

# 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 upright and indeed more likeable  
by being circumspect in all I thought.  
In other ways quite ordinary: I  
was prefect, cricket captain, head of school.  
But also easily, becoming best  
at civilising that upholds the rule —  
when what one's good at serves the rest,  
for all 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 less 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.

5. 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 the 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 detail that close 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 Government service, now repaid  
with handsome pension: one of many cooks  
to spoil the all-too Marxist 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 the human breath  
to seek detachment from the cloying past.  
A world of abnegation and of fastening joys  
that leave our lives at best but broken toys.

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.

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 leaving local courts without their laws.  
In short, another subaltern whose days at school  
had bred the attitudes of those who rule.

10. 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 quietly flies  
around some joke of girls and peasant wiles:  
a life of watchfulness and radiant smiles.

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 curried 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 instrumental in, 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 Telugu 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.

15. Who knows how far I'd go if left 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, but had no social peers,  
indeed the differences still more 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.

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 earthier, 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.

20. 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,  
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 groups and conferences, but I  
quite failed to 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 your best, but found a thousand more  
to run your innings for you, keep the score.

25. 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.

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  
of families, and so 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 pre-ordered 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 modelled 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.

30. 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 swelling potency, the passing whims  
as seen in cigarettes when fingers tap  
their lovers messages as native drums  
announce, if distantly, that evening 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.*

35. In retrospect the battle lines were drawn,  
if somewhat tawdry, and 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.  
A 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.'*

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  
apotheosis of a kind, and lent  
an edge of kindness to the sums I'd spent.  
I mentioned it in passing, but father said  
nothing but nodded then 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 appears so openly, is yet  
to us miasmas. One for western man  
as scent and mirage only, chilly dawn  
when he must grope and reckon as he can  
the purposes for which his soul was born.  
And in those fields is sown a subtle wheat  
of rank imaginings and sensual heat.*

*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 emptiness to which we hold on fast  
but look into the maelstrom, to death on death.  
You could go back, my boy, find someone new:  
countless men have done that, so may you.*

40. 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,  
that 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 all he is,  
and made 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.

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.  
No mistress, lover, or a passing friend,  
could fill my Chani's India, or 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.

45. 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:  
incongruous and all too muddled up to try  
to sort out when my country calls me home.  
Another world in which the air-conditioned coach  
transports us on past failure or reproach.