

A CITY OF MONKS AND COWS

I KNOW twenty different capitals, but Calcutta is the most crowded of them all. Imagine a city composed exclusively of monks—seven hundred thousand of them.

Seven hundred thousand other people—the women of the city—live indoors, but they don't count for as much as the men and they do not walk abroad. You are always surrounded by men. The impression is extraordinary.

A city composed exclusively of monks. The Bengali is a born monk, and all monks except the very young ones, who are carried, go on foot. Everybody is a pedestrian. They fill the street as well as the sidewalk. Tall and narrow, without hips, without shoulders, without gestures, without laughter.

Their costumes vary. Some are almost naked, but a real monk is always a monk. The naked ones are perhaps the most dignified. Some are clothed in robes with two skirts trailing behind. Others have only one skirt. Their robes are mauve, rose, green, wine-colored, and white.

Extremely numerous, they are calm, sure of themselves, magnetically sincere, and they have attained the kind of impudence that is achieved by sitting cross-legged meditating on religion. Their gaze is perfect. It is neither raised or lowered. It contains no defects, no excitement, no apprehension.

When they stand their eyes look like the eyes of men who are lying down, and when they are lying down their eyes look like the eyes of men who are standing. They have no flexibility, no pliancy. They have all been caught up in the same net.

They are careful to avoid every form of defilement, including the foul breath of Europeans, which smells of meat and murder. They have no contact with laundrymen, curriers, Mohammedan butchers, fishermen, shoemakers, or handkerchiefs, which preserve what ought to return to the earth, or with any of the innumerable things that keep plunging a man in mud up to his neck if he does not take care.

They are concentrated people and are reluctant to flow

with the street traffic and the torrent of life. They maintain an inner check on themselves.

Their emotions are always sheathed and never get out of hand. They never lose control of themselves, never give up the fort. They are assured and impudent.

They sit down wherever they please. When they are tired of carrying a basket they put it down on the ground and sprawl out on it. When they meet a barber they say, "Stop, give me a shave," and they are shaved then and there on the open street, indifferent to the tumult about them.

They sit down everywhere except in the places one would expect—on roads, in front of benches, or on the shelves of their stores among the merchandise, between hats and shoes.

They sit down on the grass in the sunlight (for the Indian derives nourishment from the sun), or in the shade (for the Indian nourishes himself from the shade, too), or they may sit partly in the shade and partly in the sun, gravely talking to one another among the flower beds in the parks or leaning against benches but never sitting on them.

Can you ever tell where a cat is going to sit down? The Hindu is just the same. Oh,

those devastated Calcutta lawns. There is not an Englishman who can look at them without shivering inside. But no police force, not even artillery squadrons, could prevent the Indians from sitting down wherever they choose.

They are immobile and expect nothing from anybody. Whoever wants to sing sings, whoever wants to pray prays at the top of his voice while he sells betel or does anything else. Calcutta is incredibly crowded with pedestrians, and one has a hard time making one's way along even the widest streets. It is a city of monks and their master, their master in impudence and the inner life—the cow.

The Hindus have made an alliance with the cow, but the cow knows nothing about it. The cow and the monkey are the two most impudent of sacred animals.

Cows wander all over Calcutta. They walk through the streets or lie down on a sidewalk, blocking it entirely. They inspect stores, threaten elevators, and install themselves in doorways. And if the Hindu were edible they would no doubt eat him.

In its indifference to the outer world the cow is also superior to the Hindu. It seeks no explanation, no truth, in the

outer world. And if it eats as much as a tuft of grass it needs seven hours to ruminate.

A large number of cows wander all over Calcutta chewing their cuds. They belong to a breed that does not mingle with other breeds and in this respect they resemble the Hindus and the English. Thus three different races inhabit this world capital.

The Hindu is not charmed by the grace of animals. Not at all. He looks at them awry. He does not like dogs, for dogs have no concentration. They are creatures of movement, shamelessly devoid of self-control.

And, besides, what are dogs but reincarnations of creatures who would not have become dogs if they had not sinned? They are foul criminals who may even have killed a Brahman.

The Hindu appreciates wisdom and meditation. He feels in accord with the cow and the elephant, who are self-possessed and live a somewhat retired life. The Hindu likes animals that do not say "thank you" and that do not cut too many capers.

In the country there are peacocks but no sparrows. There are ibises and cranes and quantities of crows and kites. All these birds are serious.

Then there are camels and water buffaloes, who are also very serious. Needless to say, the water buffalo is slow. He wants to lie down in the mud. Beyond that nothing interests him. And if you drive him through Calcutta he will not go fast.

From time to time he sticks his long, soot-colored tongue through his teeth and looks at the city as if he had lost his way. As for the camel, he is clearly superior to the horse, Orientally speaking.

A trotting or galloping horse always looks as if he were engaged in some kind of sport. He does not run, he competes. The camel, on the other hand, moves forward rapidly with enormous strides. It is not that the animals differ in constitution; they differ in character.

The Englishman washes very regularly but to the Hindu he is the symbol of filth and uncleanness. The Hindu has difficulty in not vomiting when he thinks about the Englishman.

The reason is that the Englishman is constantly contaminated by various contacts that the Hindu carefully avoids. Few people bathe as often as the Hindus. In Chandernagore there are sixteen thousand pools, and no matter what time of day you

visit them you rarely find one that is not occupied.

The Hindu behaves very seriously in the water. He stands upright, knee-deep. From time to time he ducks and the sacred water of the Ganges flows over

him. He spends some time this way and also washes his clothes or his rags. His teeth he cleans with particular care. And if the sun is shining he prays to it.

But there is no laughter.—
*Henri Michaux, translated from
Nouvelle Revue Francaise (Paris).*

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Wake Up and Live!

DARWIN spent many years of his life in tedious, painstaking research. He shook the scientific world with his writings. To his work he gave unreserved devotion. And yet, once, in a few lines written in a letter to his wife, he gives us a philosophy of happiness that may mean more to us than his ponderous biological works can ever mean.

“At last,” he wrote, “I fell asleep on the grass, and awoke with a chorus of birds singing around me, and squirrels running up a tree, and some woodpeckers laughing; and it was as pleasant and as rural a scene as I ever saw; and I did not care one penny how any of the birds or beasts had been formed.”

Darwin awoke to the fact that, no matter what our problems and difficulties may be, the world goes right on being a beautiful place. The birds still sing. The sun still shines. Brooks go babbling on their way. Our work is laughably unimportant in the scheme of things.

Too often we take ourselves so “darn seriously” that the real, fundamental beauty of the universe in which we live goes unnoticed. We cannot see beyond sales charts, ledgers, production graphs, and piles of correspondence. The grinding of gears, whirl of machinery, and blowing of whistles in our factories deafen us to nature’s music.

Wake up to the beauty of the world! Take time to live as well as to make a living. The world won’t stop if you stop to enjoy it now and then.—*The Friendly Adventurer.*