Bus-ride to Srinagar

I have a large family and an old and very unreliable car. We always start on journeys with a certain amount of noise and confusion and we never know whether we shall get to our destination or how much it will cost us. Starting out this year on a wonderful summer morning, I was reminded very vividly of a journey I made by bus from Sialkot in the Punjab to Srinagar in Kashmir fifteen years ago.

On certain points my memory is hazy. Why, for example, did the Army not give me a leave warrant? I think it was because the bus company I had chosen was so unreliable that the Army would do no business with them. It is certainly true that in most years one of their buses fell off the mountain path into the valley about eight hundred feet or more, with the loss of all hands. But so, every year, did at least one private car. I have a hazy recollection that someone explained this to me. It may have been a clerk and maybe I felt too hot and tired to take the matter any further. The temperature was always over 100 at this time. I don't think I believed this anyhow. I probably came to the conclusion that the warrant involved some form which the clerk hadn't got and that it was easier to make up a story than order any more. Or that this was a subtle move in the Quit India campaign. Anyway the fare was very small and I would save three days by making the return journey by this route, so I resolved to go.

The next thing was to get my ticket. I could not rule out the possibility of the clerk's story being true; and, if it was, I might be frustrated if any of the officers of the Brigade found out that I had bought a ticket. The Intelligence Officer always knew about visits to the Indian City, where tickets had to be bought, by British Other Ranks. It was part of his job. Therefore I asked my friend Raza, who used to work in my department, if he would get me a ticket. I offered him the money. 'No, no,' he said, 'pay me when you have the ticket.' This was fair enough. Next day I produced the money and asked for the ticket. I thought a slight cloud passed across his face but I may have been wrong. 'No ticket,' he said.

'Then I must get on the train to 'Pindi,' I began.

'No, no, you're on the bus,' said Raza. 'A fine seat next to the driver.' Again I offered him the money. 'Pay it when you get the ticket,' he said. 'I will give you tomorrow.'

From time to time I asked him about the ticket during the next week and he always described the luxury of sitting next to the driver but never produced the ticket. Nor would he take any money. Now Raza was my friend and I knew he would not let me down if he could help it. But it occurred to me that one of two things might have happened. Either he had forgotten all about the ticket until all the seats had been booked and since he was a sensitive man shrank from saying so. This would after all imply that his affairs were so pressing that mine had gone out of his mind. The rudeness of this implication would have been quite impossible for an Indian to contemplate. Or possibly a domestic crisis, so delicate that he could not explain it, had arisen and prevented him buying the ticket.

Two days before I was due to start, therefore, I proposed we should dine together at a restaurant in the city, near the ticket office. 'No, no,' said Raza, 'to-night you must take rest. To-morrow we will dine there before you go to Jammu on the train.'

'But I'm going by bus from Sialkot on Saturday morning at 8 o'clock,' I said.

I was a bit nervous now. This was Thursday.

'Yes,' said Raza patiently, 'that's right. You're going on the bus from Jammu on Saturday at half past ten so you must go to Jammu either on Friday night or at 7 o'clock on Saturday morning. (Jammu is about fifty miles from Sialkot.)

‘But the bus stops in Sialkot,’ I said.

‘It does not stop properly in Sialkot,’ said Raza, ‘so we shall of course go to Jammu. I shall accompany as arranged and when the bus stops properly in Jammu you will get on the seat next to the driver and go to Srinagar. We shall sleep in the train which is in a siding for the convenience of persons going to Srinagar, I think. So to-night, take rest.’

I was now completely in Raza’s hands, so I took rest and next night was fully packed up and drove down to the restaurant in a tonga[1] to meet him about 6.30. When I arrived Raza said, ‘Do not pay the tonga wallah. It is one of my tongas.’ He then began a long argument in Punjabi which I did not understand but in which the tonga wallah seemed somewhat reluctant to admit Raza’s claims, I thought. However I did not pay him but I became more and more doubtful of the existence of my ticket. The journey to Jammu and the claim to own a tonga fleet seemed to me to be a face saving scheme on Raza’s part, especially as he talked about everything under the sun except my journey all through dinner and he was obviously making the evening an occasion. He had dressed up and ordered a wonderful dinner. However I resolved to enjoy myself and see what happened. The night train went. I heard it pull out while we were still eating. At about ten o’clock Raza said, ‘Now you must go to sleep in the waiting room to catch the train to-morrow morning. I must take a bath.’ I now suspected that he was washing his hands of me completely. That all the arrangements had fallen through and that he proposed to leave me on the station to avoid explanations. However beds on Indian stations are as good as anywhere so I suffered him to put me to bed, bring me a nightcap from the buffet and give directions to the waiter and the ticket collector about my disposal, rather like a doctor leaving a very sick patient with two nurses. I determined to save Raza’s face by appearing to suspect nothing and to get to Srinagar somehow in the morning. In the meantime I could do nothing so I wished him goodnight and went to sleep.

Next morning the waiter brought me tea and toast, and the ticket collector came at intervals to tell me the time. I got up and waited for the train. It came in but Raza did not arrive so I asked the ticket collector whether he knew whether it would be better to pick up the bus in Sialkot or Jammu. At this he became nearly demented and thrust me into a compartment. Just as the train was pulling out Raza came sprinting along the platform followed by the waiter with a tray of breakfast, a barber with a can of hot water and a tonga wallah with a towel. Raza, the waiter and the barber all got into my compartment and the tonga wallah thrust the towel, a shaving brush, some soap and a cut-throat razor through the window. We were off. We had a convivial journey during which we had breakfast and were rather perilously shaved. We got to Jammu about nine o’clock and went to the bus office. This was an unre-assuring location consisting of a lean-to shed, empty except for a chair and table, a calendar open at the previous month and a lot of flies, in the middle of a sort of compost heap flattened by the daily passage of a bus. We left my luggage in the shed and walked to a strategic point where we could see that the luggage was not stolen but where we should not be asphyxiated by the smell of the yard. At 9.30 a clerk arrived and we went reluctantly to the shed. The clerk sat at the table so still that one of the flies sat on his face undisturbed. Raza addressed him at length in Punjabi. He answered occasionally in monosyllables and kept so still that the fly didn’t move. It didn’t look hopeful. The clerk took down the calendar and studied it. The fly walked across his face. Raza’s voice rose and was only drowned by the most frightful rattling and grinding that heralded the arrival of the bus. I turned and noted that the barber had caught us up from the station and was seated in the compost heap to await customers, and that the front seat was occupied as indeed were all the others. The bus came to a noisy halt and the passengers got out. The driver came into the shed and joined Raza in his address to the clerk. I think the arrival of the driver disturbed the fly but not the clerk’s phlegm. Raza introduced me to the driver and we shook hands and then the

[1] A tonga is a horse-drawn carriage

driver went out and silence fell in the hut. The clerk withdrew into some sort of contemplation and Raza said, 'He's going to write out a ticket.' It seemed to require some thought and preparation and I said, 'Can I get a drink of something?' It was already scorching hot. 'No,' said Raza, 'no time. The bus goes in less than five minutes.' Indeed the clerk had returned to the world. He took a book of tickets from a drawer and became for all the world like someone at Victoria Coach Station. He briskly asked me in excellent English if I wanted a single or return, and when I was coming back. He told me about reserving my seat on the return journey and the price. I paid him and he wrote out my ticket. I thanked him and he said, 'No mention.' I saw my luggage aboard and climbed into the seat next to the driver.

Some half an hour later the driver returned with most of the passengers and the bus loaded up. The driver was a bearded Sikh and he had been a soldier and spoke good English. He loved Kashmir and said he was happy that he was driving me to my first view of the Valley of Srinagar. He would see my face when he stopped at the head of the Pass at Banihal. He always stopped there for people to get out and eat the snow and look their first on Kashmir. Then he started up the engine, the bus shook so that one felt a slight breeze even though we were standing still, and someone screamed at him in Punjabi. He shouted back – in vain. He had to stop the engine so that they could hear each other. A passenger was left behind. He was pushed aboard with abuse from the clerk, the driver, most of the passengers and, oddly, the barber. I thanked Raza again for getting my ticket and again said goodbye before the racket of the engine drowned any further conversation. One thing I did hear. As the driver let in the clutch, he said in Urdu, 'In the name of God.'

We were off, about half an hour behind schedule, for a few miles across the plains and then into the foothills of the Himalayas. It was murderously hot. The advantage of being in front was that I could put my face out into the hot wind to evaporate the sweat which is not only cooling in text-books but, surprisingly, is cooling in fact. On the other hand I had the heat of the engine and the stench of burning oil. A gasket was gone and the engine needed de-carbonising. My shirt and the driver's were black with sweat and I kept my head out of the window in the dust to catch the wind and avoid the smell.

We began to climb in the blazing sun. I tried to ask the driver when we should stop again but conversation was impossible. I gave up. The foothills were astonishingly beautiful. One saw green grass and healthy trees and running water and perhaps most refreshing of all to one who had been on the plains for eighteen months, houses with sloping roofs. We came to our first really steep climb – in bottom gear – through a minor pass when a tyre burst. We swerved and shuddered to a standstill on the edge of the unfenced road. I looked down on the tops of the trees several hundred feet below and climbed out over the driver's seat. We all got out and the driver organized a fatigue party to change the wheel from among passengers whom at first I had taken for criminals being transported to prison and then for guardians of some valuable freight since they travelled behind a stout wire partition across the middle of the coach. I found that they were second class passengers. The sun beat down on the road and the hillside scrub afforded no shade. I began to be conscious of thirst. I should have been more conscious of discomfort and anxiety if I had not fallen into conversation with a young Kashmiri who was anxious that I should find some shade. It was one of those moments which made the long, largely wasted, years of Indian garrison life worthwhile. It was one of the moments of realising the warmth that Indians radiate. He said, 'We must try to find you some shade. You are not used to this and you look tired.' How many of us would go up to a total stranger, a foreigner – in theory an unwanted foreigner – and say that or something like it? Not many I think. I assured him that I would survive and we talked of Kashmir which was his home. He too wanted to see my face at Banihal and said he hoped I would eat some snow with him. He told me that I had chosen the right route to enter Kashmir so that I should see the whole valley of Srinagar spread out to welcome me. He was glad that I was travelling with Indians, 'And we must look after

you.' He was a businessman travelling on business and pleasure with his wife. She was very beautiful and shy and didn't speak English very well and she smiled gently and confidingly when I tried to talk to her in Urdu. I wondered then, and I still do, about this couple who offered me friendship as we stood sweating on this hillside road covered with bundles which had been thrown out of the back of the bus, either to disinter the spare wheel or lighten the load on the jack. In the event a crescendo of shouting from the fatigue party, taken up by the driver and spectators, announced that the spare wheel was also punctured so the fatigue party set to and repaired it. We were held up for an hour altogether. 'Now we shall get no lunch,' said my Kashmiri friend.

Nor did we. Shortly afterwards we stopped at a well and many of the passengers got out to drink from it. I didn't and asked the driver if this was the only stop or should we get lunch. This, it turned out, was an unfortunate remark for it angered a nationalist young man sitting behind me. 'When do we have lunch?' he said, in a passable imitation of my voice. 'The sahib must have his lunch, What about my tiffin, bearer?' And so on in the same vein. He appeared to have some support for several of the passengers laughed and a sententious old greybeard enunciated in a schoolmasterly pipe, 'If the sahib cannot drink water he should not travel on an Indian bus, he should go up by Rawalpindi by the train that reaches up to …' – and the rest of his contribution was drowned in the rattle of our departure.

We did not stop for lunch or for anything else except to get water for the engine and for such of the passengers who were prepared to risk it. I was very hungry for I had not done justice to Raza's breakfast some five or six, and as time went on, seven or eight hours before. I was roasted and stifled by the engine, I had sweated more than I ever had before or ever shall again, I think. I was parched with thirst. I was terrified by a new feature of the journey. When we went downhill the driver cut off the engine and coasted. But I was happy. I was having my first holiday as opposed to periods of idleness, for two years, the country was indescribably lovely and I was glowing with the friendship of the two Kashmiris.

It got dusk. As we coasted down a hill and conversation became quite possible, only interrupted by the concatenation of every part of the bus's body and the rattle of the doors and windows, the driver told me that we were in danger of being benighted. He must reach a certain Dak Bungalow[2] by dark. With the dusk it got cooler, but the altitude made me light-headed. We came into a village, rather like a Lakeland village except that there were naked children in the street and people cooking in doorways on braziers. We stopped to slake off the engine by a house where a woman was boiling water in a pan. I foraged madly for my army water bottle; if I could get some of that boiling water I could drink it as we went along. 'No hurry, sahib,' said the driver tolerantly, 'stay, make tea. No hurry.' We were nearly there and he was no longer worried it seemed. I gulped down two cupfuls of scalding tea without milk and ate a hard boiled egg the woman of the house gave me and staggered like a drunken man into the bus for the last leg. We arrived at the Dak Bungalow as the stars came out and one could see lights gleaming on the hillside and in the valley. I had a soak in a wonderful Edwardian hip bath by candle-light in my bedroom. My body drank, like the Ancient Mariner's. At dinner that night I drank bottle after bottle of soda water and ate with relish some very tough mutton and an enormous helping of boiled jam pudding, cooked I suppose in my honour from memory of a recipe left by a contemporary of Rudyard Kipling's. I slept that night very sweetly and I needed a blanket, which was a great luxury.

Next morning at dawn I had breakfast in bed and tried to buy some soda water to take with me. There was none left. I must have drunk it all the previous night. We went off in the early light. We came to a temporary suspension bridge and the driver made us all walk across, not too

[2] Dak (Urdu for *mail*) Bungalows were provided at regular intervals on trunk routes, primarily for the benefit of those carrying the mail, but also providing rest for travellers.

many at a time, and then very bravely he drove the bus over. I am not sure but I think I heard the creaking of the hawsers above the clatter of the bus. Then we really began to climb. Banihal is 11,000 feet above sea level and the last three or so thousand feet is fairly steep. I was glad I had taken my Kashmiri friends' advice to wear a sweater. As we approached the pass our progress got slower and slower. The engine boiled and we had to stop to let her cool. We did enormous hills in bottom and finally we came to a section of the road up which the poor old bus would not go even in bottom. We stuck, stalled in bottom gear. The handbrake would not hold. Every time we got into neutral we ran backwards. In this blessed silent moment the driver announced that someone must get out and put stones behind the wheels every time we stopped. 'I'll do it,' I said. Here was an opportunity to desert the sinking ship with honour. 'Not you,' he said anxiously, 'you're a sahib. You can't do that. Let one of the second class passengers go.' 'I can do it,' I said and I got out. In the event one of the second class passengers was released from the cage to act as my assistant, and so we came to Banihal. Steaming, screeching, rattling, the polished back tyres revolving in the dust, getting a little impetus from the rocks that my assistant and I thrust against them.

We ran through a tunnel and then came out above the snow line, and below us was the valley of Srinagar. The bus stopped and we all got out. We crammed snow into our mouths and looked at this wonderful land below us. Everybody was jubilant and they gathered round me as the newcomer to share my astonishment and happiness. The nationalist young man clapped me on the back and the old man recited an Urdu poem which he obligingly translated into the language of Dr Johnson. Soon after this we stopped at a Dak Bungalow for lunch and this seemed a promising day.

I had reckoned without the coasting aspect of this bus company. Either they allowed too little petrol and the drivers had to economise as best they could, or the drivers siphoned out and sold the petrol. Anyhow the run down from Banihal was an almost continuous drop, along winding roads, of 6000 feet, and here the economies, for no matter whose benefit, were to be made. The engine was used to get us out of the Dak Bungalow compound and was then cut off except for a few bits of rising ground, until we reached the valley. Above the rattle as we rushed along the driver, gesticulating over the precipice, said, 'That's where the bus went over in May.' At one point an observant passenger noted that the brake drums were smoking. We took advantage of the next rising turn to stop and put snow on the brakes to extinguish the incipient fire. We left the smell of smouldering rubber behind us on our Gadarene descent. I was shaking and sweating when we ran onto the level, my ears popping. We coasted nearly a mile along the level before we had to switch on the engine.

We had made such good time that the driver insisted on stopping so that I could have a cup of tea at four o'clock. Two hours later we ran into Srinagar and stopped outside a shop advertising Fuller's Mint Lumps. Here I met the agent from whom I had hired my houseboat. I had made it.

ALC
1959/1960

Family cars and stories of India

I'm not sure exactly when Tony went to India; I assume it was sometime in 1943. It was before November, because I believe he was away before Imogen was born. Since he says in the story he had been on the Plains for eighteen months, this would place the events described late in 1944 or in 1945. He says he is remembering events of fifteen years ago, which would make the date of writing 1959 or 1960.

We had three family cars between the first in 1955 (bought for the trip to Tenby) and 1962 when Tony went to America: a converted Morris shooting-brake, a van which may have been a Ford, and a Bedford Dormobile. Of these the van was probably the least successful and has left the vaguest impression. We felt a certain affection for the old Morris, which Kay named Ernestine after the car she had driven before the war (her own, her father's or Alan's, I'm not sure) and after *The Importance of Being Ernest*, but nobody liked the van. The Dormobile was reasonably reliable, so in this story Tony is thinking of the shooting-brake and the van. He refers to Lakeland villages, so he may have been writing soon after the Lake District holiday, when we had the van. I think we did the whole journey in a day, which compares well with the six days that it took us to get to Tenby. This is more a measure of Tony's greater confidence after four years of driving than any superiority in the van.

In the fifties many people saw a car as just a faster and more powerful horse and cart, something onto which as many people and things as possible could be piled, in the manner of refugees or travelling folk. This was how Kay and Tony thought then. It did not occur to them to see a car as a status symbol, although Jennifer and Imogen, who were at a self-conscious age, might have preferred it if they had shown more awareness of this aspect. When they came back from America they bought the first of several Ford Cortinas. By then a car was becoming part of the 'essential' paraphernalia of middle class life, like a fridge. They chose a Cortina because that is what the man in the garage said would best suit them and best suit their level of disposable income. A few eccentrics in those days would consult *Which?* before buying a car, but I doubt if Kay and Tony gave any thought to things like fuel economy, safety features or comfort; you just took what you were given.

The part of the bus-ride which most vividly recalls journeys in our first two vehicles is where the bus is climbing in bottom gear. Bottom was always problematic. In the Morris, and possibly also in the van, Tony was unable to get into bottom while in motion. It involved a manoeuvre known as 'double de-clutching' which he was unable to carry out. If a hill was long and steep enough to require bottom gear he would stop, with luck before the car stalled and get into bottom. When I have mentioned this to drivers they have treated it as a simple matter. I have even had double de-clutching explained to me, but I don't recall the technical details. For me the phrase will always stand for one of the great mysteries of life, something that marked the furthest limit set upon my father's competence. He always referred to the gears as bottom, second and top, and it was only when I first took driving lessons that I learned that bottom was known as first – I had assumed it was third, as in third class.

Tony was always afraid of the car sliding backwards, but I don't think this ever happened to a serious extent. He would always park in gear. The Morris met its end on a hill, when the back axle broke – an incident which I did not witness.

The fag end of the heroic age of motoring was still in evidence in the fifties. AA and RAC patrolmen would salute cars bearing their badge. Belonging to one or other of these bodies was a declaration of allegiance, like supporting Oxford or Cambridge in the boat race, or being Labour or Conservative. The RAC had a vaguely raffish image in my mind, even though my grandparents belonged to it. We were AA. More interestingly, passers-by would stop to offer assistance if they saw you in trouble at the side of the road. On several occasions we were

helped by skilled amateur mechanics. When the car spluttered to a halt, Tony would get out and do the one thing he knew about, cleaning the spark-plugs, and as like as not some kind person would come to his aid. There was one who diagnosed the problem as, 'You ain't got a proper connection,' and this became for us a family catch-phrase. Tiggy used it during her last illness. We would repeat it in a cockney voice. Very snobbish, and stupidly glorying in our own ignorance. The phrase acquired a different meaning (and one which was clear even to those with no mechanical knowledge) when one of our rescuers undertook to tow us to the next garage. His tow-rope was barely more than string, and it kept snapping, and each time it was re-connected the towing distance became shorter and shorter. Even as I write those words I have a nagging feeling that my memory is over-dramatizing. Perhaps the rope only snapped once. And this makes me question how often Tony got out and cleaned the spark plugs. Certainly more than once, but I can't say for certain that it was more than twice.

Lest I should give the impression that motoring was always difficult for Tony, I might mention that when something (a hill, a turning or a whole journey) turned out to be easier than expected he would describe it as a 'mere bagatelle'. But more often he would take a gloomy view of things, and he and Kay liked to compare their epic journeys with two great 'lorry' films, *The Wages of Fear* and *Ice Cold in Alex*.

I seem to recall another piece of writing concerning Tony's friend Raza. It described a visit to Raza's family, which involved going to an area where soldiers were not permitted. Raza persuaded Tony that out of uniform he could pass for a Punjabi. It's possible that what I'm remembering is something Tony told me rather than something he wrote. He did talk about Raza, although I'm afraid I don't recall any more. The attitude that some Indians have to truth was something that exercised many westerners. Tony was clearly trying to think sympathetically of what part of him must have felt was Raza's deplorable unreliability. We are left in the dark as to what was going on behind the scenes, why it was so important that Tony took the train to Jammu, and what pull Raza had with the tonga-wallah, the bus-driver, the ticket collector and the booking clerk. Perhaps he needed no pull, but simply understood them well enough to predict their reactions and be certain that everything would work out in the end.

I fear that quite a lot of Tony's Indian experience is lost because I never wrote down what he told me. But I doubt if anything we might remember from his Indian conversations would convey what he felt about India quite as eloquently as this story. He was not a man who found it easy to speak about what moved him deeply. Since he could write about it so well it is a pity he did not write more. The happiness, the shared happiness, as he ate snow with his fellow passengers and delighted them by his reaction to his first sight of the valley of Srinagar – this clearly made a great impression on his mind when he was a young man, barely thirty, and a troubled young man. India kept a powerful hold over him. I recall that when we lived in Marlborough Road he was delighted by the Punjabis in the street. He loved to see the women in their saris, and he admired their graceful action as they planted row upon row of onions on their allotments. I can see now why he laughed to see the man who drank from the trough where people filled their watering cans.

JFEC
14 April 2009