

FICTION

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They Stand and Serve Too

LAL KISHAN SINGH WALKED on the deck of the ocean liner *Edward*, grateful to make out Alexandria on the coastline. The ship was quiet now, but in less than an hour, the early-rising army officers and civil servants would rouse their wives and children to get up and make the most of their first stop along the Mediterranean, as if months or years in India hadn't come near to satisfying their appetite for the new and disturbing. Colonel Abercrombie, Singh's master when he was eighteen and on board the venerable *Victoria*, Singh's first assignment, used to walk at least three miles on the ship every dawn. This was one of the colonel's habits Singh had picked up. Singh also took care to speak to servants lower on the totem pole than himself with intense respect, and treated the ladies with the delicacy that they deserved.

From a distance, all the cities dotting the sea in Asia and Africa looked similarly haphazard, sprung without premeditation. Alexandria was memorable for the profusion of huts made of red-baked clay that lined the steep hill known as Barclays Point. Singh looked forward to the arrival on deck of Hamid, the fried fish vendor. Hamid had told him that to please the British he bought special Italian herbs and spices from a shop in Alexandria, intensifying the normally bland flavour of fish favoured by native Egyptians. Before Hamid, it was his father, and before him, his father's father, who carried a special licence to cater fish to the British on their ships. In twenty years of serving a bewildering variety of masters aboard British ships, Singh had got to know the cast of characters allowed to come on board along various stops to serve the rulers pretty well. At times, he was called on by a lord or lady to interpret some local to their satisfaction, although they could

easily have done the job better with their superior knowledge of other languages.

He could tell that Lady Cameroon, the dowager with a retinue of nephews whom she had recruited on this journey to look over her late husband's estates near Rangoon with a view to taking them over, would not want to set foot in Alexandria while they lay at anchor for a day at least. Neither would Lady Simons, who was by far the most attractive woman on board, wooed by everyone from the ageing majors and colonels with grand old war stories to brash young coffee and cotton traders with money on their mind. Lady Cameroon would stay on ship because she was the type who preferred to reign in her own milieu, taking care to carve out a zone of influence where no one else could enter. And Lady Simons would stay because it would be inexcusable for her to spread the glow of her beauty around to a less than sophisticated audience. He would stay because he wasn't allowed to leave ship at any time, on pain of immediate dismissal.

"Singh, you ruffian, up with the first rays of sun, are you?"

With that greeting, he got a hearty slap on the back. It was William, Lady Cameroon's youngest nephew, the least formal of the lot, taking a leave from Oxford because he couldn't stand the constant drumbeat of war from men who hadn't done a single day's hard work in their lives, men who were ready to do or die as the necessary cost of defending England against the rising German menace. "Once in a century is enough," they used to say, and William wanted nothing more than to join the army rather than listen to the blowhards go on and on about good patriotism and good nationalism. Lady Cameroon was threatening to cut William off, quite apart from his chances at the Burmese estates, unless he finished out Oxford. William was an honest man, but his back-slapping and offers to buy Singh drinks made him intensely uncomfortable. Young William didn't understand the rules; at his age he could get away with it, barely, but soon he would get into trouble – and get an unwitting participant like Singh into greater trouble.

"Sahib, yes, it is a clear morning," Singh said, trying to act deferential. "Does Lady Cameroon wish to go to Alexandria, to see the sights and shop for fabrics? Egyptian cotton, fine, fine cotton."

"The old bird was passed out—that brand of brandy is too strong for her, you know—at four in the morning, so I doubt it,"

said William. "I say, is that a bloody lark? It's the only bird we've seen in days. Well, what say you we go and get some ripping hot coffee and hunt for ancient manuscripts once we reach the city, hey?"

William seemed to be the only one around not to know the rule about Indian servants on ships not being allowed to disembark at ports. Singh found it incomprehensible that William would want to chat him up rather than hang around people of his own class and status. Also, vaguely insulting.

"Sahib, please, I must stay on the ship. I am needed in the middle of the morning, the middle of the afternoon, the middle of the night."

"As you wish, old chap, but I must say you're beginning to look a little like that starving lark, for lack of walking around on firm ground, I'd hazard. Terra firma, terra incognita, hey. The great undiscovered lands of the world, at your fingertips, your heels I should say, and you prefer to perambulate this doddering ship at strange hours of the morning and night. Oh well, it takes all kinds, as Lady Cameroon would say, unmercifully, I might add."

After William was gone, Singh felt uneasy. The lone lark, so far out from land, was not a good sign. Over the years, after spending so much time with the British, he had managed to let go of most of his superstitions. If a black cat refused food when it was hungry, he no longer stayed inside the cabin that day except at mealtimes, when his presence was indispensable. But certain myths had stayed with him, despite Englishmen pooh-poohing the Hindoos and Mohammedans for their fear of the new, their anxiety about the future. Lady Cameroon's skin was thick and wrinkled, probably because of all the heavy drinking, but you could see underneath it that she must have been a beautiful woman when young. They could mock him all they wanted for taking cues from animals and insects, but they wanted to forget their own sorrows through drink.

This particular journey to London was one of the rare times he was not assigned to serve a specific master, since there seemed to be an oversupply of personal servants available on short-term contract in Bombay this year. But Captain Fawcett couldn't imagine sailing for England without Singh on board; he had been asked to serve for half the normal pay, and Singh gladly accepted. He didn't like fraternizing too much with the young pups who seemed

to be part of some recruiting frenzy, as if seafaring was suddenly an adventurous man's ticket to happiness. These new guys acted not so much as servants but consorts, daring to look their masters straight in the eye, and laughing at their jokes; this arrogance could have nothing but unfortunate results. Singh wanted no part of it; when the day of reckoning arrived, and the guns went off and blood ran in the streets, he hoped he would be far, far away from the sight.

Many of the usual masters who sought him out on their journeys back home to England were staying in India this year; as bad as things were in Europe, the situation in India was no less fraught with danger. An explosion was awaited at any moment; the world was on edge. Even sleepy Alexandria, if you looked at it perceptively, now that the *Edward* was near to landing, was abuzz with a slight nervousness, a certain speeded-up movement that should scare men of wit and judgement. The number of mangy dogs who sniffed hungrily at visitors' ankles seemed to him to have multiplied many times over from the last visit.

The families were usually the first to disembark, and today was no exception; the single people took their time. Singh took up position at one of the ship's binoculars. From there, he could watch the British valets acting as if they understood every word of Arabic, pretending to find bargains for their lords and ladies. Captain Fawcett was entertaining Lady Diana Dalrymple, nineteen and famished for attention. He had been wrong: both Lady Cameroon and Lady Simons had left the ship, and fluttered in the streets, their spotless white dresses and red parasols standing out, like angels dispensing unwarranted kindness. You felt that their mere touch on a suffering leper's or consumptive's head might revive the patient for all time to come.

"Singh, I'd like you to be in attendance on Lady Dalrymple for the rest of the day," Captain Fawcett interrupted his reverie. "My man Lloyd has gone ashore to do some shopping for me. More of his own, I imagine." It was well-known that the British servants smuggled into England all sorts of valuable items that in the normal course of trade would have been difficult to obtain. It was casually accepted by the officer class as a necessary supplement to the servants' income.

"Yes, Captain," Singh said.

"Pretty sight you have of the ladies through these binoculars, hey? You might call it occult skirt chasing."

"At your service, Captain," Singh said, confused.

Before he could attend to Lady Dalrymple, Hamid arrived on board with his two baskets of spicy fish. "It's the last year I'm doing this," Hamid complained.

"Hamid, my friend, you say this every year," Singh dutifully reminded him.

"This year I mean it."

"What will you do instead?"

"I have to bribe the magistrate too much for the licence. There are fifty young fish-sellers eager to take my place. They think it would be some bonanza of profits for them, if they could only serve the British on board the ship rather than on land alone. You and I know it's not true."

"Who knows what is true and what is not true."

"What do you mean by that?" Hamid sputtered. "The British are stingy, and they treat you like animals."

"That is false. The British never treated me poorly."

"What world are you living in?" Hamid said in a high-pitched voice.

Singh touched Hamid on the shoulder to calm him down, much as William had surprised him this morning. "Please, not so loud."

"I'll be as loud as I want to be. Things aren't the same anymore, you don't understand that. We want to be free people, independent of the British, the French, the German, all the white races. Their time has come and gone. I read the newspapers carefully. The situation in Europe will change everything, you watch. Let them fight and kill each other, and we will gain from their weakness."

Suddenly, Singh felt exhausted. He wanted no more of these political fantasies. He could see Lady Dalrymple quietly waiting for him about twenty feet away. She was giving Singh time to finish his feverish conversation with Hamid. Here she was, being so polite, as if she were the servant and he the master, and Hamid was talking about blood and revolution.

"I must go," Singh said, "the lady is waiting." He shook hands with Hamid with less than his usual ardour. They said that a library had been burned long ago in Alexandria. He could understand the

passion of whoever had done it. The people here were probably too easily inflamed by the wrong books.

“Your ladyship,” Singh said, bowing deeply.

Lady Dalrymple turned out to be a chatterbox. “Singh, Captain Fawcett tells me you’re a fine judge of character. What do you think of William, Lady Cameroon’s young nephew?” Then, without waiting for Singh’s answer, Lady Dalrymple continued: “I have little hesitation in telling you that I like the young man. My mother actually spotted him at a ball last year, where the Prime Minister was in attendance. I have no desire to be married to some swash-buckling hunter type who makes war with Indian princes and forces me to spend the summers in the Himalayas. I want to be close to home. Do you see how I love England and don’t want to spend my life abroad in some Godforsaken place? You must love India, must you not?”

Singh said, bowing again, “Your ladyship, I love India, very much.”

“Then you see my point, of course. William has studiously avoided me, or maybe he’s as scared of Lady Cameroon as I am. She’d be totally against the match, you see. We’re not exactly in their league. Will you do me a favor and pass along this note to William the next time you see him? I’d be much obliged.”

“Yes, your ladyship.”

“There’s that awful Captain Fawcett ogling me. I daresay he has no respect for his wife and little girl. It is so unprofessional, plying me with drinks early in the day. For heaven’s sake, am I some tramp? But Singh, you must do me a favour. Could you fetch me from Sultan street in the old section of Alexandria some local souvenir, maybe a pipe or hookah, or something recovered from the pyramids, to make a gift of to William? My mother would be very upset if I disembarked here. Under no circumstances in Egypt, she warned me. India is fine, but not Egypt. You see, she had her purse stolen thirty years ago in this very city, and she laments it to this day. I don’t think all natives are cunning and inscrutable, but who can change the mind of old people? It’s not as if she’s omniscient and watching me, but I don’t like to disobey once I’ve given my word.”

“Your ladyship, I am not allowed to go ashore.”

“Oh, you’re not?” Lady Dalrymple thought for a moment. “Because they’re afraid you’ll run away or something? I can see if

they'd put that rule in place for England, but why would an Indian want to escape to Egypt? That makes no sense. I'll talk to Captain Fawcett about it."

"Please, your ladyship, please, you must not talk to anyone about it. This is the way it is."

She looked disconcerted for a moment. "Oh well," she sighed, "I guess I'll ask Captain Fawcett to accompany me then. I have no choice. All the other servants, I can't trust them for a moment. They tell tales, I think."

"There is much discretion here," Singh said, not quite sure exactly what he was referring to.

Singh tried to stay aware of what was happening on the ship as a whole, rather than being focused only on the master or mistress he was serving at the moment. Captain Fawcett had taken up with another lovely thing, but no doubt he would drop her as soon as Lady Dalrymple approached him. He was genuinely sorry he couldn't be of more help to her, but perhaps it was all for the best. It was preferable not to get mixed up in affairs of the heart. He could tell that Hamid was having a miserable selling day. He left ship with almost the full load of fish he came with.

Later in the day, before the sun set, Singh observed a commotion on the wharf. It seemed that a young British sailor, one of those who ended up on a luxury ship like the *Edward* through some fortuitous turn rather than sailing on a decrepit ship meant for his kind, had insulted a fortune-telling dervish for telling lies and committing fraud. The sailor seized the dervish's earnings for the day, and it took a mob threatening to attack him to finally end his drunken speeches on behalf of the integrity of the British shopkeeper, who surely knew how to earn his money by the sweat of his brow instead of pretending to be in touch with oracles and false gods.

Singh was troubled that things might not be the same again. A violent bloody sun, reddening the sky with its lust and hunger, unusual for these parts, put an end to the day. For a moment, he hoped that Lady Cameroon would force young William to be the one to take up the Burmese estates; then he thought of the way William touched him on the back and withdrew his bad wish.