

## WHAT WOULD IT TAKE

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Palgham looked like a town out of the American Wild West. Asiatic cowboys on mustangs galloped up the dusty main street. Hard-looking men lounged in front of stores that sold clay pots, tarpaulins, bolts of cloth, camping supplies. Unlike in other parts of India, the children did not crowd around begging. Instead, they looked suspiciously at us. One boy, about six years old, was herding goats. When he passed us, he spit right in front of my shoes, and insultingly grinned. His teeth were black, rimmed at the gums with lines of red that could have been betel stains—although so far I had not seen anyone chewing betel in Kashmir.

We had arrived in Srinagar a few days before.

From our houseboat roof, I looked down into one of the largest estates on the shore of Nageen Lake. A lawn, mowed by a bullock dragging a rotary blade, sloped up from the water's edge to plots of blue, red, and yellow flowers. Beyond the garden was a terrace with white wicker furniture. Beyond the terrace was a brick house.

A man sat in the garden in a lawn chair, reading a book that lay open on his lap. He was immaculate in white *kurta* and pajamas. On the ground next to him was what I at first thought was a large Irish setter and what, moments later, revealed itself to be a human being—apparently a servant.

The man in white tapped the arm of his chair, and the servant turned the page of the book.

“Did you see that?” I asked Nancy and Jessie.

But the man in white seemed to have stopped reading. Nancy and Jessie went downstairs, Nancy to change into something cooler and Jessie to paddle in the small *shikara* that came with the houseboat.

Our bearer cleared the breakfast dishes. Above my head, the breeze ruffled the canopy, which made a sound like fingers snapping.

The scent of lotus blossoms, which were as large as cabbages, hung over the lake.

I picked up the book I had been reading, an odd volume of Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*, which someone had left in the houseboat library and which, exhausted by the flight from Delhi but too excited by the exotic surroundings to sleep, I had picked up the night before.

I opened the book to the chapter on Francisco de Orellana, who in 1540 sailed down the Amazon and returned to Spain with tales of El Dorado.

“His audience listened with willing ears to the tales of the traveler; and in an age of wonders, when the mysteries of the East and West were hourly coming to light, they might be excused for not discerning the true line between romance and reality...”

The grocery *shikara* pulled up to the catwalk connecting the houseboat to the dock. Displayed in the boat were cartons of Colgate toothpaste, flat blue tins of Nivea, bottles of Dettol, bags of barley, corn, and oats, baskets of apricots, apples, miniature peaches, pears, watermelons, perfect striped spheres, that looked like soccer balls, and artichokes that looked like monstrous metal-leafed eggs.

When I climbed back to the roof, the man in white had returned to his reading. I saw him tap his chair arm, saw the servant reach out and turn the page.

We later met him on one of the three swimming rafts in the lake. He introduced himself—Laksman Roa. He asked if this was our first trip to India.

“I heard Kashmir was Paradise,” Nancy said.

“Oh, yes,” Laksman said. “It would be if the Kashmiris did not remind you of it every five minutes.”

That night, Nancy, Jessie, and I reclined on the mattress of a taxi *shikara*. I had left the front curtains open so that we could look at the full moon, orange as a mango, which hung above the mountains surrounding the valley. As we passed the estate next to our houseboat, we heard, coming from its open windows, an Italian opera. The house was dark except for one room on the second floor. Loud enough to rise above the music was what I assumed to be Laksman’s voice, singing along with the recording.

The following morning, when Laksman saw us breakfasting on our houseboat roof, he waved at us and helloed. Moments later, his bearer trotted up our dock and handed our bearer an envelope, which I opened as Laksman, on his lawn, made encouraging gestures.

Laksman’s stationary was thick as cardboard and had a red crest on top. In purple ink, Laksman had written, “I would be honored if you would walk in my garden.”

His gardens were extensive and elaborate with streams that ran along man-made channels from terrace to terrace and fountains that cast miniature rainbows in the sun. Flowers as complex and angular as quartz crystals gave off a bittersweet smell. Unlike anything else I’ve ever come across. Kingfishers, the turquoise of the nylon of Jessie’s backpack, flickered from branch to branch.

Remember this is the land of the Nishat Gardens and not that far from

the Shalimar Gardens.

Laksman's bearer followed us, carrying a tray with tall glasses of Campa Cola, Limca, and Gold Spot.

"Now," Laksman said, "the only Americans who come here are hippies. They rent the poorest houseboats in the poorest part of the lake. No cook. No boy to clean. No one to heat the water. They stay for a month or two or three and go away—to Goa, to Katmandu, to Yunnan Province in China."

"We wanted to go on a pony trek in the mountains," Nancy said.

"Indeed," Laksman said. "Will you allow me to be your guide?"



We left Srinagar at dawn and drove four hours into the mountains, stopping at the ruins of an ancient Hindu fort. I climbed the worn steps and stood on a huge stone platform. Nancy was below, following a narrow passage. Across a gulf where part of the fort had collapsed into what must have been an underground hall, Jessie stood on another stone platform.

Shielding her eyes with a salute, she squinted up at a wall as Laksman pointed out some detail.

I worked my way down and up the heap of stone blocks and examined the wall Laksman had shown Jessie. Among other, more commonplace images, not quite erased by erosion, was a bas-relief of a man being beheaded.

We arrived in Palgham in the mid-morning. For two hours, Laksman went in and out of shops, getting supplies, renting equipment, hiring people for the trek. The cook, a thin man with one milky white eye and long, claw-like fingers, swaddled three squawking chickens in a dirty cloth to be bundled on the back of a pack pony.

"That's cruel," Jessie said.

"It's their custom," I said.

"Jessie's right," Nancy said. "It is cruel."

By twelve we had set off, a train of six ponies: Nancy, Jessie, Laksman, and me, followed by two pack ponies that carried huge swaying loads. The cook and the four pony handlers walked alongside, clicking, whistling, and chucking at the animals. I wore a Red Sox cap. Nancy wore a wide-brimmed straw hat with a red ribbon around the brim. Jessie, bareheaded, carried a blue parasol that Laksman had insisted she take for protection against the sun.

Jessie was outraged, but afraid to disobey Laksman.

She did look a little silly.

I never got a picture of that.

Because of the altitude, the air was thin. In town, the breeze had smelled of coriander, cardamom, and burning dung. When we started the long climb into the mountains, it smelled of sweet grass. The road was wide enough for a car to pass, although in the three hours we were on that stretch, clopping along, we saw only one car, a government sedan that raked by in a cloud of dust and blue exhaust, which choked us.

We stopped for lunch on the side of a hill. A few hundred yards down the slope was a low mud hut. Three children, girls with gold nose studs and with faded brown shawls draped over their heads, edged toward the ground cloth on which we sat.

Jessie hid the parasol, which was closed, under the cloth. After that, she refused to carry it.

She handed the girls squares of chocolate, which they examined. One girl, about eight years old, licked the candy, made a sour face, and threw it away. The other two children threw away their chocolate without tasting it.

The cook served us Western-style fried chicken and cucumber-and-butter sandwiches that had the crust cut off. The pony handlers sat apart, passing a hookah. On the road above them, a horseman, silhouetted against the dark blue sky, charged past. He leaned over his animal's stretched out neck, his silver ornaments flashing in the sun.

The path narrowed. In places, it climbed at what seemed a forty-five degree angle. Loose rocks and snake-like roots made the ponies footing unsure. To the right, a cliff face rose above us. To the left, the land dropped sharply hundreds of feet. Laksman insisted that the handlers hold the bridles of Nancy and Jessie's ponies and lead them along the more treacherous parts. When Nancy objected, I said, "I don't think Laksman's heard of women's lib."

Nancy wasn't amused.

Jessie snorted. She didn't want any help either.

Half-an-hour later, rain hit suddenly and violently. The path turned into running mud through which the ponies churned. We had to shout to be heard above the roar of the wind.

At one of the narrowest points in the path, the front legs of my pony gave out. The animal knelt, pitching me over its head. As I fell, I twisted to keep from sailing over the steep path and plummeting down the sheer drop. After that, Laksman insisted that a handler lead my pony, too.

"Let's wait for the rain to stop," I shouted through the rain and wind to Laksman.

Laksman turned in his saddle and shouted back at me, "Not possible. Please, wait..."

Laksman dismounted and gave his reins to the handler who had a grip on the bridle of my pony. I leaned down so Laksman could shout confidentially into my ear, "If we are not at the government ranger station by nightfall, the dacoits will come."

"Dacoits?" I shouted back.

Laksman glanced at Nancy and Jessie, who sat on their ponies, waiting for the procession to start again. Nancy had draped a waterproof cloth over her head. Jessie was using the parasol again, trying without a lot of luck to keep off the rain.

"Hill pirates," Laksman said. "They will steal the horses, rape your good wife, take the child, and kill you and me."

"What about them?" I pointed at the pony handlers.

"They are probably dacoits, too," Laksman said. "But I told them you had left all your valuables in Srinagar."

The storm lasted for an hour and a half and stopped as abruptly as it started. The sun came out. The path widened into an upland meadow. The few trees were elongated. You know Giocometti? The trees looked like Giocometti figures. In the distance was a glacier. Dark blue. Like the sky.

"One more hour," Laksman said. He added for my benefit, "We shall not be late."

By the time we reached the government station, an empty one-room shack in a field of sparse grass and rocks the size of big chairs, easy chairs, our clothes had dried. The pony handlers pitched our tent and Laksman's tent, modern ones with zippered mosquito netting in the doors. Then, they pitched their own tent, an animal-skin lean-to. The cook pitched his tent, an Indian army surplus pup tent.

Nancy, Jessie, and I washed in the stream, which was so cold it numbed my hands and made them feel severed at the wrists. Laksman stood on the bank above, looking not at us but keeping watch on the thin woods on the other side of the stream. When we climbed back to the camp, Laksman handed us a pile of clean folded clothes: long shirts and loose pants, white for me and Jessie, maroon-and-purple patterned for Nancy.

We crawled into our tent and, contorting ourselves, changed. Crablike, I raised my bottom and supported myself with one hand while with the other I dragged off my dirty clothes and pulled on the clean outfit.

One by one, we emerged from the tent into the twilight.

The sky was streaked with red and gold. I mean: real gold. That deep almost bloody color gold can have. The reflection on the glacier made it look like a glass door of a furnace.

"Tibet is called the Roof of the World," Laksman said. "This is called

the Roof Garden of the World.”

He was washed and dressed in an immaculate, flowing white *kurta* and pajamas. On his feet were purple-and-gold sandals.

The cook brought us a proper British tea: a tray with a pot, cups and saucers, freshly made scones, jam, and honey. He, too, was washed and in a clean change of clothes, a snowy-white waiter’s jacket over white pants. But his hands were bloody from just having slaughtered one of the chickens for dinner.

“Wait,” Nancy said.

She ducked into the tent and came out with our camera. This was before digital cameras. It was a 35 mm Nikon, I think. I’ve had so many cameras since then. And before. When I was a kid, I had my grandfather’s hand-held bellows camera with a little cube on top, which you used as an eye-piece.

After arranging Jessie and me, Laksman and the cook into a row, Nancy adjusted the focus and beckoned to the youngest of the pony handlers. She pantomimed taking a picture, stood the young man where she had been, and handed him the camera. He looked suspiciously at it the way, at lunch, the hill children had looked at the squares of chocolate.

Today, who knows, maybe they all would have laptops and wi-fi and cell phones and would be singing the latest hit of whoever’s today’s top pop star.

But then...

“Probably, he has never held a camera before,” Laksman said.

Nancy took the young man’s hands and raised the camera to his eye. He winced at her touch but let her move his index finger to the shutter button. After some more pantomime, Nancy hurried back to the group and fit herself in between me and Jessie.

“Now,” she said.

Laksman said something sharply to the young man, who did not push down the shutter button.

Apologetically, Laksman told Nancy, “It’s no good. I will take a picture of you. Then, you can take a picture of me.”

At night, Laksman took me aside and said in a low voice, “My tent is on one side of your tent. The cook’s tent is on the other. You will, I think, be safe.”

The cook had built a campfire in front of our tent. In front of his tent was the cooking fire, which had died down to embers. In front of the pony handlers’ tent was another small fire, not much more than embers, around which the handlers passed the hookah. The whole camp seemed a cozy

room hollowed out of the darkness.

“You are where few Americans have been,” Laksman said. “This is another world even from Srinagar. I will make you feel at home.”

He stood. One hand on his chest, the other reaching into the dark toward the Himalayas, he sang “La donna e mobile.”



In the middle of the night, a delicate sound like a zipper being pulled woke me. I sat up in my sleeping bag. Nancy lay, her sleeping bag tucked under her chin and her legs curled. Jessie lay half-out of her sleeping bag, which was bunched around her waist.

A red leaf—like a sumac leaf—seemed to be growing out of the side of the tent.

It was a knife blade, catching a reflection from the dying fire in front of the mosquito netting of our tent door. The zipper sound was the blade cutting the tent fabric.

The knife blade vanished. Through the slit appeared a head, which looked like a trophy mounted on a wall. Below the chin, an arm snaked in as though it was a tentacle protruding from the man’s neck. The hand reached for the camera case, which lay next to Nancy.

The man, who I recognized as the young pony handler who had not taken our photograph, must have surveyed the interior of the tent from the tent door before cutting through the wall.

“Stop!” I shouted.

The young man looked at me.

“Stop!” I shouted again. Louder.

The head vanished.

I scrambled out of the tent.

Laksman was hugging the pony handler, pinning the man’s arms to his sides. The cook appeared, banging a knife handle against a pot. The three other pony handlers huddled together near their fire.

Nancy and Jessie crawled from our tent. Nancy wrapped a large woolen shawl around her body. Jessie wore ribbed thermal underwear.

To no one in particular, I said about the young pony handler, “He tried to steal the camera.”

“He is bad,” Laksman agreed.

Loudly, he said something first to the young pony handler and then to the other pony handlers, who glared at the young man.

Two of the pony handlers grabbed the young man from Laksman’s

embrace. The fourth pony handler, the oldest and fiercest looking, yelled something at the young man.

Laksman interpreted: "The boy is his son. He is saying his son shamed him. No one will ever again hire his family for treks unless the boy is punished."

Laksman said something to the fierce-looking pony handler, who spit on the ground.

"You were wronged," Laksman told me. "You must mete out justice."

The cook gave Laksman the knife he had been banging against the pot. Laksman gave the knife to the fierce-looking pony handler. The fierce-looking pony handler gave the knife to me.

The two pony handlers who held the young man pushed him facedown onto the ground. The fierce-looking pony handler yanked his son's arm out straight and knelt on his hand.

"Please," Laksman said to me. "Proceed."

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"You must cut off his hand," Laksman said. When I hesitated, Laksman added, "This is not your country. This is not Delhi. This is not Srinagar."

"No," I said.

"These are hill people," Laksman said. "You must follow their customs."

"Tell the father I will not report the boy," I said. "They will still be able to get work on treks."

I dropped the knife and, waving Nancy and Jessie ahead of me, climbed back into our tent.

I did not sleep. I did not know it then, but Laksman also stayed awake, keeping guard on our tent from his tent's doorway. I expected the pony handlers to sneak away in the night, but in the morning, when I came out of my tent, they were loading the pack horses. On the trip down the mountain, the pony handlers—especially the young man—were sullen. In Palgham, I paid the cook and the pony handlers, who did not look me in the eye.

Trying to show that I had no hard feelings, I gave the fierce-looking pony handler a large tip. The man jerked as though he had gotten an electric shock, but he took the money.

"Did I insult him?" I asked Laksman during the drive back to Srinagar.

"You surprised him," Laksman said.

"He thinks I'm a fool?" I asked.

"The foolish one is his son," Laksman said. "And you did not allow him to atone for his foolishness."

"He thinks I am weak?" I asked.



“By not doing justice, you gave the boy a terrible punishment,” Lakshman said. “They think you are cruel.”