to find myself in a Communist Party bookshop. Despite my uniform I was given a cordial welcome. The friendliness of the reception was not unreasonable, considering that the Indian C.P. (or C.P.I.) had characterised the current conflict as a People's War, with India not primarily an exploited colony but an ally of Britain against the common enemy Japan. And the shop assistant, doubtless a Communist, described Nehru as "the finest son of the bourgeoisie"! We got on well. So well that after another book browsing expedition I was invited to a meal, my first real Indian meal, in the Party commune on the top floor of the building. Shoes off at the door, hands washed in water poured from a copper pitcher, then sit crosslegged on a mat on the floor and eat with the hands - or rather the hand, only the right one; the left was reserved for other, unhygienic purposes. The food was simple but deliciously spicy, the best I had tasted since leaving Sichuan a year before. I was touched and at the same time amazed by the hospitality of these poor people. Shouldn't they have regarded me as a spy, or at least a traditional enemy? But more astonishment was in store. Before leaving Bombay I was invited to the wedding party of the Secretary of the Party, P.C.Joshi. He was marrying a tall and striking former anarchist, Kalpurna Dutt, who had been imprisoned for taking part in bombing the Chittagong armoury. Now a Communist she laughed in a mixture of amusement and embarrassment at the performance of Chekhov's one act play The Proposal. Unusual communists, I thought. And they ought to tighten up their security.

After a few days in Bombay our unit of 120 airmen and N.C.O.s and seven officers, travelled by troop train some 1,500 miles to Abbotabad in the then North-West Frontier Province of India (now part of Pakistan). For seemingly endless hours we crawled across "Princely States", devastated by centuries of despotic and colonial rule, sweating and sweltering.

On our arrival at Abbotabad, as Unit Welfare Officer I was assigned to report to the Base Commandant on our journey. Abbotabad was a station of the British Army in India and I was a member of the junior service, the R.A.F., and a sprog P/O at that. Still I plucked up my courage and politely suggested that the rations prescribed for the long, hot journey from Bombay were not quite suited to the climate, consisting as they did largely of bully beef, with one tin of fruit per day to be shared among six men. The commandant was taken aback by the temerity of my suggestion. He gazed at me disapprovingly for a second, then said: "My dear fellow, those

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rations were laid down in 1893. Do you think you are going to change them?' I began to doubt it. I was an unworthy heir to my mother's efforts in the field of food reform.

Abbotabad was a pleasant place, 4,000 feet above sea level, with a population of 15,000 or so, publicly known as a health resort. But it was strategically situated, only 80 miles from the Soviet border. And being close to Nepal, it was an intake centre for Gurkhas who traditionally served as mercenaries in the Indian and British armies. They were renowned for their bravery - and also, among the British, for their stupidity. (Perhaps the British were renowned among the Gurkhas for the same qualities.) The story circulated that when a battalion of Gurkhas was to be air-dropped somewhere they thought the project sounded a bit dangerous - until it was explained that they would be provided with parachutes. This story typifies an attitude common among officers of the British Army in India: the lesser breeds were lovable children. All you had to do was treat them with paternal care. It was these damned ignorant interlopers like us non-professional wartime soldiers who disturbed the perfect peace and sweet reason of the British Raj. They set about instructing us.

The first thing we were told to do was to hire a personal bearer to wait on us in the mess and attend to our other urgent needs. One of his duties was to serve us tea in bed before we got up in the morning and at 4 o'clock in our billets. For these repasts we must have the bearer purchase for us a tea tray and tea-set, complete with pot, cup and saucer, sugar basin and tongs, milk and hot water jugs etc. In the mess if you did not have a personal bearer but relied on the one or two mess bearers your food arrived late and cold. We four sprog P/Os, the youngest of the seven officers in our unit, were revolted by this arrangement, but there was not much we could do about it. After all we were young and had healthy appetites and didn't want to starve in that army messhall, where the colonel ruled and led us all at dinner in drinking the toast: "Gentlemen, the king!" On top of all this, after a few days we were told that it would be some little time before we moved off to our operational base (we were here as guests of the army) and we were encouraged to go on leave to nearby Kashmir, where one could loll on a houseboat poled along rivers winding through superb mountain scenery. We were outraged. There was a war on, we observed (to each other), and at home, there were air-raids and food shortages, to say nothing of our wives and families. I thought that something ought to be done about all this and one day penned a long screed in the mess book criticizing the bearer system, under the heading, "Carry off Jeeves."¹ This attempt at humour was not

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appreciated by our hosts and relations between the army and the R.A.F. became increasingly strained.

I realised that I should have focused my efforts on more important matters and drew up a series of lectures on the history of India, which I portrayed as a grand and ancient civilization not in all ways inferior to our own. The reaction to this approach was mixed. Some accepted it, others continued to think and speak of the Indians as "Wogs". Still, the "Wogs" had their uses. Quite a few of the airmen were soon being shaved in bed by Indian barbers, while we officers were sipping our morning tea. It was a difficult system to buck, especially while there was little or no work to do. We officers and some senior N.C.O.s attended lectures and took aptitude tests related to intelligence work, which had in fact been carried on for some time at this strategically situated listening post, close to the Soviet Union. I had been among the top few students in Firth's phonetics course at S.O.A.S. but I was only average here in such subjects as cryptography.

Still, all in all, the time passed pleasantly. I went for walks in the dry, bare, rocky hills around, trying to learn something of local life, but it was hard without knowing the language to do more than observe the poverty of the peasants. Occasionally we went to film shows at the town cinema where, among other things, I learned something about the Indian concept of time. The shows invariably started late. When I mentioned this to the manager he said: "Well, you see, the cinema is like the railway station. The trains don't start till all the passengers have arrived. And we can't start the show until the patrons arrive."

I made friends with a few of the permanent residents of the army post. One, surprisingly, was a Chinese, who wore civilian clothes and presumably did translation. He was delighted to find someone who had been to his country and spoke a little of his language, for which he showed his appreciation in the Chinese way by entertaining me to delicious Chinese meals cooked by his charming wife. Another friend was a British lieutenant. I took to him, for one thing, because he treated Indians with respect, not as Wogs or children. And through him I came to realise that for all my hatred of racism there were vestiges of it in myself. One evening we were drinking together when an Indian major dropped in, a tall, bearded Sikh. As we talked my friend from time to time addressed his visitor as "Sir". Why should this have struck me as strange? It was right and proper for a lieutenant, a junior officer, to address a major, a senior officer, in this way. Nonetheless it did somehow, for a moment at least, surprise me to find this white British officer addressing his darker-skinned visitor as "Sir". After

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all these years had I still not spat out the poison from the time almost 30 years before when my mother told me to spit out the sweet "from that nasty, dirty black man's pocket".

Such self-questioning was soon overshadowed. We were off on another train journey of 1500 miles in a south-easterly direction to the little town which was to be our base for the next nine months. Bimlipatam was on the east coast of India half way between Madras and Calcutta. It was a cluster of three villages, the one in the middle being a market and an ancient port, the two at each end being fishing villages. Our unit was billeted in a fine wooden house first built in the 17th century for the local governor of the Dutch East India Company. Behind the little town rose a hill, halfway up which a white-washed Hindu temple gleamed in the sun. It was there I met my first Indian friend, Anand. He taught in the local school and spoke good English and after commenting on the weather we discussed other things - throughout my nine months in Bimli. Anand was in his mid-twenties and a Brahmin and as such was married off to a 14-year-old girl of his own caste and with a compatible horoscope. She was a sweet child but had no education, so her relationship with Anand was that of a willing, loving slave and admirer of her learned husband. Anand accepted her as such but wanted a wife who was his companion if not his equal. Well, I suggested, after we had got to know each other well enough, you'll have to educate her and make her into the sort of wife you want. But he was already in love with such a woman, a pupil, to whom he gave private lessons at her home. But she was of the lower Vaisya or merchant caste, two grades below the Brahmins. I listened sympathetically to his story and one day he introduced me to the lady as, by arrangement, she walked along the sands, a graceful figure, the filmy folds of her sari floating in the Bimli breeze. She was closer in age to Anand than his wife, to whom he had introduced me in his home, and would doubtless have offered him more companionship if not greater love. But what could be done in that caste-ridden society in which such cases abound? When the time came for me to leave Bimli Anand did me an even greater honour than introducing me to his wife and his sweetheart. He ate with me, an outcast. Not in his own family home. That would have been unthinkable. But in the home of a friend, the two of us sat at one table and ate together, the Brahmin and the untouchable.

I was not the only member of our unit to make friends with Indians and take an interest in Indian culture. With the help of Anand's headmaster I arranged classes in Telugu, the local language said to be the most musical

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in India. The response was good and, to my shame, I was far from the best pupil. Today I remember only one phrase: Na alawattu kaadu, meaning "it is not our custom" and that I learnt out of class from the lips of an Indian Christian. (I had met him through the local missionary, an American Baptist.) He invited me to his home where we ate hot curry off banana leaves with our fingers while squatting on the tamped earth floor. I felt I must offer something in return and knowing that meat was a luxury I took him some tins of bully beef bought at the unit store. After all my hosts were Christians. But they politely refused my offering. Eating beef was not their custom. I apologised for my boorishness, thinking to myself, there are atheist Jews who still can't stomach pork. I might have guessed that Hindu Christians might not relish eating beef.

Another incident concerning food was memorable. Because of the sacredness of the cow in Hindu society there was a regulation that no beef cattle less than ten years old might be slaughtered and good fresh meat was in short supply even for the normally well fed British forces. One day word came from the nearby naval bases at Vizagapatam, from which we drew our supplies, that there was excellent Australian and New Zealand lamb for the asking. A refrigerator ship carrying meat to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) had been torpedoed by the Japanese but her cargo had been brought safely ashore. However it must be got rid of fast or it would go bad in the heat, there being no cold storage facilities for such a quantity. There was an historical reason for this. The British administration had focused its attention on north India, in such areas as the North-West Frontier Province, where we had first been stationed. That was where the infrastructure had been developed. There was plenty of cold storage in that relatively cool climate. But not down here in the south, where it was twice as hot. So... "Come and get it." Our sergeant cook did not need to be told twice and he came back to the unit with a lorry-load. We ate lamb and mutton for several days: chops, stews, joints, every whichway. But still there was plenty left and the sergeant came to me one day saying: "Sorry to report, sir, but if we don't eat the stuff fast they'll be able to smell it in Vizag. It's gettin' on the 'igh side already." Sergeant Ellis had been born well within the sound of Bow Bells.

I had a flash of inspiration. We'll use this mutton to improve racial relations. I went round to the Baptist missionary, who ran a boys' school, and proposed that he should arrange for a real Indian meal at the school, for his boys and our airmen. We would provide all the mutton he wanted but it must be cooked and

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served and eaten in the authentic Indian manner. The reverend gentleman took to the idea and so it was arranged. Every boy in the school and almost every man in our unit attended, all sitting on reed mats on the floor of the wooden gallery surrounding the school courtyard. There were yards and yards of banana leaves spread on the mats and lashings of curry bubbled in the cauldrons. For most of the men present this was the first (and in some cases, no doubt, the last) Indian meal they ever experienced. British workers and the "lower middle class," from whose ranks our men were drawn, are conservative in their eating habits. But they were willing to have a go and they talked and wrote home about that meal for ages. More important it whetted their appetites for more knowledge of Indian customs. Even Sergeant Ellis became interested, though he still called the Indians Wogs. In fact he was one of the worst offenders. Being in charge of the cookhouse he had command of our camp-followers, a number of pitifully thin unskilled labourers whose bones seemed to stick out of their rib-cages. They carried water and swept and did other odd jobs at no great speed, for which they were paid 8 annas a day. Ellis swore at them and even kicked them in an effort to make them get a move on. When I caught him at this and gave him a dressing down he defended himself. "Just look at the way they loaf and shuffle around" he protested, "like a bunch o' bleeding tortoises". "And how fast would you work on their diet and for eight annas a day?" I asked. For once our cockney sergeant had no comeback.

I seized an opportunity when it came of trying to improve his feelings for the "Wogs". A fire broke out in a nearby village. The dwellings were mostly conical wigwams made of palmyra leaves and covered with thatch. Indian peasants and slaves before them must have lived in such "houses" for thousands of years. Of course they were highly inflammable during the dry season. When I heard of the disaster I suggested a whip round to contribute to the re-building of the village. The response was good and Ellis was chosen to hand over the money to the council of village elders or panchayat, consisting of five frail old men. For the second time in my experience the fast-talking cockney was tongue-tied, overcome either by the devastation around us or by the dignified bearing of the elders. Handing over the money, he mumbled " 'ere, take this, you lot" and ambled uncomfortably off. The trip to the village, the presentation of the money and the sight of what was left of the houses made an impression on us all. We could see for ourselves the progress brought to "the Wogs" by two centuries of the British Raj. I recalled Karl Marx's essays on "The British Rule in India". But Marx was no

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sentimentalist. He saw the exploitation as unavoidable in the modernization of the sub-continent in a pre-socialist era, quoting a quatrain from Goethe on the inevitable suffering in the path of progress:

Should these torments cause us torture
Since they multiply our joy?
Did not myriads of mortals
The rule of Tamerlane destroy?

One remarkable institution of the British Rule in India was The Club. There was one even in little Bimli for the social life of the local British jute merchants. It was a pleasant, sprawling white building on a bluff overlooking the Bay of Bengal, with a dining-room and staff, a billiard room, wicker chaises longues on the apology for an English lawn. The chairs had a slot in the arm to hold one's whisky and soda as one watched the sun shining on the sea or the fishermen hauling in their seine nets. While we were there in 1943 there was only one member, a portly bon-vivant bachelor, Mr. S. Yes, there were other white men in the neighbourhood, within a radius of 30 miles or so, but they were not eligible. The club was open only to managers of the jute mills and businesses; these other chaps were just accountants and that sort of thing. But the seven officers of our unit were gladly accepted as honorary members and even invited to dinner at Mr.S's house on the hill, which was followed by an invitation to a showing of his slides of Indian erotica.

With such a variety of social activities it may well be wondered whether we ever worked. We did - in shifts, round the clock, at night sweating and swotting the mosquitoes, in the morning waiting for the breeze to spring up. It never failed us and regularly blew our secret papers about. But we did our job, keeping an eye, or an ear, on the movements and operations of the Japanese air force. As human tape-recorders we were obsolete, but plenty of intelligence could still be inferred from poring over the logs continuously fed to us, four intelligence officers and a couple of sergeants, by the wireless operators. The painstaking work of these men (and elsewhere women) in countries across the world was a notable contribution to the victory over fascism. They worked long hours, wearing clammy, clumsy earphones, pestered by mosquitoes and with sweat streaming over their bodies.

Of course, being British, they did their job but they grumbled, mainly about the issue of beer, an Indian brew shipped to us in kegs or firkins, a word which lent itself to obscene punning. I was often invited to a glass,

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not solely out of hospitality but rather to affirm that the stuff tasted like vinegar. It did. I myself preferred arrack, a powerful spirit distilled from coconut juice. This was drinkable, if knocked back fast and diluted with the juice of fresh limes, which were really the only sensible drink in such a climate.

My relations with the airmen were pleasant enough but being an officer presented problems. I was no martinet but still one had at times to issue orders and they had to be obeyed. I hated to say "sir" to senior officers but I did it and, on duty at least, expected to be so addressed by the airmen. Both they and I, I think found it irksome, especially as at this time, 1943, there were the beginnings of a democratic upsurge in the forces. On one occasion I had to put a man on a charge for calculated insolence. I felt I had to or I'd have lost all respect. The C.O. mercifully gave him light punishment: 3 days confined to barracks. But I felt bad about the business and wished we could have sat down together and talked it out over a glass of that Bangalore vinegar. But by and large relations were good between officers and men. My left-wing views were no secret, as I occasionally received copies of the Labour Monthly, about which my fellow Intelligence officers kidded me. We were rather a clique and did not have too much to do with the other three officers. The C.O. was a regular, a former Shanghai policeman, who boasted of cracking Chinese student skulls in demonstrations; and later of bombing and strafing Pathan villages on the Afghan border. The aircrew, he said, carried "goolie chits", documents written in Pashtu offering a large reward for handing over shot-down aircrew unharmed. "Without that," the C.O. solemnly assured us, "they'd have cut out our goolies" (testicles). Considering the stories he delighted in telling of mountain villages going up in flames, it may have been true.

Among the airmen I was always hopefully on the lookout for fellow socialists or communists. They were few. The one who, in my pride, I considered the "most politically advanced" was our star Wop (Wireless Operator) a young Scotsman. Jock could take down the fastest transmission with accuracy. The fastest transmission by hand, that is. Later, machine transmission came in and could be dealt with only by machine reception, in other words tape-recorders. Meanwhile Jock and the best of the others could identify an enemy transmitter by the touch of the operator, as a musician can identify the touch of a pianist. This was a gift which made it possible to identify an enemy unit which had changed to a new frequency. Apart from Jock I found only a couple of others who said they voted Labour - or would when they had a chance to vote. The rest seemed to be

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more interested in football and women (not a conflicting interest, I thought) and a few actually picked up Indian girl friends or, at least, prostitutes, daughters of the poverty-stricken fisherfolk.

One of the fishermen's jobs called for skill as well as strength. That was fixing and tending the floats. They did this by going out to sea on teppas, rafts made of three planks with rounded bottoms, not fixed but lashed together, so that back on shore they could be taken apart and carried plank by plank above the tide line so as not be washed away. I was fascinated by how the fishermen balanced, standing up on the teppas, breasting the waves and paddling out to adjust the floats. I bought a teppa and had a double-bladed paddle made (the fishermen used single blades) and braved the sun and the sharks to swim and sunbathe in the deep. I was so pleased with myself at acquiring the raft that I foolishly posted a reward (to be paid in beer) to the first man who learnt to master it, standing up. Unfortunately I won the prize myself, nobody bothering, no doubt, to take up the challenge of a snotty-nosed P/O. It is not easy at the best of times for an "intellectual" or at least an ex-public school boy and university man, to "mix with the masses." It is harder than ever when the issue is complicated by the matter of rank. I tried one way and another and probably succeeded in the end at being considered more or less harmless, despite being an officer.

After a few months at Bimli the C.O. suggested that I go to Bangalore, about 600 miles to the southwest, to pick up some equipment. I jumped at the chance, being then as now an incurable tourist, and Bangalore was a scenic city on a plateau and of historic interest. What more could one ask? One more thing could I leave early and see my brother in the army in Delhi, whom I had not seen for six years? I could if I was quick about it.

Maurice was a sergeant in the Royal Army Medical Corps on clerical duties. He had toyed with the idea of being a conscientious objector but in the end compromised by opting for the RAMC. We shared an interest in Indian history and Maurice was a good guide to the ancient cities and citadels surrounding the capital. We visited the thousand year-old Red Fort and the marble palaces in the sun, the crystallised fruit of the labour of the slum dwellers of today's Old City of Delhi. Then we ate curry off banana leaf plates with our fingers, which Maurice said was strictly warned against in his Soldier's Manual. And we talked of home. All that was normal. What surprised me was to learn that Maurice was dabbling in writing reportage. He had a gently satirical touch with a

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subtle humour. I thought of this years later when he was married and earning a living for his family peddling soft-porn films. He could have done something better with his life, but that was where the money was, and he had kids to support.

That night I borrowed a byke from Maurice and cycled to my digs in the dark, past masses of bougainvillea and down avenues of sweet-smelling flowering trees whose perfume was strongest at night. I looked up and found a young Indian cycling beside me. We talked and he invited me to his home to meet his family and drink tea. I went and was warmly received. There is no climax to this story but I recall it as one of many examples of spontaneous friendship and hospitality in the East. The feelings of colonial people towards their "lords and masters" seem often to be a mixture of hatred and admiration.

Next day I moved on to Bangalore and picked up my piece of equipment. I use the word "picked-up" metaphorically. To have picked it up literally was beyond me; it must have been over a hundredweight of metal machinery in a heavy wooden case. Beyond me, yes, but not beyond the Indian railway porter. With the aid of a couple of mates he placed it on his head and glided gracefully with the upright carriage of a dancer down the platform to the baggage car. I was petrified, partly from pity for him, partly from fear for myself in case he dropped it and the valuable machinery broke. It didn't, and for the moment at least the porter seemed none the worse for the strain. He was evidently used to it. So much the worse for him, I thought. What would a few years of such strain do to the body of an under-nourished man? It was a relief to get my precious cargo safely to Bimli.

I settled back into the uneventful routine until one night, against my better judgment I accepted an invitation to join the C.O. and a couple of other officers on a trip to "Vizag" (Vizagapatam), the naval base 30 miles down the coast, for a dance and a drink at the Officers' Club there. "Come along old chap. Pretty "Anglo" nurses and lashings of duty-free Scotch." The description proved to be accurate enough but it was not an exciting evening, until...Somehow a drunken British officer tried to steal an Indian officer's girl. The Englishman became abusive and called the Indian a "Black bastard." The Indian replied "You white swine," hauled off and knocked him cold with an uppercut. There was no race riot, the Englishman generally being thought to have got what he deserved and the Indian being admired for his boxing skill. After that we left for home in our jeep.

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It was around midnight and as usual the traffic on the Bimli road was heavy, with bullock carts taking produce to market. The oxen knew the route and the driver slept on top of his load. The C.O.'s idea of a joke, at which I ineffectually protested, was to quietly turn a cart around and leave it heading for home. "That'll fix the fucker," he chortled. I thought of his cracking student skulls in Shanghai and of his goolie chit for the Pathans, and vaguely wished that he'd crashed some night at the Khyber Pass without his chit and lost his goolies. It would have been to the good of the war effort.

After being in India nearly a year I was again offered leave and this time I felt justified in taking it.

First I headed for Calcutta less than a year after the famine of 1942, terrible even by Indian standards. I walked through slums which must have been amongst the worst in the world, where listless human bags of bones moaned pitifully for alms. This was the biggest city in India, "the brightest jewel in the British crown". Normally I was proud of my uniform, but not here. I was glad to get back to the station and board the train for Siliguri. There I changed to a narrow gauge railway with a tiny but powerful engine at each end. The engines grunted up steep gradients and round hairpin bends to the end of the line. There I boarded a postal truck which switchbacked and swerved excitingly along a road cut through mountainside forests to Gangtok.

In Gangtok I tried unsuccessfully to pay my respects to the British Resident, Sir Basil Gould, who, I had heard, was a scholar of Tibetan and related cultures. But his secretary, a long-gowned Tibetan gentleman with an ear-ring dangling unsymmetrically from one lobe, conveyed his regrets. I was disappointed but consoled myself with the thought that at least he had sent out his secretary and not, like Confucius in turning away an unwanted guest, called out in audible tones: "Tell him I am not home."

So I set out on my mountain hike with no learned briefing on the local people, the Lepchas, but with two porters to carry my gear, consisting of warm clothes for the heights and a bit of food. It was not heavy and I was only thirty-three. I could surely have carried it myself in a backpack. Why didn't I do so then? Probably because I had not shaken off the sense of superiority of the white man in Asia, to say nothing of being an officer in H.M. Forces. Perhaps I had been sucked in by the system of the sahibs, despite my mess book meanderings on "Carry Off Jeeves".

The route was marked out in stages, at each of which was a dak bungalow, dak meaning literally mail or

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postal. The first stage was an easy one, only 15 miles or so and mostly down hill, to Dikchu, only 2,000 feet above sea-level as against Gangtok's 4,000. In the Dikchu valley the vegetation was lush, and the white, pink and purple rhododendrons grew on trees forty feet high. I arrived there by noon. This early arrival plus a swig of the local millet beer must have gone to my head. I decided to do two stages in one day, my first day, at that, when I had not yet got into the swing of hiking. By twilight we were still miles from the next dak bungalow and I was feeling groggy from hunger and exertion. I staggered into a farmhouse and with sign language and my minimal vocabulary of Hindustani indicated that I was hungry. There followed one of the more memorable meals of my life. It was an omelette consisting of equal parts of eggs and red-hot chilies washed down with pints of hot milk, which did something to take the edge off the fiery concoction. I felt fortified by that marvellous meal but it was already getting dark and I staggered and stumbled along in the wake of the porters to reach the end of the stage about ten at night.

Sounds of snoring greeted me as I entered the bungalow; so did the glorious sight of a table laden with food before a glowing wood fire. I peeked in the bed rooms surrounding the living room. The four men, British army sergeants from their uniforms, were sleeping like logs. I helped myself to a massive slice of rich Dundee fruit cake, for which I have always had a weakness, and left an apologetic note, explaining my predicament. Next morning the sergeants took it goodhumouredly and said I should have taken more. They were on their way out and wanted to lighten their load. They willingly sold me their surplus tins of food, saying it was only a rumour that you could buy sheep to eat. So after a hefty English breakfast we went our various ways.

Before leaving I signed the visitors' book, as required, and discovered that a day's march ahead of me were a Mr and Mrs Salisbury of the Indian Civil Service. Day by day they were always there ahead of me, as I hiked higher and higher and the rhodendrons grew lower and lower and paler and paler. At one point I washed my aching feet in an icy mountain stream while gazing through a cleft in the mountain-range skyline at the peak of the third highest mountain in the world, Kanchenjunga.

So it went on until the fourth day, when I came into some soggy sloping open ground, with yaks grazing among wild rhubarb. On the skyline was the last dak bungalow I could hope to reach before turning back; and there at last were the Salisburys, an amiable middle-aged couple who knew the country well. In the evening we

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sat around the blazing log fire and talked of literature; not the Buddhist scriptures, which would have been appropriate in that setting so close to Tibet, nor the Hindu epics, loved by the people of Sikkim; but "real" literature, English literature, in which the Salisburys were well-read. We talked of Trollope and Fielding and Defoe and Dickens, then I foolishly mentioned Balzac. "Yes, of course," said Mr Salisbury "but his novels are all about Frenchmen." With that the whole Human Comedy was ruled out of order.

My only other encounter, or near encounter with Westerners on that trip, was with a Scottish missionary lady. I had been told of her in Gangtok and at one point passed through "her" village. Her house had a whitewashed picket-fence such as one might have found in Twickenham. I approached it and enquired of the Indian servant who happened to be in the garden. He spoke some English and told me the lady was not well. I sent in a note asking if I might be of any service and perhaps drop in for a minute or two. No, thank you, came the written reply. I was more surprised than hurt at this, my second social rebuff by fellow Britishers in these thinly populated parts. She must have been a woman of independent mind. Or perhaps she thought the R.A.F. a godless institution.

So I climbed to the temple on the hill, from which trumpet sounds were booming down the valley. The horns were several feet long, the reed resting in the mouth of a young priest and the bell on the shoulder of a small boy, kneeling in front. I was shown round the courtyard where the monks recited the Buddhist scriptures, turning the parchment leaves bound with leather thongs in bamboo covers. Then I walked around the building to see the mountain view. Against the back wall I saw wild strawberries growing and stooped to pick some. The old monk escorting me was agitated and made clear that they grew so thickly because women came and pissed here. Presumably men's piss would have been perfectly palatable, but I let it go at that and reluctantly threw down the luscious looking Eve-tainted forbidden fruit.

This Himalayan holiday marked the end of my ten months in India. On returning to Bimli I found that our unit was to be transferred to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

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NOTES

1. (p.5) I have written it from memory and it may not be word perfect. But that was the general spirit.
2. After the title of the P.G. Wodehouse best-seller Carry on Jeeves.