

Jalali

I AM SITTING on the upstairs balcony of this big Persian house and even though Jalali is gliding, bare-headed, around his bride, I can see him with the tall vermillion fez on his head as he walked up and down the university campus in America some years ago. Little of stature though he was, I could spot him from the top floor of the Humanities building as he shuffled among the crowd below. He must have suspected that I was watching him because he would tilt back his head to look up at the windows and balconies, and as he did so the two green pompons on both sides of his fez bounced like the tiny pigtails of a little girl.

I met Jalali in America quite by accident. The real-estate woman had been showing me an apartment which I found too big for myself alone. Beside her was a little man in a dark blue double-breasted suit (the double-breasted suit was then out of fashion in America), who spoke English without ever using a *the* or an *a*. He too was looking for a place to live and apparently was quite willing to take the large apartment for himself until he found out that I could speak Tehrani Persian. He asked if we could share the apartment.

In spite of his small figure, Jalali was not unattractive; he must even have looked quite tantalising to some American women what with his dark and vulnerable mignonness. But he didn't think so himself and persistently avoided the company of the opposite sex. One Saturday night when he went to bed slightly drunk, from his corner he confided to me that he avoided the company of women because he was frightfully self-conscious about his short figure, and more so in America since most men looked quite well fed. Did I know, he asked (his elbow digging into his mattress, his face propped up with his palm)—did I know why he had taken the part-time

library job? No, I answered. All right, I took it not for money of course, but in order to meet girls. Casually; accidentally, I mean (he laughed nervously). Now I don't even dare look at them. He pulled the blanket over his head. The bedsprings bounced, then he was quiet for the rest of the night.

One afternoon, sitting in a coffee shop I saw Jalali enter with an open magazine pressed against his solar plexus. It was a men's magazine, one of those which print stories about nymphomaniacs stranded on Congo shores. Jalali sat next to me, looked around, spread the magazine on the table and pointed at a finely printed advertisement with the picture of a girl in a bikini who looked up longingly at a tall man, also in a bikini. Read, Jalali said; but as I was about to read, he snatched the magazine from my hand.

"Listen to this. Don't say a word before I finish."

"Let me read it myself."

"No, you just listen."

He was holding the magazine close to his face; whether he did so in order to hide the advertisement or his half-grin, I couldn't tell.

"Be tall," he began to read, "get attention and admiring glances." He darted his face from behind the magazine and looked at me. "No more lonely Saturday nights. Amazing new method from the exotic East. Adds inches to your height. No high-heeled shoes, no strenuous exercises. Simply send \$50 with the size of your head. This miraculous device from the wise old East sent to you in plain wrapper. You must be 100% satisfied or we guarantee to send your money back. No questions asked."

"Jalali."

"What?"

"Use your head."

"Use your head yourself. You know what satisfaction means and hundred per cent

means, don't you?"

"It says miraculous device from the mysterious East. Now, you are from the East yourself. . . ."

"You don't know," Jalali interrupted impatiently but gently, almost benignly. "You simply don't know, Mahmood." And he wrote a cheque for fifty dollars.

I remember very vividly the day the package was delivered. Jalali balanced it on the palm of his hand as if he could guess the contents of the package by determining its weight. He was quite anxious and looked at once childlike and older than his age. Inside the wrapper there was a box tied with strings. Resting beneath the strings was a loose pink sheet, with words in large fresh print: Congratulations! Now you can walk with pride, like an oriental sultan, with inches added to your own *natural height*. Jalali rubbed the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, as if to wipe away the grin that was spreading all over his little face. He broke the strings and with careful hands lifted the box top. Inside the box lay a high-crowned vermilion fez, with two green pompons.

I DIDN'T KNOW, until then, that Jalali could experience such a violent fit of anger. One language was not enough for the curse-words which he spitted out like watermelon seeds. As I sat down on the floor, watching the scene from a safe distance, I couldn't help being impressed by the multilingual scatology he bestowed upon the fez, or its unknown purveyor. His hands mechanically put the fez on his head, then remembering what he had done, he immediately took it off, threw it back at the box, paced up and down the room, glanced at the wall clock (it was late for his library job), put the fez on again, cursed and kicked until the telephone rang. It was Miss Rufflebaum from the library's circulation desk, who wanted to know why Jalali wasn't in for his work. I put my hand on the mouthpiece and said Miss Rufflebaum, whereupon Jalali had another fit of anger. "That old—" he paused for an appropriate word, then gave up. "Tell her I am on my way, have already left." Still kicking and cursing his luck and shaking his fist at the telephone, he staggered out of the room. I opened my mouth to say he forgot to take off the fez but I couldn't decide if I should,

whereupon he slammed the door violently after him and was gone.

IN THE EVENING he came back, reverently holding the fez with both hands against his lower abdomen. He looked euphoric, extremely proud and self-confident. I knew immediately that he was going to speak in English.

"Functions," he said in English.

I listened.

"Functions and I go keep it."

He sat down on the couch in contented exhaustion. For the first time since I had known Jalali, I saw him put his little feet on the coffee table and spread his arms on the back of the couch. "I desire that you were there see chicks looked and smiled. No kidding, Mahmood, pretty chicks which never looked at me, looked and showed me and smiled. I ended up—" He stopped and grinned to himself.

"I ended up," he resumed, "I ended up got date from Judy, you know girl with funny nose which always works with *Encyclopedia Orientalia*."

He stood up, put on the fez and measured his height against the wall. "Not less than four inch," he said scientifically. "Where is whisky bottle?"

From that day on Jalali never appeared in public without his vermilion fez. Whenever he was out, and I wanted to see him, I could ask any passer-by if he had seen my friend Jalali—"you know, the little gentleman in vermilion fez"—and since almost everybody knew whom I meant, soon I would end up locating him.

WHEN HE HEARD the news of his father's death, Jalali went back to his country to be by his widowed mother. I received several letters from him, then a postcard with no return address. Then no more letters. Several months later, having been offered a job in the city of Shiraz, I wrote to my parents and said that I was returning home. My father who always talked excitedly about Shiraz immediately wrote back a long letter, saying that I was going to fall in love with the city, particularly with the scenic mausoleum of the great poet and mystic Hafiz.

It was during the stay with my parents that I first talked to my father about Jalali and asked him if he had happened to see my friend or knew which city he was in. No, he replied, he hasn't seen a little man in vermilion fez, maybe he doesn't wear a fez here or maybe he has returned to America. "Besides what kind of best friend is he if you don't know where he is?" But he asked his fellow tradesmen in the bazaar and came with this information: Jalali might also be working in Shiraz as a construction supervisor for Hafiz's mausoleum which is being remodelled by American-educated architects and engineers.

When I arrived in Shiraz, I had little hope that I would see Jalali then. All the same, after I had checked into the hotel, I took the city bus to the mausoleum. I sat close to the driver and asked him if he had happened to give a ride to a little gentleman in vermilion fez. What was so special about a vermilion fez, he answered, and shifted his gear.

The mausoleum gardens were cool in the late afternoon. The little rectangular ponds, deep green in the shade of cypress trees, were surrounded by potted geraniums of vivid red. Among the tourists who took pictures and natives who strolled by or read the lines on the marbles and tiles of the great poet's tomb, I searched for Jalali and, not finding him, went back to the hotel. Hardly had I walked through the lobby into the restaurant when I saw the top of the fez. The rest was hidden behind the local English newspaper. I called his name. Jalali jumped to his feet. He was wearing an American slim-style summer jacket and, for the first time since I knew him, a necktie that matched the colours of the fez and the pompons. We salaamed and embraced and went out for a walk in town. The sun was setting and the air smelled of distant orchards. The town was mellow and relaxed.

What were the chances for getting acquainted with the opposite sex, Jalali wanted to know as he watched the women, most of whom were covered under long chadors; those who weren't, walked with coiffed hair beside their husbands, who were either army officers or educated men of top government positions. With a mild sarcasm, Jalali observed that he had never seen so many army officers with such pretty uniforms. Even the low-echelon glittered in gorgeous embroidery.

In the crowded main street, a man accosted

a couple of women and whispered a few words. The two women blushed and giggled. The man walked away happily and proudly, whistling a native tune. I noticed a trace of vexation on Jalali's face.

"Let's hear adventure," Jalali said all of a sudden in English; "something I haven't heard."

By an adventure he meant any short-lived relationship leading to a consummation. When we were in America, on certain nights (before he got the fez), Jalali couldn't go to sleep until he heard an adventure. In return he would on the following day buy canned vine leaves and cook Persian dolma for supper.

WE TURNED into a side street where a girls' school had just been let out. The students ranged in age from twelve to nineteen. They walked in small groups, some of them arm in arm, and as they laughed, their ribboned pigtailed danced all over the tree-lined street. One of them who was taller than the rest had a nice figure and walked alone. Jalali quickened his pace to catch up with her, but then he lost heart. "Come on, Mahmood, let's hear adventure. One with nice climax. I don't think we know ways with chicks in this town yet." We had now left the students behind. "How about one American adventure, Mahmood? Don't tell me you never had American adventure."

"She had a nice figure," I began to make up, "like the schoolgirl we just saw. But I didn't have the audacity to approach her—you know what some American girls are like, wanting to be introduced or better still have an accident and get acquainted in the hospital. Anyway, one day I saw her sitting alone in a café drinking tea."

"You rat," Jalali interrupted. "Did you take her to bed?"

"No, not like that. As a matter of fact I liked her very much and wanted her to go at her own pace."

"I know," Jalali said, somewhat annoyed, "but you should've given her push."

"How do you know I didn't?"

"All right, go on."

"The next day we had dinner together and then went to a bar. She was a classy girl and drank rum with style. In the dim light, with

her fair hair falling on her cheek—”

“Let’s get to the facts, Mahmood, if you don’t mind.”

“After a couple of drinks she suggested that we drive to Riverside Park.”

Jalali’s face lit up. “You did it on bank of river, you lucky bastard!”

“The hell I did. Why do you keep interrupting?” I was getting quite interested in the story.

“I am sorry, Mahmood. Go on.”

“We took a walk in the park and sat on the bank of the river and talked. But all of a sudden she got up and asked to be driven back.”

Jalali pushed back his fez and scratched his head. “Look Mahmood, if it’s not going to have a climax I am not listening.”

We were now on the other end of the main street, approaching a fountain with flower beds around it.

“I am sorry, Mahmood. I just wanted to make sure.”

“I even forgot where I was. Oh, yes, coming back from the park. I didn’t speak a word until we got to town. Then I did something that even surprised myself.”

Jalali’s pompons shook with excitement. “You did it in car? While driving? Come on, what did you do? Are you mad at me? I am sorry, Mahmood, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

I was thinking how to end the story in such a way that it wouldn’t be a let-down for him.

“Where was I?”

“You’ve arrived in town. You’re still driving.” Suddenly he slowed his pace. “You can finish later,” he said absentmindedly.

It took me a few seconds before I could figure out why he suddenly lost interest in the “climax of story.” Walking down a slope, we had entered a large square in front of a holy shrine. Men and women squatted on the ground and leaned against walls or columns. Among them was an attractive woman, whose chador had slipped from her head to her shoulder. Jalali had slowed his pace and was staring at her.

IN THE MIDDLE of the square a bearded man with a fat rosy neck and bald turbaned head chanted religious elegies and a crowd stood in a circle, watching. Women passed through the wide gate of the shrine and with tears in their eyes tied wish-knots to the wooden

railings. From the loud-speaker of a distant tea-house came the sound of native music, full of longing.

Evening had fallen when we walked back toward the hotel. In a deserted street Jalali followed a couple of women and lost them in a side alley. The rest of the way to the hotel I made occasional remarks on the things around us. Jalali didn’t answer. His face looked quite sombre. He took off his fez, put it back on again. Then all of a sudden he asked, “Do you know where whore district might be?” “No, I don’t,” I answered; “do you want me to ask a passer-by?” He didn’t answer. We entered the hotel and had supper in the restaurant. Jalali washed down his pilaff and kebab with Shirazi wine, cheered up a little and suggested that we rent a place together until either or both of us got married.

WHEN WE ACTUALLY began to look for a place, he showed his preference for a two-storey house so that he wouldn’t have to move immediately when he got married. We found one that suited us, even though Jalali took an instant dislike to the landlady who was looking for American tenants. In fact she had built the house in accordance with what an American tenant would like to have: it was a house built native style (gate with knocker, walled-in yard with a little fish-pond in the middle, a charcoal kitchen in the back and a toilet in a corner with an *afstabe* for on-the-spot ablutions) which, at the same time, contained the comforts and amenities of an American house, including indoor bathrooms, indoor kitchen with gas stove, and a small lawn. When she was convinced that we wanted to pay as much as an American, the landlady yielded, even though reluctantly. Having an American tenant would have been a better token of status; besides she could use on him some of her English which she was learning in the town’s British Council evening classes. She used it on us anyway since she knew that we had spent several years in America: “I bring lawn from Holland; the lawns should be poured water every day.” This was addressed to Jalali as he was to occupy downstairs and was therefore responsible for the yard. I occupied upstairs with nothing to

water except a potted plant on the balcony overlooking the yard. "I bring it from Holland; both lawn and plant should be poured water."

But Jalali who felt lonely and listless said, after the landlady had received a month's rent in advance and left, that he couldn't care less for the half-dried lawn. Nevertheless when we hired a maid (an old stringy peasant woman, nimble as a mountain goat), he asked her to water the lawn, until we received the first water bill; whereupon he forbade the maid to pour a drop of water on the lawn which had completely dried anyhow. When the landlady came to collect the second month's rent she saw the yellow powder of the lawn under the sun, threw her arms up and accused Jalali of lack of civilisation. And you say you educated in America. I bring lawn from Holland and see what you do. You lie, it dry not if you water. Jalali answered: Bring another lawn from Holland and pay water bill. This made the landlady even angrier: You put goddam fez on head and you look like little eunuch.

During the weeks that followed Jalali looked more restless than ever. Having come back from his job, he would sit with his fez and suit on at a table in the yard and stare at the door, hoping some friends would show up for a poker game. When I came in he would cheer up a little and loosen his tie.

ONE EVENING when I came home, Jalali wasn't there. It was a Thursday night (Friday was a holiday) and I didn't have any doubt that he would be at home. He wasn't in the yard and suddenly the thought that he might have gone out made me feel despondent. I looked everywhere (except his bedroom), then walked up the stairs to the second floor. I poured water out of a tumbler on the plant and sat in a chair on the balcony. The table in Jalali's veranda was still empty, but down

there I could almost feel his presence. Worried, I walked down the stairs and peeped in through the keyhole of his bedroom. On the bed sat the prostitute with the mole on her brow who, Jalali had discovered and informed me, lived in one of the houses on the little lane across the street. Facing her, he sat on the bed with nothing on except his shorts and the fez. The woman was laughing hysterically. Alternately she held her sides and reached out to grab the fez off his head, while Jalali, with solemn face, darted back his head and asked her to keep her voice down. I sat at the table in the yard and watched the evening fall.

Suddenly Jalali's angry voice rose above the woman's laughter. "Enough insulting. Go away!"

"You can pay me in dollars if you wish."

"What do you mean pay you in dollars? I even haven't done anything."

"Then do it! But not with that fez on!" And she had another fit.

"That's enough!"

It was getting dark. I went back upstairs and sat by the window.

HALF AN HOUR later Jalali comes in with a bottle of Shirazi wine. "I have finally decided," he says and begins to drink. Through the window a sudden breeze brings the smell of damp fields. He is getting married, Jalali says. And I am not to preach. For the past few days he has been seeing a college girl taking walks in the mausoleum gardens, accompanied by her little brother. "She is as small as her little brother and guess who she looks like." Like Audrey Hepburn. He has followed her and knows where she lives. She refused to talk to him but he knows her father's bazaar address. He looks to see what my reaction is and finds me making doodles of a woman with a mole on her brow. Even so, he mentions nothing about the whore.

John Grigg

Aftermath of Empire

Britain & India since Independence

IN *A Passage to India* E. M. Forster hints at the possibility of Indo-British friendship at some indefinite time in the future. "But . . . alas," says Dr Aziz, "the two nations cannot be friends." "I know," replies Ralph Moore. "Not yet."

A Passage to India was published in 1924, five years after the Amritsar massacre had turned even such conspicuous Indian moderates as Tagore and Motilal Nehru into opponents of the British Raj. Many have read the book as profoundly sympathetic to the Indian national movement and a devastating satire on the idea of white supremacy. Actually, it is nothing of the sort. Forster's basic attitude towards India is not so very different from Kipling's. He regards the country as an impenetrable mystery, and its people as incapable of unity. At one point he refers to

a worrying committee of notables, nationalist in tendency, where Hindus, Moslems, two Sikhs, two Parsis, a Jain, and a Native Christian tried to like one another more than came natural to them. As long as someone abused the English, all went well, but nothing constructive had been achieved, and if the English were to leave India, the committee would vanish also.

So much for the Indian National Congress and its secularist ideal. And at the very end of the book he pours ice-cold water on the ideal of national independence.

India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!

Kipling, Indian-born, and writing about India before nationalism had become a serious force there, is an honest imperialist well aware of the Empire's likely impermanence, full of contempt for the metropolitan bourgeoisie and most of its leaders, by no means blind to the faults of the British in India, and ready—for all his pride of race—to admit that Indians are capable of being at least the equals of their rulers. His "Ballad of

East and West" (1889), often quoted as a prize example of his belief in racial separateness, contains the important qualification that

*there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed,
nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though
they come from the ends of the earth!*

Moreover, in the "Ballad" the Border thief behaves even more honourably than the Colonel's son: the story is not loaded in favour of the white man—whereas in *A Passage to India* the story is outrageously loaded in favour of Fielding. He is an unmistakable British imperial hero-figure, one of a long line descending from Sir Walter Scott's prototype, Colonel Guy Mannering. Of course Fielding is not an Army officer or an Indian Civil Service official, but (the Bloomsbury equivalent) a schoolmaster. He is not an orthodox Christian, but an atheist. All the same, he always does the right thing and shows a staunchness and steadiness that are in marked contrast with the volatility of Dr Aziz, the Indian sub-hero. Whereas Fielding never for a moment suspects Aziz of having assaulted Miss Quested in the Marabar Caves, Aziz is only too quick to suspect Fielding of becoming her lover when she is staying with him after the trial. We are left in no doubt that Fielding has the character of a responsible adult, Aziz that of an irresponsible adolescent.

Whatever else may be said of Kipling it is hard to accuse him of smugness, but Forster is ineffably smug. He is an English bourgeois intellectual to whom the ideals of Empire and Nationality are alike distasteful, but who is all the same permeated by a sense of cultural superiority. When he makes Ralph Moore say "Not yet", he clearly indicates that there can be no friendship between Britons and Indians under the Raj. But since he has no faith in the Indian national movement—no belief that Indians can run their own country successfully, thereby fortifying their self-respect—it can hardly