

This short story appeared in a cyclostyled magazine for students and staff at Farnham School of Art. From a reference in one of the other items it seems to have been published in 1967. In the same issue there are, among other things, a poem by Jan Farquharson entitled 'An Adder for Keble Smith', an article by Alan Windsor on a Picasso exhibition in Paris and an editorial by James Hockey.

Purgatory

Sam makes non-inflammable plastic Christmas trees and is reluctant to let life live him. He asks at intervals "What's it all about then, eh? What's it all about?" I find his belief that I know very flattering and he is very lovable so I try to tell him. When the name of this place in India was mentioned on the News the other night I said, unthinkingly, "I was there for two years during the war." I remembered that I should undoubtedly have to give meaning to the events before he would go away, so I told him the story like this.

It was a place where people went to expiate. The Brigadier knew he was expiating getting tattooed in Aldershot when he was a subaltern. It was a most banal tattoo. A heart with a dripping dagger on the right arm and a snake on the left. Old Thunder knew, I think, but one never knew properly what old Thunder knew, that he was expiating joining the Army in 1920 as a second lieutenant and being a captain in 1943. The Brigade Major was expiating his stupidity. As the son of an industrial baronet and a distinguished MP, he got compassionate leave in 1944 to go and get adopted for a constituency. No constituency, no matter how hopeless, would have him. He even tried to become a Conservative candidate for Ebbw Vale before he came back to us, defeated. The Intelligence Officer was a lapsed Quaker, a good linguist and anthropologist who wanted, after a great deal of agonising thought and prayer, to risk his life in the cause which he had come to believe was a moral one and moral in a unique way. He spent his time reading the correspondence of Danny – a small time crook in civil life and military police sergeant for the duration – and me, a stammering ex-pacifist in charge of education and welfare. The Brigade Major read the Intelligence Officer's correspondence because he was an ex-pacifist too. For a long time I could not make out why Gibby, who made the most awful act of expiation of us all, was there. It was only long afterwards that I discovered that we do not only expiate what we do but also what is done to us.

Gibby and I supervised Indian clerks filling in forms. If we went out the clerks stopped work which was quite understandable because the day temperature was 115° and the night temperature was 110° for half the year so that one never woke up and never slept. One walked about in a daze. Anyway, the clerks were underpaid and many of them hoped that the Japanese would win. On the other hand, if they stopped for too long the stream of information that flowed ceaselessly to New Delhi and Meerut dried up and we got rockets. I had to go out to supervise Indian teachers for part of the day.

In the evenings I read murder stories and history, tried to learn classical Persian and started a number of novels. Once a month a consignment of Scotch whisky and London gin came in and I went out boozing with Danny and Gibby and Old Thunder. We would finish the supply in about three evenings and all that was left was a drink called Gymkhana, a kind of whisky manufactured in a neighbouring Indian state, the inhabitants of which were forbidden to drink it. I stayed at home about my ploys. It was not a bad life once one was resigned to it and to the fact that one had been hand-picked for this boring and humiliating non-job and that when,

and only when, one had expiated one's sin effectually, or the war ended, would one get away. The heat, the solitude, the hatred of most of the Indian civilians, the contempt of real soldiers, all helped to bring one to a mood of humility and the first glimmerings of self-knowledge. It was the perfect retribution for the mocker on the sidelines, to be set down in one of the most uncomfortable places on this planet to supervise the flow of useless information to New Delhi and useless knowledge into the heads of soldiers.

It was different for Gibby. He had left school at 15 and had gotten himself a useful job. He believed this to be his duty, I suppose, and he had for fifteen years done this. He had gotten himself a wife and a house and a garden and two children. He had a hobby – growing vegetable marrows. Most soldiers produce photographs of girls. These girls are frequently hideous. They are produced at the first meeting and one must congratulate the owner on his taste and good fortune. When I met Gibby, he was somewhat older than I and I expected some awful bag when he reached for his wallet. I was just saying "She's a smasher, where did you meet her?" when I saw that it was a vegetable marrow I was being asked to admire. So I asked about the manure he used instead.

Gibby was an active man; he had never been asked to think. He had no resources except his wife, the children, his house and his marrows. These were all three thousand miles away. So he went about with Danny who had no resources at all since there was nothing worth stealing that we could not all steal if we wanted to and he practised his profitable tyranny over the Indian troops in the firm's time so to speak.

One evening Old Thunder and I had been to the birthday party of the neighbouring Rajah – the proprietor of the Gymkhana factory. The celebrations had all been a little unreal. It was murderously hot as usual. We had to listen to the Rajah's private poet read a long panegyric in Urdu; we had seen a race meeting on the private racecourse and been blown out on curry, Scotch, and a strange orange drink that was presumably a by-product of Gymkhana. We had been driven home the fifty odd miles in a Royal car, clutching the presents we had been given on leaving like Sunday school children – a real bottle of whisky and a copy of the panegyric. I was not altogether surprised to find a horse in Old Thunder's bedroom, nor to hear the sound of weeping when I got back to the bungalow that I shared with Danny and Gibby. In fact, I got into my bed before I made up my mind to investigate.

It came from Gibby's room and eventually he told me what was the trouble. He had three things on his mind. On the insistence of Danny he had duped the pay clerk into allowing him to overdraw his pay by £300, he had married an Indian Christian girl in Naini Tal while on leave, and he had got leprosy. He feared he would be imprisoned for fraud, bigamy or both, his leprosy would be discovered and he would never be allowed to return to Nunhead where he lived, or to his wife, children and marrows.

I could not do much about the girl or the money at three in the morning but I persuaded him to show me his leprosy. He did, indeed, have a revolting rash on his feet but I managed to persuade him by about five o'clock that he had not been in India long enough to catch leprosy and he should go to a doctor in the morning. This seemed to me to be the least of his troubles and the easiest to clear up.

In this I was wrong. The doctor inspected Gibby's flaking feet and decided that he ought to have all his teeth out. We shared a dentist with another station and the extractions were easy. Provision of false teeth, however, was not. We received false

teeth along with our spirits, from New Delhi. Over the next year there came, at intervals, a bridge with two teeth, a set that would have fitted a chimpanzee, and an assortment of orthodontic equipment. None of this fitted Gibby and at the end of the year his gums had become so shrunken and hard that he could eat an apple with ease. No teeth would now ever fit him and his rash came back – not only on his feet but on his hands as well. The bigamous, bankrupt and now permanently toothless Gibby was shipped home to Nunhead.

The money gave us no trouble. Gibby ceased to draw pay and lived on his ration allowance. We intercepted one form letter about the matter and replied, “Your 123/456/578 (or whatever the reference was) is not understood.” This always stilled the Indian clerks for at least three months. Actually, we miscalculated and he stopped himself too much, so he had a nice little bonus to start himself up in marrow seed when he got back. The girl we kept at bay by writing her letters and getting them posted all over the sub-continent. She did turn up, after Gibby was safely home. Danny and I were having breakfast when she was shown in by our bearer. I explained to her that Gibby was already married and that the heat and the idleness had caused him to act strangely. She picked up the teapot and threw it at me and flounced, as they say, out. She missed me. Danny, who knew considerably more about women than I did, said that all would be well. She had taken her defeat in good part. He proved to be right.

The rest is quickly told. Danny, who had never worked, let alone been a member of a Trade Union, was sent for through some mistake in New Delhi, and flown to Germany to show the Germans how to run a democratic Trade Union. Old Thunder went home to get married to a lady who, judging from the photograph he showed me, must have been waiting since 1920. He seemed very happy. The Intelligence Officer developed a rash like Gibby’s and our doctor acted with greater caution and merely certified him as insane, and he went home. The Brigade Major, fearing that Attlee was about to lead a massacre of the upper classes, joined the Paratroops, where he believed the British Whites were to be found. The Brigadier retired.

I festered on for a while. A couple of evenings before I was due to go home I had been walking nostalgically in the bazaar, had had an enormous curry and bought, as an appropriate souvenir, a bottle of Russian brandy, which must have been sold by some refugee in about 1919 – before Thunder joined the Army. When I got home I dropped it on the bathroom floor and broke it because, curled up in my bath was a cobra – or so I thought. I nearly fainted with terror. I have never been so frightened. However, when I had killed it, my bearer told me it was a grass snake.

I did not stammer again for three months.