

A Plain Tale



Colin John Holcombe

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A Plain Tale

By all things dinned in me to do my best,
my father's choice of schooling did the rest.
Personable, if not companionable,
I was a shade more priggish than I ought,
but independent, and more likeable
by being circumspect in what I thought.
In other ways quite ordinary: I
was prefect, cricket captain, head of school.
But also naturally, quite dutiful,
I wasn't maverick to buck the rule
that discipline will make us practical.
Perhaps I didn't meet the small boy's claim
of living happily from game to game.

Gifted and impatient, I proceeded on
to Oxford: father's plan, where he had gone,
to study languages. I rowed and won
a clutch of silverware, a first, and all
in all seemed honourable, a model son.
But not for him, who wrote: *I can recall
just what it meant to have a double first:
within your capabilities, we both had thought –*
the 'both' was us, of course, my mother dead.
*But anyway, my boy, it's in your court:
the diplomatic corps or us instead?*
Us. A year or two and then I'd choose
between the options where I'd naught to lose.

Except a festering innocence, of course,
but with the family principles in force
what could I do? So: promptly, off I went.
In truth I liked the salt wind in my hair,
exotic ports we took in, India bent.
I traced a thousand contours in that air
and wove a magic from its labial speech,
the which I learned for my exams. A life
of public service beckoned, selflessness:
a subaltern, a district officer, a wife.
That was the route laid down, though I confess
inflexible and needing God's good grace
to get through climate and the tests I'd face.

*We serve with every quality we can:
the height of striving is for fellow man.*
So said my father in reflective vein
one day, much later, in his Sussex home.
I watched his look take in the slanting rain,
the puddles spreading through the well-tilthed loam,
and saw him shiver in the travelling rug.
The eyes still held you though the face was pale,
that air of brusque imperiousness grown tame.
He knew by then the distant dream would fail,
that hope of Governorship which never came.
A disappointment like a hidden sin
that rooms in practices held far within.

It wasn't bitterness, I thought, but more
bewilderment at what it had been for.
*Poland brought us into it, he said,
and then we give it back without a fight.
'The world had had enough of war. It led
to empires, colonies, that might is right.'*
*Perhaps it is, he said. It builds on strength,
is not corruption and the rule of caste.
Asked, they'd have us back, I have no doubt.*
I wondered, but replied the past is past.
'They made their government that forced us out.'
*That's politics, he said. We could
have stayed to bring them into nationhood.*

The dreams of old dominion, that great prize
whose soaring height was sanction in our eyes:
that jewel of India, with its charm that stays
beyond the actual our truth exacts.

It adds a glamour to our humdrum days
beyond the money in it or the basic facts.

I didn't argue with him. It was his faith,
the one he'd wrestled with to guard the gate
from apathy and sloth and native ways. It made
him what he was, the India wallah, late
of Governments service but now repaid
with handsome pension: one of many cooks
to spoil the twentieth century history books.

India with its Mughal forts, its fret
of jewelled domes and trees and minaret
which rise on sun-baked brick and poor cement,
that binds a hundred million to its toil.

India of fumes and excrement,
of bodies moving on its hardened soil.

Where all is circular, a heartless wheel
that rolls its suffering from life to death,
uncounted, unaccountable: a vast
evacuation of a common breath
to seek detachment from the cloying past.

A world of abnegation and of fastening joys
that makes of our ambitions broken toys.

*What condemnation can fall on this throne of kings
of warriors and statesmen, when the soft rain brings
recollections - I don't know - of its peoples scattered
the cross ways of world, to the dreary places
where the sky hangs, the sea boils, and the battered
rock is the keening of westward in the granite faces.
Who sought and won all — where the vast plain's heat
swoons lazily now over the temple and kirk, where
upwards and outwards the buzzard's wings
beat over the Indus and the dusty air
deepens and then lifts into the heart of things.
So my father, lyrical: his start
of saying God and country play their part.*

I wondered if he thought that world would last:
the books, the regiments, imperial past.
I saw the India Office send its young men forth
to ride, administrate and hold in trust
the orders emanating from up north
that seemed so eminently wise and just.
My own first posting was to Mysore South,
a rural place beset by sudden storms,
the people backward, smiling, difficult.
A thousand eyes to watch how he performs
but not a one to help him or consult
with. Yet it was my district all the same
that I must learn to govern, love and tame.

10. Who knows what wishful memory appends
in looking backward through time's blurring lens?
I was young, of course, and made mistakes:
by turns too trusting and then too aloof.
I learnt the hard way what it takes
to be dependable and native-proof,
but learnt it well, was affable, and kept
my distance with the academic's touch
of mixing common sense with abstract cause.
My writ went everywhere but not so much
as leave the local courts without their laws.
In short, another subaltern whose days at school
had taught the attitudes of those who rule.

I took the scholar's route and sat till late
in wondering which of them I should translate.
The Tamil tongue is beautiful and writes
explicitly of love and love's sweet sport.
I sat as one transfixed through silent nights
of conning cribs and drafting while I fought
an aching tenderness for artless girls
who filled the markets and the paddy fields.
I saw their modesty and downcast eyes,
the dark solemnity that slowly yields
to smiles, to laughter, as there flies
around some joke of girls and peasant wiles:
a life of watchfulness and radiant smiles.

How thin the walls of manners keep us in
a brisk sobriety. The discipline
of school and housemanship, established rules
of etiquette all help us. One can lose
a footing in an instant. It's for fools
to play with expectations, pick and chose
society they'll recognize. Myself,
I saw my life again as monk in Lent.
We had a club, not much of one, it's true,
and all too pukka, where one went
to be at ease, keep company, and do
the things expected of one's class, and talk
as though one never used one's knife for fork.

I needed change of course, and all too soon
some refuge from the enervating tune
of reckless manliness and stainless thoughts.
I knew the actual degradation well enough
though most of it went through the local courts.
Not all: I got a whiff of tawdry stuff
in licenses, disturbances, the women's suits:
the bright and seamy life that sped below
with all its earnestness and coloured shame:
a world an officer can't stoop to know
in case it singe him with a similar flame.
It's one he can't acknowledge, or deceive
himself with comradeship and annual leave.

Delhi had the usual tawdry bars and worse,
that gave relief, no doubt and then the curse.
No one I ever knew had mentioned them
as fit for officers but other ranks
and part of that shame-ridden stratagem
that looked to others for its social thanks.
A world of hypocrisy in short that I
was part and parcel of, a rigid caste
not quite inscrutable but one that led
to double standards in its sexual fast.
Things just weren't done, nor were they said
until it seemed a sort of leprous sore
beneath the pomp and circumstance I saw.

Bewitched by khaki and the long parades,
the brass and bugle calls, the thinking fades
into the commonplace: what must be best
is that which serving men have always thought:
my comrades, fellow officers. The rest,
I hardly had the time to pay them court
but met them sometimes: soft anaemic men
who thought to right the-all too flagrant wrongs
of centuries of British rule. Insane,
I thought, when proper scrutiny belongs
to independent scholarship, a brain
that's disengaged and far away. For me,
I felt the power of caste's supremacy.

So back I went unchanged and saw the miles,
across the garden terraces, where evening smiles
on cardamom and sorghum, dusty hills
where Telagu is spoken, sleepy towns
within my guardianship where riot spills
from bars and liquor stores, when dusky browns
are pressed to soldiers that enforce our laws.
We steal his patrimony, plough his fields
made thin with taxes, and ensure his fruits
are even as we've chosen, as his yields
involve expenses and long civil suits.
And all the while his chattering women go
with downcast eyes and smiling, to and fro.

A scent bewildering as sari swirls,
unfathomably they linger, village girls.
A solemn beauty in the umber eyes,
a supple heaviness without the bounds
of strap and corset, and the softest ties
of downy outline rims the subtle smiles.
I saw them as the Tamil poets wrote,
their legs in tumbrel and each laughing nose
wrinkled good-humouredly as darkening cheek
would bloom enticingly and call to those
like me who knew their tongue but could not speak.
A moving paradise in warm confusion
that lay entangled with the day's profusion.

Who knows how far I'd go if free to roam?
But it was time, high time, that I went home,
resigned, did something practical that kept
me out of policies I didn't like.
It was the steady whole that I'd accept
in all its sordidness, that didn't strike
false attitudes and loyalties, in short
the country India would have been without
its memsahibs, district officers and caste.
I wanted naturalness without the rout
of simple deference now going fast.
All things considered, rural administration
I thought most helpful to a third-world nation.

I went to Hereford, a pretty town
where hills and hedge-crossed countryside look down
on level windings of the Wye. Four years
I studied there. Scholastically at least
did well enough, though not with social peers
where differences between us much increased:
the girls seemed pallid and my friends too young.
I thought of India with its fervid heats,
the creaking trishaw, oxen, laughing wives.
It all was different here, the rainy streets,
the chill propriety, the little lives
so orderly that if they kept in touch
it was at Christmas only, and then not much.

20. Perhaps my attitude was most to blame:
it takes some time to settle, be the same
as every Tom or Dick or Harry. I
was all too clearly cut from costlier stuff,
a manager of men, who didn't lie
and didn't cheat, or mix in with the rough
and tumble that is normal life. You'd think
an overseer's post is what I'd take
at some old manor farm, baronial seat
well stocked with pheasant woods and villa'd lake;
a place where farming new and old could meet.
It's true I made enquiries, but the thought
of Raj decorum ruled it out of court.

I wanted something seamier, with more accord
to truth, and wired my father, then abroad.

*My advice to you, he wrote, is go elsewhere
before the lure of India taints the blood:
if that's impossible, then have a care,
remember poverty, the flies, the mud:
besides, our rulership is not to last.*

I thought of women with their nose-piece gold,
their fluted fingernails, their chiselled nose,
I saw the darkness at the elbow fold
and thought how languid is our English rose
with small proprieties and ill-brushed hair
that rises out of High Street underwear.

So India once again of summer heat,
dead animals and bustle in the street,
the scrawny, barefoot peddlers shouting wares,
and horse-drawn carriages, and crush of bikes;
the whining beggars working round in pairs,
and then that fragrant peace as evening strikes
a marbled dome or minaret with light,
the last of coloured daylight brings its care
across the wheat and paddy, shaded wells
with knots of villagers collected there
to circulate such talk as gossips tells
of pregnancies, of lawsuits won or lost,
the price of oil or what a sari cost.

Would I be happy in the stench and heat
as bright-struck rupee jingling in the street?
That much was clearly written on the wall:
another tour of duty would not do.
But still I had my languages on call
and what I'd trained for hitherto,
and both then served me splendidly at last:
I wrote and got a cultural mission post
not much money, certainly, but chance
to show what specialisms mattered most.
The past that led me such a hapless dance
swung doors that led me to the Indus plains
of monsoon sweltering and heavy rains.

Immediately I took the next boat out as one
who feels his mission is at last begun.
I heard again that sonorous thick-rolled tongue,
the cries, the creaking trishaw, all the past.
I felt apart from it but still was young,
and if I wondered vaguely how I'd last,
I pulled myself together, settled down
to farms and consultations, trying out
a dozen strains of millet, sorghum, rice,
what best survived the rains, astounding drought:
a dozen headmen hung on my advice,
and trainee graduates were just as keen,
to make me comfortable in my new scene

I mean the well-intentioned specialist,
the one accomplishment I never missed.
I banned the title *sahib, engineer*,
insisted that they use my Christian name,
forwent the Landover, the khaki gear,
and so was one of them, and just the same
accursed by moneylenders, rain and drought.
It's true my remit ran to rural health,
to prophylactics, and to giving birth:
a thousand trifling views that under stealth
I gave in honesty, for what it's worth,
my views on this and that, and all the while
there slowly faded that bewitching smile.

Ineluctably they dried up at the source
as water in some cut-off river course,
those surface pools that held the tranquil sky
grew shallower and shrank, the grass poked through
as one by one the busy months passed by
and evenings found me other things to do.
What was I thinking of? The dreadful gulf
transferred itself to Delhi, Madras, Bengal.
I joined the expat tennis clubs, both came
and left without regret or stir at all:
considerate and obliging, all the same
retained my offhand, enigmatic guise,
both expatriate and native in their eyes.

Increasingly my time was in the fields:
irrigation, crops, their varied yields.
I went to England sometimes, first on leave
but then to conferences, but I
couldn't make my countrymen conceive
how vast is India, and how many die
each day from poverty, insanitation, want
of drinking water, simple drugs. Became
no doubt a Johnny one tune, deadly bore.
England was different, bland, too much the same
with village pub and bobby, local store.
You did you best, but found a thousand more
to run your innings for you, keep the score.

So I, as though I hadn't overdosed
enough on that vast country, took a UN post,
but with this difference: I didn't take
the usual route of memo, meeting, filed report
but did things simply for the country's sake.
From my own salary in time I bought,
mosquito netting, equipment, medicines.
What others talked about I got to do,
which wasn't sensible in retrospect:
*the man's gone native: it is most non-U
to stamp one's annual leave as 'non-collect'.*
I think of it as posture, empty show
from one who had no other place to go.

I lived as they did through the sweltering heat,
I watched and worried over summer wheat.
I saw the fields turn barren, dusty greys
and followed up each gesture, each complaint
who stood there patient with that shuttered gaze
that's half of sinner and yet half of saint.
So pitiful they were and burdened down
with landlord, moneylender, sterile seed.
My thoughts were written in each wrinkled face
that showed their poverty and constant need
for hope and surety and resting-place.
They were as I was, simply making out
against infrequent rainfall, constant drought.

30. To know them better was to grow apart
as though that knowledge there would wall the heart
against a local girl in dalliance
if that would jeopardize the sounder part
why families married, and would look askance
at any canoodling woman's simple heart.
I now was older, wiser, nearer fifty,
and if distinguished not a young girl's choice.
Kindly, I hope, I smiled at matron's looks
and all those leading interests they voice,
but stuck to numismatics and to books.
By stages distant were those downy limbs
as long forgotten as our childhood hymns.

In that preordered world an interview
changed everything, and life, and we both knew
the dark-eyed charmer made my chit of thing.
Of course I should have laughed, and shown the door,
and not have let that husky softness wring
correctness out of me. It had before,
I had no doubt, but I was old, and tired
of being the model of high rectitude.
A dry old stick, in truth, who lacked the grace
or guts to shun whatever flack ensued.
Besides, she had a gentle, friendly face.
'You'll want a salary,' I said, *'or find
no doubt some shortfalls if you're paid in kind.'*

I have to say at once my PA ran
up lines of debt as only women can.
Own car, apartment, cleaner, heaps of clothes,
and jewellery of course, the fretted gold
that Indian women love: It ill behoves
an officer to treat as weighed and sold
his occupant of fervent hours. So there
we are. I had in Chani what I'd sought
and she was beautiful and kind and gave
some softer purposes to what I taught.
Apart from cost I've no complaining save
she chattered over-much and promptly said
whatever nonsense bumped into her head.

But I was pleased, yes, certainly, and had begun
to warm to Chani's prattling sense of fun.
It thawed innate reserve, and more like friends
were colleagues, site technicians, those who came
to weekly surgeries, on field weekends
where I was working, travelling just the same
but with a happiness, and sometimes Chani too
improbably turned out in khaki drill.
No doubt much gossip spread. I didn't care.
Against the protocols, of course, but still
I took her, loud and laughing everywhere.
Through all the turmoil by that pretty head,
my life was watered every day and fed.

One earring lost within her tangled hair
and I would love all women searching there,
and in her slow unclothing I would trace
the soft embodiment of what they said,
those Tamil poets with their labial grace,
whose little ears held trumpets round her head.
I knew her urgency and how she sat
when sad or satisfied, the hang of limbs
when laid beseechingly as hands in lap.
The evening's potency, the passing whims
as seen in cigarettes when fingers tap
their lovers messages as native drums
announce, if silently, that trouble comes.

For me, so new it was, but soon well known
but not by all accepted and I own
I made a show of what was better hid,
and often brought her to our cocktail dos.
I saw her circulating much as others did
but wildly aberrant in dress and shoes.
All too evident in hands she'd grab
that Chani wasn't diplomatic stuff,
but still I loved her for it, more so, thought
I'd never tire of that or have enough
of ingénue attempts at holding court.
Whatever empty silliness I heard
from her, I saw the point of it, concurred.

*You lucky sod, they said. . . a pretty toy,
a word in confidence . . . you know, old boy. . .
Mountains of good advice were thrown at me,
and wasted there of course: I knew their wiles,
the what they hinted at: I couldn't be
oblivious of malice and of pointed smiles.
Envy, most of it, but it still hurt.
I think old Phelan's lost it, broken down. . .
it's pretty scandalous . . . he needs a wife . . .
just look: he revels in it, addled clown . . .
and suchlike wishes for a better life
which I was having, and much more than they
were in this frowned on and belated way.*

But as for Chani's part or what she'd said,
whatever thoughts there rattled through that head,
its beckoning manner or the laughing eyes
I'd not the faintest notion, nor could guess
the facts behind the all-too-frequent lies,
and if I tried she bought another dress
or something anyway. At last I said,
*'Let's go to England for a while and live
as man and wife together, then we'll see.'*
*The strife our disapproving neighbours give,
the regulations, forms, bureaucracy.*
For every word she had a stroke off pat:
and there's your work, and clothes, the flat.

In retrospect the battle lines were drawn,
if somewhat tawdry, a little worn.
I met such stratagems each working day
and smiled, prevaricated, tried again:
the cost of it, the rents, my scale of pay.
Perhaps we'll think of some allowance then
I said to her entreaties, not too well.
I was a little shaken, expected tears
and accusations, tantrums, but instead
I got the polished charmer's wealth of years.
She smiled at me, looked glum, and shook her head.
To the end professional, she took her tools
of mistressing: the dresses, perfumes, jewels.

It was a drawn out misery forestalled:
I'd put my stake in and the hand was called.
But numbing grief at first, as though a part
of me was broken off and lodged elsewhere,
and to that consciousness there came the smart
of knowing honestly she didn't care.
She'd got the best of me, and then had left.
I didn't make excuses, simply tried
to put a face on it, say thousands more
will no doubt take your money, smile and hide
ulterior purposes they're angling for.
*'Such is life,' I said, 'and for the best,
no doubt, and adds a certain something's zest.'*

40. And still the tongues were chattering, I knew,
but left that inbred, poisonous brew
for England's cooler retrospection, sought
my father out at his new Sussex home,
that large and ornate Lutyens place he'd bought
with views of Downland, space to roam
between the long-grassed slopes and orchard trees.
I have to say that even there the scent
of something loved and personal underwent
strange metamorphosis, and it lent
an edge of kindness to the sums I'd spent.
I mentioned it in passing, but father said
nothing but nodded a bit that wise old head.

*I told you at the time what India did:
it bred the body's heady dream amid
appalling squalor, stench and heat.
It is a fabled land, the gorgeous east
but bears its carriage over dirty feet.
On want and exaltation senses feast
but what is underneath for western man
is scent and mirage only, chilly dawn
when he must grope and reckon as he can
the purposes for which his soul was born.
They have a way of seeing it, a subtle yeast
that draws the body from its sensual feast.*

*Such fire and torments test our potter's clay,
he said, who with a smile have gone their way
and into nothingness, an endless stream
of notes and meetings sensing one by one
what is not difficult until they seem
a date with providence, what must be done.
Here it's different, ordered, the months tick round
we do our visiting and vote as best
may suit our consciences or pocketbooks.
There is no fall in status, nor the zest
of being something other than our looks.
Here is a continuum, a silent clock
that takes the right responses out of stock.*

*You find yourself, my boy, an old man's son
with education somewhat late begun.
India's a sorcerer, and no one knows
from whence she comes, nor where she goes.
The dreams of bodies in their heavy throes
are more than sorrows that a young man sows.
They rest on emptiness, on endless pasts
and under countless rains will nothing last.
Life has a presence: it passes: a water's breath:
an absence even to which we hold most fast
but look into the maelstrom, to death on death.
You can go back, my boy, find someone new:
countless men have done that, so may you.*

I saw the repetition, toil on toil:
uplifted, grown, returned to dusty soil.
The wheel cranks water from the well, the seed
is scattered, watered, tended, when it thrives
until the dust storms of the summer lead
to dried-up harvests where enough survives,
to keep the same old process slowly turning
of birth, degeneration, death: a light
that flickers in our waking selves, and one
that seems beyond the footfalls of our sight.
The world is big with promises begun
that yet are nowhere but a passing on,
as soon as apprehended, soon are gone.

Although they may not know it, being more
concerned with wells and grazing rights, the poor
are poor in spirit always, all the same
across the continents: the inward things
that stir and wake the thinking man have claim
on times of indolence that leisure brings.
The working man is work: that's what he is,
made more mechanical by daily tasks,
whose days stretch onward while the summers last.
the hows and wherefores of it no one asks:
why should they? Age and sickness press on fast.
There come the yearly festivals to play
the fool and then survival has its sway.

Myself: no doubt I should have altered tack
but didn't, worried, waited, went on back
to age and ignorance and practices
that made them beasts of burden, didn't pay.
I spoke of quotas, targets, indices,
of how we westerners were doing day
by day, the benefits we brought, the land
retrieved from fallow and the latest yields.
All was commendable, nor out of hand
would anyone dismiss the richer fields,
but what was deepest was this urge to fill
my waking hours with every hard-learned skill.

The only hopes we have are those we make,
we pour our heart and soul in, never take
at random or at second hand. All this
is obvious, of course, and in my case
I tried to find some other dark-eyed miss
to fill my flat with chatter, dresses, face
that pouts at me with looks and latest news,
to fill the place with welcomings and friends.
It was no use. Long intervals in bars
then led to money and to tawdry ends
in one-hour cheap hotels and passing cars.
Not mistress, lover, or a passing friend,
had been that India in her and its end.

It was my UN boss who stopped the rot:
*Phelan, I'm giving you what you are not
entitled to, not yet, a Delhi post,
where you can meet up with another stripe
of woman: at least respectable, where most
you go for now are called the other type,
I hear. Which is not good for you or us.
George, be sensible, I know how much
those budding dusky promises engage
our sense of manhood that we have to touch,
but not so openly, not at your age.
So that's it, George: it's yours to choose,
but you're an officer I'd hate to lose.*

And so, if slowly, came the turn around.
I lost my taste for India's scented ground
of ancient pleasures and their emptiness.
Its stench is stench to me, its voices fill
my ventricles with chatter. Here unless
there's something new that binds me, someone still
epitomising India, that is past.
I met a woman sensible, divorced.
We married six months later. Jean went home
to find a house for us, her hopes endorsed
by FAO's new contract out of Rome
and I was left to wonder, as no doubt
the others, why I'd ever voyaged out.

50. Drenched, knocked senseless by the brazen heat,
by stench and clamour, from my narrow seat
I give my holdall up. The hostess smiles
at all such travellers. In windows pass
the varied, drab and dusty, ragged miles.
I watch in safety from this business class.
For me a breakfast with my small case packed,
as dawn grows light and empty through the sky.
We pass odd shops, a warehouse, Mughal dome:
things incongruous and too muddled up to try
to sort out when my country calls me home.
I leave the crush and trishaws as this van
behind me whispers as the office fan.