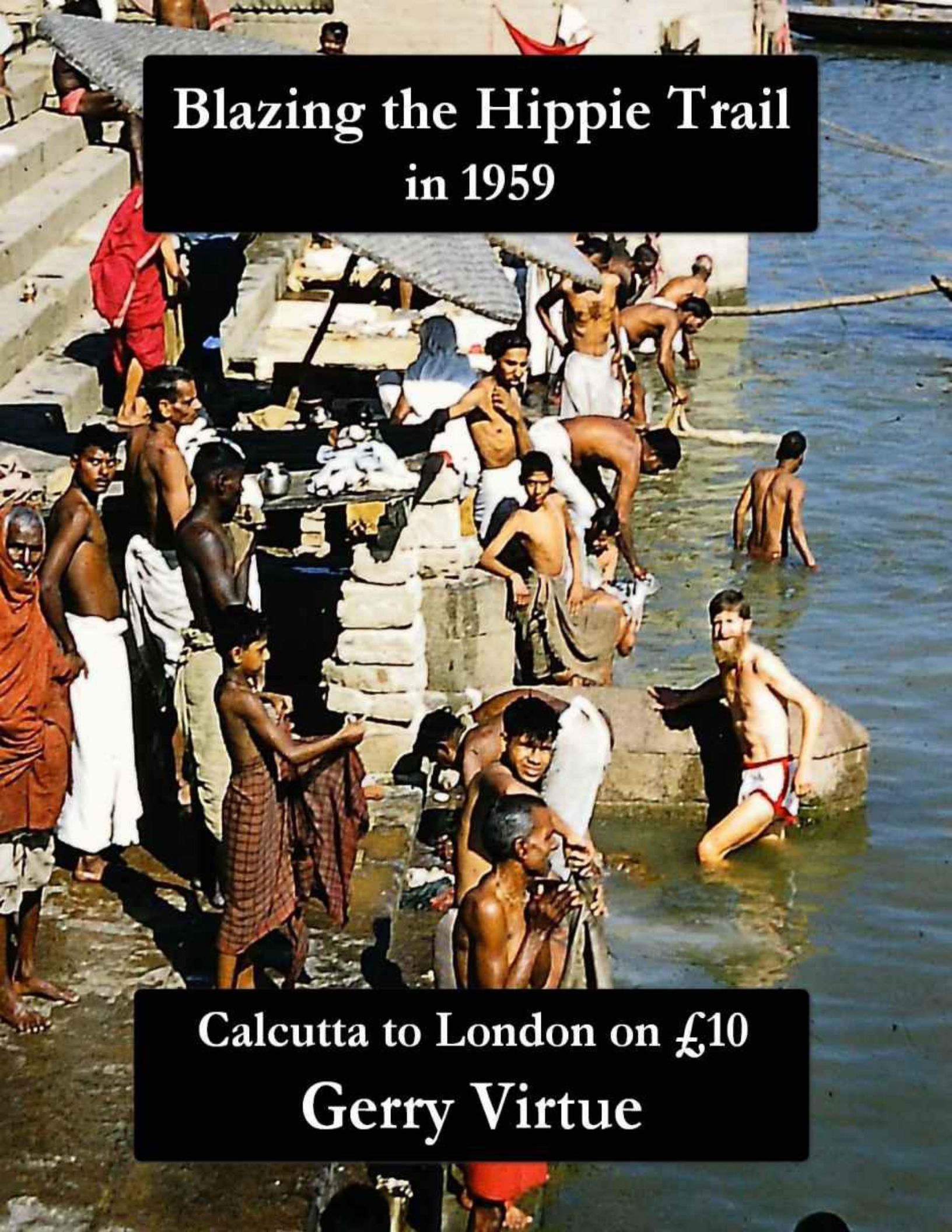

Blazing the Hippie Trail in 1959

Calcutta to London on £10

Gerry Virtue

On The Road with Geoff and Jules

A Journey at the Dawn of the Hippie Era 1959-60

Licence Notes

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Chapter One

He had sharp, pale blue eyes and a thick bushy beard. Seated at a low table in a corner, he was writing in a large exercise book. Small, slight, with sharp and beady eyes, he was totally engrossed.

I glanced at him from time to time, but he was so intent that he paid no attention to anybody or anything else. He had compelling eyes. Very alert, maybe a little wild, they gave him an edgy, self-confident look. Absorbed as he was, he seemed indifferent to the social niceties. And he mumbled as he wrote. Not loudly, but as though he was in some private conversation with himself. A very contained man.

It was Christmas Eve 1959, and we were in the communal sitting-room of the Salvation Army Hostel in Sudder Street, Calcutta, just a few yards off the main city road, Chowringhee. I was down in the dumps since my South African travelling companion had been booted out of India a day or two earlier for attempting to enter the country on an Apartheid era South African passport. So here I was in this Christian stronghold looking for a taste of Christmas, a festival largely ignored in the Hindu world.

There were others there like myself, a small, scruffy and haphazard collection of wanderers from various parts of the world. With its Christmas tree, decorations and fussy English missionaries, the Sallie's Hostel was a haven. Although mostly godless and shabby, we got along well enough with the missionaries. There is something about such gatherings; everybody is a stranger and everybody is passing through, yet there's a camaraderie. There are outrageous travellers' tales and a constant exchange of information. Free doss-houses, black-market currency dealers, porous borders, temples that welcome travellers, suppliers of bogus student cards, and a hundred other items of vital interest to those with little money and big itineraries.

But in all this hubbub of conversation, my attention kept coming back to this self-sufficient scribbler. He had a slight build and was wearing a grubby blue jacket, old and food-stained, together with a pair of shapeless gabardine trousers, shiny with age. He could have stepped straight from the gold-fields of nineteenth-century Australia. With his thick beard and a profusion of brown wavy hair he could have been any age between twenty and fifty. He looked up and squinted across the room for a moment, then scribbled away again, hunched, with one arm thrown protectively around his journal. You could imagine him at the river bank peering into his sluicing pan, eyes alert for the faintest gleam, the archetypal digger of years

gone by. Had to be Australian. When he next looked up I caught his eye and called ‘Hello.’

He jumped up, eyes gleaming, and rushed over. ‘G'day! How ya goin’?’ Australian right enough. A penetrating, almost rasping voice, and he preceded his words with a cough - a sort of compulsive clearing of the throat. ‘I'm Geoff Watt,’ he said. ‘Where're you from?’

‘New Zealand,’ I replied.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Yeah,’ sounding vaguely disappointed. ‘I thought you were a Swede.’ He went on at once, ‘I met two New Zealanders yesterday in the market. One was called Clive. Funny pair of buggers, always asking each other about cups of tea. Very polite, you know, but a bit peculiar. Where are you going?’ The words tumbled out in a rush, and he barely paused enough to hear me say I was waiting for a plane to England. ‘Jeez! I'm going to England too!’ It was a commonplace, but he made it sound like a revelation. ‘I've been on the road four months. Going like a beauty too, until those Burmese bastards buggered me up.’ And he continued with a lengthy tale about leaving Japan some months earlier travelling twelfth class on a French ship bound for Singapore, and then hitchhiking through Malaya and on to Bangkok. He’d then gone to Burma and hitchhiked up the road to Mandalay. In honour of the song, he claimed, and to see if the dawn came up like thunder, something I’d also wondered. It didn't, he said. Just straggled up pale and wishywashy.

He stood there declaiming, one hand upraised, finger pointing to the heavens like Moses with the Ten Commandments. With flamboyant gestures he continued his tale, illustrating an occasional point with a little run or leap.

He’d been arrested in Burma for trying to make an illegal land crossing into India, and was taken into custody by a policeman on a bicycle brandishing a huge revolver. He illustrated this incident by careering across the room on tiptoe, legs apart, eyes gleaming, waving his arms and shouting.

The missionaries regarded him with astonishment; I was delighted. It was an unselfconscious performance, and our fellow-travellers regarded it with admiration, appreciating it at once as a most superior style.

He told me he would stay for Christmas dinner the following day and then hitch-hike to Darjeeling, the hill-station township perched on a high ridge of the Himalayan foothills.

After lunch we walked out on Chowringhee Road and he told me about himself. He was a keen athlete, a marathon runner, and a burning desire to run in some of the world's big races had started him travelling. Never quite good enough to be selected for the Olympics, he had decided the only way he'd get to compete internationally was to make his way round the world to wherever these events took place. And so he had 'fronted up', as he termed it, for the Boston Marathon in the United States, then received an invitation to Korea to run in the Seoul International, and then some time later presented himself for the Japanese Marathon.

'I never got better than tenth in any of them, but they seemed happy enough to have me there, I think the beard got them in ... they were really intrigued by it in Korea and Japan. The papers used to write me up as the bearded Aussie, and the spectators always gave me a pretty good go ... I'd play up to them, and they liked that.'

His money was running low now, so he needed to get to London, where he could work and build up enough funds to run in some of the English and Continental marathons. But he saw no reason to hurry.

'You can go a hell of a long way on a few quid. I reckon I'll be four or five months on the road yet.' He told me about his training in Australia where he used to run in the sandhills at a place called Portsea Beach with an assortment of athletes ruled by an eccentric old despot called Percy Cerutty. This volatile old bloke had apparently overturned all the orthodox methods of training and considerably upset the athletic establishment of Melbourne by producing an occasional champion. At the previous Olympic Games he was often to be seen, a suntanned, white-haired old man surrounded by athletes, holding forth at length about training methods.

'They all wanted to hear what he had to say,' said Geoff, 'and after a couple of hours of talking and demonstrating he hadn't even scratched the surface, so they arranged for him to give a lecture to the athletes in one of the little theatres nearby. Well, old Perce turns up and the place is filled - mostly blokes, but quite a few sheilas too - and first up he strips right off down to a G-string. "Now," says Percy, "I'm in the ready position for fight, flight or copulation!" That sort of held their attention for a start. It was a beaut lecture!'

We had walked across the Maidan by now, somehow managing to ignore the beggars, and stood near the George V statue, gazing over the

Hooghly River. A listless snake and mongoose were performing on the Maidan, but it was a perfunctory business.

The grey and murky Hoogly waters drifted sluggishly past. Calcutta was a melancholy counterpoint to the Australian's cheerfulness. We were constantly confronted with human misery and degradation. The relentless accusation of sightless women standing mutely with silent babies, hands outstretched; grovelling figures clutching and whining; the malformed and crippled displaying their deformities. I gave an involuntary shudder and we walked on. You pay a price in shame to walk these streets.

Disinterested mongoose and listless cobra (in sack)

Geoff, in the meantime, told me about hitchhiking round Australia. ‘Look, I went round Australia for a training run. Sort of a warm-up for hitch-hiking round the world. But it's a bloody sight harder to get round Australia than it is to go round the world. Hell, this is a piece of cake.’ He had an infectious enthusiasm and bounced along, unaffected by the misery around us, relating tales and anecdotes.

I was having second thoughts about the fainthearted way I was travelling. In three days I was to fly to London and was beginning to realise how much the flying cocoon would cut me off from the rest of the world. It had taken a while, but I was coming to understand that the beauty of travel

lay in the adventures and encounters along the way, not the quick and easy route to my destination. To miss these was to miss engaging with other people, cultures, or anything much at all.

‘One of the great things about hiking around on the cheap is that each day is a total experience. Sometimes it's tremendous and sometimes it's bloody awful. Mostly it's pretty good though. And I'll tell you one thing ... you know you're alive every single day.’ If he was trying to persuade me, he was doing pretty well. ‘When you get up in the morning you don't know where you'll be that night. You don't know if you'll get anything decent to eat, and you don't know if you'll have a bed to sleep in.’ We had walked some distance along the river. There was a maze of jetties and small craft by the bank, and the Howrah Bridge was looming in the distance. He gave a short laugh. "Anyway, I reckon there's only two things in this life that are important: eat well, and sleep dry. That's enough."

We went on in silence. I was finding it increasingly more difficult to walk past the grim spectacle of the hungry and homeless all around us. Tiny children with wise, sad eyes and shrunken bodies; women offering themselves for the price of another day's food; pitiable wretches without legs manoeuvring themselves along like grotesque crabs; and the endless cries of 'Baksheesh!' The Bengali people seemed still to be suffering the catastrophic disruptions of Partition more than ten years earlier.

‘My God!’ I said to Geoff. ‘I don't think I can stand much more of this.’ I felt hemmed in, beset with feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy.

Geoff regarded me calmly. ‘Yeah. It's hard to get used to all right. But what can you do?’ He appeared unmoved.

Downtown Calcutta 1959

‘I feel like running off back to Chowringhee,’ I said.

‘Well, it's pretty bad,’ he went on. ‘But you can't feed all these people, you know. You can't do anything for them at all. If you give some money to one, you'll be hounded by crowds swarming at you from all directions. This was true, as I’d discovered a few days earlier. ‘You’re just embarrassed,’ he went on. ‘You've got food in your belly and you feel guilty. But that's not going to help anyone. You're not feeling for them when you feel guilty; you're just sorry for yourself. You don't like it because they won't let you walk around in peace. You don't like it because they won't just make themselves scarce while you're out and about seeing the sights.’ He walked on, apparently unaffected. ‘You've just got to accept them for what they are, and accept yourself for what you are.’

We made our way back to the hostel.

We had Christmas dinner the next day, with roast turkey, potatoes and plum pudding. It was a splendid meal of good humour, begun with prayers, and all the guests seated at two long tables. Nobody listened much to the prayers except the missionaries, the rest of us too intent on the steaming food the bearers held waiting on trolleys. I tried not to think of the starving

folks not far away. Then afterwards there were bonbons with riddles and paper hats, balloons and Christian jollity. Very genteel, very convivial.

Geoff sets off

Geoff confided to me that he had really come only for the Christmas dinner, being strongly opposed to paying out ten rupees (a little less than a pound) a day for bed and food but, he said, he was sorely in need of a good meal. And he was as good as his word. Shortly after dinner he said goodbye and disappeared, rucksack on his back into the seething crowd of humanity on Chowringhee.

I had been in Darjeeling for a few days the previous week and had strongly recommended the place to him. Even though I'd had a bad bout of dysentery and hadn't seen much of the mountains, I'd caught a glimpse of Kangchenjunga in the dawn light just before I left. The great towering mountain was tinged an indescribable pink and orange, floating on a long bank of white cloud seemingly just beyond the town. Then great masses of cloud rolled across the face and it vanished, the morning white and still once more. It had affected me greatly, as perhaps it does anybody who visits this hill-town.

You just cannot be prepared for the sheer immensity of these mountains, their incomparable perfection, and it is almost a physical shock to come

face to face with them for the first time. Then there are the legends and mysteries that cling to their slopes: Hindu rishis sitting tranquil and motionless in high rocky caves; yetis glimpsed from afar running low across high snow slopes; Sherpas toiling over twenty-thousand-foot passes into unknown regions of Tibet; remote monasteries in hidden valleys with stores of secret knowledge in great, dim libraries. The first impact gives these images a powerful effect.

I'd told Geoff about them when he showed me the journal he had been writing in so busily. He was compulsive about it and had already filled six huge diaries with the scribbled events of his journeys. I suggested that he go to the Himalayas and write about them. He took this as a serious challenge and set off filled with enthusiasm.

He was back just after dinner that night, bad-tempered and despondent. 'A man might as well give the bloody game away,' he muttered angrily. 'Hitch-hike! It's no go here, that's for sure! Crowds of ignorant bastards just think I'm some idiot sahib standing at the side of the road waving my arms!' He danced about to demonstrate. 'Even a bloke on a bullock cart just stared, gave a bit of a grin, and kept going. They didn't understand what it was about. Silly buggers.' He subsided and went off to the kitchen to see if he could get a meal.

A difficult place to hitchhike from

I was delighted to see him again, for I'd finally come to the conclusion that flying to England was about as adventurous as having a bath, and was trying to decide if I should cancel the flight. I told him this and asked him what sort of gear I should need for the road. He gave a sly grin, 'I thought you might wake up to yourself. Why not come with me? I'm going bloody silly talking to myself anyway.'

'But I'll have to cancel my air ticket first,' I said, filled with indecision.

'Yeah! Why not? Tell them you're worried about all the crashes and you think you'll walk!'

So it was settled. Geoff was still keen to go to Darjeeling, so we agreed not to waste time trying to hitchhike, but simply take the train next morning - third class, the cheapest. I'd buy a rucksack and other gear in Darjeeling, and in the morning we caught the North-East Frontier Express to Siliguri, railhead for the Darjeeling-Himalayan Railway.

Chapter Two

Colonel Younghusband led the British Military Expedition into Tibet from his base camp at Siliguri in 1904, an event which, whilst it would have been a bonanza for local merchants, must have puzzled the local people at the time. What sane person would want to go over the Himalayas to Tibet? But the Sahibs were crazy, everybody knew that. Siliguri has changed little, I imagine, being simply a low, featureless town baking on the north-Indian plain. Just beyond, a low range of jungle-covered hills is the only hint you have of the Himalayan giants that lie beyond.

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway

But the Darjeeling-Himalayan railway operates from here, and Geoff and I gazed in admiration at the splendid little train. Here was a true Himalayan jewel. Painted bright red, its brass gleaming in the morning sun, the little engine, hardly taller than myself, hissed and puffed with barely-contained energy. This was as well, since soon it would have to haul half a dozen well-filled carriages up to seven thousand feet along the narrow-gauge, switch-back rails.

People tumbled about in a chaotic muddle with bed rolls and luggage; tea-sellers in grimy dhotis dispensed a hot, muddy liquid into stained cups; barefoot urchins ran about shouting and offering sweet, crumbling cakes for

sale. Our breakfast was thus taken amid the turmoil and confusion, the stale cakes and hot sweet tea tasting surprisingly good.

Indian Railway officials find it difficult to accept that Westerners would travel third class, so, although we assured the ticket collector that all was as it should be, he remained convinced that there was some serious mistake. He escorted us personally into the first-class carriage, kicking and shoving the unfortunate third- and second-class passengers out of our way and apologising to us all the while for the inconvenience.

'That foolish Calcutta ticket-wallah does not know his job, sahib. Here you are, I am thinking you will be much more suitable now. Good morning to you!' He saluted with some pride and took his leave.

Liz Stein &Jules

There was a fresh-faced Western girl sitting opposite wearing an amused smile. She chuckled as we sat down. 'Ha!' said Geoff. 'A first-class memsahib!'

'He fixed you guys up too, huh?' She had a strong face, and alert, sparkling eyes. 'I had a third-class ticket as well. And here we are, top class, riding fine style. I'm Liz ... Liz Stein.'

We introduced ourselves, feeling smug about our good fortune, and were soon deep in conversation. The little train gathered a head of steam and chuffed slowly off. The journey to Darjeeling is only about fifty miles but, not surprisingly in view of the altitude reached, takes six or seven hours. Liz was an entertaining companion so the time passed quickly, and the views from the windows were constantly changing: from hot flat-lands through hillside jungles to cooler altitudes, with tea gardens and prayer flags marking the changing climate and different people.

The little engine stopped from time to time, to take on water or negotiate the switchbacks, but what cheered us most about the journey was the man perched on the buffers at the very front of the engine, throwing sand onto the rails to prevent the wheels from slipping on the steep gradients.

When we left the train at Ghoom, the highest point on the route, Liz agreed to join us. There was a forester's cabin not far from the township, and we had been told it was the cheapest place to stay near Darjeeling. All that was necessary was to find the district Forest Officer who lived nearby. Liz and I went off to find him, and Geoff looked after our baggage. While he was sitting there, a little Nepalese girl befriended him and insisted on taking him to her house, where we later found him. She was about ten years old and her name was Tsering. She said Geoff looked like a demon –but a friendly one.

He possessed a quality which attracted children, and often they came up and stood shyly next to him, the brave ones sometimes fingering his beard. He never knew what to say but just grinned at them through his whiskers, and they would smile happily.

Tsering took us on a tour of inspection of her house on the slope, while her mother beamed and brought out the family's prized possessions. In the prayer room there was a praying-stand and sacred book, an old prayer wheel, worn and polished from use and now fixed to the wall, and a number of flickering butter lamps. We greeted two old, brown-robed Tibetan monks. They giggled at Geoff's beard and fingered their own chins, where only a few wispy hairs sprouted, then fell into peals of laughter. The mother ushered us to a low table where she had set out a meal of soup, hot little meat rolls and tea. Friendly and good-hearted, she pushed us gently on the chest to sit us down again whenever we showed signs of taking our leave. She wanted us to meet her husband, and before long he appeared, small,

like all his family, and with an equally broad smile. Astonishingly, he proved to be the very Forest Officer we'd been looking for.

Later he escorted us to the cabin and made us comfortable, and that evening we sat in front of a crackling log fire and talked. Liz sparkled as she told us of life on the road. She had started as a nurse in Brigantine, New Jersey and had later become an air hostess with an international airline. This was tiring work which allowed her to see only the insides of air terminals and plush hotels. They were all the same and, since she had taken the job to see the world, she left the airline in Spain and set out to travel alone, through Europe and overland to India. Sometimes she hitchhiked, sometimes she travelled by buses and trains, but always she went the cheapest way.

'Weren't you afraid, being on your own?' said Geoff. We were both wondering how such an attractive girl had avoided being attacked or molested.

'Why? Oh, you mean of being raped?' She gave a gurgling laugh. 'No! Not really. You can't thread a moving needle.' We burst out laughing. This girl had presence. 'The only time I came close was with an Arab truck-driver, in the Persian Gulf, when there were just the two of us out in the desert. And that was only because I was ill with dysentery, and he was hard to fight off. But I did,' she added. 'Mostly I've had a great time with all the people along the way.'

She had been in Nepal earlier and had spent several months there helping to train Nepalese girls as air hostesses for their newly established airline, Royal Nepal Airlines, which had just commenced its first flights between Kathmandu and Delhi.

The next morning, early, we made porridge and brewed up coffee, which we drank standing outside on the edge of the forest in the thin cold light. There was a superb sunrise on Mt Kanchenjunga, seemingly only a few miles away across the cloud-filled valleys. The previous afternoon when we arrived, clouds had covered the mountains, and there was no hint that one of the highest peaks in the world dominated the landscape. Geoff watched the delicately changing colours intently, sipping the scalding coffee, then after the final change when the great slopes became purest white, he turned and went back inside without speaking. In a few minutes Liz joined him. Standing there alone, swallowing the last of my coffee,

catching the wafted smell of wood smoke on the high air, I stood motionless, mesmerised by the massive mountain.

Suddenly a young woman with a serene face appeared on a path just below, on the crest of the ridge. She was toiling up the track with a wicker basket of firewood on her back when a clear tenor voice rang out with a soaring, joyful song. A woodcutter was beginning his day's work. At once the world came intensely alive. I was transfixed, totally aware of everything around me. The rustle of a slight breeze in the forest trees, small birds diving and fluttering in the branches, wisps of smoke trailing from the village houses away down the valley, and the people whose lives were so close to the earth, and who moved with a grace and simplicity beyond measure. Such moments are few, but powerful and precious. Elated, yet with a sense of loss that the moment had passed, I went inside to pack my belongings.

‘How about we line up a walk round these hills, out near that bloody great mountain?’ Geoff had packed his rucksack and was sitting on the table looking out the window.

‘You guys can count me out,’ said Liz. ‘I've had enough walking these last six months to last me sixteen years.’

‘What about you, Jules?’ Geoff looked at me. He had taken to calling me Jules since he preferred it to Gerry, and in any case he reckoned I looked like a French swaggie, whatever that could mean. Some years earlier at a gathering in my home town, Wellington, New Zealand, the local pharmacists were hosting a welcome for a visiting pianist, Winifred Atwell, a famous celebrity at the time, and also a pharmacist, when a phone call came for me, and whoever took the call got my name a little wrong. ‘Is there a Jules Verne here?’ he called. ‘Phone call.’ This caused little interest at the gathering, but later that evening, a woman came up to me and began telling me how much she had enjoyed reading ‘Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea’. It was a somewhat surreal experience, and caused some hilarity amongst my friends. They took to calling me Jules from then on.

‘I'll be in it,’ I said, ‘but I haven’t got any decent gear. I'll have to go into town and see if I can get a rucksack before I can go anywhere.’

It seemed simple enough, so we walked the several miles into Darjeeling, where we said goodbye to Liz, who was going a different way. However, we spent hours making the necessary arrangements for this simple walk. Along with such necessities as porridge, sugar and coffee,

Geoff purchased a prayer wheel from an old Tibetan curio dealer, so as to send appropriate prayers spinning about the hills. This old fellow followed us outside after we had made our purchase and pointed to a large helicopter circling overhead.

"God! On Friday!" He announced. An enigmatic statement, but compelling. And with a mysterious smile, he went back into his shop.

The next morning we strode out along the road into the hills. A slight breeze fluttered prayer flags on their tall poles on the slope above. An old man sat in the early sun outside a yellow-painted house, dozing as he twirled his prayer wheel. As we passed, a young woman leaned out of a window and scolded him mildly. Catching sight of us, she giggled shyly and hid behind the big wooden shutters.

Our young friend Tsering ran on ahead to where half a dozen youngsters were hopping about, pointing at us with shrieks of laughter. She told them that our beards were real and not demon-masks, and that we were going to carry those bundles on our backs up into the mountains for fun. Indeed, it must have been an odd sight. A small gnomelike man with a bushy beard and a contented smile striding ahead of a tall, thin man with a short stubbly beard and the look of a startled parrot. We laughed and played with them before moving off up the road in the cool sunshine.

It was a splendid time to be on the road. Below us lay the distant plains of northern Bengal, with the faint gleam of a river winding away through the haze. Ahead, the road turned and was lost in the green of thickly forested hills. Behind them, serene and unearthly, soared the great white bulk of Kanchenjunga, the Mother of Snows, with all her Himalayan consorts.

'God, on Friday!' Darjeeling

We had obtained permits in Darjeeling to trek out along the borders of Sikkim and Nepal and to use foresters' huts along the way, for which we were to pay a small fee. We were well equipped as we set off toward a village at the end of the road some fifteen miles away. I carried an official document issued at Darjeeling, which described us as 'Mr G.P. Virtue and Party of One.' It authorised us to travel in the border areas but urged us to carry two cotton bedsheets and at all times to keep our cutlery, crockery and bedding scrupulously clean. Five copies of this document had been made, and with proper regard for bureaucratic tradition, four had been sent to Regional Forest Officers in remote parts of India, while the fifth,

unaccountably, had gone to the Chief Inspector of Physical Education, Writers Building, Calcutta. From time to time, I and my party of one would chuckle quietly as we marched along the road.

Tenzing Norgay & Jules at Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling

Two days' sporadic bargaining with a foxy Sherpa in Darjeeling had provided me with a rucksack and fine, red, waterproof jacket. I had selected them carefully, with Geoff offering advice, and they had cost me twenty-five rupees (about two pounds) together with my elegant leather suitcase, which until now had carried all my belongings, and a good deal of anxious perspiration as we haggled. I had reluctantly turned down a bright yellow rucksack which had "Sherpa No. 6" stencilled on the back. This of course had a certain resonance, but it had no frame and was not entirely practical. We were, however, assured that the gear I finally bought had been on Everest in a recent French expedition.

This seemed important at the time, since the previous afternoon at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute we'd met Tenzing Norgay, who had climbed Everest six years earlier with Edmund Hillary. Maybe something would rub off.

About mid-afternoon we arrived at the village of Mane Bhanjyang, a few low houses and vegetable stalls astride a saddle in the hills, from where a long terraced valley swept away into the mists of Nepal. We passed a whitewashed Buddhist shrine on a grassy rise, and a swarm of half-naked children rushed to greet us, along with a tiny, yelping dog. They danced and tumbled about, their little brown bodies grey with dust. Then a small, round man in a dilapidated military uniform puffed importantly up to us. With great pride and carefully enunciated English, he announced, 'I am the most important man. I am here and watching the people, for it is here that is the border!' He spread his arms wide and pointed to the valleys on either side of the ridge. 'Here is India, and here is Nepal. Many men are coming here from Nepal and going to Darjeeling. And I am watching everything most carefully.'

Tenzing's house & Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling

Grandly he detailed two youngsters off to escort us to the forester's hut perched on a spur just below the village. We quickly had a good fire going and cooked ourselves a meal. Later, after dark, we were sitting back contentedly and thinking about unrolling our sleeping bags, when there was a clatter and the door burst open. In rushed a grinning madman with wild

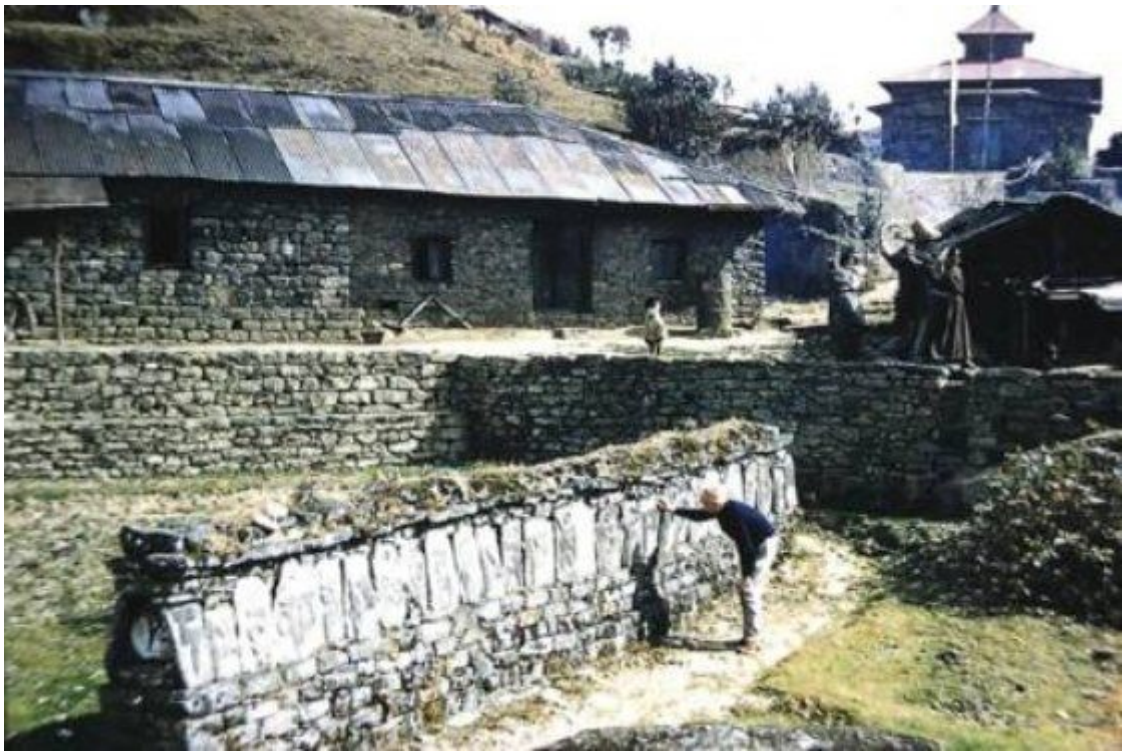
eyes. This apparition apologised that he had not come earlier, that the village was not bigger, that his English was not better, and what could he do to help. Stunned, we watched him ruin our carefully prepared fire and put in its place a small brazier of burning charcoal which did no more than faintly warm its metal container. He expressed his regrets for not having done this earlier and, smiling all the while, launched into a long, rambling monologue about himself, very little of which we understood. We tolerated this for as long as politeness required, then taking him firmly by the arm and insisting we not keep him up unnecessarily, Geoff propelled him to the door and out, grinning, into the night.

The next day we climbed three and a half thousand feet, yet covered no more than seven miles. The cabin that was our destination was stuck on top of a cold, windswept hilltop just above the treeline. The caretaker and his wife were surly and unhelpful, so, collecting damp wood on the mist-shrouded hillside, we struggled to build enough fire to cook on. Exhausted, we then collapsed shivering into our sleeping bags and slept fitfully through a long, cold night.

We paused for breakfast the following morning after covering about six miles in thick mist. With the warmth of the sun, this eventually dispersed and, as the track had led us down about sixteen hundred feet, we found ourselves again walking through forest. Shortly we came out of the trees into a rolling, grassy meadow, and our spirits lifted in the bright sunshine. Great mountains towered above the hills ahead, and our hearts sang. Just to be alive was exhilarating. The track crossed mountain streams and wound its way round wooded hillsides where birds sang continuously.

Traders from Nepal

Beginning to climb again, we met a party of traders from Nepal, the older men strolling in front flicking at stones with their staves, while the younger men and women toiled behind under massively loaded wicker baskets strapped to their foreheads. All were barefoot, the women wearing gold ornaments in their noses and golden bangles around their ankles. They paid little attention to us, the men barely grunting as we passed.



Jules examines the prayer wall, Gompa on the hill behind

A little later, in a grassy expanse which looked directly across to the mountains, we came upon a small monastery with a few wooden huts scattered about, in front of which was a stone prayer wall, with the words of the mantra ‘Om Mane Padme Hum!’ chiselled along its face.

A monk appeared and beckoned us inside, and before long we were drinking greasy tea with two or three others, all with broad grins. They grimaced as they lifted our rucksacks and tried them on. This proved great fun, and other monks were fetched so that they too could try these fancy shoulder bags. We were later taken into the 'gompa' where a great prayer-wheel was kept turning by means of hot air rising from a taper on to an inclined plane surface on the inside of the metal drum. In the semi-darkness of the interior the impassive face of the Buddha gleamed dully in the light of flickering butter lamps. Wall paintings depicted serene Buddhas and ferocious demons from the Tibetan pantheon. But it was a far from solemn place. Everyone laughed, chatted, and pointed out objects of interest to us. Although it was very peaceful, we were anxious to get back on to the road, so took our leave and made off at a good pace.

At times the track emerged on to saddles at the head of immense valleys that spread and stretched away into the terraced vastness on each side. Then

on into forest again. The trees at this height - about ten thousand feet - were mostly covered in alpine moss, and an immense variety of birds soared and swooped around us: yellow finches with black eyes, red-breasted sparrows, babblers, tits, and many we could not identify. Around midday we stopped in the warm sunshine of a sheltered spot beside a small stream, gathered wood and brewed coffee for ourselves.

The track now zigzagged steadily upward above the tree-line, and about mid-afternoon, feeling the altitude and breathing in great gasps, we rounded a grassy knoll and came upon the settlement of Sandakphu, around twelve thousand feet. There was a forest cabin, a Dak Bungalow, a wooden house and a hut for the ‘chowkidar’ (caretaker), all nestling in a hollow beneath the rise of the hill.

Huts at Sandakphu

It was bitterly cold, but there were great mountains to be seen. Kangchenjunga, of course, wreathed in clouds, loomed above us on one side, and farther away behind a long intervening ridge the Everest group stood out, misty and beautiful. The chowkidar was a good fellow and helped us build a fire in the cabin. He stayed for a while to warm himself but was rather shy and after a little, left us to ourselves. We soon had a meal

bubbling thickly in our billycan: beans, rice and dhal, flavoured with onions and a little chilli, and fortified with an egg. We ate this concoction with great relish, then settled back contentedly with a mug of steaming coffee.

‘What more could a man ask, Jules? High in the Himalayas with Everest out the window and Kangchenjunga round the corner. Beans on the boil, arse up the chimney. We've got it killed!’ It was indeed a rare moment, and we enjoyed the warmth of the fire as we contemplated our wonderful good fortune. ‘Remember that round-faced fool in Darjeeling who kept telling us we’d come at the wrong time of the year? Well, so much for him!’ He raised his middle finger toward Darjeeling.

In the intense cold, a bucket of water the chowkidar had left was now completely frozen a mere five feet from the fire. This prompted Geoff to compose his Ode to Sandakphu entitled, ‘It's Bloody Cold, Mate!’

> “There's a little frozen bucket
> In a hut at Sandakphu
> Where a couple o' beaten bastards
> Are trying to boil their stew.
> They'd give the game away, tho'
> If they only bloody knew
> That the temperature outside, mate,
> Is minus 22.”

‘Do you know what day this is, Geoff?’ I gazed into the flickering fire. ‘New Year's Eve.’

‘New Year's Eve? Jeez! Is it?’ He jumped up and began to rummage through his pack. After a moment or two he held up a small, half-empty bottle of scotch. ‘Right! Here we are, Jules! This'll do the trick!’ And he carefully measured out half the whisky into my mug, pouring the remainder into his own. ‘Here's to you, old lad. Happy New Year!’

‘Same to you, mate. A good start to the new year. The best!’ We sipped slowly and in silence for a moment. It was the last day of 1959.

‘Did I ever tell you about Danny Reardon, Jules?’ He pursed his lips. ‘’e was a funny bugger. Lived in a valley that had been settled by Irish families way up in the hills near Sale. That's out in the eastern part of Victoria,’ he said, glancing over at me. ‘Loved fighting ... and the booze. I stayed with him for a while once, and he used to come in on Saturday afternoons and say, “C'mon Geoff, let's get down to the pub 'n get drunk 'n

have a fight.” We used to put a few jars away together. Anyway, one day I'd been out in a paddock fixing a fence for old Danny when I spied him coming in at the gate down near the creek. He came across the paddock towards me but didn't see me because there were a couple of big, old gums in the way. So I thought, 'I'll have a bit of a joke on Danny,' and ducked behind one of the gums, thinking to jump out at him and give him a fright. But when he gets to the tree, he just stops around the other side, drops his strides and squats down to have a crap. Well, I thought, here's a go, and seeing Danny didn't know I was there, I quietly slid a big old piece of bark around the tree and under his backside. Then when he’d finished, I just as quietly removed it. Danny stood up, fixed his pants, and naturally enough turned around to see what he had produced. When he saw there was nothing, he let out a squawk like a sick parrot, looked all around, up in the tree, then finally went off scratching his head, looking worried. He stayed off the booze all that week.’

Once started, the tales were brought out lovingly, one by one, and we sat yarning until the embers had died away and the freezing cold drove us into the warmth of our sleeping bags.

Our next day's hike was to take us to Phalut, about twelve miles away and at about much the same altitude. We rose early, in the half-light, and I spent some time with the chowkidar, hacking away at the ice on top of the water storage tank set in the ground. The ice was about eight inches thick, and we used his kukri (Gurkha knife) to break through sufficiently to get water. My hands became so cold that it was agonising when they thawed later by the fire. The mountains remained shrouded and hidden until mid-morning, and the track wound gradually but steadily along the ridge that led to Phalut. When the mist cleared, it became just warm enough that we sweated on the uphill stretches. The scene was enormously varied: deep valleys, forested slopes, with Birch and Silver Fir predominating, and always the massive bulk of Kangchenjunga to spur us on as we breasted each hill and rise.

About noon the track led upward again, so we stopped and sunned ourselves, absorbing the beauty of this high sanctuary. Off again and steadily upward, until finally we arrived at the bungalow at the top of the rocky path. There was nobody about, only a yak grazing peacefully beneath a fluttering, tattered prayer flag. We let ourselves into the cabin and, finding fuel and a half-used packet of Brooke Bond tea, made a brew and sat for a

while before busying ourselves with the important business of preparing a meal. Panes of glass were missing from some of the windows, letting in gusts of icy wind, so we stuffed them with pillows, floor mats and other odds and ends.

Tibetan at attention near the Phalut hut, Mt Kanchenjunga behind

A little less cold, we had just settled down to eat when there was a sudden thumping on the door. I opened up, expecting to see the chowkidar, and found instead two broadly smiling Tibetans. One was little more than a youth, and the other older, perhaps his father.

I motioned them to come inside, and in they tramped, accompanied by a large, evil-smelling goat and blasts of freezing wind. The Dalai Lama had fled Tibet a few months earlier, after an uprising in Lhasa when the Chinese began shelling his Summer Palace. He had taken refuge in India. Had these two escaped Tibet at the same time? We never found out.

I bundled the goat outside and beckoned the two men over to our fire, where they hunkered down, grinning happily. Not knowing Tibetan or Nepali, Geoff made eating signs, inviting them to join us as we tucked into our egg and vegetable stew. They refused but seemed to enjoy watching us, and squatted there smiling and nodding encouragement.

After we had eaten I offered them a puff of my pipe, but they indicated a preference for cigarettes, which we did not have. Geoff, however, had been admiring their marvelously ornate boots and began to covet them. They had thick hide soles and uppers brightly patterned in red over a black felt legging which stretched to the knee. After a while he tried a little tentative bargaining but without success. Then, pressing the matter, he tried by every means to persuade one of them to part with his boots, turning out his rucksack and offering them odd things he felt they might like. All to no avail. Indeed, they could not grasp what he was driving at and, still beaming, managed to convey a sense of compassion and empathy that I should be saddled with a companion so clearly unbalanced. Undaunted, Geoff made one last attempt, taking off his baggy and badly stained gabardine trousers, offering them as a final bargaining chip. But mistaking his intentions, they backed away, grinning less confidently, and took their leave, bobbing their braided pigtails as they ducked outside into the cold night.

Chapter Three

Tumbling out of bed the next morning in the opaque darkness before dawn, we climbed the ridge behind the hut and watched the world being reborn. The softly glowing pinnacle of Everest was emerging from the night far away, across the vast intervening valleys.

This soft radiance intensified and changed, while the world below slept in darkness. Then one peak, and another, and then another were lit by the gently dawning sun until all the high Himalayas gleamed with a soft, pale light, and only the chilling cold remained.

We watched as the sunlight crept down the slopes, finally spilling into the cloud-filled valleys below, and the world began to wake to a new day.

Vast deep valley sand dawn light on the distant Everest group

We should have started off early on the long trek back to Darjeeling, for the Himalayan mornings are the hours to treasure, when the air is crisp and cool, and everything stands out sharply in the clear, bright sunshine.

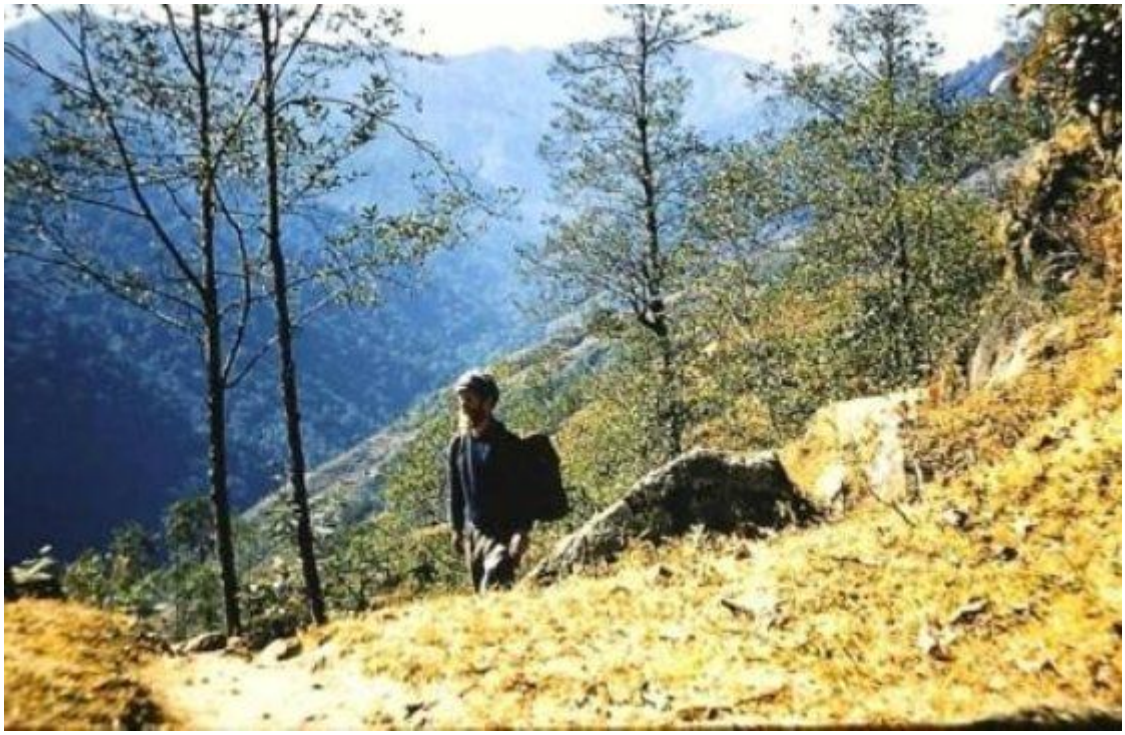
Geoff contemplates the world

But we were enclosed by mountains, hemmed in by them, and a little drunk with the heady exhilaration of the morning. Everest, Lhotse and Makalu stood in a high group off to the west; Kangchenjunga dominated the foreground, while behind it and a little to the east was a cluster of tall distant peaks in Tibet. Further along again a single peak stood very white, high and alone. It was several hours before we collected our senses and were able to start off down the track.

We spent three days on the return trek to Darjeeling, and the terrain was very different, for having travelled out along the ridges, we were now making our return through the populated valleys. Thick forests alternated with areas of intense cultivation, and the path wound through villages, past waterfalls, and alongside roaring mountain streams on the valley floors.

It was fortunate this wiry Australian extrovert possessed a temperament that did not clash with mine. In fact, we got along much better than I had any right to expect. Geoff was sometimes a little testy in the mornings before we set off along the track, and was inclined to mutter to himself. This, he reckoned, was the result of having spent so many months travelling alone. And indeed after a month or so the mumbling stopped. On the other hand, in the morning I was inclined to silence, not wanting to talk to anyone

before I had eaten. But later, on the road, we were usually in good spirits and conversed easily, Geoff chatting readily on a range of subjects. My life had been ordinary enough and I'd had less experience, so I tended to be somewhat assertive to compensate, but he was always very tolerant.



Geoff on the return trail to Darjeeling

In the evenings, over our meal, Geoff came into his own and would launch into tales about improbable people he had encountered - or perhaps invented - over the years. He did not so much talk as declaim, one finger in the air like an admonishing prophet. Then his narrative would unfold with unconscious theatricality as he leaped, grimaced and mimed his way through the yarn.

'What's that "S"on the top of your pack, Geoff?' I asked one night. 'That green "S". It looks like a drunken snake.'

'Oh, that… That, Jules, is the sign of the Stotan.' His face was expressionless, and he stared at the fire in silence.

'Ah,' I said, reflecting for a moment, thinking it to be something I should know. I considered for a moment. There was nothing for it but to ask, 'What's a Stotan, Geoff?'

'A Stotan?' Incredulously. 'Mate, a Stotan is a cross between a Stoic and a Spartan, of course.' He gave a chuckle. 'That's what we called

ourselves down at Portsea, where we used to train in the sand dunes with old Perce. Stotans.'

Perce was Percy Cerutty, the tyrannical old despot who used to rule his athletes and dominate their lives with his uncompromising precepts. He was both a trainer and guru; and you either accepted his eccentric ideas on diet, lifestyle, training and philosophy, or you were out. 'Eat oats and fly!' he used to say, and he had them eating uncooked rolled oats mixed with honey, raisins, sultanas and nuts. These were days long before muesli appeared on our breakfast tables. Percy allowed very little meat. Then he would lead them pounding up and down the high sand dunes behind the beach until they dropped with exhaustion. 'Har! Har!' he would sneer and point at them, ridiculing them as they lay gasping on the sand. 'You young blokes are weak as kittens, and I'd beat every one of you if there was sheilas waitin' over the hill!' And he would goad them into getting up and running through their exhaustion to finish the course. He lived his own doctrines and, although in his late sixties, was fitter than most men in their twenties.

I was not much impressed with all this at first, having no particular interest in athletics and regarding sports people in general as self-interested body-worshippers, and marathon runners as only slightly better. I could see that running twenty-six miles called for unusual qualities of endurance, and that this was of course admirable, rather like climbers who scorned regular routes on mountains and climbed 'direttissimo', but it hardly seemed like a sensible activity for a normal person.

Geoff had started his wanderings in the United States when he turned up to compete in the Boston Marathon, one of the big races of the world, and in which he amazed himself by being placed in the first ten. It was his first big international race, and he was elated at his performance - his best ever - in tough competition.

Later, in a reflective mood as we stared into the flickering fire, he told me how he had gone running on a beach near Boston after that race. "It was a beaut beach - long stretches of sand and rolling dunes behind. Great to run on. Sometimes I ran in the dunes, but mostly the beach was so full of interesting things that I stayed on it. Sandpipers running along the water's edge ... driftwood, and the hull of an old whaler ... barrels as old as Boston - great treasures, I thought. There was an old Victrola Talking Machine, half buried and strangled with sand. I remember thinking of James Thurber as I ran alone with the birds and the sea. I don't know why. Then out over a long

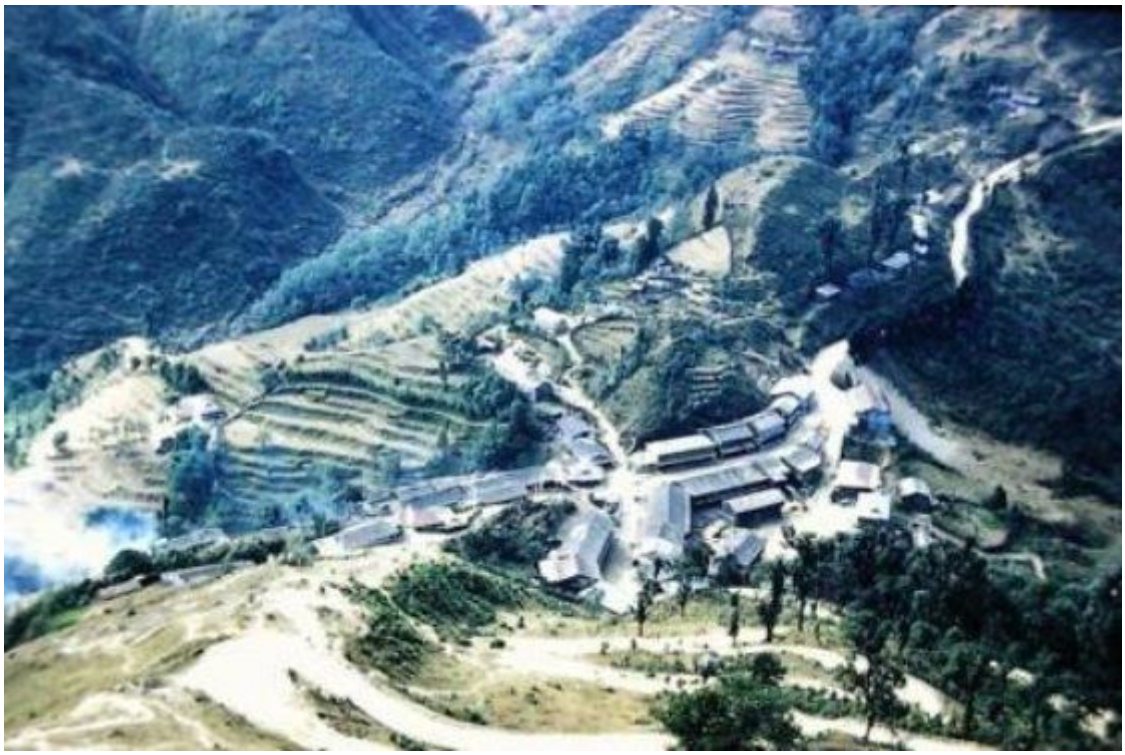
spit, sloshing along in thick mud – feet barely tracking through it. The wind blew over my skin, and I became aware of my soul floating free, and my feet going 'slosh, slosh, slosh' way below in the mud. I could feel my muscles working and the wind on my back. I felt strong and elated. I stripped off my shorts and dived into the cold surf and came out glowing.' He gulped the last of his coffee and savoured it for a moment, his eyes shining as he watched the flames. 'A man feels close to God in one of those moments. It was a beaut run, and I thought I had been out for about half an hour. I checked the time later and I had been running for an hour and a half.'

I came gradually, over the months, to understand that running like this and training, and taking part in races was for Geoff a powerful form of self-expression ... an intense feeling of freedom, yet one which demanded, at the test, all his reserves of mental and spiritual strength.

Late on the second afternoon of our trek back to Darjeeling, we came into a village set on a slope just above the junction of two rocky streams. I was tired, beginning to flag, and our food was running low. Our arrival - especially the bushy beard and the two rucksacks - caused a stir, and a staring crowd gathered around us. Feeling hungry, and spying a food stall in the centre of the village, we purchased a couple of chapattis each, which proved to be rubbery and quite unpleasant. We covered them with sugar but couldn't improve the taste. Then, to wash down this mess, we bought two glasses of tea which tasted strongly of sump oil. Geoff screwed up his face, his beard bristling, and muttered angrily at the tea seller, for he strongly resented paying four annas (around two pence) for such unpalatable rubbish. An old man in the still-gaping crowd leaned forward and shouted something unintelligible. It sounded to me very much like abuse. Geoff thought so too, and with the villagers looking decidedly unfriendly, and some of the more burly ones even threatening, we shouldered our packs and moved rapidly off up the track, pausing only for Geoff to mutter, 'Up you too, mate! Silly old bugger!' as he passed the old man.

We put several hundred yards between ourselves and the village as we moved quickly up the ridge toward the rest hut we were heading for, about half a mile further on. But the villagers were to have their revenge for that casual insult. Suddenly we found we were walking through human excrement strewn all over the path. Obviously the inhabitants of that unpleasant village just hopped up the path to relieve themselves and left

their shit lying about to be stepped in by unwary passers by. Revolted, we cursed them roundly as we tried to clean our boots on rocks beside the track. ‘It's enough to crap you off, Jules,’ Geoff muttered with unconscious humour. The experience reminded me of a passage in Peter Fleming’s book, “A Forgotten Journey”, where in 1934 he claimed to have seen written in English on the wall of a filthy latrine somewhere in Communist Siberia: ‘Why don’t you learn to shit before you try to teach the rest of the world how to live?’



Descending to a crossroads village

When we reached the hut a little later we were so tired we barely noticed the fine dry-stone construction of the buildings and the intricately worked stone channels which brought water from a nearby stream to the tiny settlement in this forest glen. Likewise, when we went into the cabin there was a cheery blazing fire but we did not at first see the figure seated at the table a few feet away. We were, in fact, somewhat startled to hear, ‘Good evening, gentlemen,’ when the figure rose from the shadows and came forward, introducing himself. ‘I am Gopal Bannerjee. Welcome to you.’ He was thin, middle-aged, with faint pockmarks on his face and very dark, sensitive eyes. He was dressed in jodhpurs and jacket with a fine,

cream-coloured woollen shawl wound about his shoulders. ‘I do not often have the pleasure of sharing my cabin with travellers, so I am pleased to have some company.’

‘Yeah,’ said Geoff flatly, nonplussed, and he mumbled an introduction. We had both spent many hours talking with Indians who had no interest in us but simply wanted to practise their English, or make themselves appear men of the world to their neighbours. However, this bloke seemed different.

‘You are English?’ he asked.

‘No. I'm Australian, and Jules here is from New Zealand.’

‘Ah. Ah yes.’ He seemed to have placed us in relation to some mysterious orientation. We bustled about, unpacking things and preparing our evening meal, but somehow felt we had disturbed his peace and were making an unnecessary demand on him with our clatter. He, on the other hand, regarded us in a lively way and took a great interest in our activities, saying nothing but smiling gently.

We invited him to eat with us, but he refused politely saying that he had eaten already for the day. By the time we had finished our meal we felt more at ease with him and were conversing in a quiet, relaxed way. He did not say much, but when he spoke he was cheerful and direct. He told us that he was a regional forest officer, and it was his job to make regular tours of the district and make reports of conditions as he found them. ‘I spend many months each year in the forests, and I travel slowly and I observe carefully the trees and the animals and the birds. And, of course, the people and the mountains.’ He spoke affectionately. ‘They teach me a great deal. In fact, they teach me everything I need to know.’

‘You mean the levels of animal life, and the condition of the trees, that sort of thing?’ Geoff asked.

‘No. Not exactly. But that is, of course, important.’ He smiled. ‘This is the centre of my world.’ He gestured out toward the wide, darkened valleys. ‘I am coming slowly to understand it ... to understand something of its nature and its purpose.’

Geoff darted a swift look at him. ‘How long have you been doing this work?’

‘Nearly three years now.’

‘And before that?’

‘Before that?’ He laughed and was silent for a moment. ‘Before that I was a soldier.’

‘A soldier? That's a bit different from forestry, isn't it?’

‘Yes, it is,’ and he grinned broadly. ‘I was with the British Army at first, and then afterwards, when they had gone, I stayed on. The British were good people mostly and did much for us, but they were so conscious of their destiny and their position in the world that they did not understand us at all. In fact, they were the first conquerors of my country that we did not absorb. They were indigestible, I suppose.’ He chuckled at the thought.

‘But why did you leave the army?’ Geoff was not going to be sidetracked into a discussion on the fall of the British Empire.

‘Oh well, you see, there was nothing more I could do as a soldier. I had fought for good causes, bad causes, and all sorts of causes that nobody knew were good or bad. And that's the way it is when you're a soldier. I was born to it, you know; my family had always been in the army; we come from a warrior caste. Always we have believed that it is a good and honourable profession for a man.’ He spoke slowly, regarding us pensively. ‘Our religion teaches us that the spirit goes on and doesn't die when the body is killed. It remains unchanged for ever. And that when we kill in war we are simply instruments and do not have the power to start or stop it. And you see, the spirit is not wounded or burned or disfigured - only the body; and there are many bodies, not only this one.’

‘Do you believe it?’ asked Geoff quickly.

‘Should I not? It is a truth after all.’ He paused. ‘But you gentlemen must find all this very esoteric. After all, you have a long journey ahead of you, and you didn't come all this way to listen to a lot of nonsense about the soul and the spirit and that sort of thing.’

Geoff was persistent. ‘But why did you leave the army?’ he repeated.

The Indian said nothing for a moment, then asked a question in return. ‘What is your profession?’

‘I'm an optometrist. Why?’

‘Well, do you find complete satisfaction in your work as an optometrist?’

‘I suppose so; I've never given it much thought, really.’

‘Do you have some other interest in your life?’

‘Oh, yeah. Sure. I like to run. You know, athletics. I do the marathon.’

‘The marathon is a very long race, isn't it?’

‘It varies. Somewhere around twenty-six miles is the official length. But there are a lot of ten- and twelve-mile races too, you know.’ Geoff's eyes

gleamed as he began to talk about his running. ‘It really depends on yourself whether it's a long race or not. You see, training for it is the real story. You've got to get rid of all kinds of useless attitudes and habits and ideas and concentrate on being able to beat your own body, your own laziness ... yourself really. It's when you want to stop and lie down, but you make yourself keep going, that's when you're starting to get somewhere.’ He subsided and looked across at our companion. ‘But what's that got to do with leaving the army?’

‘Well, you have told me part of the reason yourself. Getting rid of useless habits and ideas, and concentrating on what is essential. There was nothing more for me in the army. Once I had accepted the truth of being only an instrument, and that so long as I behaved in a reasonable sort of way, fighting as a soldier was neither good nor bad but just another kind of action, honourable enough in itself, then it was no longer enough. I needed something more. I had to find something very important to me. You may perhaps call it soul or spirit. But my religion couldn't help me because it taught that finding self-realisation was a matter of following the right path and practising my profession with honour. Selfless action. Dharma ... that sort of thing. So I came away to the mountains and now I have this job. And I go about the hills and I look and I listen.’

Geoff seemed to grasp at once what the man was talking about. ‘So what happens to you when you go around the hills?’

He laughed. ‘Oh, nothing unusual happens. It's just that as I go about I am aware at last of what is happening. Previously I never had time. Now I feel like a bowl ... I am taken out each morning and filled gradually with treasures of great value until by the time evening comes I am overflowing with the richness of the day.’ And he laughed again. ‘But I don't pretend its something I really understand."

‘Yeah! Look, I know what you mean; I get it sometimes when I'm running. I run because it makes me feel good - like some men smoke marijuana or take drugs. I run for the thrill of it, and to hear the music in the wind. My muscles feel strong and my blood pounds through my veins, and I feel the oxygen being burnt up. To run against some other fellow, to run till you're exhausted and done. It's like making an offering.’ His voice trailed off, and we were quiet.

Then, very softly, the Indian spoke again. ‘Yes, I believe you understand it. You see, it's not just a matter of a religion or a faith being insufficient.

For some people it is quite enough. Maybe more than enough for some. But for others, well, they just have to listen to the voice in their heart that tells them what they must do. And they are driven to do it. There's no other way, and there's no turning back. The heart gives the orders and off you go, marching on, and you've no idea where you're going. Actually I found it hard. I was used to giving orders and commanding a great many men, then suddenly I stopped, but the impetus of my life carried me on for a while and I could not settle the commotion and confusion inside me. We do agitate ourselves with a lot of unnecessary worry, you know. But gradually it came to me, when I stopped struggling and allowed myself to be carried along, that the world could tell me what I needed to know. It's just as you say ... there's music in the wind if your ears can hear it. And, of course, it's beautiful here, and very peaceful. They say the gods live here in the Himalayas. I think it is true.'

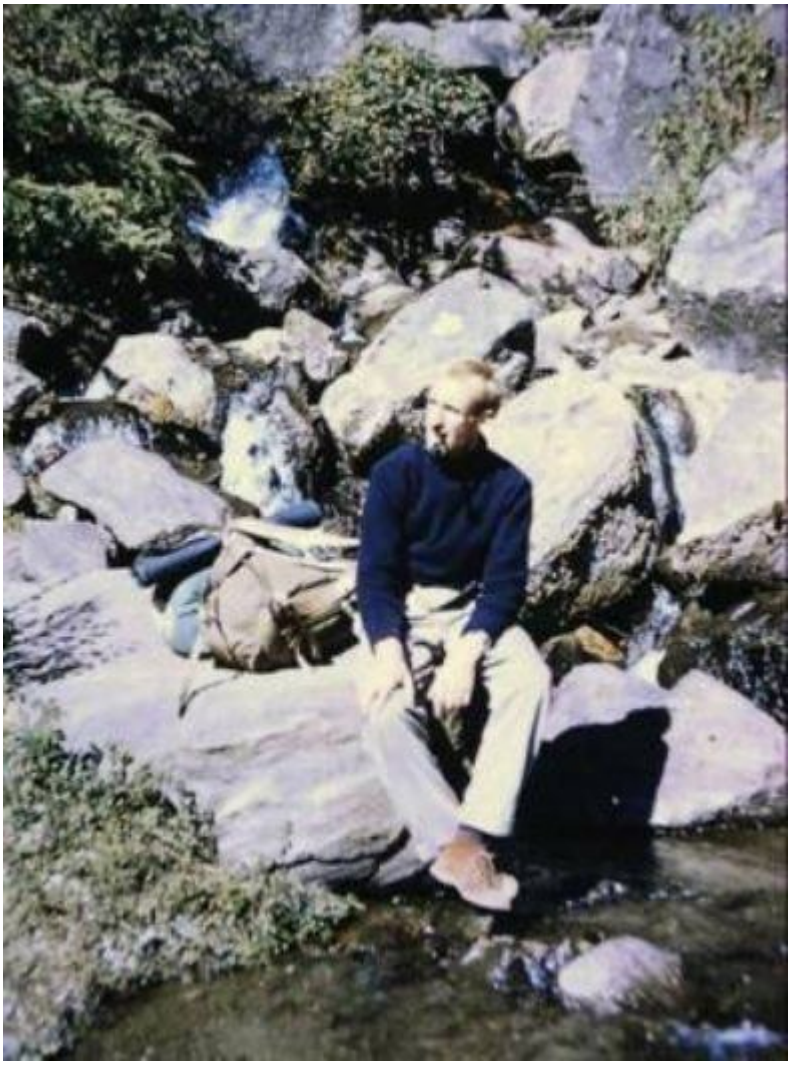
We talked on for a while before I decided to turn in. Gopal and Geoff were still deep in conversation in front of the dying fire when I climbed into my sleeping bag.

When we rose next day it was late. We went out into the morning sunshine in time to see Gopal riding off on a mountain pony, down the path we had climbed the night before and into the forest. He gave us a wave and a grin, and then he was gone.

There were two further stages back to Darjeeling, but we were feeling so good and making such excellent time, that we reached the first day's stop by early afternoon. From here a four-wheel-drive road ran along the valley and wound its way up to Darjeeling, strung out around a spur nearly four thousand feet above. For five rupees (not quite ten shillings) each we could have hired a jeep to take us, but it seemed an unnecessary expense, so we set out to hike the distance, confident we could make it by nightfall.

We began the long climb up to the town, and before long I could feel my legs beginning to give out and my breathing becoming laboured. We had already come about fifteen miles that day, and I was feeling not quite so springy, even before we started to climb.

We went on some distance, but soon my legs became weak and wobbly, and I felt I could not carry my rucksack much further. We stopped and rested by a creek until I was able to go on again.



Weak and wobbly, Jules rests by a creek

When we were about a thousand feet below the town I was wheezing and gasping, finding it difficult to support what seemed like a tremendous burden on my back. Geoff was still climbing easily and showed no sign of tiring. "Come on, Jules, you can make it, mate!" and he encouraged me to stagger on a bit further. Finally, however, I was done. “All right, give me your pack and we'll see how we go." I protested weakly, but he was firm about it and dismissed my objections with a wave of his arm. "Look, I’m feeling OK. Don't worry, the time will come when you'll have to carry me." And somehow he managed to sling my pack over one shoulder without dislodging his own, and we set off again, little realising how prophetic his words were.

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It was dark when we stumbled onto a bitumen road on the outskirts of Darjeeling, and sat resting and drinking a bottle of raspberry fizz we bought at a nearby road-stall. We were both exhausted and vowed that we would hire the first jeep-taxi we could find to take us into town, where, if possible, we intended to stay at the local dharamsala.

Liz Stein had told us about these dharamsalas before we set off on our hike around the hills, and advised us to stay in one whenever we could, the main attraction being that they were free. They are, in fact, a kind of dosshouse for religious pilgrims, there being an enormous number of these in India, with holy sites and sacred places scattered throughout the country. Dharamsalas are to be found all over the place and in all sorts of towns, large and small. Often a wealthy Hindu will have such a place built to house pilgrims and poor travellers, and by such a charitable action he might perhaps hope to offset some of the ill-fated results to come his way in the next life should his wealth have been obtained at the expense of his less fortunate brothers. An excellent arrangement we felt, where everyone wins, and one that could be introduced with some merit into our western world.

So standing out into the centre of the road, we imperiously waved down the first jeep to appear, and asked to be taken to the dharamsala. It was a moment or two before we realised that, far from hiring a jeep-taxi, we had unwittingly hitchhiked an army jeep.

‘You guys want a lift?’ an American voice from behind the headlights. Two civilian Americans were being driven by an immaculately turned out Sikh sergeant from the Indian Army. We mumbled apologies for our mistake, but the two men good-naturedly made room for us in the back, and off we went into the town. They were salesmen for the US Sikorsky

Aircraft Corporation and had been in Darjeeling for the past two weeks enthusiastically demonstrating helicopters in the mountains to the Indian Army. It was one of their machines which had prompted the cryptic remark by the Tibetan curio dealer over a week earlier. ‘What hotel are you guys staying at?’ one of them asked as we came into Darjeeling.

‘Oh. Um. Well, at the ... ah ... dharamsala,’ I said.

‘Dharamsala, eh? Hmmm. Don't know that one. OK. Hotel Dharamsala please, driver!’ he instructed the Sikh.

‘Well it's not exactly a hotel,’ I said hastily.

‘OK. What is it, some kind of boarding house?’

‘No. Well ... you see ...’

‘The dharamsala, sir, is a place for poor people to stay without payment,’ the Sikh driver cut in icily. ‘It is for religious people who are making pilgrimage to some holy place.’ We squirmed in our seats.

‘Say, is that right? You guys some kind of religious nuts?’

‘No. It's just that it's free, and we're not exactly loaded.’

‘Is that right? Yeah, I get it,’ and he laughed. ‘Say, that's a real good deal.’ They drove us very close to the street of the dharamsala. ‘Look, why don't you guys come and have a few drinks tomorrow afternoon? Over at our hotel, say around 6 pm.’ We agreed, and their driver took them off, still chuckling, back to their hotel.

We made our weary way to the dharamsala and were greeted by the custodian, a cheerful Nepalese, who appeared pleased to see us, and he led us upstairs to a room on the first floor which, to our surprise, we had to ourselves. It was furnished only with two wooden pallets but was clean, and a wooden-shuttered doorway led out on to a small balcony. We were delighted. That such quarters were available to pilgrims seemed to us a gift from a bountiful heaven. We were, we felt, honest travellers, perhaps even pilgrims, and sank gratefully on to the plain wooden beds.

The place had been established by one Mohendas Lall, and in his honour, Geoff felt moved to verse:

‘Some pray with the Prophet to Allah,
And they rate him a pretty good fellah.
But Mohendas Lall
Was right on the ball
When he set up the old dharamsala.’

Mt Kangchenjunga from the toilet window of the Darjeeling Dharamsala

The next room was noisy with a band of porters from Nepal, all laughter and loud talk as they sat on their haunches smoking and drinking. They waved us in, and for a few minutes we had an uproarious conversation with waving hands and grinning, contorted faces. The other two rooms on the floor were empty, and we were entranced to find that the toilet, although it was of the usual hole-in-the-floor variety, nevertheless had what appeared to be Darjeeling's most spectacular view of Kangchenjunga from its window.

We spread out our sleeping bags on the wooden couches and slept soundly. The next day we rested and sat for much of the time on the little balcony overlooking the street. We were right in the middle of a seedy part of the town with second-rate herbalists, fly-blown sweet shops and an amazing number of places selling old motor tyres and second-hand car parts. It was noisy. Steam billowed out from a basement laundry, mingling with an extraordinary variety of smells, and a tiny narrow-gauge railway ran the length of the winding street. It was never empty, and we watched and dozed in the warm sunshine.

In the evening, having carefully spruced ourselves up, we made our way to the hotel where the two helicopter-salesmen were staying; a pleasant,

homely place in a more refined part of Darjeeling. There were the usual white-robed and be-turbaned servants gliding obsequiously about, and one of these took us into a small sitting-room, very cosy with a blazing fire. Our two Americans were there, and after chatting together for a moment they asked us whether we'd like bourbon or rum. I chose bourbon. Geoff, however, elected to have rum with one of the Americans, whose name was Kelvin. 'I'll join you,' he said, more to be sociable than from any great fondness for the stuff. What he did not know was that the rum was from the Indian city of Lucknow. Called 'Lucknow Rum,' it was exceptionally savage, and possibly even played some part in the Indian Mutiny. He told me later that as the first mouthful touched the back of his throat, his eyes went momentarily out of focus, although for some reason he did not at the time attribute this to the rum. The American had only one drink, but Geoff tucked into the stuff with gusto and later, he could remember nothing of the evening with any clarity.

We were, in fact, the first guests at what proved to be a cocktail party. It was turned on by the two Americans in an effort to clinch the deal with their customers - in this case the Indian Army. Before long the room began to fill with elegantly dressed folk; slender women in graceful saris, suave, dark-suited Indian businessmen, and a number of Indian military people; a general, two colonels and several lesser officers, all impeccably uniformed, their brass gleaming. We were, by contrast, undeniably scruffy, and I felt very much out of place. Not so Geoff, who, having discovered that he and Kelvin had a mutual friend in the United States, was busy penning a note to this friend, which the American promised he would deliver on his return home. He was seated at a table in the corner, and I could see that his writing was rapidly deteriorating, becoming a scrawl and trailing away illegibly down the side of the page.

Meanwhile, I had been accosted by a young Indian officer, who claimed to have met Liz Stein in Kalimpong a day or two earlier. He had previously seen her with us in Darjeeling. He set out to dress me down for being so shabby and opined that Liz was clearly 'not right in the head' for associating with such scruffy people as Geoff and myself. I suspected he had made advances to her and been rebuffed.

Geoff overheard the last part of this one-sided conversation and, rising unsteadily from the table, lurched across. He had, of course, rather fallen for Liz and would have sailed to her defence at any time. He fixed the man

with a beady-eyed sneer. ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute!’ he said loudly, silencing the room. ‘You met Liz in Kalim - ah - Kalim - er - pong, eh? And you reckon she's not right in the head.’

‘Yes,’ said the little fellow, ‘that's what I said.’

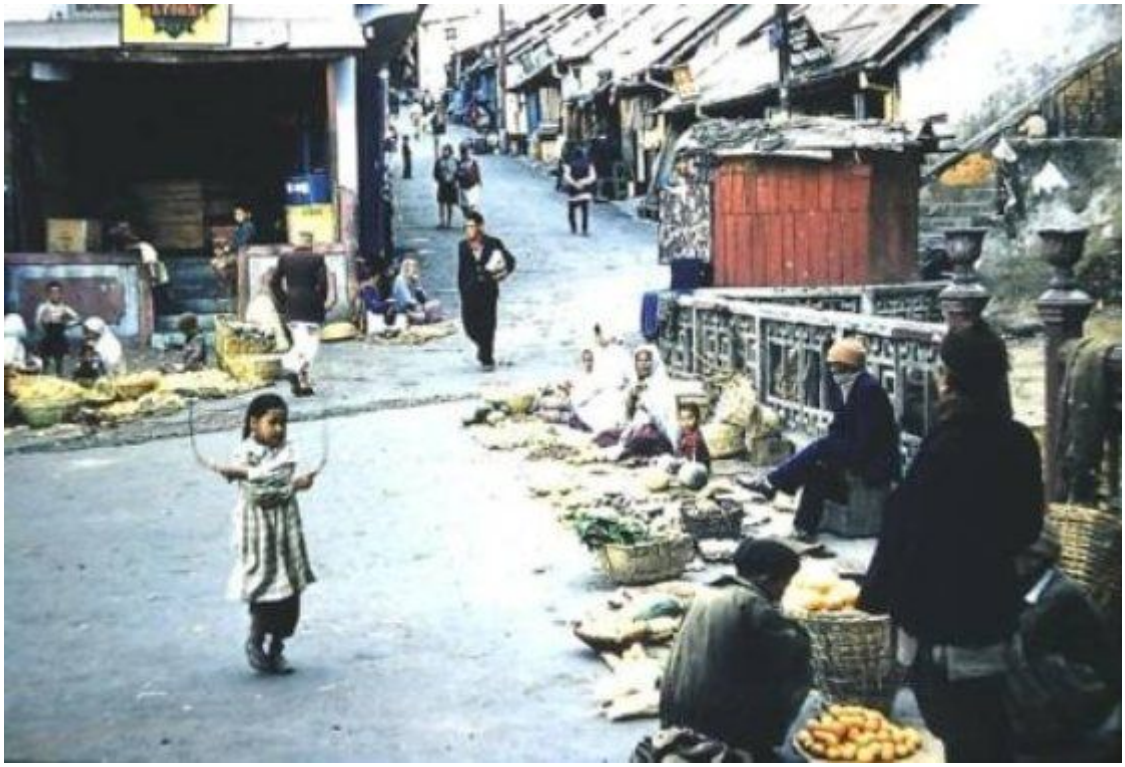
‘Let's get this straight.’ Aggressively. ‘You reckon she's NOT RIGHT in the head?’ He tapped the man on the chest. ‘Bloody rubbish!’ The young Indian fully expected to be attacked, I think, but to my secret delight Geoff kept at him, belching occasionally to emphasise his annoyance. Everybody in the room had stopped to watch, and the wretched man was mortified and clearly embarrassed he had brought the matter up. He slunk away quietly and disappeared.

But by now the poisonous effects of the rum were beginning to show, and, to the embarrassment of all, Geoff started in on the general's tie - a striped one - which he insisted was an Old Melbournian tie. ‘Hey General!’ he shouted genially. ‘Hey General, that looks like an Old Melbournian's tie. Don't tell me you're an Old Melbournian?’ The unfortunate general was standing with his back to the fire and Geoff, approaching him front on, was difficult to ignore, particularly as all conversation had died again. As Geoff kept at him about his tie, he reddened and shifted from foot to foot, looking as though he might at any moment give orders for the Australian to be shot. Finally Geoff let up and collapsed backwards into a chair which I brought up behind him quite abruptly. With obvious relief the general turned away and began an animated conversation with his neighbour. Geoff was now quite drunk and making incoherent, full-throated remarks to nobody in particular. These would erupt at odd, unexpected moments when the conversation had begun to flow freely again, and they had much the same effect on the gathering as a fire alarm. Although I was in a quiver of embarrassment,I nevertheless felt for Geoff.

Kelvin sidled up and hissed at me through clenched teeth, ‘For Chrissake, get that guy out of here, will ya!’ Only too happy to oblige, I managed to get Geoff to his feet and, with Kelvin's help, steered him out of the room.

As we stumbled out, he muttered over and over, ‘Jesus, I'm drunk!’ And reaching the cold air outside, he lapsed into a kind of trance. Putting his arm round my shoulder and supporting him at the waist, staggered off with him into the night.

Nearly twelve months later, when we were both living in London, it was my habit for a time to read ‘The Times’ every day. This newspaper, I discovered, had the most amazingly comprehensive news coverage. Nothing escaped its watchful correspondents. So it was with some feeling one morning that I read, tucked away at the bottom of Page Five: ‘INDIAN ARMY BUYS SOVIET HELICOPTERS’. The news report seemed a fitting postscript to the story and I wondered just how much of a part Geoff played in the Russian success.



Darjeeling market

Chapter Four

We spent several days more in Darjeeling, resting, writing letters and enjoying excellent meals at the Orient Restaurant, a well-provided Chinese establishment where we could fill our stomachs for a few pence.

And there were other attractions for impoverished folk like us. Our procedure was to cook our regular breakfast of porridge and rice in the dharamsala, eat a few slices of bread and peanut butter for lunch, and in the evening repair to the Orient Restaurant and eat like kings on a pauper's purse. We could go to the movies and sit on benches at the very front for three pence; we could write letters or read in the public library in front of a blazing fire; and there were always a few odd characters to yarn with in the restaurant over cups of tea.

These were agreeable days, but the urge to move on is strong, driven by an irresistible urge to see what lies further along the road. Accordingly we gathered our belongings one morning and moved out, heading for Benares, the city of sanctity and scholars that sprawled along the banks of the Ganges far below on the plains. We made our way back down to Siliguri, arriving just in time to catch an afternoon train, the Lucknow Express. After his experience with the rum, Geoff was understandably apprehensive about having anything to do with Lucknow, but he put his trust in providence and we set off to buy our third-class tickets.

It was daunting to see the great, swarming crowd clinging to the dozen or so carriages. We pushed determinedly toward the ticket office, but our progress was arrested by the impressive figure of a big, red-turbaned police-inspector in khaki drill. Bending down to Geoff, whom he must have assumed to be an Englishman down on his luck, he bellowed into his ear through all the hubbub, ‘Do you have a reservation, sahib?’

Geoff shook his head and mumbled something, whereupon this benevolent soul took him by the arm and propelled him to a small compartment, marked ‘Attendants’, at the rear of a first-class carriage. The occupants were none too pleased to see us but accepted the situation readily enough when the inspector brandished his baton. We were jammed in tight with the ‘Attendants’ but enjoyed the luxury of seats without tickets as the train pulled out across the flat Indian plains. Geoff was wedged in the corner next to me and was disconcerted to find a ragged religious mendicant daubed with the mark of Siva seated on the floor between his feet chanting as he gazed intently up at him.

And so we rattled on over the featureless countryside, past dusty villages, waterholes with boys riding half-submerged water-buffaloes, and half-naked figures merging with the brown earth, figures that straightened up to watch impassively as the crowded carriages clattered across the flat fields.

We wrote as best we could in the rocking carriage, or read, or stared, dozing, out of the window. We talked about travel and other parts of the world. Geoff related how he and a friend, Ian, after the Boston Marathon, had travelled to Toronto in an old wreck of a car. ‘That Austin was so clapped out, we only just made it to Toronto. There was oil blowing out the air filter. We pulled up at a service station, and a guy offered us twenty-five bucks for it as a wreck. He was the attendant. Well, we thought about it for a moment or two then decided to go and unload our gear then come back and take the dough. On the way back we picked up a hitchhiker. ‘We're taking this car to the wrecker's,’ I told him. ‘We're getting twenty-five bucks for it.’ ‘I'll give you twenty-five bucks,’ says this hitchhiker. ‘Make it thirty and it's yours,’ says I. ‘Don't think I've got thirty .. oh .. yes I have .. here you are!’

‘I caught sight of his money and pulled up. I was all for making the deal on the spot, but Ian thought we should demonstrate the wreck to the bloke. So I tried to start it up again. No go. Boy, was it sick! The bloke said he thought it was flooded, and he was probably right. Ian showed him where the oil was pouring out and tried to talk him out of it. But the poor bloke was sold. We shook him by the hand, and I took a picture of him in it as he drove off. Great clouds of smoke billowed from every pipe and crevice, and he disappeared from sight long before he reached the top of the road. “Sometimes I hate myself,” I said to Ian, and we sat down at the side of the road and laughed and laughed. We were nearly in hysterics. I don't reckon many people who give a hitchhiker a lift end up by selling their car to him.’

Geoff talked as he usually did, with a full range of gestures and expressions, and our companions in the compartment, very few of whom spoke English, listened and watched with complete concentration. Even the chanting pilgrim on the floor fell silent. When Geoff reached the end of the story and he and I started to laugh, they smiled at one another and shook their heads in the Indian way, as though something rather pleasant had occurred.

Night had fallen, and we travelled on through the darkness. Most of our companions were squatting on the seats, wrapped in shawls and dozing, so we unrolled our sleeping bags and, climbing up into the luggage racks, quickly fell asleep, lulled by the swaying carriage.

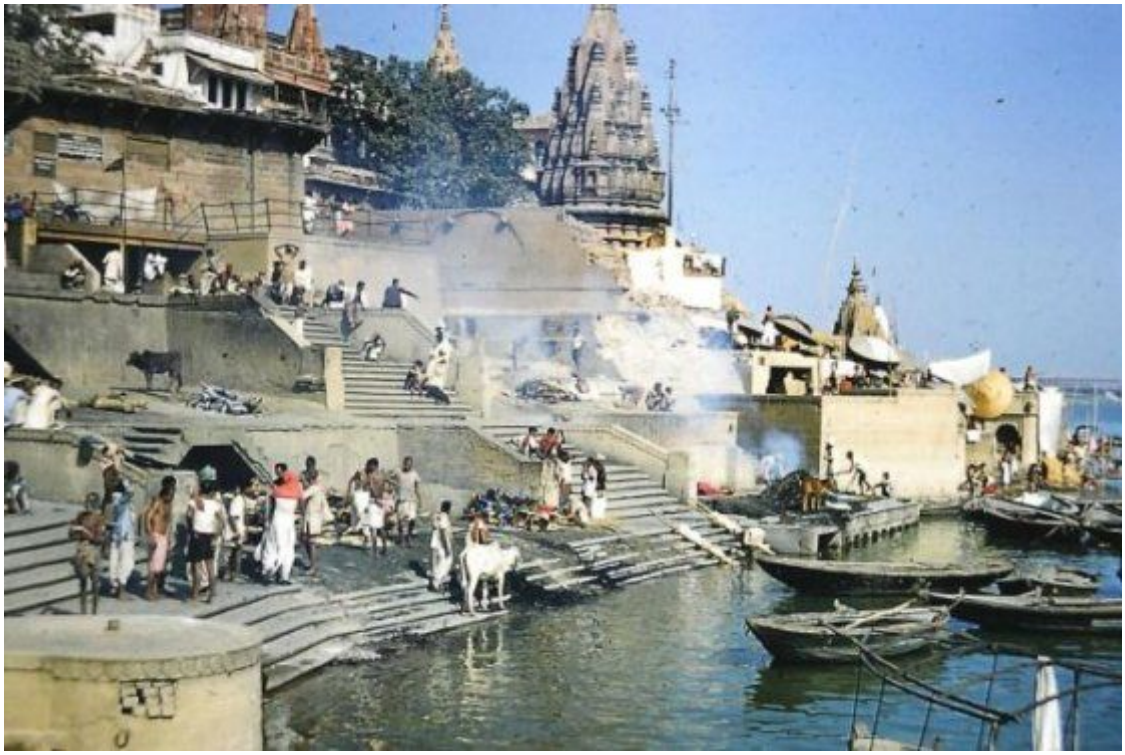
We awoke to find the train stopped, our companions of the night gone, and the Ganges awaiting us, to be crossed by ferry. By the time we had gathered our belongings we were among the last down to the ferry, and we discovered to our horror as we approached that the rail tickets were being collected at the gangplank. Ducking back a little way to collect our wits, we watched the ferry pull away from the bank without us.

The sun had still not risen, and a thick mist lay over the river, muffling the sound of the ferry. We went back to the station and brewed some porridge in the waiting-room, hoping it would return sooner or later. We were not there long before a second train pulled up, belching steam, just as another ferry materialised at the river bank. This train, surprisingly, was crowded with Tibetans, hundreds of them milling about, children, old people, men and women with huge bundles, all streamed down the river bank to the ferry. Better prepared now, we joined the rush and merged with the shouting, jostling throng as they swarmed happily aboard the ferry, brushing the ticket-collectors aside in their scramble.

The ferry pulled out from the bank just as the sun came up. A great fiery ball, it shimmered and gleamed on the brown water as the vessel throbbed slowly through the drifting mist. The Tibetans had quietened and were busy eating. Mothers pulled aside brown robes to give babies the breast, and others produced food from the folds of their bulky garments. We watched an occasional grey fish leap from the river with a dull splash.

According to the guide books, Benares, or Varanasi as it is now usually called, was sacked in 1194 AD by Shahabuddin of Ghor, who left the city in desolation and ruin. It shows little sign of having been restored since, and the impression remains of an impenetrable maze of ruins, alleyways, tumbledown buildings, ancient shrines and chaotic markets. There are crowded, twisting lanes and small, busy temples, wet from the splashing of Holy Ganges water and the ceremonies of devotees. On all sides are ragged, makeshift shelters interspersed with street-stalls and piles of rubble; and everywhere throngs of people, the locals who make this ancient city pulse with life.

Pilgrims jostle and chant, daubed with the marks of their sects; the beggars and maimed clamour for baksheesh; people urinate and defecate with quiet detachment in every street; children and babies play happily in squalid thoroughfares, and everywhere sacred cows wander unmolested, while on all sides is the daily hubbub of the people who make this extraordinary city their home.

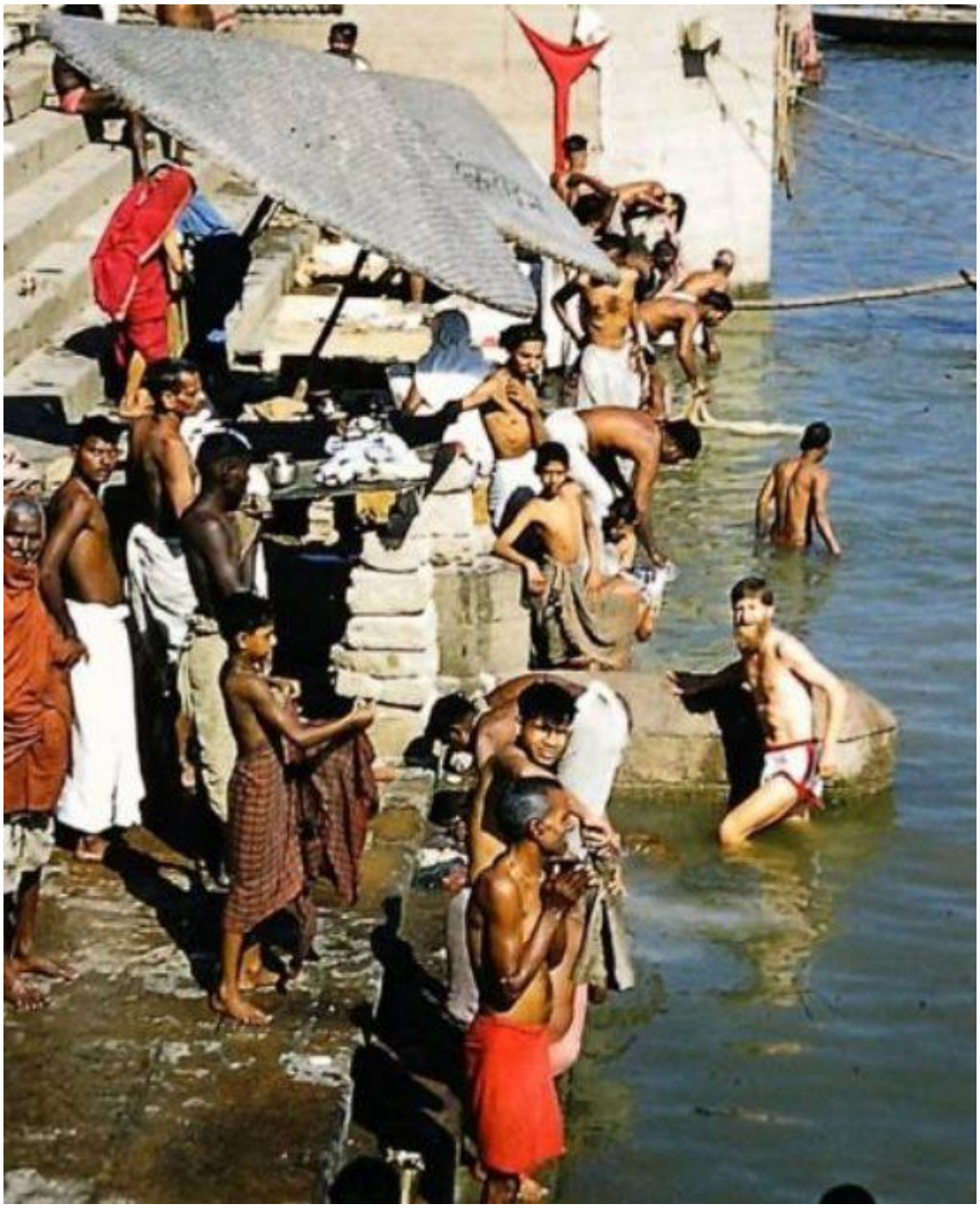


The ghats of Varanasi

Amidst the chaos, Geoff suddenly decided to purify himself by leaping into the Ganges at one of the Bathing Ghats. He stripped to his underpants and plunged in amongst the faithful, to the profound astonishment of devotees performing their rites. We had watched them taking water from the river in little brass bowls, ceremoniously pouring it back, then plunging in and turning around three times. Geoff merely contented himself with plunging in and turning three times. Whilst doing this, he inadvertently took a mouthful of the less than clean Ganges water, which he promptly spat out. This was not appreciated by his neighbour, who remonstrated with him furiously and demanded several annas to forget the whole affair. Clearly you can always mix a little business with devotion.

Later we stumbled upon the Vishwanatha Temple, quiet and peaceful, where a sadhu was seated cross-legged on the floor playing a small portative organ with one hand and chanting along note-for-note in a beautiful, sonorous voice.

Then another noisy temple, crowded and sacred to Siva, the shrine beautifully garlanded with marigolds, where a priest was seated giving flowers to those who approached, painting their foreheads with the red mark of the Lord of the Universe. We came up, and he gave us each a rose, daubing our foreheads with the red pigment. And an old pilgrim lay awaiting death on a stone step overlooking the Ganges at one of the public Ghats. He was half-sprawled in the sun, quite naked, with thousands of flies swarming over his body, clustered at every orifice. To bathe in the Ganges is to wash away your sins, however great they may be, but to die within the compass of the holy city, by the sacred river, is surely to be transported immediately to heaven.



Geoff emerges purified from the Ganges

Disconcerted and exhilarated, our brains withering under the tumult, we felt the need for a brief escape. So we travelled the few miles to the haven of Sarnath - the Deer Park of the Buddha – where we discovered our companions from the Ganges ferry. The place was filled with Tibetans, crowding here from the hills of Nepal and the remote corners of India to be

with their beloved Dalai Lama, himself a recent refugee from their Chinese-occupied homeland.

It was the two thousand five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Buddha; and the Deer Park, where he preached his first sermon, was the place to be. This was where, for the first time, the Buddha had set the Wheel of The Law in motion. The Dalai Lama had come for a few days to take part in the celebrations.

Mulaghanda Kuti Vihara at Sarnath, bedecked for 2,500th anniversary of Buddha's birth.

He was inside the Vihara, the great temple, praying, so we retired to sit in an open-air teahouse that had been set up in a leafy grove of banyan trees opposite. It was pleasant in the shade with the people milling about so joyfully. They must have felt the heat of the plains terribly, but their sense of who they were somehow prevented them changing their heavy clothing for something lighter.

We drank several cups of tea with them and enjoyed the usual childlike jokes about our beards. Wherever he went, Geoff said, he was ribbed about his beard and people often came up to him while he was training and made cracks, either about running or his beard. 'While I was in the States I went

to New York to run in the Yonkers Marathon. Soon after I arrived I got togged up and set off running along Broadway. Before I went there, they told me New Yorkers were not at all impressed by size or distance. And right there on the sidewalk a bloke calls out, “How far ya runnin”?

“Fifteen miles.”

‘Pause. “That all?”

‘I just ran on and had a bit of a chuckle to myself. Then on the way back there I was, running along, not thinking about anything in particular, and I was treated to a real sharp piece of New York wit. A guy calls out, “Battista back?” as I run past, and it was a couple of blocks before I figured out what he meant. It was the best comment I ever got on beards, and running.’

I must have looked a bit blank, for Geoff laughed and said, ‘Don't you get it? Battista. The guy that was running Cuba before the bearded Castro booted him out.’ I gave a weak smile, and he went on, ‘I didn't do all that well in the race, but I had a great time in New York. The runners there really set a man up. We had some fine bull sessions ... It was a funny place to go shopping, though. I remember when Mum wrote to me and wanted me to get her a rhinestone brooch. Well, she drew a little diagram of how she wanted it, so I had a look in some of the big stores. Went into Macy's, where they reckoned nobody could undersell them, and they had some pretty good stuff too, but not what I wanted. I had a look in a place called Saks, but they were no use at all, so I set off on a jaunt along Fifth Avenue, looking in all the likely shops. Guess I covered a mile before I thought of Tiffanys. Tiffanys is an ultra-expensive jewellery shop, Jules.’

He waved his cup at me to make sure I understood. ‘Anyway, in I went. “Rhinestone!” said the counter clerk, indignant. “We don't carry THAT, sir! We do have some SEMI-precious stones.”

‘I looked at a red one. “Have you got that in green and yellow?”

He produced a green brooch set in gold. “This is turquoise, sir.”

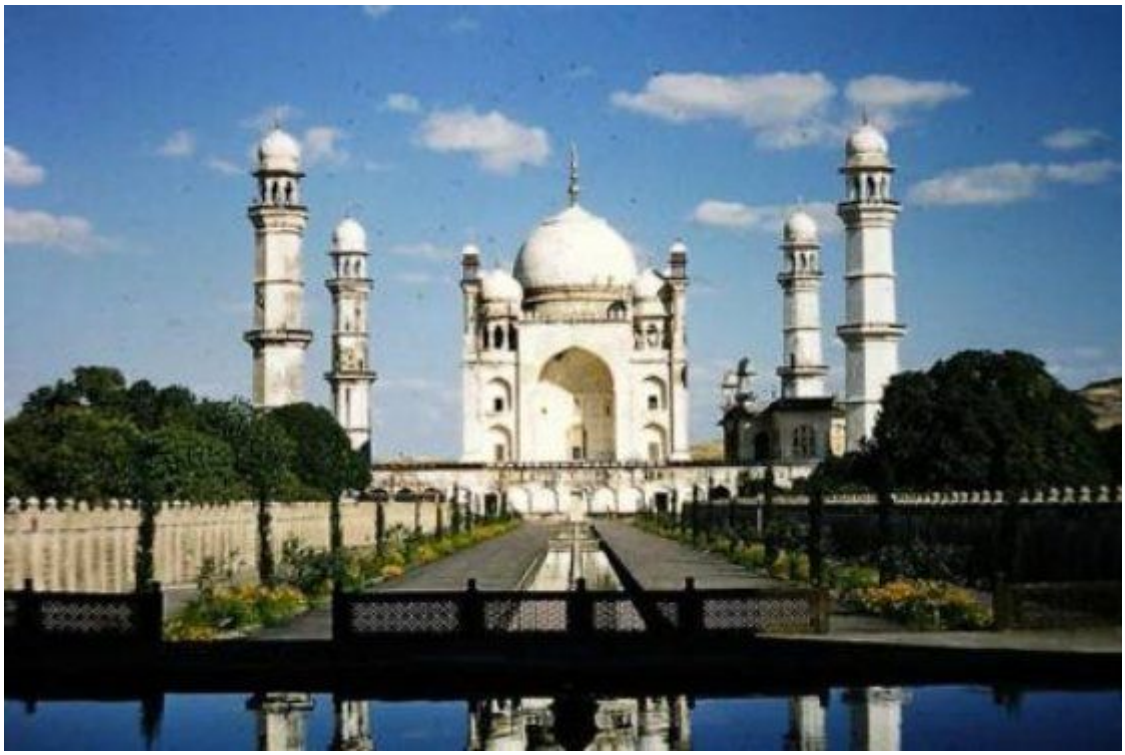
I peered at it and enquired how much. “Three hundred dollars, sir.”

“Hmmm ... Pity it's not green and yellow. Wrong colour.” I ducked out of there smartly and found just the right thing later at another place for eight dollars twenty-five.’

Waiting for the Dalai Lama, Mulaghanda Kuti Vihara, Sarnathh

We returned to the Vihara to find that the Dalai Lama had left a few minutes earlier. But we were not disappointed. The Deer Park had worked its magic. The air was clear, the sun was warm, it was a happy place, and much refreshed we returned to Benares to catch the night train to Aurangabad, far away on the other side of India, not far from Bombay.

One of the hazards of travel in India is the almost constant harassment by well intentioned people who come up to you and say, ‘Excuse me, Sahib, from which country are you coming?’ You give an appropriate answer. ‘Oh! And to which country are you going?’ You say where you're going. Another polite ‘Oh!’ And that is the end of the conversation. The questioner either goes off shaking his head with satisfaction or simply stares blankly. Before long he will be replaced by another with identical questions, and a staring crowd gathers. And so it goes. These folk materialise everywhere; only very occasionally are you able to carry on a satisfactory conversation. Mostly they are merely satisfying a harmless curiosity, but it can become extremely trying. On this twenty-six hour journey to Aurangabad we were shaken awake several times by relentless questioners. ‘Excuse me, Sahib, from which country are you coming?’



Bibi Ka Maqbara, Aurangabad

It was early in the morning when we arrived at Aurangabad station, and enjoyed the sensual luxury of a shower in the first-class waiting-room before emerging clean and invigorated into the bright sunshine of the dusty street. We had come to see the colossal cave temples and sculptures at Ellora and Ajanta, not far away, and it was not long before a small hand-painted sign bearing the word ‘Dharamsala’ caught Geoff's eye. Quickly we crossed over and were soon installed in one of a number of small cubicles which opened out onto a large courtyard where several broad, leafy trees gave shade.

We were a little disoriented to find in Aurangabad a Taj Mahal look-alike, albeit a little down-at-heel. It turned out to be a mausoleum built by a Mughal Prince, one Azam Shah, in the late 17th century as a tribute to his mother, Rabia Durrani, first wife of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. We never discovered which of the two mausoleums was built first, this or the Taj Mahal.

After stowing our gear we found we could hire bicycles cheaply nearby. The caves of Ellora were only twenty-seven miles away, so cycling seemed an excellent way to approach them. Off we set and in a few minutes were spinning along, exhilarated at the rush of wind on our faces. Down the hills

we sped, our spirits soaring. To be free from the towns, the press of the people, the heat, the flies and the squalor; to be alone with the warmth of the sun and the birds dancing in the wide sky; this was joy enough and we cherished it.

We paused to look at the great citadel of Daulatabad, a medieval fortress rearing up six hundred feet from the plain, its base hewn from the natural rock into an almost impregnable wall. It had been for a brief time, long ago, the capital of India until it was abandoned.

Then on again, up a steep grade, along an escarpment and through an old Muslim town, to zoom down over the last few miles and stop where the great caves of Ellora lay partly hidden in the side of a low hill. These staggering excavations in the black volcanic rock of the hillside were carried out from around the third century after Christ, and the ancient craftsmen created huge temples, Buddhist at first, then later when Buddhism died out in India, Hindu and Jain. All were chiselled out of the living rock. A little dazed by their immensity and the religious fervour which could sustain the excavation of two hundred thousand tons of stone from a single temple, we wandered from cave to cave.

Ravana shaking Mt Kailas, Kailasa Cave Temple,Ellora 8th C. AD

‘Hey, Jules! Take a look at this!’ Geoff called from behind an ornately chiselled facade. It was the Kailasa Temple, a stone representation of the abode of Lord Siva on Mount Kailas, high in the snows of the far-off Himalayas. ‘Look at this bloke!’ he cried, bubbling with enthusiasm and pointing at a sculpture in high relief. ‘It's wily old Ravana, see. He's crept up under the mountain when Siva isn't looking since he’s busy giving his lady a fondle, then all of a sudden lifts the whole set-up on his head and starts shaking the bejesus out of it. I suppose he wanted to put on a bit of a turn for Siva's lady, Parvati. But she's scared rigid. Anyway, pretty smartly Siva wakes upto what's going on and stamps his foot down, quick as a flash. Poor old Ravana's buggered, trapped under the mountain, everybody's happy again, and old Siva gets on with the business of fondling his lady.’ He was delighted with his find, a renowned eighth century sculpture, and went off hunting for more.

Indrani, Queen of the gods, Cave 23.

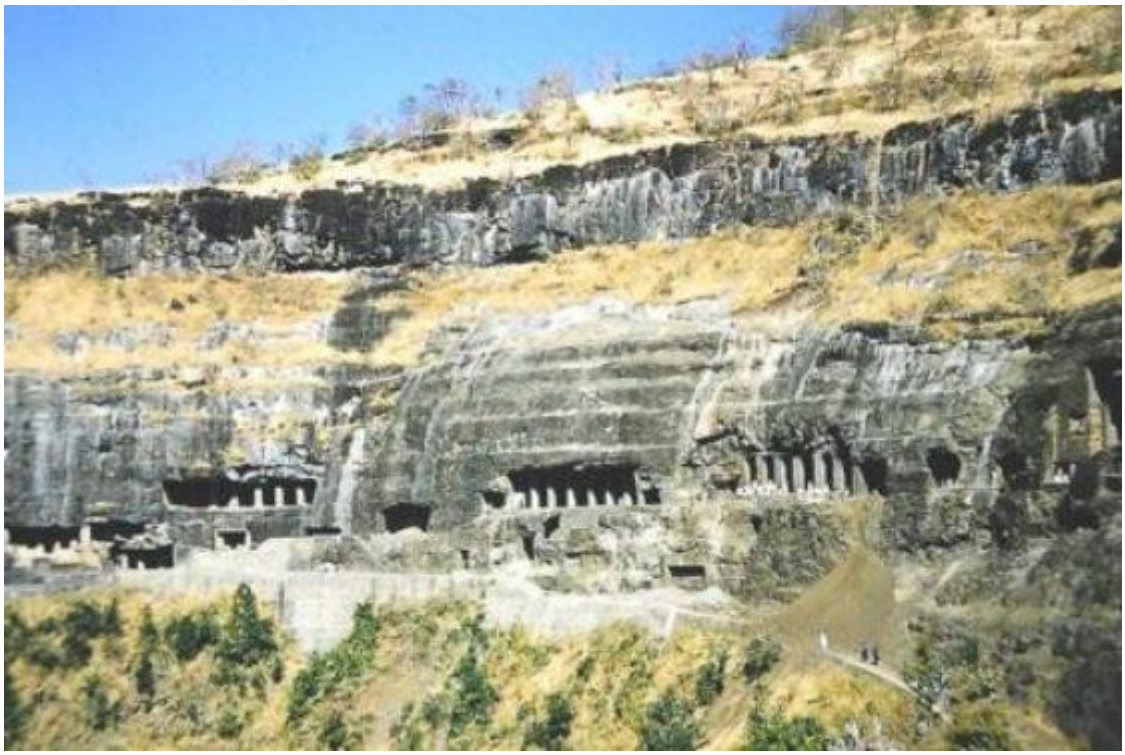
The day gave us such pleasure that we decided to forego our usual lunch of bread and peanut butter and treat ourselves to a meal at the nearby tourist restaurant. A waiter brought us a great menu - two pages closely typewritten with a fine range of appetising meals. Salivating with anticipation, we selected succulent dishes and gave our orders to the hovering waiter, only to be met with a doleful expression and to be told that those dishes were off. Disappointed, we chose others but found that they too were off. Choosing again, with a sinking sense of desperation, we were rebuffed again. 'What on earth can a man eat, then?' pleaded Geoff.

'I am sorry, Sahib, there is only tea. You should not ask for more. Please do not get angry. I am only a poor waiter, you see.'

'So why bring us the menu?'

'Well, it is like this, Sahib, all the food is finishing at midday. But you can take tea.' The poor fellow had not been able to bring himself to tell us when we arrived that there was no food, preferring to incur a little wrath than be the bearer of unwelcome news. Such is, of course, not unusual in India, and reflects both an innate gentleness and a humiliating self-abasement in such a hierarchical society.

Cycling back to Aurangabad, the muscles of our legs stretched and tingling from the unaccustomed exercise, we easily evaded an irascible old Muslim warrior attempting to extort a few annas from us as a toll-charge for his particular piece of road. We arrived back at the dharamsala as the sun was going down, a great, swollen, blood-red ball settling heavily on the dusty horizon. On our Primus stove we cooked a fine meal of tomatoes and onions, potatoes and eggs cooked up with rice and dhal and flavoured with part of the contents of a packet of soup.



Ajanta Caves

Up betimes to catch the early bus to Ajanta, sixty-four miles away, we travelled in the company of a hearty bunch of young commercial artists from Bombay, on their way to make copies of the famous cave paintings. A more impressive site than Ellora, the Ajanta caves had been fashioned in the same manner but are sculpted dramatically into a curved rock face above a deep ravine. We approached them through a narrow, wooded gorge, and the road ended at a spectacular entrance to the ravine, with a waterfall tumbling away to one side.

Entirely Buddhist, these caves were commenced about 200 BC, and the site was to become a religious, artistic and commercial centre famous for several hundred years. Some of the caves are exquisite chapels, architectural masterpieces carved from the solid rock. The frescoes, however, are the wonder of the place, their extraordinary colours still vivid after thirteen hundred years.

We were both greatly taken with the subtle grace and elegance of the Great Bodhisattva, a figure that seemed to embody tenderness and compassion, the essence of Buddhism. Perhaps most compelling are the extraordinary delicacy and gentleness with which the figure holds a blue lotus flower.

Bodhisattva Padmapani, Ajanta wall painting, 6th C. AD

This must have struck a deep chord in Geoff, for a year of two later, when he lived in the attic of our flat in London, he was consumed with a passion to recreate this figure on the white plaster ceiling of his sloping roof. Coming down only for food, he worked on his painting for days, and all that could be heard from his loft were muffled thumps and curses as he stumbled over his bed and other articles of furniture, then long silences as the painting continued. Forswearing visits to the pub and the training runs he enjoyed so much, he even forbade his lady of the moment to visit him as he worked. Finally he pronounced the work complete, and we all climbed up the rickety ladder to view his masterwork.

It was not at all bad. He had always been keen to join us when we visited a nearby coffee cellar where a nude model was provided for ‘artists’ to sketch for the price of a cup of coffee, but I had assumed that this was the limit of his talent and expected a hotchpotch of colour. Not so. It was a very fair representation. The only drawback, to my eye, was that instead of the arching brows and lotus-petal eyes of the Great Bodhisattva, the figure was adorned with the head of John F. Kennedy. ‘Yeah,’ said Geoff ruefully when I pointed this out to him. ‘The more I tried to make him the Bodhisattva the more he turned out to be Kennedy. Anyway, how do you know Kennedy's not his reincarnation?’ That seemed unanswerable, so we celebrated the event at length in the Sun In Splendour, our pub across the road.

We returned to Aurangabad late in the afternoon and strolled about the town, bargaining with shopkeepers as we replenished our supplies. It was a great town for pan, a kind of after-dinner carminative based on the betel-leaf, and the hawking, spitting and streams of flying betel-juice unsettled our sensibilities, conditioned as we were to the cleanliness and godliness of our deodorised world. But it was the constant sight of people defecating and urinating in the streets which finally proved too much and we retreated muttering to the dharamsala for sleep.

Looking for the most interesting route we could take from here to Delhi, we called on the resources of the local Indian Tourist Department, a government organisation we found to be marvelously efficient and informative. The young official quickly made out a fine and varied itinerary which would lead us north to the capital. Providing tea all round he discoursed with us for some time about our homelands, in the course of which he remarked, rather unkindly I felt, that ‘Oh yes, of course in New Zealand you also have the White Australia Policy.’

We needed to change some of our fast-dwindling money into rupees so made our way to the only bank in town, a grimy building with a signboard reading Bank of Hyderabad. It proved to be a murky sort of clip-joint, charging an extortionate fee for foreign exchange, and to Geoff's intense chagrin resolutely refused to have anything to do with his Letter of Credit, the only form of money he had left. Cursing all bloated moneychangers we strode off angrily. ‘If they won't change my money,’ Geoff muttered resentfully, ‘they’ve got no chance of getting me to pay the bloody train fare out of here!’ Although his logic appealed to me, I tried to placate him.

‘Look, I'll pay for your ticket. You can pay me back when we get to Delhi.’

‘No, bugger it, if the bastards don't think my money's good enough, then I'm not going to use it! I'll con my way.’ There was no arguing with him; his mind was made up. He would jump the night train to Agra, and that was all there was to be said about it.

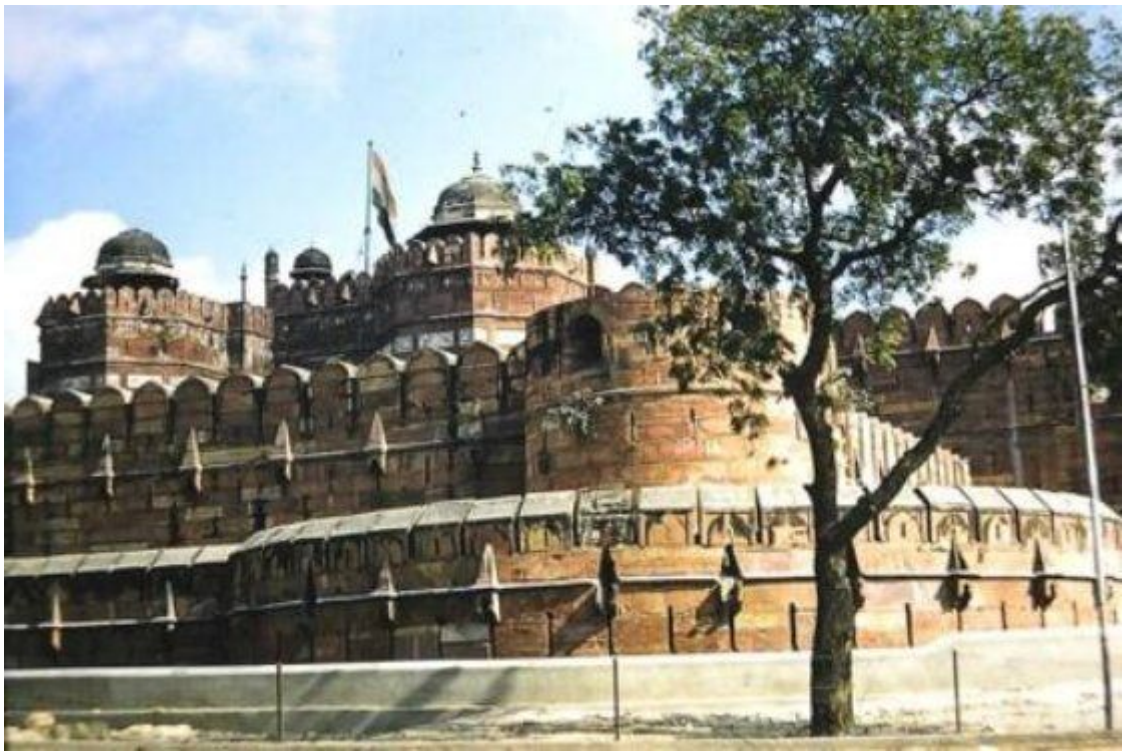
We returned to the railway station, and I purchased a solitary third-class ticket while Geoff brewed up a vegetable stew in the first-class waiting-room. Since he was preparing the meal, I took the opportunity to have another shower and was halfway through this operation when he appeared in the shower-room, worried and agitated. ‘There's a portly little bloke out there wants to write my ticket number in his book.’

He had managed to hold this official off by writing ‘Dentist’ on the space provided for the ticket number, then disappeared quickly into the bathroom. When I dried myself and went out, there was no inspector to be seen, so I signalled Geoff that the coast was clear and we emerged furtively on to the platform to lose ourselves in the close-packed crowd. We were standing by a little food-stall having a cup of tea and a bun, when out of the crowd appeared a small plump man wearing a black railway cap and a pair of silk pyjamas. He waved a large red book at Geoff. ‘Ah, sir! I think you have written wrongly in my book. Here you must write your ticket number, not your name. Acha!’ And he shook his head reprovingly.

‘Ah! Thank you very much,’ I said heartily, taking the book from him and making great play with my ticket, ostentatiously writing down the number while Geoff slid silently into the close-packed crowd.

I found him later in the gloom at the other end of the station crouched like a gnome in the midst of a throng of squatting tribesmen, the hood of his anorak over his head and his body hunched and motionless in the shelter of his bulky rucksack. When the train finally arrived we climbed into the most crowded third-class carriage and squeezed our way to the middle. Looking out the window as the train pulled away, we glimpsed the poor inspector wandering up and down the platform, clutching his book and peering hopefully into dark corners.

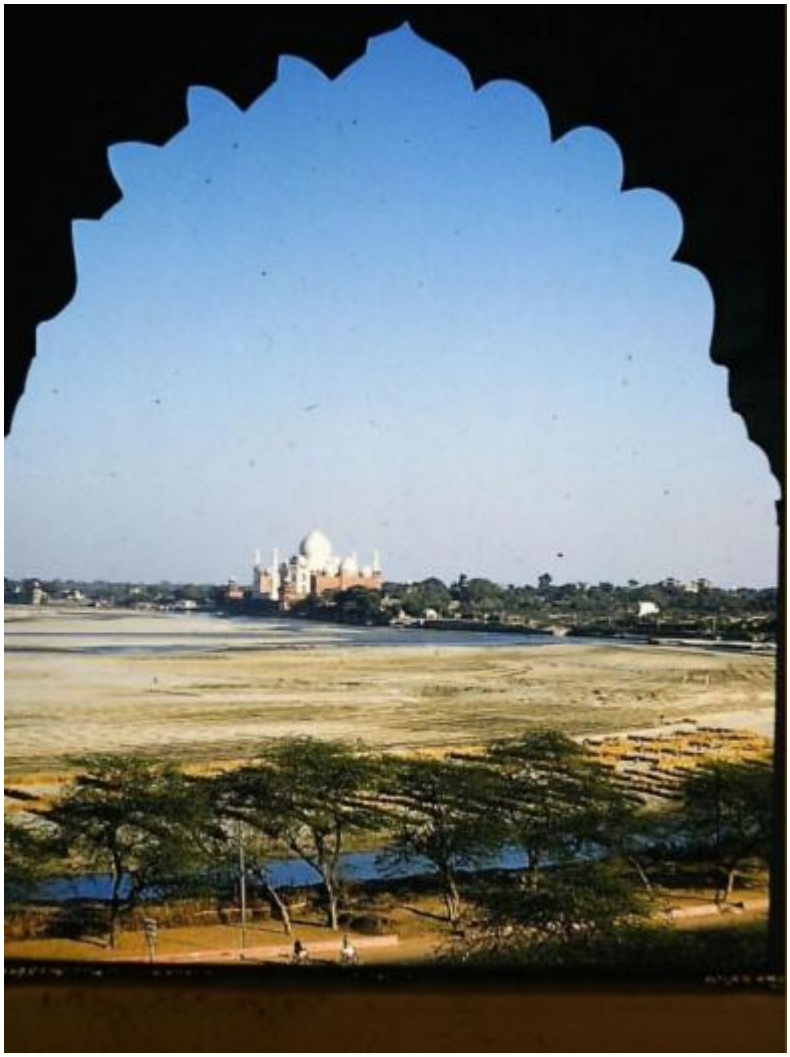
The train had no sooner cleared the station when I felt a tap on my shoulder and a voice said, ‘Excuse me, sir, from which country are you coming?’



Red Fort, Agra

And so we made our way to Agra over the next couple of days, stopping at Sanchi to see the beautiful Buddhist Stupa, and at the pink city of Jaipur, where the pink proved to be merely a faded red wash on the sandstone walls.

The Great Red Fort of the Moghuls in Agra, with its massive sandstone walls, evokes the power and splendour of their empire. In the old palace section it is easy to imagine sultry harem beauties stepping daintily across the polished marble floor of a scented bathing chamber and gazing out through the marble lattice screens at the Taj Mahal - that marvelous monument to love – elegant and beautiful across a curve in the Jumna river.



Taj Mahal & Jumna River from Agra's Red Fort

Despite the elegance and purity of the Taj Mahal, Agra is no more free of citizens who defecate and urinate in its streets than any other Indian city, and Geoff was becoming more and more affronted. 'It's time to start a Sahib-Strikes-Back campaign, Jules,' he muttered as we passed one fellow who had dropped his dhoti and was squatting at the side of the road. A little later he spied another, similarly engaged a little further on, near our railway residence. True to his word, he ran up behind him and, with a great shout, kicked a shower of dust from the roadway straight into the unfortunate man's unprotected backside. 'Sahibs strike back!' he cried triumphantly and ran on. Although unprepared for this action I nevertheless had sufficient presence of mind to run quickly after him, although I was not as fast as the situation demanded.

I'd covered not more than a few yards when the outraged squatter leaped to his feet, dhoti trailing, and ran after us, shouting at the top of his voice and calling upon the whole street to witness this appalling indignity. There was no lack of sympathy for him, and rocks began to fly from an angry crowd that joined in pursuit. Geoff's athletic ability was now clearly demonstrated. As a big stone thumped me on the shoulder, I twisted in pain and lamented the fact I had no such skill. Gasping and blowing, I cursed and swore as we rounded the final corner and took refuge in our railway station waiting-room. 'You bloody idiot!' I howled, rubbing the large bruise on my shoulder. 'Next time you want to do something stupid like that, at least let me know first. I could have been bloody killed!'

He grinned unperturbed. 'Jeez, Jules, just think what a roaring success the Sahib-Strikes-Back Campaign is going to be. Imagine if everybody started doing the same bloody thing. I mean, they can't all like shitting in the street. If this catches on, we'll have it stamped out in no time. After all, look what happened when Mao gave all the Chinese a flyswat. Wham! No more flies.'

'It'll be "Wham!" no more us if you try that again,' I snorted.

He was quite unrepentant and turned his zeal for reform next to a chiselling food merchant. There was a dingy restaurant near the station where we decided to spend five annas (a little over two pence) each on a two-egg omelette. We were hungry and waited expectantly, relishing the thought of a decent omelette. Before long the proprietor appeared and presented us each with a miserable-looking, wizened object, possibly originally a pigeon's egg. 'How much is this?' asked Geoff.

'Five annas, sahib.'

'Five annas! Five annas for that!' He roared. 'Don't be ridiculous. It's too much for a thing like that. I'm not paying that much!' He stalked out. I followed without argument, for it really was minute and unappetising, and as we walked away I heard one man remark solemnly to his companion, 'They are poor men!' Much impressed, they regarded us with interest ... a poor sahib is a memorable sight.

Further on we found another restaurant where for four annas we each enjoyed a huge omelette, well prepared and more than satisfying. 'You are the most honest food-wallah in India,' Geoff complimented the owner as we took our leave.

'No, no, Sahib! In India, everybody is honest!' was his considered reply.

Idly regarding the vast crowds on the station and contemplating the journey to Delhi, Geoff somehow found himself caught up and whisked into a crowded compartment from where I heard him calling faintly. Following, I found there was no room for us to do anything but crouch on the floor; and so we proceeded to the Capital through a long sleepless night, to the accompaniment of rousing snores from a stout lady sleeping blissfully on the seat above us. We arrived early in the morning, and after some complex dodging and manoeuvring, emerged into Old Delhi, jubilant we had again escaped the attention of vigilant ticket collectors.

A month or two later - in Athens - we encountered a young American with a rueful tale of riding the Indian railways without paying. He had travelled all over the country using various ruses and dodges. On his final journey he was speeding along comfortably in a second-class carriage en route to Bombay, where he was to board a ship for East Africa the following day. A pleasant, mild-mannered Indian chanced to sit with him as they neared their destination, and they fell into conversation. In the course of this the American boasted of how he had ridden free all across the country and began to ridicule the Indian Railways for their laxity. His companion was much interested and asked him exactly where in India he had been. Whereupon the American recounted his journeys with relish, gratified at the man's interest. The Indian, meanwhile, was doodling with pencil and paper as he spoke. When he had finished, the Indian looked at him with an apologetic smile. 'I am pleased you have enjoyed your stay in my country so much, sahib.' He produced a little card. 'I am inspector with the Indian Government Railways and I have calculated from what you say that your account is one hundred and sixty-eight rupees.'

The American knew the game was up. 'Look,' he said, 'I've only got a hundred and twenty rupees left. That's all the money I've got, apart from a few dollars for the boat.'

'Ah,' said the inspector solemnly, making new calculations, 'Yes, I see I have made an error. The correct amount is, of course, one hundred and twenty rupees.' And he made out a receipt for the amount. 'Thank you very much. I am so pleased you have enjoyed my country. Perhaps you will visit us again some other time.' He gave a beatific smile, and shook the American's hand as he left.

Chapter Five

‘A daring young man going west for a wheeze,
Was conning his way with remarkable ease;
This is his story; a series of sprees,
And all that he learns and he hears and he sees.’

Thus wrote Geoff in his diary before setting out to cash his Letter of Credit at the Delhi bank. Meanwhile I went in search of the dharamsala attached to the Lakshmi Hindu Temple. The dharamsala, however, was crowded with people come to Delhi for the fairs and festivities of Republic Day a few days hence, and there was no room. But I was taken in hand by a worshipper at the temple who informed me thus: ‘Ah, never mind, my very good fellow, you may stay in the house of my friend, who is away from Delhi just now and who will be pleased for you to stay in his house.’ So saying he spirited me away to an elegant residential area and installed me in the care of the chowkidar of a comfortable two-storied home. I never saw him again.

Geoff, on the other hand, was disconsolate. Nobody would cash his Letter of Credit. It had, by a cruel stroke of fate, expired the previous day. Somehow he’d never realised that it was valid for only twelve months from its date if issue, and was now quite useless. He would have to send it back to Melbourne and get the bank to forward what was left to him at some other city along our route. The balance was only about thirty-five American dollars, but that, together with another thirty or so which he expected to receive by mail from home was all he had to take him to England. So off he went to the Poste Restante at the post office for his mail. There were several letters for him but no sign of the draft he was expecting. That it had been sent was confirmed in another letter he received, so away he went to see the Inspector of Mails. Why was a registered letter marked PLEASE HOLD AND AWAIT COLLECTION not there. ‘Oh,’ said the Inspector of Mails sorting through reams of papers, ‘it is very simple. You were not here to collect the letter when it arrived, so we have sent it to the Dead Letter Office at Amritsar. That is why your letter is not here.’ In the face of this formidable argument there seemed little to be said, but Geoff dug his toes in. He would wait in the Inspector's office until he arranged to have the letter sent back from Amritsar.

No. Impossible to do such a thing quickly.

‘I'll wait here anyway,’ said Geoff cheerfully, unpacking his rucksack, laying out his sleeping-bag and setting up the stove to cook a meal. So a telephone call was made to Amritsar which revealed that the letter had inexplicably been sent on from that city to the Dead Letter Office in Madras, and from there it had then been returned to the sender in Australia. Formidable indeed. And a financial disaster for Geoff, who was now without any money at all.

There was other mail however, and amongst this he was much cheered by a breezy letter from his mother, in which she told him about her attempts to let the back flat in their Melbourne home. She relatedthe story of one such attempt: ‘I was showing this chap how to work the gas stove with the gas lighter. “Flick of the wrist,” I said, “and Bob's your uncle. No matches!”

“Oh,” said this chap, “Do you know my Uncle Bob?”

“No, no,” said I.

“But you just said Bob's my uncle,” said he.

Me: “No, no! He's nobody's uncle!”

Chap: “But he's my uncle!”

Me: “Look, it's only a saying. I don't know whose uncle he is.”

Chap: “He's mine!”

Me: “No, no. I just mean ‘Bob's your uncle’, you know - meaning quick and fast.”

Chap: “My Uncle Bob isn't quick or fast!”

Me: “I didn't mean he was anybody's uncle or that he was quick and fast.” I had to leave it at that. I hope he didn't think I was silly.’

Geoff was much cheered also by our elegant Delhi residence, and we showered, washed our clothes and slept peacefully in great comfort, being woken finally by the chowkidar, the caretaker who insisted on bringing us breakfast. Such luxury. We hired bicycles and toured various places of interest in Delhi before Geoff returned to do battle once more with the Postal authorities and I presented myself at the Tourist Bureau to obtain tickets for the Republic Day Parade. It says a great deal for the officials of this Government organisation that although bearded, long-haired, with dirty dishevelled clothes and a rather down-at-heel appearance, we were always treated with great courtesy and made to feel that our wanderings were as important to them as to us.

Whilst in the Tourist Bureau a young American clapped me on the shoulder and asked abruptly, ‘Say, man, have you been to Africa?’ Startled,

I confessed that I had not. He was flying to East Africa, he said, and wanted to hitch up into the Sudan and then into Egypt. ‘I sure as hell do need some information on that route. But I can't find anyone who's been there.’ We talked, and I told him I was travelling with an Australian. ‘Hey! You're not with a guy called Geoff Watt?’

‘I am, yes.’

‘Christ! I last saw that guy in Japan! Where is the old bastard?’

I took him off to find Geoff.

‘Norm Frost! You bloody old ratbag! What are you doing here?’ Geoff pumped his hand enthusiastically then stood off and eyed him curiously. ‘Last time I saw this bloke, Jules, he was my manager at the Japanese Marathon!’

Norm was a genial fellow who possessed a rather glib tongue. They had travelled together in the United States and then met by chance some months later in Hiroshima, where Norm had immediately declared himself Geoff's manager. Geoff had never had a manager and had no need of one, while Norm knew nothing about athletics of any kind, let alone the marathon. But this in no way deterred him from persuading a large Tokyo newspaper to sponsor Geoff and accommodate them both in a comfortable hotel.

We went with Norm and had a meal at the Delhi YMCA, where he was staying, and spent the afternoon there swapping tales. Norm told me how he first came to meet Geoff.

‘I was in Detroit, see, and I got this job where I had to drive a Chevvy up to Alaska inside fourteen days. They gave me a hundred bucks for gas and off I went - five thousand miles right on to Anchorage. I was going through the Badlands of Dakota - before you get to the Black Hills - when I see this funny little bearded guy dancing around on the road up ahead. Well, I slow down and then he pulls out a big sign that says THE LAST BADMAN IN THE BADLANDS. So I figured that a guy with a sign like that sure as hell deserved some support.’

‘Yeah,’ said Geoff. ‘I had another one that said THE BLACKGUARD FROM THE BLACK HILLS! People like weird signs and they'll pick you up if you’ve got a good one, but they keep right on going if you just stand there and wave your arms.’

‘This crazy guy used to go off running along the road when we stopped to camp for the night,’ Norm continued. ‘I figured he didn't like cooking, but he reckoned he was in training.’

‘I got some great runs along that road,’ said Geoff. ‘The first night on the Alaska highway we set up camp and I went off for a run. I set out to go about five miles, but it developed into a real gallop. I was just rolling along and knocked up five miles in no time. Then I turned round to run back. After a mile or so a car pulled up and I was offered a lift. These Canadians must be nuts, I thought; can't they see I'm training. Then another car pulled up. I kept on running, and they plied me with questions. “Where are you running to?”

“Alaska.”

“Alaska?”

“Yeah, from Dawson Creek. I’m running the length of the Alaska Highway.”

“When did you start?”

“Today. I run a hundred miles each day. Takes twelve hours,” I said, running along steadily.

“Do you stop at all?”

“Only at lunchtime. I stop for ten minutes while my mate gives me eggs and milk and sugar.”

“Is there any money in it?”

“Oh, there will be soon, when it catches on.”

“Where are you from?”

“Australia.”

“Have a beer.”

“Thanks.” We drank a toast and went our ways. I hadn't gone another mile when another car pulled up. More questions ... same sort of thing.

“... to Alaska?”

“Yeah, a hundred miles a day.”

“Well, how come you were running the other way when I saw you back a ways.”’

Geoff danced about, eyes gleaming. As he talked, a crowd had gathered and he held forth, the centre of a circle of grave, puzzled faces, all watching intently.

Later we wandered from New Delhi across into the old part of the city, which we liked better. It was, however, rather like going from Canberra to Calcutta, so extreme was the contrast. We stopped to watch a spruiker, who had a monkey beating a drum while he talked up a big crowd to see the fearful battle of the cobra and the mongoose. He was a polished conman

and we admired the style with which he extracted two annas (about a penny) from everybody in sight. There was no show till the crowd was a good size and everyone had paid. Then a rather dazed-looking cobra was poked unwillingly out of a sack while a mongoose, tethered in the dust to a nearby stake, scurried over and bit the snake casually on the neck. The snake was finished and the show was over.

We caught a bus to the Delhi International Agricultural Fair where, we were told, there were fine displays from the Indian states as well as from other countries, notably the Soviet Union, China and other socialist republics. As we settled into the seats on the bus, people began to nudge each other and murmur, 'Rusko, Rusko.' Because of our beards they believed us to be Russians. Rising to the occasion, Geoff got to his feet and, in a thick husky voice, addressed the passengers.

'Ve have come to Hindustan to sell you machines for the fields. They are good machines! Very good! But you must not buy machines from Amerika. Bad! Very bad!'

And, as the bus was stationary, he danced a little jig - his idea of a Cossack dance. It was a smash performance. His little speech pleased the people, but his jig delighted them even more. They fell about with laughter, hooting, snorting and doubled up with mirth, so much so that Geoff felt impelled to continue. 'Today ve bringing you machines. Tomorrow ve make you part of Mother Russia! No?' And he stretched his arms wide in a heroic pose. More hilarity, slapping on the back and much laughter. It was, perhaps, the most good-humoured busload to arrive at the Exhibition that day.

Various foreign countries were competing with one another to show the Indians how excellent their system of living was, and how it was merely a matter of adopting their style for the problems of India to be solved. So there were smiling faces at each pavilion, with soaring production graphs and gleaming machines. East Germany outdid them all for interest by exhibiting a life-size plastic cow, fully illuminated internally and dissected to show all 'working' parts - veins, arteries and other organs. This fascinated the Hindus, and they gazed at their holy animal in wonder. Hordes of these gentle beasts wander the streets and roadways of India unmolested, living off scraps from vegetable stalls or handouts from storekeepers. In the cities they block traffic, cause general confusion, and their droppings lie everywhere, a hazard to pedestrians. The only thing to be

said about it is that they provide a living for a few - those who collect the dung, dry it into little cakes and sell it for fuel. The roast-peanut vendors of Delhi use nothing else for their roasting, and those people who cannot afford kerosene have no other cooking fuel.

We were in the pavilion of the Socialist Republic of Outer Mongolia when Geoff was seized with an urgent need for a toilet. He tried to explain his predicament to a smiling Mongolian demonstrating a butter-churn. Unfortunately the man was not expert in English and could not grasp Geoff's meaning. Geoff uttered every word for lavatory he could think of without success and, in a final desperate bid, seized the butter-churn and squatted down upon it to demonstrate his need. A stunned silence. Then a horrified Indian attendant rushed over and snatched the churn from him indignantly, exclaiming, 'No, no, sir! It is not for that purpose. It is for making butter!'

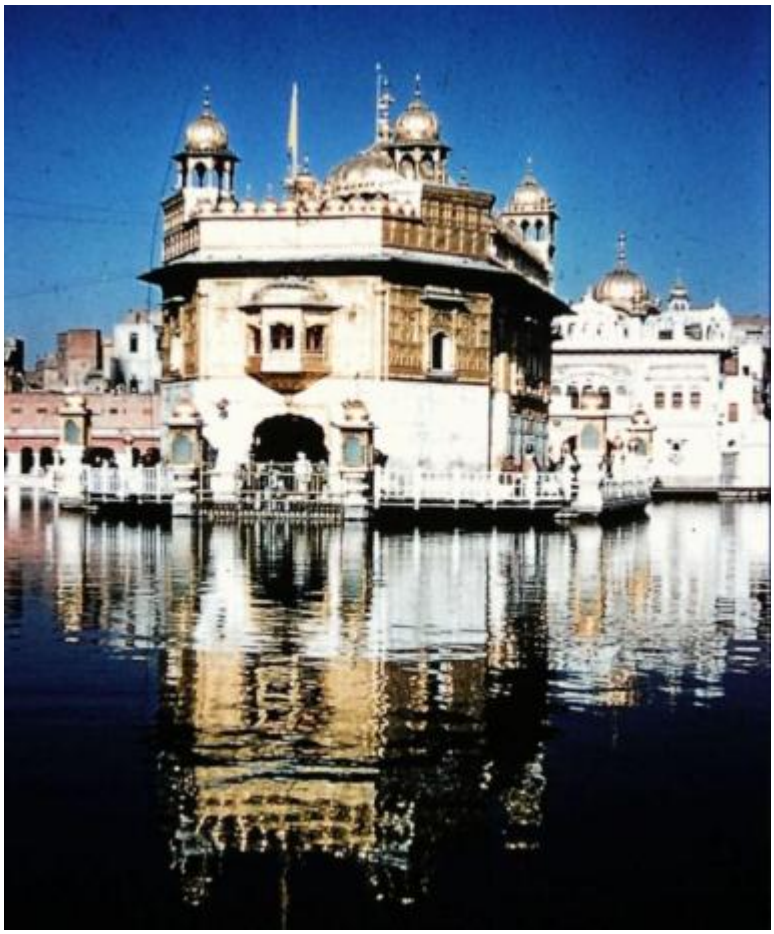
Geoff had sent a cable to his bank instructing them to forward his money to their agent in Teheran, so he could collect it as we passed that way. In the meantime we would share what money I had. We were anxious to be off, felt we had been long enough in India, and could feel the pull of the Khyber Pass and the mountains of Afghanistan beyond. After our sojourn in the crowded lowlands, we had a need to betake ourselves to a cooler climate, to the snows of the Hindu Kush. Accordingly, we boarded the Frontier Mail to travel to Amritsar, on the Pakistan border. Installed comfortably on the luggage racks of an 'Attendants' compartment, we settled down to read our paperbacks before drifting off to sleep. But alas, Geoff was beset by a relentless questioner. 'From which country are you coming, Sahib?'

Irritated, he determined not to get caught up and parried neatly with German, a language in which he rather fancied himself. 'Nicht sprecken Englisch!' he rasped darkly. His questioner was momentarily nonplussed but not deterred. Struggling on laboriously with a kind of hideous pidgin English, the poor fellow rephrased the question in half a dozen different ways, all of which Geoff rebuffed with a dogged, 'Ich nicht sprecken Englische,' or occasionally, 'Ich nicht bin Englander.' He was finally stumped, however, when the Indian noticed the book he was reading.

'Sahib, why is it that you are not speaking English when it is an English book you are reading?'

Geoff had no answer to this, and with a contrite smile, he said, ‘Oh, well, my friend, in my country we have a saying that if you can't beat them, join them.’ And he fell to a long description of Australia, kangaroos, koalas, swaggies and all.

We paused for a day or two at Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs; stalwart, bearded men in turbans, surely some of the best-natured and most helpful in India. There was free accommodation for pilgrims at the Serai of Guru Ram Das by the Golden Temple, where generous-hearted people accommodated and fed up to two thousand of the poor, pilgrims and refugees. We camped in the courtyard of the Serai, along with several hundred Tibetans who had found their way there after an arduous and heartbreaking escape from their Chinese occupied homeland. The Sikhs provided them with shelter and food and were busy helping them on their way to more permanent settlements.



Golden Temple of the Sikhs, Amritsar

We fell in here with a young Englishman returning home from Malaysia. He was an agreeable companion but offended us somewhat the following morning by rejecting our carefully prepared porridge-and-rice breakfast, which he claimed was ‘pretty awful’. Nevertheless he joined us on a tour of the Golden Temple, whence had come the melodious chanting throughout the previous night.

It is a brilliant, golden structure with shining cupolas, set in the centre of a square marble-terraced tank of water - the Pool of Nectar, from which the city takes its name. A Sikh accompanied us, explaining his religion and the significance of everything we saw. A particularly horrific series of paintings in the nearby museum depicted the ‘martyrdom’ of various Gurus and their followers. One showed a follower of the ninth Guru being held in a rack and sawn vertically in two for refusing to become a Muslim. This was done in Chandni Chowk, Delhi - a peaceful-enough thoroughfare nowadays but a regular butchery then. Another showed the ninth Guru himself - there were ten in all - being chopped up joint by joint.

Small wonder that they took the name of Singh - or lion-hearted - and believed that the waters of the Golden Temple gave them strength and courage. The simple fact is that they needed it. And of course they are known as fearless, forthright men who fight fiercely when roused. There are other pictures of more recent times in which British soldiers are seen firing on about two thousand Sikhs, peacefully gathered at a political rally in 1922. It was, of course, the work of the infamous General Dyer who commented, according to our young English companion, ‘That'll teach the buggers a lesson.’

‘As most of them were dead or wounded, I suppose it did,’ observed Geoff drily.

Having changed our money into Pakistani Rupees, we caught a bus to the border a few miles away. Geoff clowned about to entertain the few passengers and introduced our young Englishman as ‘an Englishman from England, a resident of London, British, and a Commonwealth citizen to boot.’ Later he repeated this introduction to a Pakistani immigration official, who regarded the young man steadily for a moment before remarking, ‘Truly, he is a man of superior qualities.’

Soon we were in Lahore and, having said goodbye to the Englishman, cast about for the road to Rawalpindi, Peshawar and the Khyber Pass. By a stroke of fortune we were not on the road an hour before we had hitched a

ride with three Germans driving from Karachi to Kabul in Afghanistan. They were from the German Embassy there and had just taken delivery of three new Volkswagens. We thus saw very little of Pakistan, stopping the night at Peshawar, before pressing on next morning for the Khyber Pass. I possessed a battered old copy of Murray's Handbook to India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, 1949 edition, so had the benefit of its mostly useless information on India and Pakistan, such as proper etiquette for the travelling Englishman, and how to give instruction to bearers and cooks. Beyond Pakistan we had no information of any kind. Still, the road was enticing, the Germans agreeable companions, and we revelled in the unaccustomed comfort of their cars.

Pulling in at a Pakistan Military Control Post, Geoff and I angled about to get a photo of the legendary pass, from here a low opening in an undistinguished line of hills ahead.

Jamrud Fort, entrance to Khyber Pass

The profile of Jamrud Fort, an ancient baked mud building, stood out in the foreground. But within minutes a small, narrow-faced man appeared at my side, clutched anxiously at my sleeve and demanded my passport. He informed us the Commandant wished to see us at once. It was clear the invitation could not be refused when two soldiers appeared with rifles and hustled us into the fort. Through the great gates, round dark corridors, along battlements to where the Commandant's office looked out over the road and the entrance to the Pass. 'Your passports!' The commandant eyed us coldly, hand outstretched. 'Why were you photographing my fort?'

We mumbled a story about just looking at the scene through our camera viewfinders. '...and it wasn't really worth a shot …' Geoff offered brightly. Not surprisingly, the Commandant was unimpressed. It was his fort, after all.

He looked at our passports. 'Ah! Australia, New Zealand! Commonwealth people!' He gave a genial smile and relaxed. 'I thought you were Russians. Will you take tea?' He ushered us into his office where a radio in the corner droned, '... and Davidson moves in again for the third ball of the over ...' It was the cricket, Australia vs. Pakistan at Rawalpindi. 'You see, I must be very careful,' he explained earnestly. 'I know the Russians are trying to photograph my fort. This is a most important place.' We listened politely. No doubt the Russians' first photographs of the fort were taken in the 1890s, and in any case a well directed fire-hose would have seriously damaged the place.

There was a clatter, and in rushed our German hosts puffing and blowing, exuding diplomatic bonhomie. Obviously thinking to extricate us from a ticklish situation, they beamed, apologised, shook hands, complimented the Commandant on his excellent establishment and exerted all their professional charm to avoid an unfortunate incident. This resulted in another invitation to tea, and we all sat about smiling foolishly.

On and up through the Khyber Pass. Bald barren hills, and the road cleverly engineered between great masses of rock, rearing high into the limits of the sky. An excellent sealed road that wound on, around and steadily upwards. Stone forts and pill-boxes clung to every hill and crag into the far distance. And bronze plaques on rock faces were inscribed with the names and coats of arms of British regiments which had fought doggedly for every inch of this ancient stretch of road. The legends were brief: 'Shagai Fort: Khyber Rifles.' But the tribesmen were more striking than the road. Some on donkeys, some perched precariously on the high, luggage-stacked roofs of spectacular Khyber buses, others in square stone villages, staring stolidly as we drove past. Along the road, men strode with a spare, aggressive dignity, and all carried rifles, from flintlocks to army .303s, cartridge belts fully loaded and slung over the shoulder.

In less than an hour we breasted the pass and gazed out across hazy miles of rugged hills. Towering along the horizon were the snow-covered mountains of the Hindu Kush, and somewhere beyond the distant hills lay Kabul, remote and cold at an altitude of some six thousand feet.

Then on through the Afghan border post and lines of indolent, grey-clad soldiers staring blankly. Their uniforms could have been field-grey cast-offs of German stormtroopers. Our cars sped on. Toward evening we pulled in at the straggling township of Jalalabad and took a meal of kebabs and bread at a teahouse.

Jalalabad Chaikhana - Tea house – Afghanistan

It was dark inside, and we were scrutinised by proud, haughty men dressed in ragged finery seated cross-legged on carpets laid over earthen benches around the walls. Faces from the melting-pot of millennia. There an Italian, there the rosy cheeks and broad open face of an Irishman, over there two Mongols and an Arab, while certainly that blonde, blue-eyed fellow must be Scandinavian. And what about that red-headed Scot? A heterogeneous people. We ate with gusto. Oh how we ate! The kebabs were our first meat for months. And the bread, coarse, flat and delicious. We tore off great hunks and washed them down with strong, sweet tea.

It was dark outside now, and we continued along the metalled road. There were patches of snow on the ground, and every now and again our headlights caught the greatcoats of patrolling soldiers, the light gleaming for a moment on a fixed bayonet. They were guarding the road. My German

driver sounded the horn. ‘In Afghanistan,’ he said, ‘it is necessary to be making a great noise. Ze people, all the time they are sleepink!’ I wondered if Afghans expected their roads to be spirited away in the night. ‘Ach, zese Afghanistan roads!’ he muttered, negotiating a boulder-strewn pothole.

We were driving now beside the Kabul River, a harsh rocky landscape, stark and beautiful in the moonlight. We stopped for a moment at the bottom of a deep gorge where the river rushed, roaring and tumbling over enormous masses of fallen rock. A thin moon shone into this jagged canyon, and on each side, black walls towered high above. It was stark, but eerily beautiful. The landscape of another planet.

Kabul River, Kabul

By midnight we were in Kabul, and leaving our German friends, trudged through the slush of snow-covered streets. Where to sleep? We spotted the outline of a mosque ahead and found a courtyard with a low shelter protected from the snow and the harsh wind. Unrolling our sleeping-bags we slept fitfully in the cold night.

A strong tenor voice rang out and we struggled awake. What, what? Where were we? The voice soared, fell with what sounded like choking sobs, then rose again with a long wailing ululation. We struggled back to

consciousness. It was the muezzin, calling the faithful. Above us the pale blue of the early morning sky, and it was not so cold. His call was strangely beautiful and we listened in silence. Away on the other side of the grey courtyard the rhythmic movements of a few shadowy figures bowing, prostrating and rising.

The voice stopped and we heard footsteps descending the minaret steps. A figure emerged from a doorway and approached, striped robes billowing. 'Gruss Gott!' Arab features, and strong brown eyes twinkling in a bearded, leathery face. He spoke again, 'Wir kommen sie?' Geoff began a laborious reply in halting German. 'So you speak English?'

'Yes, we're better with that.'

'And let me see – Australian?' His voice had a deep resonance and he spoke with little accent. 'Ha! A matter of providence. You have come to Kabul and you don't know anybody.' He gave a great laugh that shook his body, and the trailing end of his turban danced over his shoulder. 'What a pair!' We were a little confused and not quite up with events. 'Come!' He turned and strode over to a gateway, beckoned us to follow and disappeared. Geoff, unusually silent, shrugged. We packed up our gear and followed. The man was seated in a battered old jeep in the narrow street, eyeing us with an amused smile. 'Come, jump in!'

He let out the clutch and the old jeep lurched forward. 'I am Yunus Ahmad,' he shouted over his shoulder. 'From Badakshan!' And he spun the wheel to turn into another street. A few trees standing gaunt in piles of mud and snow. High stone walls along one side, and a motley collection of mud and stone buildings with wooden posts and shutters on the other.

'I'm Geoff Watt from Australia.' We introduced ourselves. He nodded, and drove on. We crossed a bridge, beneath which ran the Kabul River, blue-grey, cold and murky. Then past a mosque with a blue-tiled minaret and into a part of the city crowded with markets and stalls. There were few people about, but shopkeepers in a wonderful array of garments were taking down wooden shutters and setting out gaudy piles of goods. There were men in waistcoats, old Army jackets, Indian shawls and dhotis, pantaloons and shapeless flowing robes. Multi-coloured, patched and brilliant, most wore turbans wound about with strips of dirty-looking silk. Others were attired in natty American suits, perhaps a little too big or too small, but set off nicely with woolly Karakul caps. We bounced along in the ruts and slush, pulling up with a jerk outside a snug-looking teahouse.

Kabul breadshop – Kabuli Nan

‘Come!’ said Yunus. ‘We take Chai and Nan!’ He led the way and greeted the proprietor haughtily, making known his wants in rapid, flowing Farsi. He washed his hands at a little tank of warm water fed by a huge copper samovar in the centre of the room. Then arranging his robes comfortably, sat cross-legged on a carpet-covered bench against the wall. A man wearing a patched coat of many colours brought three china pots of tea and three small bowls.

This was our chai, and he was the chaikhana’s proprietor. Making an obsequious gesture, he hurried off, returning in a moment with great flat pieces of the bread like the ones we had enjoyed so much the previous evening. Sipping the sweet black tea, we warmed our hands on the little bowls. The bread was fresh-baked and delicious.

‘How did you pick me for an Australian?’ Geoff asked.

Yunus laughed. ‘Oh ho! Your German is so bad, and I know the accent. I have met Australians before! How do you like our Nan?’

‘Nan? The bread?’

‘Yes. Nan.’

‘I'd say,’ said Geoff chewing thoughtfully, ‘it's about the best bread I've eaten!’

Yunus smiled, ‘I am pleased it is your taste. It is our staple food. Many poor people can afford little else, but it is full of goodness and will give you strength for many hours.’ He sucked tea noisily through a sugar-lump between his teeth. ‘I am going to the village of my brother. You will come.’ Clearly no refusal was expected. Rising abruptly he flung a few coins at the proprietor of the chaikhana and climbed back into the jeep.

We rattled off and headed out through the now bustling streets into the hills. In a few moments we had passed the remains of the ancient outer wall of the city and were climbing a tortuous road through stark, snow-spattered hills. Brilliant sunshine cast a dazzling contrast between the dun-coloured earth and great drifts of snow. After half an hour, and passing only two or three fortress-like farm dwellings, we came to the village. Straggling, square-cut buildings clustered together on the banks of a small stream where a few willows grew. We pulled up outside a door set in a high mud wall. A few barefooted boys in skullcaps and dirty pantaloons ran up chattering. Yunus led us through the doorway and into the bustling courtyard of his brother's house. The sun streamed down and there was immediate warmth after the rush of cold air in the jeep.

Two or three shadowy figures vanished through the door of a squat building across the yard ... the women of the household. A straggle of hens pecked about in the dirt and the snow. A few children were playing at one end, while animals could be heard moving about in a makeshift building against the courtyard wall. The place had an untidy air of prosperity, and the people looked well fed and content.

A great shout, a door flung open and into the yard leaped a tall, lean man who ran across to us. ‘Yunus!’ He embraced him and pummelled him affectionately.

‘Koshan, my brother!’ Yunus grinned and in a few quick phrases explained to Koshan how he had found us at the mosque.

Koshan gave us an appraising look and, grasping Geoff by the arm, led us both over to a table set with chairs under a cloth awning. He called through a door, and in a moment a boy appeared with tea and sweet cinnamon cakes. Beyond the courtyard wall the snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush seemed to ring the little village. While the boy served us, Koshan fell into earnest talk with his brother. He was handsome, clean-shaven save for a luxuriant black moustache, tall and probably in his late thirties. A yellow,

embroidered waistcoat over a silken shirt hung loosely over his black pantaloons. His eyes were clear, and he radiated strength and health.

Yunus turned to us. Please pardon our rudeness, but there is much business I must discuss with my brother.' He gestured around at this domestic rural scene. 'I grew up here as a child. But I had a clever way with words, and my father sent me to Kabul to study the holy books with the wise men and the mullahs. I miss this place. Then when I was older my father's brother paid for me to go to Germany to study at university there, and I learned German - and English too.' He paused. 'If you can be patient with us, soon there will be wrestling.' He turned and talked earnestly again with Koshan. Wrestling! Geoff and I looked at each other. I hoped I would not be called upon to wrestle. Fortune would not favour me. Especially if I had to pit myself against such as Koshan.

The door in the courtyard wall swung open with a bang, and a great thickset figure strode across the yard. Wearing a full-length leather kaftan, beautifully embroidered with swirling patterns and lined with coarse wool, he wore a tall sheepskin hat, carried a short whip and presented a formidable appearance. Of indeterminate age, he had a thick black moustache and gleaming white teeth. One hand on his hip he called harshly to the two brothers. They jumped up and responded with loud, angry voices. Faces appeared at the unglazed windows behind us, and women could be seen in another doorway, their faces and figures enveloped in the long chadors of purdah. Through the gateway behind the stranger crept ragged figures in ones and twos to take up positions squatting against the wall at the far end of the yard. Children stopped their games and stood staring. Then the stranger called out again, threateningly and the air was tense, expectant. Geoff and I glanced at each other uneasily and began to edge back towards the wall. Suddenly all three burst out laughing and rushed together, thumping each other and embracing. Smiles creased every face, and we relaxed, wondering what was going on.

The stranger was called Shahbaz. He spoke in a booming voice, and when he laughed he erupted. 'Shahbaz is my wrestling partner,' beamed Yunus affectionately, taking the burly figure by the arm and drawing him over to us. Shahbaz smiled gravely and almost crushed my hand.

'What was all that business at the gate about?' asked Geoff later. We were both curious.

Yunus threw back his head and laughed. ‘It sounds bad, nay? But I can come here only two or three times a year for wrestling with Shahbaz, and when he comes we must insult each other. I suppose it is a sign of madness, but we make these great insults. When we wrestle we become very good at it. We try to make each other angry.’

Geoff grinned. ‘Yeah, I know what you mean. We do it in Australia, too. Especially when we're good mates. The more you abuse the other bloke the better you get on together. Sometimes it's like a bit of a contest. But only amongst friends. If anyone else does it then there's trouble.’

‘Yes, also it is with us.’ Yunus called the boy again and issued rapid instructions. ‘We will wrestle now.’ He and Shahbaz disappeared inside one of the low mud buildings, while more and more people filed into the yard, ranging themselves about the walls. Merchants, traders, mullahs, bazaar-stall owners, and small farmers, all had the expectant look of children at a party. Meanwhile, servants were sweeping clear a large dry circle of beaten earth, and the boy brought us more tea.

‘Jeez, Jules!’ exclaimed Geoff. ‘This could be better than when Careless Hands shot the Canadian in the main street of Cooma!’

The two men reappeared, wearing pantaloons and stripped to the waist. A murmur went up from the crowd, and the audible sighs may have come from the half-hidden women. Shahbaz was the taller of the two and more heavily built. He had massive shoulders, while Yunus was slighter, with a well proportioned and muscular body. Both men were lightly oiled, and their arms and torsos glistened as they moved in the sunlight. They stood facing each other in the circle. Then a cantankerous-looking old warrior appeared and raised an arm high, shouting a few words at the people crowding into the courtyard. What he said we could not tell, but his words were treated with respect, the motley, ragtag crowd falling back against the walls.

Shahbaz half-crossed his eyes, arms hanging loose, then dropping one knee he lunged forward and down, catching Yunus behind the thigh with one hand and behind the neck with the other. Then twisting suddenly, he lifted him with his back and threw him hard onto the beaten ground.

"Aiyee-e-e-e-e!!" went the crowd, small boys hopping up and down gleefully. Such a quick throw was evidently not expected. In several places money changed hands. Then a hush as Yunus rolled quickly and rose to his feet smoothly. Shahbaz circled about, carefully watching his opponent, then

another lunge as he tried to grasp Yunus around the waist. Yunus was better prepared now and slid to one side, catching Shahbaz by the leg and throwing him off balance. Now there was a tangle of legs, and Shahbaz was on the ground, gasping as Yunus thumped him down on his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Giving him no time to recover he slid behind and clamped a leg around his neck, choking him and pinioning him to the ground at the shoulders.

Koshan leaned over and tapped Geoff on the chest, grinning and flexing his muscles as if to suggest that he and Geoff could try a bout after these two were done. Geoff quickly mimed himself running for his life over the hills with Koshan in hot pursuit, which set the Afghan slapping his thighs and roaring with laughter.

Meanwhile, Shahbaz had flipped himself over and applied a scissor-lock on Yunus, whose turn it was now to lie spreadeagled on the ground, writhing and twisting to be free of Shahbaz' relentless pressure. Both men were grunting and gasping, and the sweat ran off them freely. For the most part the people in the crowd watched in silence, but every good throw brought a murmur of approval, while an especially skilful grip won an "Aiyee-ee-ee-ee!!" as they began to crowd in around the wrestlers. The old warrior snarled, swore, and berated them as he prowled the inside of the circle, driving them back with savage blows from his fist. The men in the crowd were betting on their favourite, and a richly dressed, elderly merchant, wearing an elaborate green silk turban, sat cross-legged, holding the wagers and staring impassively at the spectacle.

The two combatants stood together now, grasping each other in a great hug, each straining and striving to throw the other off balance. There was scarcely any movement as their muscles drove and strained and cracked; the veins stood out in their foreheads, and their teeth bared in a ferocious grimace. Their bodies were streaked with sweat and dirt, and each heaved and worked to shift the other. Then Yunus slackened his grip for a moment, giving Shahbaz a chance to lift him to the side. But Yunus straightened again, applied a sudden pressure in a different place, and Shahbaz was over, flat in on his face in the dirt, looking surprised, with Yunus kneeling triumphantly on his back, pinning him to the ground.

The bout had not been in progress more than fifteen minutes but both men had had enough and they signalled servants to bring them gowns to throw over their sweating bodies. Yunus was deemed the winner, and the

men in the crowd broke up into small groups, arguing the finer points of the contest and settling their wagers. They were unhappy that the fight had not gone on longer, but Shahbaz and Yunus ignored them and went inside.

A few men wandered over and stood talking to Koshan, eyeing Geoff and me curiously. But most squatted on their haunches absorbing the warmth of the sun, since nobody was in a hurry to go anywhere. One of the refreshing aspects of life in such ‘undeveloped’ countries is that one is freed from the burden of regulated time. Here in Afghanistan the greatest enjoyment of life is to be extracted from today, for it is here and now, while yesterday is past, and tomorrow is in the hands of Allah. Men do not seem demoralised by the fear of future security, so what better than to enjoy now what God has freely bestowed, and quietly absorb the warmth of the sun.

Chapter Six

‘How do you like our little games?’ A servant had sponged Yunus down and he was dressed again, drinking tea with us under the awning. We smiled, and he went on, ‘We do not have many opportunities for games or sports, so even if it is just wrestling, everyone comes. It is an enjoyment, and there is a chance to bet some afghanis, and maybe win a little.’

‘Do you have much wrestling?’ asked Geoff.

‘No, not here. But sometimes in Kabul. You like it?’

‘No. Not especially wrestling, but I am keen on Athletics ... you know, running.’ And Geoff told him of his love for the marathon. Koshan and Shahbaz watched and listened politely, and every now and again Yunus would translate into Farsi for their benefit. Shahbaz leaned forward, looking at Geoff, and spoke rapidly to Yunus.

‘He wants to know how many wives you have. He thinks you must be wealthy and important men for your country to send you here to Afghanistan.’

Geoff chortled. ‘We haven't any wives at all,’ he laughed. ‘And anyway our countries are very backward. We are only allowed to have one wife each.’ Yunus translated, and Shahbaz and Koshan shook their heads in disbelief, then looked sympathetic. Obviously the Emir of Australistan was an ignorant man not to allow this elementary right, sanctioned by Allah and the Koran.

‘Bacha!’ Shahbaz called for the boy to bring the hookah, and the gurgle of the water-pipe mingled with the conversation as it was ceremoniously puffed and passed around. Shahbaz then asked about horses in our countries and why were we not riding through Afghanistan. Clearly he had little regard for automobiles and felt that people who rode about in them were debasing themselves. The thought had crossed my mind that some of our technological achievements might one day prove to have been illusory, and that in time we might learn again from ancient ways of life that still functioned in other societies. Maybe Central Asia preserved something of importance for us. There was a warmth in social relations here, an unspoken but deep interdependence not yet compromised by the depersonalized and mechanical encounters that often pass for social intercourse in our own society. Although it had to be said that Afghanistan’s public segregation of women was not to our taste.

‘It is good that you run,’ said Yunus seriously, looking at Geoff. ‘Allah has given us fine bodies, and they are not to be made into skins for holding fat. I saw many people in Europe, and they are perhaps also in America, who have no respect for their bodies and let them become fat and useless. It is an insult to God!’ He spoke with feeling, eyes sharp and intent. ‘Even here in Afghanistan, where I suppose it is more difficult to get fat, even here there are those who are wealthy and stupid enough to eat nothing but rich food and sweets. Do people in Australia take more care?’

Geoff was a little taken aback by this line of question. ‘Oh yeah ... I mean no. No, they don't. I suppose we get just as fat as other people. We’ve certainly got our share of beer bellies, that's for sure!’

‘Beer bellies? What is that? Oh, beer in the belly ... yes, I know. In Germany they drink much beer and I see many men there with ...what you call ‘beer bellies”’. Geoff nodded, and Yunus went on, ‘But you are not drinking beer. I can see. You do not have the beer belly.’

‘I wouldn't be too sure of that,’ said Geoff laughing. ‘I love the stuff.’

‘But you are not a fat man,’ said Yunus.

‘Yeah. Well, that's because I don't drink all that much of it. Anyway I get a lot of exercise. I run up to a hundred miles a week when I'm training, so I suppose it doesn't have much effect on me.’

‘One hundred miles in a week.’ Yunus was impressed and translated for Koshan and Shahjaz. Koshan got up and came round to feel Geoff's calf muscles, which were very solid. He grinned up at Geoff, whistling his admiration. ‘But it is important also you are eating good food,’ went on Yunus. ‘Two things. Good food - not too much of it - and good exercise. That is all what is necessary for a man to remain healthy and content until he dies.’

‘Yeah, but just what exactly is good food?’ said Geoff. ‘It is very hard to know what the best diet is. In Australia my teacher used to work us very hard, running in sand, and he would get us to eat raw oats, raisins, sultanas and other dried fruits, honey and nuts. We didn't eat much meat. Then I was running in America and they were very keen I should eat a lot of meat. Fresh vegetables, and lots of steak, that's what they reckoned. Then I went to Japan and it was quite different. The athletes there had me eating beans, various kinds of grain and seaweed. I didn't like that at all, but it seemed to do them a lot of good. And now Afghanistan is the first place where we've had meat since I left Japan, and by God we’ve enjoyed it, too, even though

we've been months without meat and feeling very fit. But the point is, everyone can't be right. There are those who eat a little meat and do very well. Those who eat mostly meat and do very well, and those who eat no meat at all and still do very well. What is a man's best diet?'

'If I could answer that question I should have the solution to something that puzzles men over many ages. It is a simple problem, but it is not easy to give a simple answer. According to the way God has constructed man, it is probably meant that he should eat food from the earth.

'Our teeth, as you know, are mostly those of plant-eaters, but also there are those few which are the remnants of teeth like the fangs of the flesh-eating beasts. So which is it to be - flesh or plants? Probably you would say both, since that seems to be the way the teeth are made. But is that the way it is?'

'No,' replied Geoff. 'As I said, I have been in places where they eat an enormous amount of meat, and in others where they eat none. Anyway, when man was evolving he was a plant-eater before he was a flesh-eater. Flesh-eating came last, after man had come down from the forests and food was harder to find. But the canine teeth are smaller now than when man lived in the trees. They might have been used for fighting and self-defence in the forests, but I don't think they were used so much for flesh-eating.'

'Yes, perhaps that is so. So the teeth do not teach us very much. Perhaps it is better to look in another direction. What is the food we eat really for?'

'Well, give us proper nourishment, I suppose ... nourishment we need for our bodies to grow in a healthy way.' Geoff was becoming quite involved. It was a subject he loved to debate. We had often argued about the best sort of lifestyle and diet for good health, arguments we were never able to resolve.

Yunus was relaxed, obviously enthused about a topic he also liked to discuss. He was authoritative, yet spoke in a gentle voice. It was midday, and warm, but a keen breeze swayed the willows outside the high wall. 'What makes the growth, then, in animals and plants?'

'Nourishment.'

'Yes, but even beyond that. Is it not the life force? I think maybe you would call it energy.'

'Energy? Yes, I suppose that's right. Energy it is, in plants and animals. You can't get anywhere without it.'

'And where does this energy come from?'

‘Well, I suppose it must come originally from the sun.’

‘Yes. All the life force in animals and plants comes from the sun. But animals generally cannot use it directly. They must get it from the plants, the only living things which take the sun's energy directly and combine it with water and the elements to make the living tissues of the plant. Animals then must get the life force second-hand, as it were. They must eat the plants in the form of fruit and nuts, berries and leaves, grains and grasses. And then they are getting it distilled, directly from the sun and the earth, by the very good favour of the plants. Is it not wonderful?’ Yunus beamed, spreading his arms wide, inviting us to share his enthusiasm.

‘Oh, yeah?’ Geoff was sceptical. ‘I guess what you’re saying is that man should not naturally be a meat-eater.’

‘Is that what I said?’

‘It’s near enough.’

‘Well, we must look closer. If an animal does not eat plants as food, there is only one way in which he can get the life force he needs to live; and that is by eating the flesh of another animal. And this flesh is tissue which has already used the life force, so it is in a very true sense dead. But if the animal which is being eaten is also a flesh-eater, then the eater is getting his life force far removed from its original source, the sun. So there is not so much of it available. That is why it is not usual that flesh-eaters feed on other flesh-eaters. They eat plant-eaters. So man has this choice, and that is where the problem arises. When there is a choice, then people seem to come to one side or to the other and believe their choice is right. Then they have pity on the other ones who do not share that view. For myself, I believe it is simple. Man should eat whatever fresh food is available where he lives. If he lives in a harsh rocky place - like much of this country - then he will eat meat from the flocks of goats and sheep. He will have milk and cheese and maybe eggs if he is lucky. But rice and maize will not be so plentiful, so he will have to eat food from the earth whenever he gets the chance. But a man who lives in a river valley where the soil is good, and many crops grow, then he should eat mostly plant food and perhaps balance it with a little meat when he gets the chance. That is the important thing ..... to balance your food according to what your body knows. People do not understand their bodies. So be still, listen, and understand. That is the secret. Be still, listen and understand. Ha! I started by wrestling and now I am being a schoolteacher!’

We sipped our tea in silence, and I reflected on the curious nature of things that we should have come from two modern, technologically advanced countries to a poor, 'backward' land to hear a rational approach to nutrition, free of the talk of calories, multivitamins, carbohydrates and all the other 'essential' components.

'Well, do you think such a diet will keep a man healthy and free from sickness?' Geoff was still immersed in the discussion and not ready to let it be.

'Such a diet?' Mirhud was indignant. 'Such a diet? I did not speak of a particular diet. It is necessary only to be still, listen and understand. Then if you eat according to the harmony of your body, your whole being will be in harmony. Your body will function according to its nature, your mind will be free from discord and become tranquil, and this will result in the even flow of your emotions. Finally your spirit will preside over the whole man and you will come close to God.'

I thought this was a fine, impressive exposition, but Geoff was sceptical by nature and was suspicious of such a simple prescription. 'Oh, yeah? So is that going to stop a man from being sick? Get the body in tune, and you'll never be sick again?'

'Perhaps. But your understanding must be ..... what do you call it? ..... mature. Yes, mature. This does not come at once. It takes many years to understand properly. In our religion we have a time called Ramadan. Do you know of this?'

'Ramadan. Yes, I've heard about it. Isn't that a month when you only eat at night, or after the sun goes down? Something like that?'

'Yes, I'm afraid that is the way it often is. But Ramadan should be a period of fasting. It is common in many religions, fasting of one kind or another. In ancient times it was understood more, when people understood natural ways much better. It is simply a time to fast so as to get the body back to a condition of health. It is also a way to cure sickness. And it is the way of nature. You will know that a wounded or sick animal cures itself by fasting. It will go, lie down and rest in a quiet place, and not eat until it is well again. It is the way of nature and, like many other wise things, it was brought into our practice of religion by the old ones. But fasting… that is a subject in itself, but now it is time to go back to Kabul.'

He got to his feet and eyed us quizzically. 'Do you go now to Kandahar, or Mazar-i-Sharrif?'

We looked at each other. Mazar-i-Sharrif was in the north - on the other side of the Hindu Kush Range, not far from the southern border of Soviet Russia - while Kandahar was to the south.

'Mazar-i-Sharrif,' we said. 'What's the road like?'

Yunus gave a short laugh. 'It is OK when there is no snow, but at this time the Pass of Shibar is closed, I think.' He turned and spoke to his brother. 'Yes, it will not open for another month. Koshan says you are welcome here as his guests if you wish to wait until it is open. There will be trucks and buses waiting to go at that time, so if you wish .....' He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands out, taking in the little village. It was generous and tempting, but the urge to keep moving was strong and we declined the offer.

Reluctantly we took our leave of Koshan and Shahjaz and returned to Kabul with Yunus.

'There is a small room near the mosque where you can stay while you are in Kabul,' he said as he let us off by the main bazaar. 'We have had a nice time together. Perhaps we shall meet again.' We shook him warmly by the hand and watched him drive off.

'You know, Jules, it's a year today since I started travelling.' We trudged off along the muddy alleys, ankle deep in slush and melting snow. 'I set out to go to England via America, but now I'm in Afghanistan via Alaska ..... and I'm flat broke.' We tramped on in silence. It didn't seem to matter that I had very little money and Geoff had none. We had developed a fatalistic approach to travelling. We'd keep moving, see what we could and hope for the best. So far we'd been lucky. We reflected on the fact that we'd had no bills for accommodation since Calcutta. This had not been our original intention, but the fact was that our expenses had been only for food and a few train journeys, so at this rate we would make it to Teheran on the cash I was carrying, and Geoff's money should be waiting for him.

'G'day there!' Geoff called. We had come on to a main thoroughfare where a few high clearance Russian cars passed infrequently. And he'd spotted an American station-wagon some distance away, with two clean-cut young men about to climb in. 'There's a few construction companies here, Jules,' he muttered. 'We might get a lift.' We hurried toward the car.

'G'day!'He beamed expansively at the two men and contrived to look the very soul of innocent friendliness. 'Saw your car there and thought one of you might have been Nick Ford. Do you blokes know him?' The neat

young men looked puzzled, as well they might, since Nick Ford was an instant invention.

'Hi. Nick Ford? No, can't say I know him. What outfit's he with?'

'I don't know for sure. Knew him in Boston some time back and he told me he'd be working here with some construction company. We're just here for a day or two and thought we'd look him up.' I squirmed but managed an earnest smile.

'I see. Well we're from Columbia University, here on a teacher-training program.' A pause. 'Say, why don't we run you guys out to Morrison-Knudsen to their construction office. They probably know him.'

'Thanks, that'd be great!' We climbed in and drove off. The two young men were having an argument, one beefing that the other had invited him to dinner and not invited a girl for him. He was quite put out. We listened to their conversation with interest.

One turned after a while and said, 'I guess you guys know that Kabul is a city of fun and fornication.' He went on, 'Bob, here, and I have a theory that it's the water that does it. Rhinoceros horns, you know, are an aphrodisiac. Well, we figure that a long time ago there must have been a big herd of rhinos grazing here in this valley. Then there must have been some great catastrophe, and they all got themselves buried. Now when you draw water from the wells here, there's a good deal of dissolved rhino horn in it … Well, it's just a theory, but I'll tell ya one thing, there sure is something that affects the girls when they get here. Wow!'

We arrived at the construction company's office, the two men let us off and drove on, still arguing. The construction office had air-conditioning, a row of typists, dark-suited men and memo-carrying employees scurrying about. The sight of such business efficiency in Kabul was depressing, but Geoff ran through his Nick Ford routine to a man with glazed eyes, quickly working round to the important subject of getting a lift to Kandahar.

'Hell no! It's winter, and we haven't sent a vehicle through there in two months.' Thanking him, we left and made off back into town to check on buses to Kandahar.

On the way we passed a huge, Russian-built bakery. Both the Americans and the Soviets pour aid into this very strategically placed country, each competing fiercely to be the major influence and to suck the little country into its orbit. In this 'hearts and minds' contest it was interesting to observe the different approaches. The Americans concentrate

on mammoth schemes to build airports, dams and the like, gigantic activities which the ordinary Afghan regards in much the same way as he would the waxing and waning of the moon; interesting, of course, and important, but quite remote from him. The Russians, on the other hand, take a more seductive approach - a bakery which supplies the bulk of Kabul's bread, ungainly cars which are not very good, but cheap, and hundreds of miles of roads, stretching from the Russian border, ultimately to tunnel under the Hindu Kush Range as far as Kabul. The only casualties in this struggle are likely to be the innocence and simple lifestyle of the Afghan people. They are, naturally enough, unlikely to see that Progress, the Industrial State, a High Standard of Living, all of which they believe will solve their problems, are the very things which will rip the fabric of their lives to shreds.

A mail bus would leave for Kandahar next morning, 'Inshallah', and would, for a hundred and two afghanis - about two dollars fifty, take us there. Good value for over three hundred miles, but the 'Inshallah' indicated the chancy nature of the undertaking, it being in the hands of God just when the bus would leave and when it would arrive in Kandahar, or in fact if it would make the journey at all.

We insured against the cold with two Pushtun jackets bought in the bazaar. These brightly embroidered leather waistcoats have coarse wool linings and, although giving us the appearance of eccentric dandies, nonetheless kept us warm and comfortable in the biting wind. We were not to know that within five years such jackets would become essential gear for the aspiring hippie. We spent the night in a tea-house near the bus-serai and next morning took our seats in the Royal Afghan Mail Bus.

Kabul to Kandahar bus – Royal Afghan Mail

This vehicle bears description. Brightly painted like a gipsy caravan, an oblong, box-like superstructure was mounted on the chassis of an International Truck. Inside the seats were wooden-backed benches running the width of the bus, and on its top, along the sides, gaudily painted boards formed a shallow cavity where women making the trip were obliged to perch with the luggage, exposed to whatever weather might come their way. The two seats behind the driver were 'First Class' but differed in no way from the remainder, save for their position, all being engineered for maximum human discomfort. The space between the back of one seat and the front of another was just short of that needed to sit with your legs to the front. So you sat with them tucked to one side, as did everybody else. When one person on the seat wanted to change position, it was necessary for everybody to rise as one man and do the same. The 'aisle' was taken up by little cross-seats to accommodate an extra person, so with the escape route blocked, getting in and out became a feat of gymnastics that involved climbing and crawling over all the other seats and passengers.

Our bus driver was a raw-boned, genial character clad in a turban, vivid green shirt, matching pyjama pants, and a khaki army greatcoat. He marshalled his passengers in a good-humoured way, seating us all with

polished authority. Amongst our companions were two mullahs and a superbly dressed policeman, resplendent in what could have passed for the uniform of a four-star general. We encountered these grandly attired gentlemen fairly often, the country having a decided penchant for gold braid and glittering epaulettes, whether the wearer be a military man, a policeman or an attendant in a government office. Indeed, when ex-King Amanullah visited England in 1928, it was his custom to distribute twenty-pound notes amongst those who did odd jobs for him, and at railway stations he habitually saluted gold-braided station-masters, believing them to be cabinet ministers or admirals.

Finally preparations were completed, the last passenger had squirmed his way to the last seat, the driver had been harangued lengthily by the manager of the bus company, and the great machine lumbered out of the bus-serai, through the crowded bazaar and on to the road to Kandahar. Bump! Lurch! All that day our magnificent vehicle swayed and groaned as we climbed to more than eight thousand feet through stark, black hills streaked with snow. There were stops for tea at village chaikhanas, stops for mail, stops for breakdowns and stops for prayers. For the latter, all the men got out, spread their prayer-mats on the ground and bowed, knelt, prostrated themselves and rose in rhythmic unison, firmly overseen by our two mullahs. Whatever the stop, it was welcome, since it gave some relief to tortured legs and backsides, although only at tea-stops and prayer-stops could we get out and stretch our cramped limbs.

Our chaikhana companions

The comradeship of the journey soon entered into us all, however, and before long we were good friends - except for the mullahs, who held themselves aloof, and the policeman who possessed a sour disposition.

Our final stop for the day was at midnight in a small settlement which sported a hotel with mud battlements, and a straggle of low mud buildings. Regarded as passengers of some distinction, we were expected to spend the night in the hotel with the mullahs, the policeman and the driver. But with persistent cries of 'Nay afghani! Nay afghani!', asserting thus that our money was not so plentiful that it could be squandered on hotels, Geoff led the way back to a cosy-looking chaikhana where most of our companions were already installed. Inside it was warm and dim-lit, the mud wall blackened with smoke from an ancient tin samovar, and our fellow passengers sprawled on benches, some already sleeping, others drinking tea and eating. Space was made for us, and declining hashish from a proffered hookah, we slept soundly in a corner.

We were well away by seven the next morning, without the benefit of breakfast or other preliminaries. There was still snow on the ground, but it was less cold. We had descended somewhat, and the countryside took on a different aspect. The mountains were still there, but quite bare. Without

snow, they looked unreal - like a painted backdrop for a stage play. Snow had made all the difference - you could feel its cold, be dazzled by its brightness, but now there was nothing but sparse, open tussock country. All was brown, grey and black. Mid-morning, just when we were feeling the need for food, the driver pulled in to a chaikhana. We squatted expectantly in the sun with our companions until a young lad came round with tea in little china pots, and breads as big as snow shoes. With this inside usthe day brightened. There was now an interminable delay, so sitting there in the sun we produced the paperbacks we read on such occasions – "Mr Norris Changes Trains" and "Brazilian Adventure." Geoff was reading the latter, in which Peter Fleming relates the story of the road upcountry into Brazil. Fleming's descriptions of that road tallied rather well with the one we were on, and oftimes as he peered around at our Afghan companions, Geoff would nudge me and say, 'By George, Jules, these Brazilians are colourful folk!'

Negotiating a particularly accursed creek-bed crossing in the afternoon we blew a tyre. And for an hour and a half were stuck at that little spot, with nobody permitted out of the bus save the driver and his mate. I suppose nobody expected they would take so long to change the tyre, so we sat like so many sardines and endured the wait. Near the end of this time there was a great lull. People had stopped talking and a long silence reigned. It was broken only when Geoff vented a great fart. At once the bus rocked with great gales of laughter. 'Ho! Ho! Ho!' the people went at this indiscretion.

Later, the afternoon was further enlivened by our 'General' attempting to settle a small grievance. He was an improbable character, swarthy, hooknosed, balding, with a thin, drawn face, hollow cheeks and burning black eyes. Rather than dressed like a general in a musical comedy, he would have been better cast mounted on an Arab steed, burnous flowing and eyes flashing darkly. But the sad fact was that he spent most of the time hanging out of the window being sick. During one of these chunder sessions a young fellow behind him took his hat and hid it ..... his bright, shining, high-peaked cap with the peacock-blue trimmings. Recovering from a spasm and finding his hat missing, the 'General' rounded fiercely on the inoffensive man beside him, who happened at the time to be laughing but knew nothing of the missing cap. Pulling out his revolver, the 'General' shouted angrily at the man, firing off a shot which went through the roof and must have seriously alarmed the ladies squatting there. At once there

was pandemonium. The driver applied the brakes, the bus stopped abruptly, and men began shouting and climbing over the seats in every direction. Two men grabbed the ‘General’ from behind, while another recovered his hat and placated him with soothing talk. He simmered down somewhat after a time, and we resettled ourselves when the bus restarted. But at intervals he would erupt again with an angry outburst. With the shooting over, however, it was entertaining and served to break the monotony.

The atmosphere became increasingly stifling late in the evening as we rumbled into Kandahar, and it was a great relief to clamber down from the bus. A thunderstorm was brewing, and away in the distance there were black clouds and forked lightning. A wind sprang up and we caught a few drops of rain, but the worst of it fell well beyond the town.

Kandahar, we saw, was a fine city. Apparently free of western influences, it was pure Afghan, wild, dirty, haphazard, with a garish, jaunty bazaar in which crowds of Baluchi tribesmen, nomads and merchants haggled, ate, jostled and shouted at one another in a furious hubbub. But suddenly we were accosted by a seedy individual, apparently eager to show us to a tea-house where we could sleep.

Geoff, centre of crowd, inspects his nan in Kandahar

Following him for some distance through bazaar streets and along narrow lanes, we came to a large, fortress-like building and were led up a flight of narrow steps.

'Ah!' said Geoff as we came into a bare room. 'This looks a good place to doss, Jules.'

But alas, no. A door opened and we were shown into a small room where a swarthy man in a karakul cap and dark glasses sat behind a desk. We were at Police headquarters, and the unsmiling man in dark glasses scrutinised our passports carefully whilst carrying on a long, low conversation with our seedy companion. A uniformed policeman was summoned and issued with instructions. Down the stairs again and into the street, only now with a police escort. Were we under arrest? Geoff spied a little restaurant where a man was grilling liver slices.

'Let's duck in here, Jules,' he muttered. 'This bloke'll get tired of hanging around.' But as we finished our meal he reappeared, now with a horse and cart. We were loaded aboard. Clip, clop! Along the crowded streets to the outskirts of town. What was this? Hotel de Kandahar. A pretentious, mud-brick building set in a high-walled compound. The driver pulled up at the white colonnaded porch where a suave, smiling hotelier waited to greet us.

'Bon soir, messieurs. Ici l'Hotel Internationale de Kandahar!' A small bow of welcome.

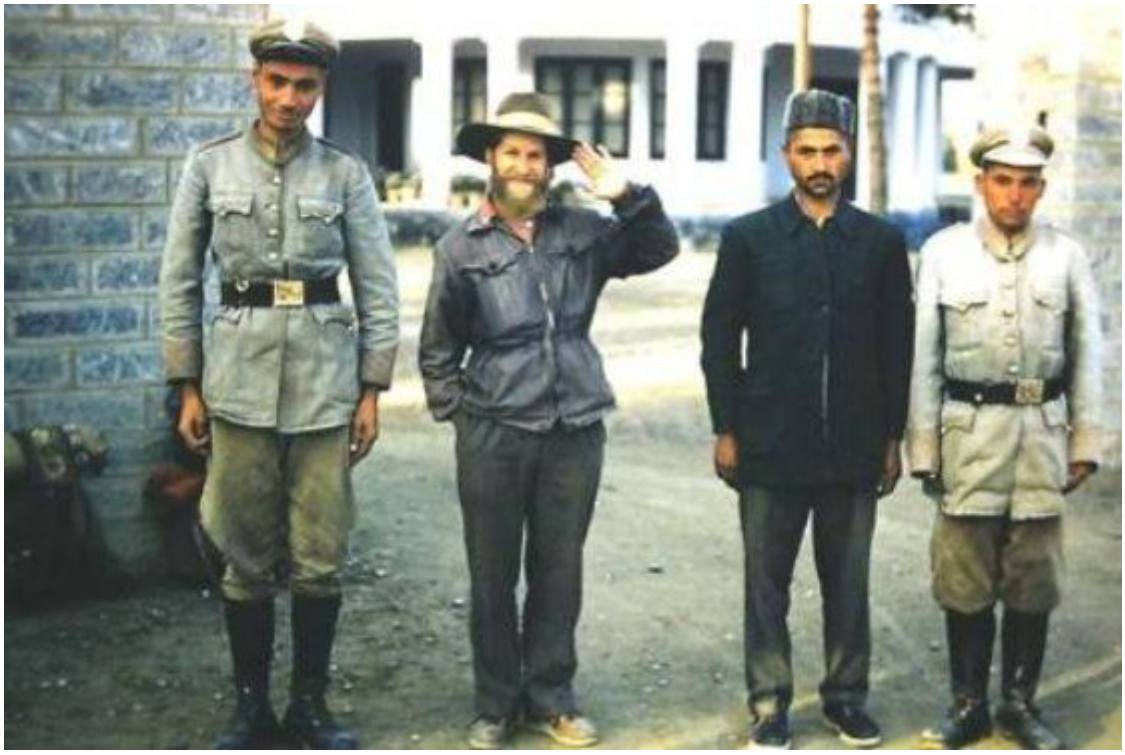
Geoff exploded. 'What the hell's this?' he railed at the policeman. 'You blokes drag us all round town when all we want is a place to sleep. You don't give us a moment's peace, and now you've brought us to a bloody hotel!' The unfortunate man looked quite crestfallen, while the hotelier wrung his hands in distress.

Geoff, lolling about at our 'hotel'. Police guard with hookah.

'We're not hotel men,' Geoff went on. 'We're tea-house men! Chaikhana! Nay afghani!' He subsided and we sat obstinately in the cart. The hotel manager explained that we had no choice. We were to be kept in the hotel by order of the chief of police. Why? He shrugged his shoulders. Who would pay? Why we would, of course - such wealthy men. No. The police chief could pay. A long argument, and finally it was agreed. The bill would be sent to the police chief, and so we slept in a bed for the first time in months.

In the morning we found we now had two police guards, one outside our door and another at the hotel entrance. The first was tall and the other quite short, their uniforms, however, were much the same size. Dressed like amiable storm-troopers, the sleeves of one ended way above his wrists, while the other's flapped about uncontrollably. But what was to be done? We lolled about indolently for an hour or two, then Geoff quietly opened the window of our room and dropped to the ground outside. I lowered our rucksacks and followed. In a moment we had crept round to the high iron gates at the front of the hotel. There was one of the policemen, sitting on a chair and smoking a hookah, eyes half closed. He had not seen us. Slipping

round the gates we made off up the road at a good pace, looking back from time to time to see if we were pursued.



Geoff with our guards and chief 'protector' at the Kandahar 'hotel'

By the time we reached the bazaar section of the town we had relaxed and were strolling along casually, looking for the bus-serai, where we could board the next bus to Herat, far away in the west near the Iranian border. There came a clatter in the street that sent people scattering, and up behind us rolled two red-faced policemen in a commandeered horse and cart.

'Ho, Jules!' cried Geoff gaily, 'They're after us again!' And we darted down an alley where we made ourselves inconspicuous behind a pile of grain sacks in a yard. Alas, we were quickly discovered and hauled back off along the road, presumably to police headquarters. Just as we were passing the bus-serai - a big courtyard filled with buses, people and piled baggage - Geoff spied a yellow station-wagon of the Morrison-Knudsen Construction Company parked in an adjacent street. Acting together, we stopped in our tracks, turned to our respective captors and shook them warmly by the hand, beaming, bidding them farewell and thanking them for their concern. Then, as they stood nonplussed in the centre of the street, we vanished

amongst the crowds of the bus station, emerged stealthily into the adjacent street and hid in the back seat of the construction company's station wagon.

The driver, who returned before long, was a cheerfully disposed Filipino, in no way perturbed to find two uninvited passengers hiding in the back of his car. We explained the situation. 'Hell, fellers, that's OK. I'll run you out to camp. I'm pretty sure they've got a truck going to Herat soon.' And he went on to explain how that Geoff and I had actually been 'detained' for our own protection. It seemed the king, in Kabul, had proclaimed increased land taxes and decreed that women were no longer obliged to wear the chador - the all-enveloping cloak of purdah. But the mullahs, who held sway in Kandahar, had other ideas. Very quickly they stirred people up against these new laws, and there were riots, killings and much damage to property. Only the previous week a mob had gone on the rampage and killed a woman schoolteacher who had elected to wear western dress. Then they burned down the school. Several cars had been set on fire and an American had had his ear cut off. Far from being under arrest, we had on the contrary been under police protection so that we should come to no harm.

'Jeez!' said Geoff contritely, 'I feel a bit of a rat.' I felt the same. Yet neither of us had any qualms about being alone with a crowd of Afghans, no matter how fierce and villainous they might appear, since we'd found them good-hearted, kindly people who scrupulously observed the laws of hospitality. Furthermore, since neither of us was any cleaner or better dressed than the average Afghan, we flaunted no display of wealth. Nevertheless, we were much chastened by this official concern for our safety and determined to inform the police chief as soon as possible that we had left Kandahar, and were making for Herat.

Morrison-Knudsen had a truck going to Herat that afternoon, and the Afghan driver was happy to take us. A little further than the distance from Kabul to Kandahar, the journey would involve two nights on the road. Sixty miles from Kandahar, however, we rolled into the Afghan Engineering Company's construction camp at Chah-i-Anjir in the Helmand River Irrigation Project, where Morrison-Knudsen had some involvement. This enormous enterprise had been started some twenty-two years earlier and had received much help and assistance from the UNO, and it was largely under Afghan direction. There were about twenty separate irrigation projects in hand, involving almost the whole of the arid south-west corner

of Afghanistan, centred on the Helmand and Arghandab Rivers, which rose to the north in the mountains of the Hindu Kush. The aim is to bring as much as possible of this land into production of wheat and other grains.

A German doctor at the camp took us in hand and we ate at the camp canteen - beer, veal cutlets, and plum pudding. It was astonishing fare.

'I must eat this cutlet before it vanishes, Jules,' said Geoff, 'I'm not sure this isn't a dream.'

The doctor told us that in ancient times this area had been a network of irrigation canals, and when Alexander the Great passed this way with his armies it had been one of the granaries of Asia. The great irrigation works were destroyed around twelve hundred AD when the hordes of Ghengis Khan swept over the mountains from the northern steppes; and it was hoped that the present project would bring the area back into something like its original production.

Geoff, the German doctor and his wife, Helmand River behind.

He and his wife drove us out to see some ruins of this civilisation at Q'ala Bist - not far from the camp - and we climbed to the top of an ancient fortress that dominates a huge tract of desert country, part of which is now under irrigation. He told us that nobody knew just who the people were that

inhabited this place, but since ancient Greek coins were sometimes found there, it was likely that Alexander had besieged and conquered it. Perhaps it was simply part of the later Greco-Bactrian kingdoms.

Coming down from the top we came upon an old mullah giving instruction to a younger one using an aged and much venerated copy of the Koran. The doctor greeted the two men, and after speaking with them in Farsi for a moment, introduced us as two holy men from Australistan. They greeted us warmly, the older one promptly offering Geoff the holy book, inviting him to read and interpret a verse or two.

Geoff's ignorance of Arabic script was no hindrance, and he launched immediately into a spirited recitation of 'The Man from Snowy River". The mullahs were much impressed and commented to the doctor that the people of Australistan were clearly well served.

'If even the mullahs think we look like mullahs, Jules,' observed Geoff later, 'then the general public will be easily deceived!'

That the Afghans are a hardy race was attested by the following tale related by the doctor. A man walked into his surgery at the camp one evening and removed his trousers to reveal an almost severed penis and scrotum. It came out that he had been sleeping with another man's wife in his village and the husband had come to know about it. He was outraged and ordered his wife to make love to the man once more. Then when he fell asleep she was to take a knife and cut off his penis. She did just that. The man left the village immediately, abandoning all his belongings, for he knew that if he returned the husband would surely kill him. Proud, fierce folk, and very tough. The man had walked several miles to the surgery.

Chapter Seven

The truck started out again next morning, and we rolled along through flat open country, stopping and starting throughout the day. It was cold, and we lay stretched out in our sleeping-bags atop a load of cement, and regarded the fantastic purple mountains rising sharply from the saltbush plains with a languorous disbelief.

Boarding the truck to Herat

As the day progressed we acquired a goat, three hens and an assortment of wild Afghans, turbans wound about their faces to protect them from the wind and the choking dust.

There were none of your city refinements about these fellows. They hawked and spat continually, sometimes over the side, sometimes at each other, and occasionally at Geoff or me. Then for a while they diverted themselves with boot-throwing and selected one or other of their number as targets, hurling boots at him until he rose up in wrath and beat his tormentors about the ears with the offending boot. All this went on with much rich abuse and good-tempered yelling. Finally it was my turn to be ‘target’. I was suffering from dysentery at the time and not really in the mood for this kind of boisterous fun. So after enduring several ‘direct hits’,

I lost patience and hurled two of the aggravating boots out into the desert. Instant uproar. Were these not valuable boots? Had they not been acquired at great expense? Why then had this miserable one with the look of an ill-starred goat acted so offensively? A swarthy, brooding fellow on the roof of the cab started angrily toward me, and with a sinking feeling I recalled the policeman on the bus threatening murder for the loss of his cap.

Foothills of the Hindu Kush from the truck to Herat

Geoff, however, rose to his feet with a benign expression and, placing his outstretched palm gently against the chest of the advancing tribesman, rapped imperiously with the other on the roof of the cab. The driver pulled up and Geoff, bestowing a salutation on us all, climbed down, retrieved the boots from the desert and returned them to their owner. Then, hunkering back down in his place, he joined his hands together, bowed serenely like a bearded Buddha, and squatted without a word. Nonplussed by this, our companions clearly regarded his action as having a religious significance. Perhaps he was some kind of wandering holy man. In any case, henceforth we were treated with considerable deference.

We came to the city of Farah and pulled in at the bus-serai. There was time for bread and tea, and a compulsory interview with another

magnificent police ‘general’, who made copious notes from our passports. Then away again, rolling across the arid plains. So the day passed. We rode along in a sort of torpor, not caring a damn about time. One hundred and sixty-five miles in twenty-four hours is fine going, you concede, when all the stops that have to be made are considered. After all, a man must visit his relatives, pee, chat to camel-drivers, take chai, peer at the engine, and squat in the dust to discuss the ways of the world. These are the essential matters, and if in the course of events you happen to pass from Kandahar to Herat, then truly Allah has smiled upon your affairs.

Chaikhana-wallah at Farah

The sun set slowly, etching the mountains black against the rising stars, and the cold became intense. Nevertheless, with the monotonous lurching and swaying we fell asleep, and the truck continued along the rutted road.

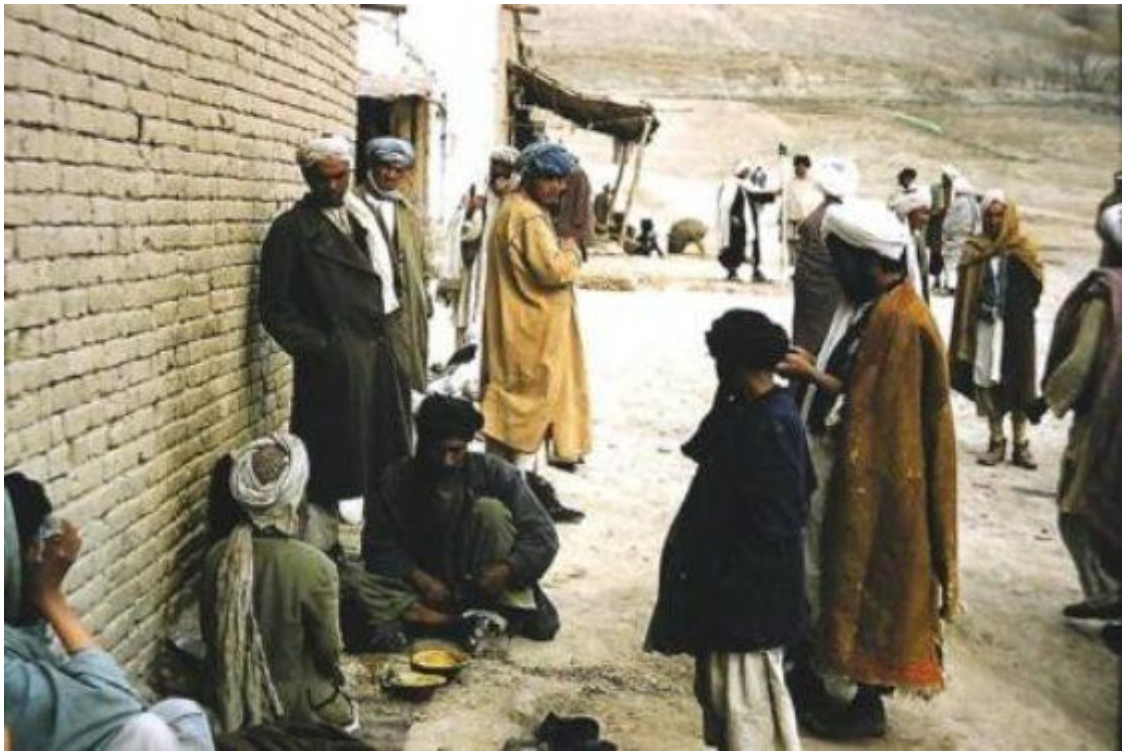
We entered Herat in the morning in time to witness a parade of ‘generals’ - whole companies of policemen marching by, rank upon rank. Some were tailored Nazi-style, some Italian, but all wore high, peaked caps, jodhpurs and jackboots.

Later we were brought to the police headquarters for the customary passport scrutiny and, seizing the opportunity, brewed ourselves some

porridge in an unoccupied room. We were about to consume this when the door opened and in filed a line of ‘generals’, in uniforms so splendid that they appeared tailored with the neatness of their fit. Their jackboots gleamed and the turquoise hatbands of their peaked caps were spotless.

‘Come in! Take a seat!’ said Geoff through a mouthful of porridge, inviting them in with an expansive wave of the hand. ‘Make yourselves comfortable. And we went on with our meal as though it were perfectly normal to have six Afghan ‘generals’ sitting beside us at breakfast. Their names were Ahmed, Hussein, Abdul, and the like, nicely introduced to us by an English-speaking official summoned for the purpose, and as respectful as can be, they sat on a row of chairs watching expectantly. They seemed disappointed and a little confused when we packed away our belongings, shook each of them by the hand and left.

Later we discovered that they believed us to be their new English teachers.



Some Herat folk, before the onslaught of ‘generals’

The Persian border was a mere seventy miles away, so we made inquiries about taking the bus. Estimates of the time of its departure ranged from eleven am to four pm, and the reckoning of the fare varied by as wide

a margin. As a result we saw little of Herat, our last Afghan city, but the impression remains of wide, slow-moving streets, mud buildings glowing pale gold against a deep blue sky; two green parks bordered with enormous pine trees, and the ancient mosque, an apparently haphazard collection of domes and minarets, whose proportions and colours were deeply satisfying.

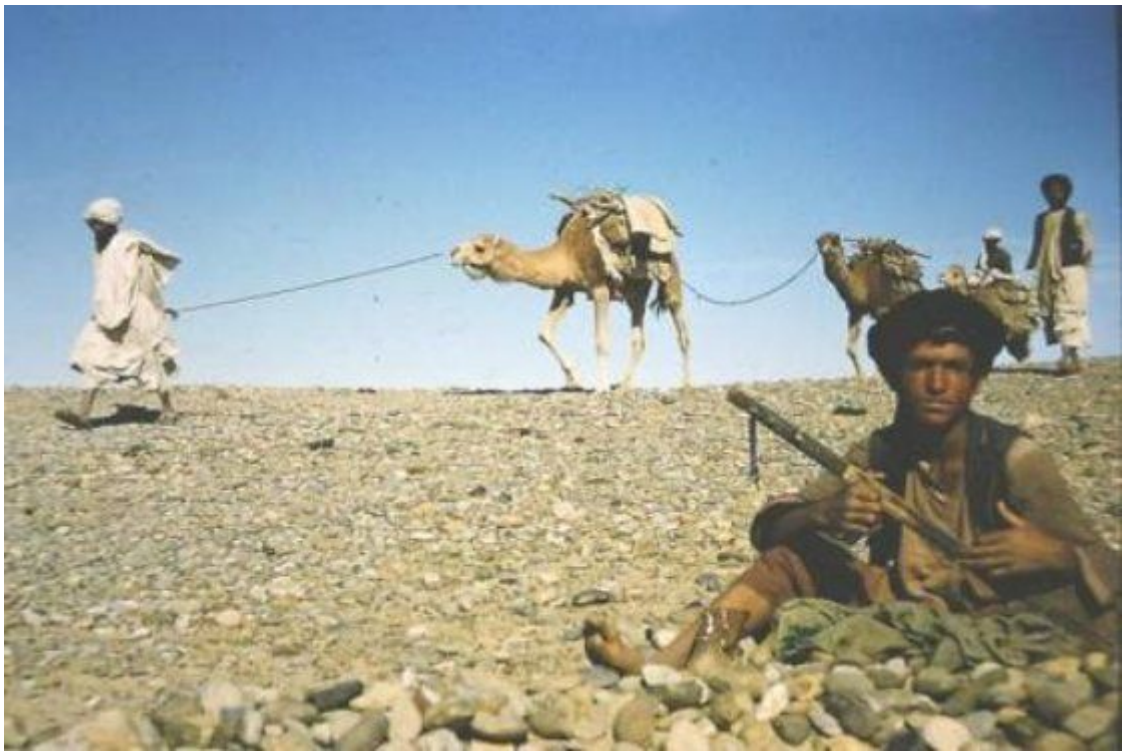
Wary horseman beyond Islam Q'ala

Before we departed, our driver bought some daffodils. Around the corner he bought meat, and further up the road he stopped for petrol. Finally we were away. The daffodils were given to a rough-clad soldier who, tiring of attempting to fix his bayonet inside the bus, sat, daffodils in hand, sniffing blissfully.

Some miles from the border settlement of Islam Q'ala, there was a nomad encampment of low-slung black, goat-hair tents, with a few camels tethered nearby. Several huge Afghan hounds ran out at us, baying. Fierce, deep-chested beasts, they loped alongside for a while, snarling and snapping.

Then we were at the border post and another passport inspection. Our visas expired that day, so we could scarcely have timed our departure better. There was vague, uncertain talk of a bus that would come from Iran that night, or the next day, or maybe the next night, and which would return as far as the Iranian city of Mashad. This Iranian city would suit us well, but we were scarcely prepared to wait hours - or perhaps days - until the bus arrived. We would have to walk.

So off we set, determined to march across the desert into Iran. Night had fallen by the time we reached the stone column marking the actual Afghan border, so we unrolled our sleeping-bags and stretched out under a wide, deep sky alive with stars of astonishing brilliance. There was the sound of an approaching horse. A grey-clad soldier appeared out of the darkness, waving a bayonet. He dismounted and squatted with us while he smoked a cigarette, then rode off again into the night. He had been sent to find out if we were still on Afghan territory.



Camels, a musician and a featureless plain

Several hours' trudging across the featureless plain in the morning toward a mirage of buildings brought us to a single, but undeniably real, building - the Iranian Quarantine Station - where we were greeted warmly and shown true Persian hospitality by the occupants. They plied us with tea and rye bread until a bus arrived to take us to Yusofabad, some miles further on, where later we took another bus through to Mashad. The country was flat and largely barren, with snow-capped mountains rising sharply from the plain. The road was rough and the ride bumpy, but we rolled along at a fine rate and pulled into the city of Mashad in the early afternoon.

Geoff was keen to press on to Teheran with all speed, since his money would be waiting, and he was fed up with being financially dependent on me. Accordingly he urged me to find the railway station and do whatever was necessary to get us on the train. I left him seated in a chai house with strict instructions not to stray. It was an unfortunate fact that he had an appalling sense of direction and, had he wandered away, would never have got back to where he started from. When I did return, however, he was in earnest conversation with a young Iranian cleric.

'Jules', he enthused, 'Jalil here wants us to go and talk to his students about Australia.' He grinned at this Jalil, a dark-eyed young fellow with a luxuriant black beard and flowing robes. 'He's got a school round the corner. We'll go and give them a few lessons before we get on the train.'

So a little later we climbed the stairs of a dingy mud-brick building to a small bare classroom with benches, a blackboard, and about thirty boys in an assortment of clothes from rags to recognisable shirts and trousers. Since our own dress fell somewhere within this range, we felt very much at home. Jalil said it was a religious school for poor children, a madrassa, he called it, in this holy city. This was news to us. We hadn't known we were in a holy city, especially one with a steady stream of pilgrims, millions of them apparently, all anxious to visit the burial place of an important imam. We somehow managed to get the fellow confused, believing the holy one to be none other than the mighty Harun al-Rashid, eighth century Caliph of Baghdad, immortalised in the Thousand and One Nights. How he came to be buried so far from home puzzled us somewhat since nobody could explain it. We were eventually put on the right track, however, when we learned that holy one of the Mashad shrine was another chap, the Eighth Imam, Ali Ridha, a very important Shia divine.

Our class of boys knew nothing about Australia, so Geoffrey seized the opportunity to prance about the room as a kangaroo, wiggle unconvincingly as a platypus, and regale them with terrifying tales of man-eating sharks. But as these had to be rendered into Farsi by Jalil, they must have lost something in translation, since the boys remained silent and mystified.

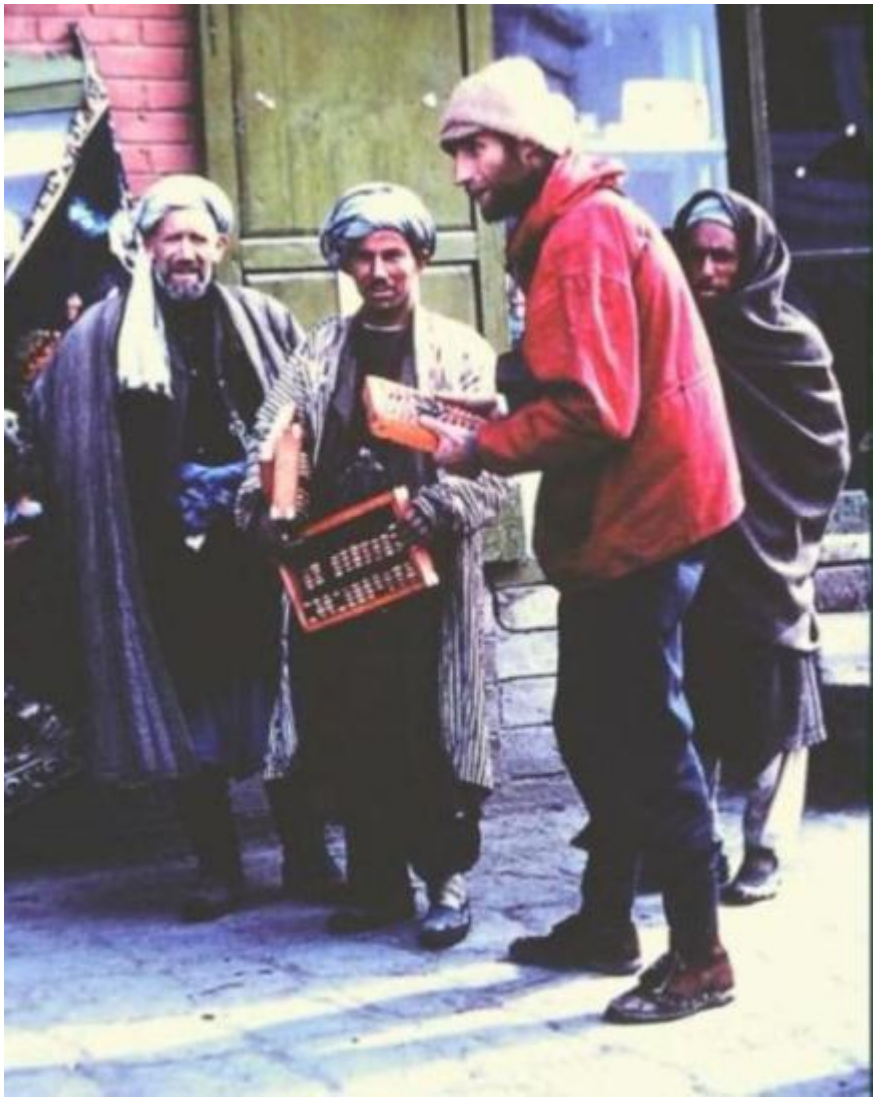
That evening we took the night train to the capital, Tehran, and settled comfortably into a third-class compartment with three others. After the trains of India it was unparalleled luxury; seats for all, no crowding, and a man who regularly provided us with tea. When it came time to sleep, Geoff

climbed up into the luggage rack, I slid under a seat, one man occupied the floor, and the others had a seat apiece.

In the morning we were visited by the ticket-collector. Such a person clearly enjoys great prestige and holds a highly sought position in Iran, since a line of four or five dignitaries moved in solemn procession behind him down the corridor, stopping to inspect tickets at each compartment. They stopped at ours. A squat, short-necked man detached himself from the line and bowed, while his associates stood by respectfully. He extended his hand requesting our tickets and accepted them reverentially, in the manner of a high priest receiving a sacrificial offering. Clasping the ticket in both hands he swept it aloft as though an offering to God, appraised it critically, clipped it back and front in a blur of speed, and returned it with a splendid flourish and a polite bow. His duty now discharged, the collector resumed his position at the head of the line and the whole assembly bowed, smiled and moved on.

Teheran possessed none of the charm of the Afghan cities, being more like a provincial European town than anything else. Still, moving into a poorer quarter, we bought bread and made our way to a nearby tea-house.

Dim and smoky, lit by a kerosene lamp which threw large and portentous shadows across stained walls and arches, this seemed more in keeping with the Persia of old. Its occupants were friendly and affable. We had learned an engaging Persian custom whereby strangers, with an expressive gesture, offer to share their food with one another before commencing to eat. These invitations are invariably returned, so it is nearly impossible to eat without being on the very best terms with all and sundry. We offered our bread in this fashion and were accepted at once by the patrons.



Jules negotiates with locals, Mashad

Geoff, who had never ceased to fill his diaries as we travelled, settled down at a table to write and described the place this way: '.....now it's 7.30 pm and I'm sitting in a chai-house in Teheran, a dingy little place opening into a lane in the old part of town. The domed roof is stained with smoke, and brickwork shows through the fallen plaster. About twenty of the shiftiest-looking, unshaven hoboes this side of Sing Sing sit around on boxes, benches and rickety chairs. One bloke has his foot wrapped in a bag. In a secluded corner a man breaks loaf-sugar into small lumps with a hammer. He works ceaselessly, regardless of anyone else. Then there are the others. The proprietor dispenses tea dressed in a black beret and mustard-yellow roll-neck sweater. He could be in Marseilles. Then the bloke opposite me, a bleary, bloodshot type sucking a hashish-loaded hubble-

bubble. “Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle,” he says. Or the character in the woolly-lined jacket conversing with Jules in French. He says his mother was a Turk and that he spent eleven years decorating a shrine in Constantinople with gold inlay. Oh hell, I can’t describe this place - I’ve eaten too much bread - half a kilo - ugh! There’s patchy linoleum on the table, its pattern long sunk in grime, and I’ve got a white china plate with a pink flower design and a large hunk out of the rim. Shah Mohammed Reza is here too - a glossy print of him in evening dress peering down from an archway. The walls are covered with pictures from magazines; girls and wrestlers, rallies and the Yeomen of the Guard; an ad for Zeiss Ikon, another for Agfa. Cripes, there’s even pictures of Siamese twins and cowboys.

‘The bloke opposite me is way out. He grins toothlessly, foolishly, then whistles at an imaginary cat under the chair. A hunchback sucks his tea from a saucer and wanders off into the night. The Turk talking turkey to Jules reckons we can doss in some place called the Club Internationale. Gaffers gape at their fluency in such a strange lingo. The place is thick with smoke - smoke like you never smelt - sort of Middle Eastern aromatic. It’s...by crikey, there is a cat under there, a white one. Persian, it would have to be - no, it’s gone, and the man in the corner chips away conscientiously at his loaf sugar.’

The Turk informed us that all Iranians were ‘robbers and animals.’ It was a story we had heard many times before. In India all Pakistanis were thieves and would cut our throats, and from the Pakistanis, Afghans were murderers and not to be trusted. No doubt in due course the Turks would tell us about the cutthroats in Greece, and the Greeks about the appalling Yugoslavs. There seemed to be no way to convince these people that their neighbours were much like themselves and that we had found them all, in their different ways, good and decent people. The antagonisms are deep-seated and probably spring from ancient injustices, both fancied and real. There does not seem to be much hope for peace in the world in the face of such foolishness, and perhaps only the opportunities for increased travel and intermingling might bring much hope for the future. Or not.

We left the tea-house and set off for a large park to bed down for the night. Alas we attracted a considerable crowd, all of whom were anxious to explain that sleeping in the park was forbidden, so we followed a man who promised to take us to a place where we could sleep undisturbed. He led us to the American Mission Church. A little embarrassed, we explained to the

Mission Director how we came to be there, and he kindly allowed us to camp in the open compound. It seemed churlish not to attend the service in the morning, and we were much encouraged to hear the sermon urging us to 'shoulder our burdens and march along the rocky road to salvation.'

Shouldering our burdens we marched off to Bank Melli-Iran, the national bank, where Geoff's money and our mail should be awaiting us. This bank, we discovered, was a bastion of bureaucracy flourishing in muted tones behind an impressive marble facade. We waited some hours for the man in charge of our sort of affairs to appear, before learning that he was on leave, and that, since he possessed the key to the cupboard in which such mail was kept, nothing could be done. When would he return? Who could tell? We returned later in the day. The man was still away. Could someone else not open the cupboard and give us our mail? Impossible. Geoff picked up a large pair of scissors and advanced on the cupboard with a wrecker's gleam in his eye. 'Tut tut! Quel horreur!' squeaked the dapper clerks waving their hands in a flutter of consternation. The manager was fetched, and with the utmost reluctance he had the little cupboard opened for us. This produced some money in sterling travellers' cheques for Geoff and a letter from his Melbourne bank advising him that a draft of American dollars had also been sent, although this was not to hand. These procedures took the bank's entire working day, so we retired to refresh ourselves before making another assault the following morning.

More shuffling about from one department to another in search of the missing draft, but without success. Finally we moved in on the manager in his executive sanctuary. He made a number of phone calls and after an hour tracked down the draft, its amount inscribed in the ledgers of one of the bank's branches. 'That's the trouble with your Australian banks,' he said. 'We've had trouble with them before. They think Bank Melli-Iran is only some little bank around the corner and they address mail to Bank Melli-Iran, Central Office, Teheran! They don't realise what a huge organisation this is. Seven hundred people work here, and the postman gets confused. He could have left it on any one of seven hundred desks!' Finally,after much huffing, the money was produced and we retired, flushed with success.

Geoff's passport was now completely filled, so he had arranged to pick up a new one at the British Embassy. Here everything was calm, orderly and unruffled, and while we waited we observed a brown tweeded

gentleman, scarf round his neck and pipe in hand, very much at home as he and his spaniel took a constitutional around the grounds.

Shah's Security Policeman outside HQ, Tehran, 1960

These formalities completed, we struck out on the road to the Turkish border, having with much difficulty, secured an exit permit from the shadowy SAVAK, the Shah's infamous Security Police, an organisation so secret as to be almost impossible to locate. We progressed steadily with a series of lifts as far as the town of Khoi where, in the absence of traffic, we came to a standstill, It was a dreary town, high up in stony unproductive country where icy winds sliced through us from snow-covered mountains nearby.

Geoff packs up after our night in the lice-infested haystack, Iran.

We slept in a haystack outside the town, completely unaware that the hay was infested with lice, and were finally driven by the cold to catch a bus to the Turkish border at Bazargan. The customs and immigration buildings were set in the form of a square forming a large courtyard, half of which was in Iran and half in Turkey. It was bitterly cold and snow lay all about. Through the gate on the Turkish side stood the beautiful snow-peaked shape of Mount Ararat, seemingly only ten or twelve miles to the north.

Our stay in Turkey began with Geoff hammering loudly on the glass door of the Turkish side of the Customs Inspection Room. Having taken our leave of Iran, we were confronted with a locked door to Turkey and no sign of life. Continued hammering eventually produced a group of officials who materialised on the other side of the glass door only to point and guffaw at us with obvious enjoyment. The more Geoff danced about and hammered on the door the more uproariously they laughed, and only when they had extracted the maximum entertainment from us did they relent enough to let us in. They set about the business of stamping our documents readily enough, and we prepared to leave for the town of Erzerum. Stepping

outside we found an unbroken blanket of snow, swept by an icy wind, stretching along the road into the distance. No vehicle had passed that way in the last few hours and none was expected. It was over twenty miles to the next town, so we went back inside, where the border police were sitting about idly. Slipping into the unoccupied passport desk, Geoff donned a nearby peaked cap and demanded the papers of the official closest to him.

'Passport!' he cried peremptorily. 'Passport!'

This fellow nearly wet himself with merriment and produced his identity card, which Geoff stamped with a flourish, after peering carefully at all the entries. This pantomime was hugely enjoyed by the others, and they all lined up to have their cards stamped, chortling happily at such a lark. A fine joke like this could not be allowed to die, so I was required to take Geoff's place and run through the whole performance once more. Just then a startled young German arrived to have his papers processed and, amidst hoots of laughter, he in turn was installed behind the desk to continue the entertainment. Clearly life must have been dull on this border, and Geoff had quickly realised that if he could amuse these fellows enough with his antics they were unlikely to kick us out into the snow.

Next he hammed up the 'dying scene' from some hoary old Western movie that took his fancy. Clutching his chest, face twisted agonisingly, he reeled about the room, stumbling and staggering until at length he fell and sprawled motionless on the floor. The Turkish constabulary roared its appreciation. Bravo! Great stuff! Encore! One of them pulled out his pistol and pointed it at Geoff. 'Bang! Bang!' he went, happy as a two-year-old. Once again Geoff reeled about, enacting another lengthy and agonising death.

In the middle of these capers, however, a side door opened and the Commandant of the border post strode into the room, a stern-eyed, humourless individual who quickly dispelled the frivolity, angrily dressing down his officers and restoring the proper air of solemnity. Demanding to see our passports, he inspected Geoff and myself, his lip curling in distaste. Then with a sudden change of expression, he turned to the young German, conjured an affable smile and invited him to dine with him in his quarters. Somewhat subdued, the Turkish officials took us into a room warmed by a small peat burning stove and indicated that we could sleep there if we wished. Later, the German returned and explained that the Commandant's odd behaviour derived from the affection that many Turks have for

Germans, while at the same time detesting the British. Apparently Anzacs, being obscurely connected to the British, are not forgotten either.

There was much activity in the morning when two Iranian tourist buses appeared in the courtyard, heading into Turkey. They were filled mostly with young Iranian students off to study in Europe, and among them was a tall, pink-cheeked Englishman in a green tweed hat, who singled us out for a chat. He too was a traveller, although rather more affluent and elegant than ourselves, and our talk was of life and encounters on the road. Kashmir came up.

'You know they have a splendid sense of humour up there,' he said.

'You mean like the British?' asked Geoff.

'Well, yes,' he said. 'For example, I went into a little shop to buy some straps for my case. Actually I felt as if I were back in England and should have recognised people. Anyway, the man showed me leather ones. "Oh, no," I said. "What I want is webbing straps." "Webbing straps?" said the shopkeeper. "We only sell those to vegetarians."'

We persuaded one of the drivers to take us in his bus. There was plenty of room, it was heated and the students were a lively, humorous bunch.The police were on hand to greet us in Erzerum, and because it was a Kurdish area, it was also a military zone and all our passports were spirited away to be examined. It was a grim town, grey and cold in a featureless landscape, where dirty snow and slush lay in piles in every street. The inhabitants were equally depressing, having a beaten, hopeless look about them. The men went about hunched against the cold, in drab, patched suits and broad cloth caps which gave them the appearance of Russian workers at the time of the revolution.

We had arrived at the Otel Tehran Palas where our companions were to stay. The proprietor was so enraptured at having a house full of paying guests that he made no objection when Geoff and I unrolled our sleeping-bags in the foyer beside a little oil burner.

Morning came, and we determined to press on with all speed to Istanbul. Greece and the warmth of the Mediterranean beckoned. There was nothing to hold us in these cold, inhospitable regions, so we would take the first train to Ankara and hitch from there to Istanbul. But first we had to retrieve our passports from the police. Where had they taken them? We marched around the streets until we came to a police station. They knew nothing. Patiently, in a mixture of English, French and German, we

explained how our passports had been taken the previous evening. Not a flicker of concern. Geoff reasoned that a direct approach would stimulate more interest, so he picked up a tray of important-looking papers from the desk and made off into the snow, assuring the police captain that they would be returned when our passports were produced. It was a moment or two before the stunned men were able to move, by which time Geoff had disappeared around the nearest corner. The captain let out a howl of anguish. His valuable and important papers.

Stolen from under his nose. How could he explain such a thing? He clutched at me anxiously, while two stalwarts stumbled out after Geoff. He personally guaranteed that our passports would be located without delay if only his precious papers were not lost or destroyed. I must please assure him that Geoff would not lose them or harm them in any way. A little later, Geoff reappeared with the papers and the two policemen, one of whom was then detailed to take us to Police Headquarters where, after much confusion, we were able to retrieve our passports. However, we were not yet free to go. An officer kept repeating, ‘Militaire! Militaire!’ and eventually an army jeep appeared, we were bundled in and driven off through the snow.

Ten miles out of town, in the midst of a howling blizzard, the soldiers motioned for us to get out. We refused. They threatened. We sat tight. Finally when we would not move, they threw up their hands in despair and took us back into the town, not quite knowing what to do. First we were taken to the Army barracks then back to Police Headquarters, where we told anyone who would listen that all we wanted was to catch the train to Ankara.

‘But you have no money,’ stated the police chief, disbelieving. We produced money. ‘Ah.... I see.... There has been some misunderstanding," he murmured, signalling a policeman to summon a jeep for us. ‘Please excuse these young officers. They are sometimes a little....ah....impolite. But it is a pleasure for me to meet two such cultivated gentlemen.’ He oiled us out into the jeep, and we were driven to the Station where, in the steam-heated warmth of the waiting-room we brewed endless cups of tea for ourselves and our bus companions from the previous day, before boarding the Ankara train late that night.

We shared a compartment with the green-hatted Englishman, the young German from the Turkish border, an Indian from Singapore called Garth, a Persian legal gentleman en route to Paris to deliver a lecture on

Criminology, and a confused young American whom we dubbed ‘Bewildered Frank.’ Frank told us how he had taken the train out as far as Erzerum from Istanbul and had been on his way to India. His money had been in the back pocket of his jeans, and since the train was crowded he had crawled out through the window to buy a cup of tea, only to find his pocket torn and the money gone. We thought at first his rather confused and lost appearance was a result of the loss of his money, but it became apparent that he was like that all the time. In fact, he did not really want to go to India at all but considered it something of a duty, and was rather pleased now he could go back to his girlfriend in Copenhagen with a clear conscience.

From Ankara we left the train and struck out on the main road to Istanbul, leaving the snow for the first time since arriving in Turkey. Leaving the city we came across a bunch of mustachioed Turks crouching in a line beneath a notice which read RESTORAN JOKEY KLUPP. Geoff placed me in their midst and photographed the result. He titled this photo: ‘Jokey Klupp Restoran Team, Ankara. Jules Virtue (coach).’

We picked up a lift with the driver of a red truck travelling fast. He was a genial fellow, and we were congratulating ourselves on our good fortune when, a few miles on, two soldiers with rifles barred our way. An officer came up in a jeep and spoke to the driver, who then turned to us.

‘Kaput!’ he said, making a chopping sign with his hands. ‘Finis!’ He switched off his engine. Perhaps he had committed some offence and was under arrest. Whatever the reason, it was evident that he was going no further. We climbed down, thanked him and took our leave. The officer and the soldiers watched us pass without comment as we marched off down the road, and made no attempt to stop us. The air was cool, but since the sun was shining and the snow was behind us, we strode out at a good pace, exhilarated to be moving under our own steam again.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion some distance away to our left. We stopped and looked around, having come perhaps two miles since leaving the truck. There was a long whistling sound, followed by another explosion, much louder now and closer, and a great shower of earth and stones sprayed up from the ground a few hundred yards away. Hurling ourselves into a ditch by the side of the road, we huddled there and shook. We were being shelled. The idiotic Army officer had allowed us to walk into an artillery barrage.

Shell after shell whistled over our heads and exploded nearby. When our initial quaking fear subsided, we lay there cursing him, his soldiers and the whole Turkish Army. Why had the rotten bastard allowed us to walk into an artillery range? Why had he not stopped us the way he had stopped the truck? Was he too smouldering about the Anzacs? For some twenty minutes the shelling continued, and we swore to exact our revenge. We were now convinced he had contrived this diabolical scheme to murder us.

Then it stopped. Sudden silence. Cautiously we raised our heads and looked about. Nothing. We had not been killed. No thanks to the Turkish Artillery; we felt they had tried. Cautiously we climbed out of the ditch and ran back along the road. Breasting the top of a low hill we were in time to meet the officer and his soldiers coming toward us in a jeep leading a convoy of vehicles that had been held up behind the red truck. The officer and his soldiers gave a derisory wave, the truck gave a toot of its horn, and they drove on without pause.

Geoff danced up and down and shook his fist. "Rotten bastards!" he cried. But there was nothing to be done. Revenge would have to wait. We trudged on in silence. Then a Mercedes pulled up and we rode in style with a Turkish engineer across the plains and up into the snow-covered hills. He dropped us in a little mountain village where we bought bread and ate. The hills were forested here and the trees heavy with snow. It was as we imagined a European winter should be, and were grateful to be alive to see it.

Geoff and I had been together now more than three months, and although we still got along well, there were times when we irritated each other and got on each other's nerves. Sometimes we would bicker endlessly over some triviality. It was not so much that we were fed up with each other as that we both needed to vent the frustrations and irritations that were part of the business of travelling. We had met people travelling alone who had become morose and introspective, mistrusting everybody. Others who had travelled with a companion, but split after a while, no longer able to tolerate each other. Somehow we had muddled along this far. Today as we walked along we began to argue over whether or not it was possible that the arid deserts of Central Australia could be irrigated; an inoffensive topic, one would imagine, but we became extremely heated about it.

'Jules, it's just not possible,' growled Geoff, who had travelled several times around Australia and through the Centre.

‘Don’t see why not,’ said I, who had never been there.

‘You don't see it, because you don't know anything about it,’ Geoff said. ‘You’re like a lot of other peanuts that just think with their backsides. Get some brainless idea in yer nut and you reckon you know it all!’

‘Hang on. Who are you calling brainless? What’s wrong with it?’

‘Well, any idiot can see that the cost involved in bringing billions of tons of water from distilling plants on the coast to the centre is beyond any country in the world, not just Australia.’

‘Yeah. Well, it might be now, but what about the future?’

‘Jeez! Why does a man have to get stuck with such an idiot?’ He fixed me with a beady eye. ‘If you used your bloody brains you’d be able to see it for yourself.’

‘Wait a minute! I cried. ‘There’s nothing wrong with my brains!’

‘Jesus, look! The cost of the energy you’d use getting the water there would be a bloody sight more than the potential of any crop you could grow.’

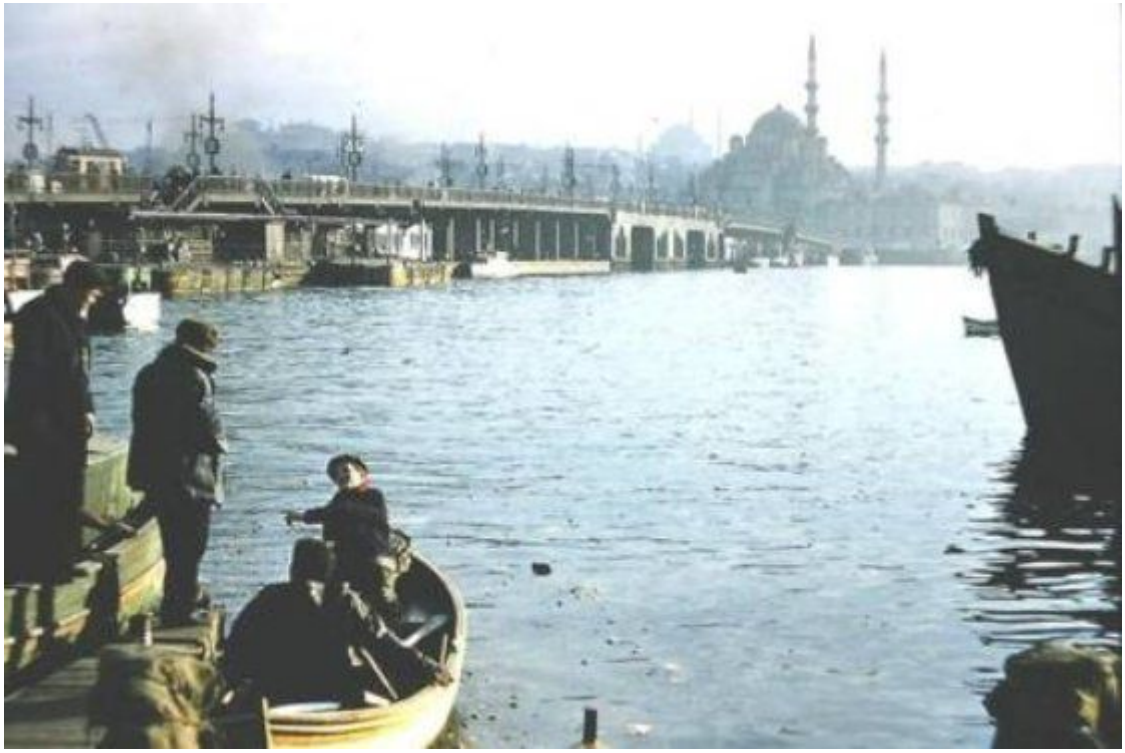
‘What would you know about it?’

‘A bloody sight more than you, that’s for sure.’

And so it went. We subsided, muttering, and trudged on for hours, occasionally reviving the argument and wrangling some more. Late in the afternoon we were picked up by another truck and sat sullenly in the back whilst being taken to Istanbul. There was an unpleasant altercation later when the driver demanded money, but it provided an excellent opportunity to take out our frustrations on a third person. We rounded on him vehemently and he backed off at once, dismayed at our violent outburst. Rather cheered by the exchange, we made our way down to the waterside township of Haydarpasa, and from this last outpost of Asia crossed the Bosphorus to the old Byzantine city, our first encounter with Europe.

Chapter Eight

There is no better way to approach Istanbul than by water. Beating across the Bosphorus on a crowded ferryboat, you are instantly seduced by the low domes and the elegant, slender minarets of mosques thrusting up from amidst the rooftops and towers that crowd its seven hills.Then behind the battlements of the old citadel the great cupola of St Sophia merges with the towers of the Topkapi Museum. And their looming, half-seen shapes draw you in to the bustling old city and its teeming, twisted streets.



Galata Bridge with Blue Mosque & Aghia Sophia

Just ahead in a confusing turmoil, where the traffic of the Galata bridge merges with the clamour of the waterfront quays, you are engulfed by the colours, smells, and endless hubbub of this ancient city.

Geoff had somehow got into conversation with a chubby-faced young woman called Ayla, who promised to show us to the YMCA where we planned to stay for a few days after the constant travelling of the last few months. They conversed haltingly in German, and she agreed to meet him later and show him the sights of her city.

We had some distance to walk from the ferry wharves, and despite the city's damp cold we'd warmed up by the time we reached our destination. The YMCA, or Amerikan Dersanesi as it was known, was a building of no

particular character but, located right across the street from Santa Sophia, that fifteen-hundred-year-old monument to Byzantine splendour, it had a clear advantage over the air-conditioned absurdity of, say, the Hilton Hotel, away on the other side of the Golden Horn. It was the first accommodation we had paid for since leaving the Salvation Army Hostel in Calcutta months before, and we looked forward to the unaccustomed luxury of hot showers and proper beds.

We had also brought with us uninvited guests – lice from the haystack near Khoi. They had infested our clothes and were causing us considerable discomfort, so our first priority was to devote ourselves singlemindedly to their destruction. Having checked in and established that, like the Hostel in Calcutta, the place was a refuge for tramps, down-at-heel travelers and a variety of layabouts, we purchased a large can of DDT powder and retired with our belongings to the basement shower-rooms. It is not easy to rid yourself of lice when everything you possess is infested, especially if you have no clean clothes to change into whilst the others you have are being deloused. So it was necessary to shower, dust ourselves all over with the powder and sit naked whilst everything we had was bubbling away in a great laundry vat. Then later, while they were all drying in the boiler room, we peppered them freely with DDT and waited until something was dry enough to wear.

Istanbul, we discovered, and the YMCA in particular, was a funnel through which all sorts of wanderers from Africa, Asia and the Middle East passed en route to Europe, while those from Europe took the reverse direction. Nearly every nationality was represented, and outrageous and extravagant tales flourished like weeds. We listened with vicarious pleasure, knowing that one elaborate yarn would undoubtedly be topped by the next.

In the middle of all this, as we waited for something to become dry enough to wear, a close-cropped American in a neat suit appeared and addressed us.

‘Say, you guys.’ He was hesitant.‘I understand....ah....you’re suffering from....er, well....lice!’ He was embarrassed and shuffled his feet.

‘Lice?’ said Geoff, astonished.

‘Yes. Well....they say there are two guys here from Australia with lice,’ he went on hurriedly.

‘Lice?’ said Geoff again.

‘Yes....Well, that’s what they say. He looked confused now. ‘I guess it’s not true. Really. but we can’t be too careful, can we?. Are you guys Australian?’

‘Not at all,’ I said indignantly. ‘I’m a New Zealander. Quite a different thing.’

‘Ah. Yes....Yes,’ he exclaimed. ‘Of course....Anyway, I can see you guys haven’t got lice… have you?’

‘Certainly not!’ we chorused. ‘What do you take us for?’

‘Well...Yes … That’s all right, then.’ He went off, pink-cheeked. ‘Real sorry to have bothered you.’

Istanbul’s Blue (Sultanahmed) Mosque

Clean, refreshed and for the first time in weeks free from the interminable, irritating itch, we slept that night like just men, well satisfied with our day’s work. We emerged in high spirits the next morning, ready to absorb the wonders of this splendid city. Ayla was there to meet Geoff, and off they went together to inspect Sancta Sofia and the marvels of the Topkapi Museum in the old Seraglio Palace.

I wandered through the Covered Bazaar and then over to Sultanahmet Mosque. Islamic architecture and its different styles are, at least to me,

fascinating and very satisfying to the eye. The Sultanahmet Mosque is no exception. Its dome is lower and flatter than those further east in Iran and Afghanistan, and the minarets more numerous and slender. Although the geometric relationship of the structures appears more precise here, the whole nevertheless seems to have a more organic relationship with its surroundings.

I took off my shoes and went inside. A mullah was instructing a class of children, and his voice echoed from the luminous blue of the famous tiled walls, reverberating up into the still vault of the great dome where his voice became attenuated and indistinct. For a long time I stood and absorbed the tranquillity of the place. Later I met Geoff and Ayla, and together we inspected a sunken palace built by Justinian in the sixth century and now used as a cistern for water storage. Ayla left us to return to her class, and Geoff and I wandered on.

'How did you go?' I asked.

'How'd I go? Well, I'll bloody tell you! That museum is a trap for young players. It's got about a hundred rooms, each one's as full as a tick with every kind of little thing, and you need all your strength to last the distance. I feel as though somebody's got away with me eyeballs!' He shook his head with a dazed look. 'A nice girl, that Ayla, but she wanted me to see everything. She didn't miss a room. There's a collection of portraits of all the sultans, a treasury of jewels, a section full of fabrics, one of brocades, another one full of thrones, and a room full of clocks. But the thing that finished me off was the Porcelain room. Do you know there's ten thousand Ming vases in there? Ten thousand of the bastards! And we peered at the bloody lot. Ayla explained each one to me in German, which was very nice of her. But if you're not a Ming vase man, the first hundred is enough. Ten thousand of the bloody things! And besides, it was freezing.' He grinned ruefully. 'But you can get a good view of the Bosphorus in between vases if you're quick. That's not too bad.'

We took a meal of kebabs and cold beans in a back street cafe, where we were approached by a swarthy, thick-set man from a group at a nearby table. All were dressed in the regular Turkish working-man's outfit of dark baggy trousers and worn double-breasted jacket.

'You are Norwegian?' he asked Geoff in English.

'No, I'm from Australia,' Geoff replied. 'And this man here is from New Zealand.'

‘Oh.’ The man eyed us stonily for a moment. ‘I thought you were Norwegian.’ He turned to his companions. ‘Australia,’ he said, ‘Yeni Zelande.’

They stared at us with blank, slightly hostile faces and we continued our meal uncomfortably. The first man turned to us again.

‘In the war,’ he said, ‘men from Australia and New Zealand were fighting my country.’ It was a flat statement and he regarded us coldly.

‘Well, yes,’ replied Geoff. ‘But that was a long time ago. It’s nearly fifty years ago now, you know.’

One of the man’s companions muttered something that sounded hostile, and we made ready to run for it. Then he spoke again.

‘You are right,’ he said solemnly. ‘It was a long time ago. The war is over now. We must be friends again. You must be friends with my country.’ He called his companions over and they stood around, regarding us gravely. One of them signalled the proprietor. ‘We will drink raki together and our countries will be friends.’

The first drink burned its way to the pit of my stomach, the second was tolerable, and by the third we were all smiling in a very serious kind of way. Before long the raki had accomplished an effective armistice and we were pledging our respective countries to eternal peace.

‘Well, that beats the Dawn Parade on Anzac Day, Jules,’ remarked Geoff later as we made our way unsteadily back to the YMCA.

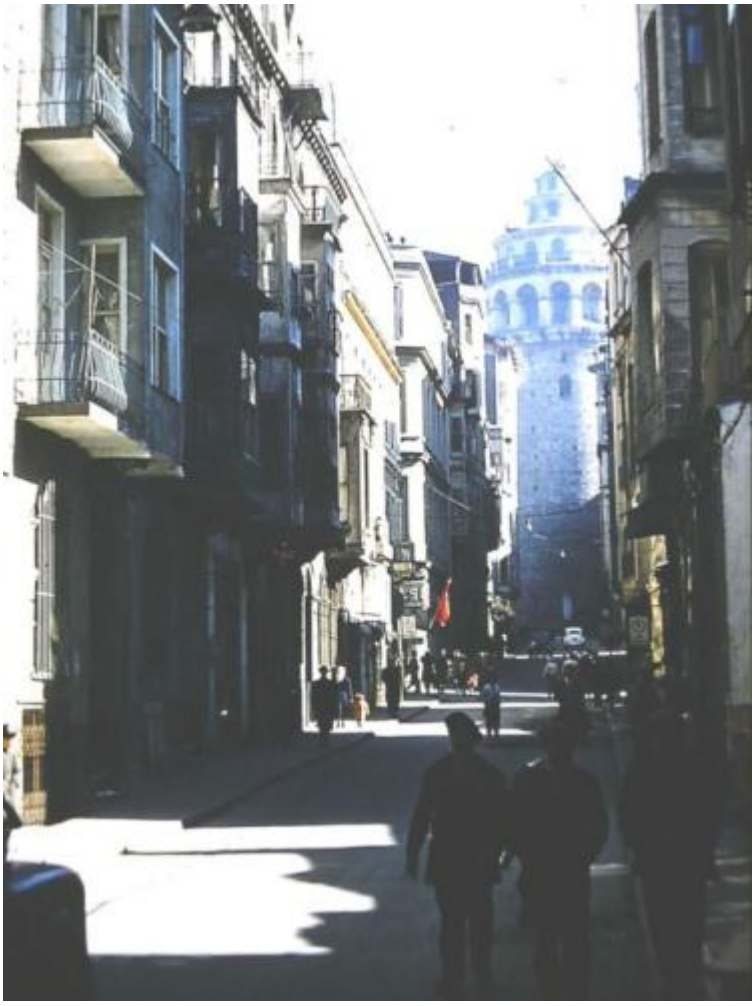
The hostel was warm, and we settled in to exchange yarns with the other tattered wayfarers until the early hours. Some of our friends from the Erzerum-Ankara train were there, among them Bewildered Frank, looking even more bewildered than before.

‘You know, I really should go out to India,’ he mumbled. ‘But then I’ve got this girl in Denmark.’ He could not make up his mind what to do. Another prospective overland traveller was the Edible Crud Man. A long-nosed, gangling American, he had questioned us closely about the perils and privations of the journey and, having just arrived from Europe, was fearful about the quality of the food he would be able to find along the route. We were talking with some others when he burst into the room excitedly, holding aloft a green, plastic, string bag.

‘Say, you guys! Hey! This is what I’ve got! Look!’ He paused triumphantly while we gazed at his string bag. ‘I got it today, right? And I’m going to fill it up with good edible crud. Man, I’ll get me enough edible

crud to take me clear through to Tehran!' We were speechless. His concept of a wasteland between Istanbul and Tehran, where the honest traveller could obtain no food, was certainly original. But his plans for the more distant future were even more so. 'An' see, I've got this piece of land in the South of France, an' I want to get a couple of guys round me to get into smuggling.' He paused for dramatic effect. 'We'll get us a boat and go off to Algeria to dig up diamonds. I read about it in Time magazine – or was it Life? Anyway, I read this article, see, an' it said there was diamonds there just three feet deep in the ground. Man, you could dig 'em up with a shovel.' Nobody spoke, and he went on, eyes gleaming. 'Trouble is, there's cobras there too – that's the rub, see. Man, they say those cobras are so rough they'll spit right in your eye! Hell, I can rough it with the next guy, but I'm not that rugged! Maybe we'll just stick to smuggling.' Nobody could think of anything to say.

The next evening two young Scots lads prevailed on us to go with them to the red light district. 'It's a good "chip' night's entertainment," they assured us as we wandered up and down narrow streets on the other side of Galata Bridge. There were ten-lira, fifteen-lira and twenty-lira streets, but as the canny Scots pointed out, "lookin' is free." And so it was. Along with most of the locals we were spectators, for the doors on each house had eye-level grills through which a prospective client could observe the ladies sitting about inside in various degrees of undress. Almost without exception they were big women, fat and hefty. When they caught a glimpse of a face peering through the open grille, some would beckon, some would perform an enticing little dance, while others just sat there bored and disinterested.



Galata Tower. Heading off to the red light district.

On one occasion when Geoff's bearded face was seen at the grille a large woman with enormous breasts came out, grabbed him by the ear and hauled him inside, much to the lewd amusement of the other women and the merriment of the outside promenaders. 'It's cheaper than the pictures,' observed our two Scots with satisfaction.

Geoff escaped and returned to us rubbing his ear. 'Jeez, she was strong!' he muttered.

Chapter Nine

Next morning we took leave of Istanbul and made for the Greek border some hundred and fifty miles away. It was evening when we crossed, but the contrast between Turkey and Greece seemed so marked that we felt we had emerged from the darkness of a tunnel into the light. Even the air seemed somehow brighter, warmer, more luminous. To Geoff, entering the land of the marathon for the first time, it was a hallowed occasion, and he thought it appropriate to cross the border with a certain style. Completing his Turkish exit formalities, he handed me his rucksack and drew back up the road a short distance. Then, watched suspiciously by the Turkish officials, he ran triumphantly across the border, holding aloft a bottle of raki. Bowing to the Greek border officials, he saluted Greece with a short drink to its health. The Greeks beamed their appreciation, indicating that they considered this a fitting way to leave Turkey and enter their country.

When we reached the little village beyond the border, it was twilight and the time of the promenade. This gracious Greek custom of greeting your neighbour and farewelling the day charms the senses and relaxes the soul. The fragrant spring air hinted at warm, sun-stretched days to come, and strolling villagers smiled and called greetings. Our spirits were buoyant, and we felt relaxed. Before we knew it we had slipped into the delicious rhythm of the Greek countryside and we seemed to have come home after a long journey.

Young men beckoned from a nearby taverna, and we went inside to the wild music of bouzouki and santouri accompanying a young woman's impassioned singing. We looked around but could see only men, sitting at bare wooden tables, staring at us. Some were playing cards, some talking, some sitting alone tapping their feet and fingering worry-beads. All were drinking, and there was no orchestra to be seen. Then we spotted it. A jukebox.That was the source of this splendid music. We sat down and were immediately addressed by a man somewhat better dressed than the others. In a suit and tie he looked almost prosperous.

'G'day! Where're you blokes from?' It was bizarre, this affluent-looking citizen in a small Greek village speaking with a brassy Australian accent.

'Australia,' said Geoff.

'New Zealand,' said I.

He turned to the other patrons. 'Aufstralia!' he called. 'Nea Zelandia!'

‘Aufstralia, Aufstralia!’ The word ran from one to the other around the room. There was some magic to it, we could see, for they were clearly impressed.

‘Hey, you blokes, it’s great to see someone from Australia again!’ He was almost beside himself with excitement and called to the proprietor to bring drinks. ‘I used to have a fruit shop in Melbourne a few years back. Are you from Melbourne, maybe?’ he asked Geoff.

‘Well, yes, I am.’

‘Is that right?’ He jumped up, embraced Geoff warmly then turned to the others. ‘Melvourné!’ he announced proudly, holding Geoffrey’s arm up as though he was a winning boxer.

‘Melvourné! Melvourné!’ Again the patrons were enthused, the magical word again racing round the taverna. In a moment they crowded around, plying Geoff with questions, all translated by our prosperous friend. Did he know this one’s cousin Giorgio in Melvourné, this one’s brother Zaccharios in Sydney, or Nikos in Brisbane? It was exhilarating, and bemused by all the attention, we accepted glass after glass of retsina, the slightly bitter resinous wine. The music burst out again and away went some of the men dancing, leaping and slapping their heels in a surging swaying line, arms outstretched and linked with their neighbour’s. It was zestful and exuberant, a celebration of life, and we banged the table with our glasses in time to the music.

The beaming proprietor, who also claimed a cousin in Melbourne, brought us Ouzo, the fiery aniseed liquor not unlike the Turkish raki, which we began to drink with retsina chasers.

‘By God, Jules,’ cried Geoff, ‘these Greeks have got the secret. This is the place! They know what it’s about!’ He roared his appreciation at the leaping, stamping dancers, and we began to sing loudly along with the music pouring from the glitzy machine.

Soon singing and banging our glasses was not enough, and we leaped to our feet, joining the fun. Arms outstretched we weaved about in an amazing ballet of jigs, reels and hops. Geoff’s face shone. He was exultant. Before long we were dancing in a way that seemed beyond our powers. The music swelled, and in a haze of wine and friendship, an unfamiliar but contagious spirit flooded through us. It was primitive and unconstrained, and the wildness of it all made our heads reel. It didn’t matter that we couldn’t

follow the intricate measures of the dance. It was sufficient that in our crazy madness we felt utterly free.

Geoff donned my red anorak, and with the hood pulled up over his head, launched into his version of a Tibetan demon dance. It was a spirited performance, only momentarily interrupted when he cracked his skull on a doorway. The Greeks danced on, and together we cavorted and drank mightily. Later, while Geoff and I were spinning about, we collided violently. My nose bled, Geoff nursed a split lip and, the rollicking scarcely missed a beat.

It was late when we staggered off into the night, swearing eternal friendship with the patrons and vowing to deliver unfathomable messages to their unknown brothers and cousins in far-off Melbourne and Sydney.

Jules sluices off after a hard night

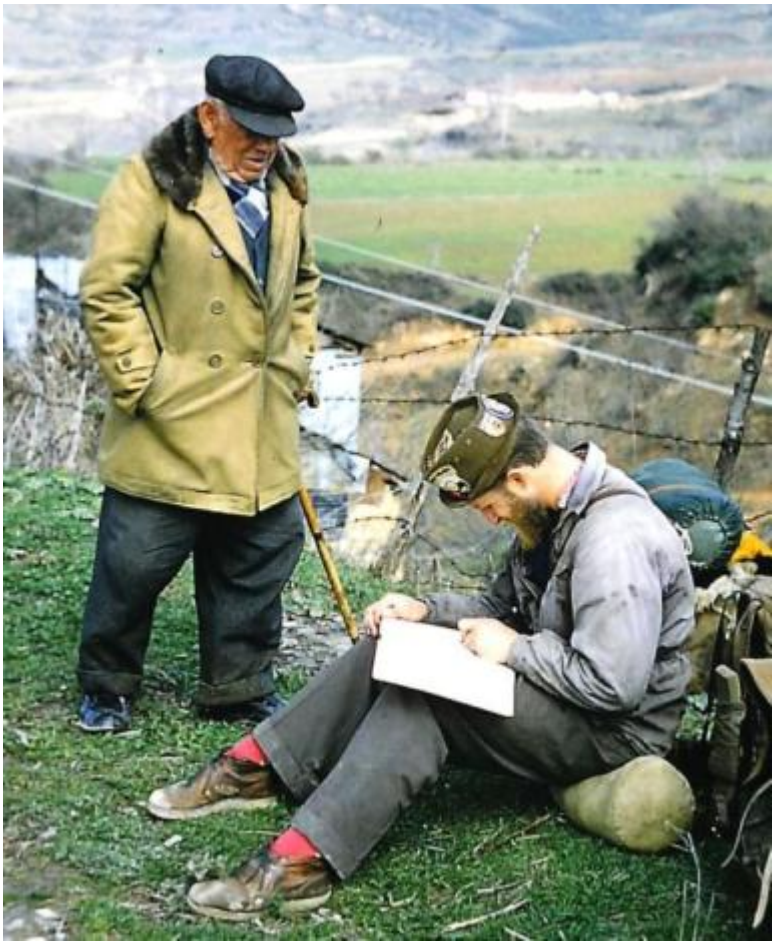
The first painful light of dawn found us barely conscious after a few hours of oblivion. I peered out through slitted lids, but the effort of moving my eyes proved so awful that I closed them again. We seemed to be in somebody's chicken yard, and a woman was standing over us, shouting from very far away. It did not concern me, somehow, so I tried to get comfortable, but there was a low moaning close at hand which I found disturbing. I forced my eyes open again long enough to observe that Geoff was bent double, retching. The woman was there too, still shouting. She sounded very angry. I sat up. My head felt the size of a pumpkin and my stomach was sea-sick. A man came up and spoke to the woman, who fell silent. I noticed a gaggle of hens huddled nervously at the end of the yard. One stood apart and eyed me indignantly. I found a water trough and sluiced myself off.

Geoff continued to groan from time to time and sat on the ground holding his head. Other people arrived to watch us, and one brought us coffee, thick, black and very sweet. A little later someone brought bread, and we began to move about cautiously, gathering odds and ends of our belongings scattered about the yard. The sun was shining now, but its warmth did nothing to help our tortured bodies. Nevertheless, the bread and coffee effected a small recovery. There were other women there now, regarding us impassively. The men were more sympathetic. Some of them had been at the taverna the night before and they smiled compassionate smiles.

Geoff hitches a ride

We struggled out of the village and sat suffering on a grassy verge, beside the road to Thessaloniki. As the day progressed we accepted short lifts and gradually achieved a delicate, almost normal equilibrium.

In this way we began a month-long interlude in Greece which took on the quality of a dream-like idyll. Old ladies dressed in black pressed bunches of grapes and figs into our hands as we wandered through small villages. Truck drivers shared lunches of fetta cheese, olives and bread. Even the buses in remote areas would pick us up and allow us to ride free in ‘paupers’’ seats at the front. There were, of course, many Greeks that we did not like and no doubt a great many more who did not like us, but the overwhelming impression remains of a land where the visitor is king, hospitality a joy, and the ordinary man is remarkable in his natural warmth and generosity. Perhaps this derives from some magical quality in the air.



Geoff solemnly observed by a Greek Muse

Somewhere around this time we encountered another, rather less scruffy, traveller, one Tony Powell, a fellow I'd met briefly in Singapore, many months before. He was on his own and joined us for a while.

In Athens we discovered the House of Simos. Rumours had reached us of this strange abode from other travellers along the way. It was said that you could stay there as long as you wished and no charge would be made. It was said that it was a brothel, frequently raided by the police. It was said to be a refuge for artists, freaks and drop-outs. Others claimed it was the haunt of drug-runners and political agitators. So with some curiosity we made our way to the place in Sarri Street, a narrow, nondescript street in a crowded quarter to the south of Syntagma Square. In the event, Simos' proved to be a ramshackle, narrow, two storied building with a cramped staircase leading to its upper floor. This was one long room, perhaps once a tiny theatre, stretching from above the street to a raised dais or stage at the rear. There we found half a dozen people, one cooking something at a crude bench

along a wall littered with odds and ends of food; one asleep, two in languorous conversation, and the others, two girls, sprawled in a shambles of clothes, mattresses, sleeping bags, and strewn clothes. These two were half naked with long blonde hair, goddesses waiting for their golden garments to dry on a makeshift clothesline. Geoff surveyed the scene, 'I think, Jules, this will suit us very well.'

Geoff & Tony on either side of the doorway leading to Simos', Athens

Of the mythic Simos there was no sign, nor did he appear during the time we were there. Nobody asked us for money, nobody questioned our right to be there. A sleepy Canadian, dressed even more shabbily than ourselves, claimed to have lived there for some months and said of Simos, 'Oh, he just comes and goes, that guy. Sometimes you see him, sometimes you don't.' And that was as much as we ever learned of the man, although we chose to think of him as some Greek benevolent spirit, a sort of 'daimon', said Geoff, who rather fancied himself in classical Greek matters. On the other hand he could have been a successful drug smuggler, in a style to which The Edible Crud man in Istanbul aspired. Only one of Simos' guests got up our noses while we were there, and this was a German who lounged about, scrounging what he could from other travellers, and whingeing on about Greece, Greeks and Mediterranean people in general.

Simos' itself, 'dirty place,' he complained, Greek food, 'terrible', Greek people, 'thieves' he opined, and so on. Fed up, Geoff finally rounded on him. 'Look mate,' he snapped, 'just get a bottle of vinegar, pour it allover yerself, and you'll be a real bloody sour kraut!'

Tony & Geoff waiting for a lift

'It's a bloody long way!' Jules& Tony trudge out of Greece

By now our money was virtually gone, and we had no choice but to head for the finishing line with all speed.

We remained in Athens only long enough to see the Archaeological Museum with its marvellous bronze Posiedon, take a trip to Cape Sounion to inspect the remains of his temple, see the sunset, and visit the Parthenon for Geoff to contemplate Pheidippides' run to Athens from the Battle of Marathon. We knew it was time to move on. And in spite of having insisted, as we travelled through Greece, that he would 'of course' make the Marathon run in honour of his ancient hero, in the event, he simply gave a wry smile and remarked, 'Jules, it's a bloody long way!'

We slowed a little in Yugoslavia to take a boat from Dubrovnik along the Adriatic Coast, past the splendid island towns of Lopud and Korcula, as far as Split, where we sampled the workers' lunch of bread, salted fish and red wine, affordable for such as us, and remembered years later as a truly marvellous meal.

Tony, Jules & Geoff, camped by a nameless river near Zagreb

After a quick tour of the Plitvice Lakes, we hopped a train to Zagreb where we changed again for a long haul through the mountains to Munich.

And here, Tony Powell our companion for a brief while, left us to take a sojourn in Italy.

Geoff and I were quite thrown off balance by Europe. It was all so neat and prosperous, too much like home, and quite out of our price range. We needed to sleep that night in Munich, but being still in Asiatic mode, refused to spend good money frivolously on sleeping. We were not members of the Youth Hostels Association and weren't prepared to pay the fee to join up. Somehow, however, we stumped up the money for a stein of good beer, before wandering the streets looking for somewhere to doss. The city was far too well ordered and tidy. Even the parks were locked at dusk. Finally there was nothing for it but to scale a park fence and establish ourselves behind a screen of bushes.

Morning found us hunting the park for water with which to make our daily porridge. Alas, the only tap we found had a lock. 'Don't worry, Jules,' chirped a buoyant Geoffrey, 'there's the railway station; it's got water. We'll go there!' With such resourcefulness, how could we fail?

Munich's Hauptbahnhof was abuzz with the city's commuters, and unlike at any self-respecting Asian railway station, we attracted no crowds of onlookers, barely occasioning a passing glance from the hurrying hordes. The spotlessly clean men's toilets indeed had taps, and we were able to fill our billy for the usual morning porridge mix of oats fortified with a little rice and a few lentils for strength. Quite soon our old, battered primus stove, purchased months ago in India, was roaring away in the concourse of the Hauptbahnhof, close enough to the men's toilets should extra water be required. This assembly of roaring stove, rucksacks, assorted plates and other gear, watched over by two squatting, scruffy, long-haired itinerants stroking their beards, now began to attract more than a casual glance from the bustling throng.

Before long a man stopped, stared a moment, then asked, 'Wo kommen Sie her?' This, of course gave Geoffrey, our German speaker, his chance. 'Aa-aa-aargh!' he said, gathering his thoughts, then, 'Australia!' pointing to himself, and, 'Neu Zeeland'. 'Ach so….' the man replied. Then considering our set-up in the railway concourse, he concluded we were sorry folk indeed, down on our luck and far from home. Then, 'In der krieg,' he spoke slowly in deference to our inadequate language skills, 'man kommen aus Neu Zeeland, und Australia, und …' He began to mime, raising an imaginary rifle to his shoulder, 'Bang! Bang!' A happy smile that we

understood. Then, ‘In mein korper …’ he rolled up his shirt so we could see the scars, and stabbed at his torso two or three times. By now we were getting the picture. A few people had stopped and were watching the pantomime with interest. There was no getting away from the fact that he’d been shot in the war by Australian and New Zealand riflemen. This must have been at least fifteen years earlier, but unsurprisingly it was fresh in his mind. We mumbled some sort of apology for the horrors of war and for our countries’ involvement in wounding him. ‘Nein, nein!’ he said, ‘is OK. Is der krieg.’ and with that he turned and vanished into the crowd. ‘Jeez, Jules,’ Geoff said, ‘for a minute there I thought he was going to have a go at us …..’

In silence we contemplated what might have been. Then, as we were tucking into our freshly brewed porridge, the man reappeared, now holding two packages, one with a loaf of black bread and a large cheese, the other a carefully wrapped whole salami. With a shy smile he presented them to us, shook each of us by the hand, wished us well and disappeared.

That evening found us far along the Bavarian roads enjoying a splendid wayside meal in the luxuriant countryside after a successful day’s hitch-hiking. We spied a fine field of ripened wheat not far from the French border and laid out our sleeping bags beside some leafy trees, cooked a meal on the primus, and slept soundly under the stars. The imperious clatter of an approaching harvester shocked us awake. Stuffing our belongings in our packs, we scuttled out of the field and onto the road. ‘Crikey, Jules,’ Geoff observed, ‘we could have been reaped!’

Later we’d built up a fine head of steam as we neared Ostende and the ferryboat to England. A boisterous Belgian truckdriver entertained us with his views on life, ‘Ve are all poor deevils,’ he opined, ‘but eat gud and sleep dry, iss all ve need!’ It was a philosophy we had no argument with.

As our ferry pulled into a grey, wet and windswept Dover, it only remained for Geoff to remark, ‘Merrie Old England!’ and it was done. I reflected later that, in the nearly six months since leaving New Delhi, I had spent just over ten pounds on the journey.

Chapter Ten

As soon as we arrived in England we travelled to Woking, where my sister Mary lived with her husband John. I had not seen her for ten years or so, and she and John afforded us a splendid welcome, despite our grime and uncivilized scruffiness. They provided luxurious hot baths and a few days rest before Geoff tipped his hat and disappeared off to London.

Not long afterwards I also vanished into the silent, hurrying throng of London's millions. I soon found myself deep in the grey world of work, money, and responsibility. Gradually, however, I found my feet and began to enjoy the wide-ranging satisfactions of this enigmatic city. There was a period of disorientation during which I felt sorry for those unfortunates obliged to live in the tiny mews terraces of Knightsbridge, and I was disappointed that Piccadilly, Marble Arch, Leicester Square and the like were built on such a modest scale. With my antipodean concept of the recently departed British Empire I had expected something grander.

It was also disconcerting to find such a class-ridden society, but like other 'colonials' I found myself cushioned from its effects by having an unclassifiable accent. Being a 'colonial' had its advantages. I could have been poor or wealthy, from a good school or a poor one, from an old and respected family or of no particular breeding. The Englishman could not tell from the way I spoke, and this served to insulate me from the barriers between the layers of English society and allowed me to move around freely, unencumbered by the restrictions imposed upon the locals by their backgrounds.

I had a comfortable place to live and a humdrum job, both quite satisfying, since I needed a period of routine to soothe a subsiding restlessness. I had met up with Mick, a friend from New Zealand, and we came to share a flat in Notting Hill Gate with Mike, an elegant Englishman, Nick, a morose Greek, and Jack another New Zealander, genial and good-hearted. This flat was in Pembridge Villas, immediately opposite the entrance to Portobello Road, and took up the first and second floors of the building whose entrance, like most of the others in the street, had an imposing portico, the roof of which served as the floor of a first-storey balcony running off a huge sitting-room. This room, and the kitchen and bathroom, occupied all of the first floor, and from there stairs ran up to the bedrooms above. Beneath the roof there was a dark and dusty little attic connected with the bedroom landing by a ladder. Our only outlook from the

sitting-room centred on the entrance to Portobello Road and a pub called the Sun in Splendour, which figured prominently in our lives.

One morning while I was at work in a pharmacy near Victoria Station, Geoff appeared, jaunty and irrepressible as ever. I had not seen him for many months. He had his rucksack on and was wearing a well worn windcheater over a grubby but vivid tartan shirt, and on his head he wore a digger's hat, from which the entire brim had been cut away, leaving only the crown. The word PAKISTAN on a red cloth badge was sewn on the front, and beneath this, unaccountably, were the words, 'I go by foot, yet I ride on the back of an ox.'

His appearance attracted some attention, my customers watching him in the English fashion, appearing not to see him at all while examining him closely out of the corner of the eye.

'Jules! Jules!' he hissed loudly, adopting an overtly conspiratorial stance. 'I've got the hash!' He produced an untidy brown paper parcel from the inside of his windcheater, handing it to me with a furtive flourish. People nearby lowered their heads and hurried off about their business.

He had just returned from a trip to Italy and Germany, and the packet of 'hashish' in fact contained a one litre drinking-mug he had deftly removed from a Munich beerhouse as a present for me. I invited him to sleep on the floor of our flat until he could find a place, and there I found him when I returned home from work that evening.

When we first arrived in the city I had been pleased to see the back of him, for the six months on the road we had become bound up with each other in all kinds of ways, from the food we ate to the money we shared. The very fact of being thrown together, saddled with each other and having to put up with each other's foibles over such a long period had brought us, near the end, to a state of bare tolerance. At times this manifested itself on my part with a weary annoyance, and on Geoff's with muttering and an occasional irascible outburst. So I'd been pleased to be free of him. Yet left to myself I would probably never have undertaken such a haphazard journey.

And as the months passed in London I came to miss having him around. There was no disguising the fact that life was duller, and I missed those incomparable, free-flowing tales with the grimaces and leaps that enlivened the adventures of various unlikely characters. It was a long time since I had seen a group of people have their conversation arrested as he raised a

declamatory finger, cleared his throat with a rasping ‘Aa-aa-aaaargh!’ and launched into some lengthy, extravagant epic. I missed his raging and muttering over some fancied injustice. He’d been a sounding board for the mundane and the ordinary, the absurd and the fantastic, all of which he amplified, transformed, and returned to the world, wonderfully embellished.

So here he was again. I asked him to stay. ‘You could move into the attic.’ We climbed the ladder and made an inspection. ‘Pay us a couple of quid toward the rent and you can stay as long as you like.’

It was an arrangement that appealed to his thrifty nature. He shuffled forward and peered around at his new home. ‘It’s a deal, Jules!’ he exclaimed, eyes shining. ‘That’s a bloody good deal!’ The attic was thickly carpeted with dust and contained old lampshades, bicycles, perambulators, ancient electric stoves and a multitude of trunks, boxes, cases and other junk.

‘It’s very cruddy,’ said Mick, who had climbed up after us. Neat in his dress and possessing a certain fastidiousness, he gazed about with indulgent distaste. Mick had an enviable capacity for seeing absurdities in the most ordinary events, and these often provoked him to bursts of almost hysterical laughter. The thought of Geoff actually living in the attic was nearly too much for him. He collapsed on the top step. Surely nobody in their right mind would live in such a place. He became helpless with laughter. Mick’s outbursts were very infectious, and before long we were both convulsed.

‘You’ve got to admit the place has got atmosphere,’ said Geoff defensively, puzzled at our laughter but smiling anyway.

‘Yes! Yes!’ Mick chortled, wiping the tears from his eyes and trying to display a courteous enthusiasm. ‘It has. You could sit here and meditate!’ He and I had been taking Philosophy Lessons of late and learned the benefits of contemplation.

I picked up a dusty box of charcoal sticks. ‘You could make sketches on the roof, Geoff.’ The sloping roof was lined with white plaster and invited adornment.

‘Hmmmmm. Yeah……’ Geoff stared absently at the high, tiny window which let in a dim light through dirty glass. ‘You know, Jules,’ he mused, ‘this place would have suited my old mate Barnesy. He would have liked it here.’ Barnesy, it seemed, was an ancient acquaintance of his who was given to addressing the Sunday crowds in Sydney’s Domain. ‘Yeah, Barnesy always knew what he wanted, and a cheap doss like this was a

good deal. No fuss. Always reckoned he'd end up dying in style. I remember him there one day holding forth to the people about the churches all being full of thieves and ratbags. And there was this voice come from the crowd, "What'll you do when you die, Barnesy?" "Well, I'll tell yer. I won't have none of them fancy funerals…..all yer mates standin' round saying, ''E wuz a good bloke wuz Barnesy, e wuz a good bloke.' No. An' I won't have none of them fancy doctors tappin' me 'eart 'n sayin', ''E's dead!' No, mate! I'll do it native style. Take me up to the islands, I sez. Lay me out on one of them big bark leafs…..real native style. Carry me down ter the beach wiv twelve bearers. There's the surf thunderin' in, deep blue water, white curlers. Long golden stretch o' sand, azure sky an' wavin' palms. Very nice. Then bring two dozen native sheilas' – pause - 'wiv nuthin' on. They dance around me for forty-five minutes, ya see, an' if I don't move – I'm dead.'

'Then there's another voice from the crowd, "Any regrets, Barnesy?" Only that I'm an old man, mate, only that. Why, in my day we didn't front up ter the sheilas an' say, "Do yer want ter dance?" Dance, be buggered. We jus' grabbed 'em an' said, "Do yer love me?" "No." So we'd haul off an' hit 'em. "Now do yer love me?" "Yeah." Y'see, mate, the best answer to a woman's rights is a man's lefts!'

Mick was entranced. It was his first encounter with Geoff and his tales.

'We'll give you a hand to clean the place up,' he said. Clearly he was keen that Geoff should move in. A certain cultural tone emerged in the attic as we uncovered books in English, Russian and German, dealing with subjects from mysticism to mountaineering, and by authors as diverse as Lenin and Lin Yutang. There was a slightly warped violin in one corner and an easel under some dust-covered drapery. We stacked the junk in one corner, put a bed in another and swept the place out. It couldn't be denied, as we regarded the attic by the light of a single bulb, it was a dwelling with character.

Geoff's arrival heralded quite a change in the previously unruffled course of our lives. He acted as a catalyst, attracting all sort of erratic people and provoking all kinds of outrageous behaviour. Life began to centre around The Sun in Splendour, the pub across the road, and there were some memorable encounters with neighbourhood eccentrics.

It was our custom on Thursdays to put three pounds each toward the provision of food for the week, which we would take in turns to buy. Since

we invariably underestimated the amount required, by the following Sunday there was usually nothing left in a larder which in theory should not have been empty for another three days. So we each took to hiding food in odd places where we imagined it would remain undiscovered. It was not unusual to open the washing-machine and discover somebody's sausages and eggs; or a packet of butter and a half-eaten loaf of bread might tumble out from the laundry cupboard. As a result, toward the end of the week we always seemed to be reduced to sausages, and reflecting on all this one evening on my way home from work, it occurred to me that I had eaten sausages on the last six evenings. Time for a change, I determined. I could not stomach another sausage. Purchasing some lamb chops, I went home. 'Geoff and Mick are over in the pub with Jack,' said Nick, staring glumly at the television. 'They were going to have a beer before dinner.'

I found them there, firmly entrenched. Geoff was haggling with a ragged art dealer over the price of a very bad painting he had no intention of buying. 'Yes, yes, go ahead and cook the chops,' they chorused. 'We'll be over after another pint.'

The chops were duly cooked, together with peas and potatoes, but no Geoff, no Mick and no Jack. So Nick and I ate. Then I set up three plates on a tray and took them across to the pub. The lads were delighted and sat at a table by the door devouring the meal and greeting customers as they arrived.

An old lady came in with her daughter and a young man. 'There!' said the old lady, turning to her daughter. 'I knew you could get a meal here – and a good one at that!'

'Indeed you can, Madam,' said Geoff, rising gallantly. 'Sit down, make yourself comfortable – you are our welcome guest.'

The old lady sat down and leaned across to Geoff. 'Now, where's Mort?' she asked.

'He's over there,' said Geoff with a vague wave of the hand.

'Where?'

'Behind the bar.'

'I don't see him,' she complained, peering short-sightedly.

'Ah, now, wait a moment,' said Geoff. 'Which Mort do you want? Could it be Mort the Sport?'

'That's the one.'

‘Ah, yes. Well, he’s in the corner there with Black Jack and Mick the Monk.’

She gazed around, then picking up Geoff’s chop bone she began to munch it absently. ‘I knew he’d be here,’ she said, satisfied. The daughter was horrified at her mother’s behaviour, and the young man’s lip curled in disgust. We had no difficulty in convincing the old lady that she should stay a while, and Geoff sang some songs to cheer her. Before long the daughter and her young man mellowed enough to join the jollity, and we passed a riotous evening. Toward closing time Geoff happened to notice the young man’s shoes, which he thought very desirable. They had deep ripple soles.

‘A man’d go well in shoes like that,’ he muttered. A complex deal was arranged whereby Geoff exchanged his shoes and a brown woollen pullover for the ripple-soled shoes, while the young man gave his pullover to our Jack, who was sorely in need. ‘These’ll be great for bouncing!’ exclaimed Geoff, tentatively leaping up and down.

‘Give them a good go, Geoff,’ said Mick, holding the pub door open. Geoff gave a great bound forward and away he went, leaping and bouncing along Pembridge Villas, bellowing with delight each time he touched the ground, and badly frightening an embracing couple in a nearby doorway.

It was about this time that Jack decided to return to New Zealand, where he had been offered a partnership in a business. We called for a replacement. Several people answered our advertisement and came along to see us, amongst them another Jack, a great hulking young man, with a ready smile. ‘Fiji Jack’ we called him when we learned that he hailed from Fiji, or sometimes ‘Rampant Jack’, as he admitted to having been called from time to time. In many ways Jack looked a cowboy, and we learned without surprise that indeed he had been one before coming to London. Tiring of the tedious ways of the bank, Jack had left and gone to Australia to work as a jackeroo in Western Queensland. Later he rode as a gaucho on the Argentinean Pampas, and as a cowboy in Galveston, Texas. When we discovered that he worked at present as a roast-beef carver in the most prestigious of the Lyons Eating Houses, we decided at once he was our man.

The previous evening we had been sitting quietly at home after drinking a few beers in the Sun in Splendour; Geoff was in the kitchen brewing coffee, having just cooked us a fine stew. Glancing through the window he noticed a girl waving to him from the rear window of a building across the

way. ‘That’s friendly,’ he said, returning the greeting and calling us over. We gathered round and several more girls appeared beside the waving figure.

‘Very friendly!’ said Mick, waving vigorously and beckoning. One thing led to another, and before long they were all distributed around our sitting-room. Just then a balding, middle-aged man in a crumpled suit arrived to inspect our flat. He had answered our advertisement for a replacement, and we’d asked him to call. Geoff answered the door and, with the girl who had done the waving clinging to him, started to show the man about. They had got as far as the bedroom level when the girl, wrapped sinuously around Geoff, began to peel off his shirt. Distracted by her attentions, Geoff excused himself, and thrust the wide-eyed man into the sitting-room, expecting the rest of us to look after him. But there was Mick locked in a passionate embrace with a voluptuous, bespectacled girl called Hazel, while the rest of us sat about with the others. The little man’s eyes shone. This was the place for him!

‘Splendid! Splendid!’ he cried enthusiastically, rubbing his hands. ‘I think it will suit me very nicely. Just what I’ve been looking for!’ He sat down and beamed around the room. It was two o’clock in the morning before we could persuade him to leave.

Geoff was recounting this episode next morning to a visiting friend and described the sinuously writhing girl as being ‘rather spidery’. This led to her being known from then on as the ‘Spidery Lady’.

Our custom of awarding such titles to people originated in the Sun in Splendour where, among other people, we had fallen in with a group whose central figure, Joyce, we called the ‘Comfortable Lady’. She was a broad-faced, cheerful girl who taught hockey, netball and geography at a nearby school, and who shared a flat in Portobello Road with ‘Cruddy John’, a debauched-looking man with pouched eyeballs who drove a derelict, unlicensed taxi and earned his living as a psychologist in a research department at London Hospital. One evening, on our way home from a party, we all trooped off to call on her at her flat. We were in good voice, having serenaded the taxi-driver with Negro spirituals all the way home. Standing on the pavement outside Joyce’s flat, we continued our serenading, calling upon the Lord to ‘open up dat do’’, while Geoff danced about keeping time with his fists as he beat upon that door. There was no response, so spying a ladder against some scaffolding, Geoff clambered up

to the sitting-room window some two floors above. It was not surprising nobody had heard us, since there was a wild and noisy party in progress. Geoff banged on the window, and in a moment it opened and he was drawn inside. Darting down the stairs he let us in. The air was thick and hot and throbbed with music and shouted conversations. Geoff discovered Joyce asleep in a chair and awakened her with some gentle prodding. She opened an eye.

'Go away,' she declared. 'I'm comfortable.' Indeed she was, and the name stuck.

Cruddy John produced some wine made from turnips. It was sweet and turbid and of no value. He claimed a degree of excellence as a psychologist and was inclined to expound in tedious detail theories he held which would disprove some of the widely held ideas of the Gestalt School. On and on he went while we became more and more glassy-eyed. Finally, Geoff could stand it no longer.

'Why don't you do something useful with yourself?' he rounded on him. There was a lull in the conversation and his words resounded in the room. 'Standing there with your thumb in your bum and your mind in neutral, you're no bloody use to man or beast!' Cruddy John withdrew, insulted, and muttered at us all night from the other side of the room.

Their friends included a girl we dubbed the 'Beady-eyed Lady', a narrow-faced, plain looking young woman. She had an intense look and fixed a gimlet eye on Geoff with what she must have imagined was an alluring expression. This caused Geoff to smile, and she would ask him what was so amusing. Taking her in his arms he would kiss her gently on the ear. 'The universe, my sweet, the cosmos,' he would say. 'It is crazy!'

During this time Geoff was living his life on two levels other than the merry diversions of Pembridge Villas. He was still running, of course, and it was his custom to run to and from the surgery where he worked in Feltham, an outlying township gradually being swallowed by the grey, spreading growth of London. In this way he covered a distance each day of about sixteen miles, and very often, after an evening at home or in the pub, he would set out again late at night for Hyde Park where, under the still shapes of the trees on Rotten Row, he enjoyed running most of all. He was starting to run competitively again now, and joined the Middlesex Harriers for regular practice and training. He aimed to compete soon in the London-to-Brighton and the Isle of Man marathons.

One night, out running late near Marble Arch, he came upon an old lady struggling along the wet pavement with several canvas bundles tied with rope. As he ran on he remembered the cold, uncomfortable nights on the road when we had slept out. Sometimes they had not been too good. Wheeling around, he went back to her.

'Are you all right?'

'No. My church has thrown me out. I've got to go and sleep in the park.'

'Well, now, look. You don't have to do that. Get around to Fifty-five Pembridge Villas – that's just round the corner from Notting Hill Gate Tube Station – and ask for Jules. He'll see you right. He'll give you a nice cup of tea and some porridge – and you can sleep on the couch.'

'What's that now? Pembridge Square?'

'No. Pembridge Villas. Our place is just opposite a pub called the Sun in Splendour.'

'Oh. Who's there?'

'A fellow called Jules. He'll set you up all right, so don't worry. Just ask for Jules. He'll give you some porridge and a nice cup of tea. I'll be back there in an hour or so.' He ran on and thought about sleeping in the park in London when you're old and tired.

Coming up the stairs and into the sitting-room later, he paused at the doorway as he always did and advanced into the room with his finger in the air, clearing his throat with the customary 'Aa-aa-aaaaargh!' His running togs hung limply from his perspiring body, and the only evidence of athletic capacity was in his unusually large calf muscles. Mick and I were drinking a last cup of coffee before bed and waited expectantly for his nightly utterance.

We rarely went to bed early, and whatever we had been doing, drinking in the pub, out at a show or just sitting at home, if Geoff had been out running we were invariably still up when he got back. Always he had some observation to make, some splendid thing that had occurred to him as he ran, some small thing which had excited his interest, or the story of a chance meeting with a night-time eccentric.

'Where is she?' He peered around.

'Where's who? asked Mick, chuckling in anticipation.

'The old lady. I told her to come here.'

‘The Old Lady?’ Mick laughed. ‘No, Geoff. We’ve had Spidery Ladies, Beady-eyed Ladies and Comfortable Ladies, but no Old Ladies.’

‘Yeah.’ Geoff grinned. ‘But look, she should be here by now. It’s over an hour since I saw her.’ And he told us how he’d found her struggling into the park and his suggestion that she come and stay in our flat.

Mick and I looked at each other and sighed. We’d become used to Geoff’s finding lost or bemused souls and bringing them home. A week or so earlier a frightened-looking girl had come up to him in the pub and asked hesitantly if he had a threepenny stamp. He had, and gave it to her. Since she looked a little distraught, he followed her outside. She was quivering and tearful as she looked down the street. Geoff thought he saw someone skulking in the shadows several doors along, so without further ado brought her home. The next morning Mike, our elegant Englishman who was usually first up, ask Geoff who the figure was asleep on the sofa. ‘Oh,’ said Geoff casually, ‘that’s the Threepenny Stamp Lady.’

‘Well, the old lady hasn’t arrived.’ Mick shrugged his shoulders. ‘She probably found somewhere else.’

‘Yeah. Maybe.’ Geoff stared into space for a minute. ‘I think I’ll go and look for her anyway.’ He turned and started down the stairs.

‘Hang on, Geoff,’ I called. ‘We might as well go on my scooter.’

It was old and dilapidated Lambretta with a taped up windscreen and a kickstarter that regularly fell off. It was the only independent transport we had, given to me by a Welshman who thought it no longer fit to ride. We cruised along the neighbouring streets, but Geoff could see no sign of the old lady. Passing the Queensway Tube Station, shuttered for the night, Geoff pointed to a shapeless bundle on some steps.

‘Pull up, Jules, I’ll just have a look.’ He went over and bent down. It was the old lady and she was half dozing, her head resting on her knees. He took her gently by the arm.

‘I was only sitting there for a minute,’ she quavered uncertainly.

‘Never mind, mum,’ said Geoff, bringing her over to the scooter. ‘I just want you to sit on the back there and hang on tight to Jules.’

‘O-o-o-oh!’ she squeaked. ‘I couldn’t do that.’ Her old eyes went wide with fright. ‘Ee-ee-eeee! I’d fall off!’

‘No you won’t. Just hang on tight.’ He placed her firmly on the seat behind me and we stacked her bundles between my feet. ‘I’ll run home, Jules. See you soon.’

I set off slowly. The old lady let out a terrified wail, and her fingers clawed my jacket. It was not a great distance, and I drove carefully, the scooter very steady. Mick was still up when we arrived home.

'Hello there,' he said calmly, as though we customarily entertained elderly ladies at midnight, and assisted her up the stairs. Geoff arrived a few minutes later and in a short time had her sitting in front of a heater sipping a steaming mug of chocolate.

'Don't you take any notice if Mick here tries to race you off to bed,' said Geoff putting some blankets and a pillow on the sofa beside her. 'He's a terrible bloke for women, and you've just got to be firm with him.'

The old lady cackled. She was warmer now and beginning to relax. Her old eyes twinkled and she nudged Geoff. ''Ere. I bet you're a bit of a one with the girls.' Her false teeth gleamed as she grinned up at him. 'Runnin' about like that round the streets wiv hardly any clothes on in the middle of the night. Tut, tut!'

'Don't you believe it, mum,' said Geoff. 'I'm a very religious man and I've taken a vow of chastity.' The old lady had some colour in her cheeks, and she was giggling like a young girl when we went off to bed.

'Who's that on the couch?' asked Mike the next morning when he came down for breakfast.

'Oh, that's the Elderly Lady,' said Geoff blandly.

She wanted to go that morning, but Geoff insisted that she stay until she knew where she was going. In the meantime our language had improved miraculously and we were observing an unusual politeness with each other.

'Look, Jules,' said Geoff seriously. 'We just can't chuck her out, you know. We've really got to find a place for her.'

I was baffled. 'Sure. But where on earth will we find a place? We can't pay for rooms for her, or that sort of thing.'

'Yeah…Yeah…' he muttered. He took me aside when he came home that night. 'I think I've found a deal,' he said. "I was thinking about how the Sallies looked after us that Christmas in Calcutta, and I reckon they're about the only Christians that do anything much for people. Anyway, I phoned them up today and told them about our old girl. Well, they've got a place over at West Kensington where she can have a room to herself. All we've got to do is get her over there before eight o'clock tonight.'

We bought some extra food to giver her a good send-off before taking her over. Roast beef with gravy and potatoes and beans. The old lady

devoured it with relish, and we took her over to West Kensington in a taxi.

'Now make sure you lock your door each night.' Geoff wagged his finger at her as we said good-bye. 'Some of those Salvation Army blokes are worse than Mick!'

On another level again, Geoff had a curious romance with a remote and mysterious girl called Ann. She was a student at the Slade School of Art, and none of us ever met her, since for vague, unstated reasons she would never agree to come to our flat. Geoff pursued her ardently, but for the most part she remained aloof and distant, allowing him to meet her only occasionally at uncertain times, when she might permit him to take her to an art exhibition or to the cinema.

Not surprisingly this behaviour caused Geoff agonies of despair, and he would go off running around and around his Hyde Park circuit, or sit unhappily in the pub muttering into his beer. Then when she sent him a letter and they were to meet, he would become elated and go pounding ecstatically round the park, or become expansive and deliver preposterous stories in the pub. It was a strange romance, largely carried on by letter, and sometimes weeks would go by and he would hear nothing from her. But he would write several times a week, and the letters, sometimes filled with endearments, more often pursued discussions about philosophic and religious points of some obscurity. He showed me her reply to one of these, which read:

'You are right. The Bhagavad Gita is supremely magnificent and contains what Huxley calls "The Perennial Philosophy", but for me it transcends philosophy. I believe it was Kierkegaard who wrote that philosophers build fine palaces but are reduced to living in huts alongside them, while all the palaces are fit for is the gaze of men, including themselves. If he was right – and it seems a fairly true statement – then the Gita contains not a philosophy but It, which transcends rationalist thought in a truly Zen manner. It is the Way, as Christ is also the Way. The only Way, for they preach the same gospel. Sri Krishna, Buddha, Christ – all are equivalent manifestations of what Taoists call the Nameless, because to give It a name is to place It within finite bounds. So I do not call it God.'

After such a letter he would climb up to his attic and spend hours feverishly penning a suitable reply. Often this would be met with a long and eloquent silence from the enigmatic Ann. After he had endured one such

silence for more than two weeks, he went out and obtained a beautiful rose, packed it in a long box and sent it off to her with the accompanying verse:

‘A man of aspiration had
Many friends who thought him mad
He bashed his head against a wall,
Acting without sense at all.
Until at last they heard him moan,
“I’m like a dog without a bone.”

Suddenly he was aware
Of something that was never there.
The mystery of woman made explicit,
It seemed to him she was deficit.
But studies art and goes to College
And has no heart nor yet the knowledge
Of that which such a man requires
- Not the commonplace desires –
For far beyond the thrilling surge
Conditioned by the sexual urge,
And quieting all his worldly strife
He seeks the ecstasy of life.

Deep within us flows a river,
It belongs to life and not the liver.
Just now he suffers from a drought,
Distracted by despair and doubt.

River, river, flowing deep,
Stir me from this waking sleep.
This is his creed, his word, his prayer,
And he would live if she did care.’

That did the trick. She replied the next day, agreeing to go to the theatre with him. He smiled a smug smile. ‘That’s all you need, Jules, a little finesse…’

The End

In memoriam, Geoff Watt

(Geoff died from exposure while marathon training on Mount Erica in Baw Baw National Park, Victoria, Australia in 1969)