

Lesson- 9

A Walk through the Fire

The other evening I was sorting out the contents of a trunk in the loft when I came across an old pair of khaki drill slacks, a souvenir of my army days in India. Nothing unusual in that, I suppose, but this was a rather special pair of army issue tropical kit carefully preserved and still in fine shape after twenty years except that the bottoms of the legs were badly burned, almost as though someone had deliberately held them aloft over a fire. In fact that was, near enough, what had happened to them.

It was in the early part of 1947 when I found myself stationed at a Sapper camp at a small place called Begampet in Hyderabad State, and one evening I was driving back to the camp after a visit to the nearby town of Secunderabad where I had a delightful meal at a Chinese restaurant. I was at peace with the world.

I had reached a point where the road, such as it was, divided, and as I was swinging into the left-hand fork towards the camp I caught a glimpse of something in the headlights over on the right-hand fork- this was a little more than a cart track which led to a small village called Firozguda. I stopped the truck and reversed it back along the road until the headlights shone across to where something had first attracted my attention, and I was just in time to see shadowy figures disappearing like mad across the rough ground. Whoever they were, they were obviously intent on putting as much distance between themselves and me as they could in the shortest time, so I let them get on with it because I could now see what appeared at first sight to be a bundle of white clothing on the ground but what on closer inspection turned out to be an elderly Indian. He was lying quite still and I feared the worst, but as I knelt down beside him he opened his eyes. His face was covered with blood and it was obvious that someone had been doing a pretty thorough job of putting the boot into him.

Not for the first time in my life I then wished that I was a good soldier who always carried his field dressing kit in the specially provided pocket of his slacks instead of the usual tin of cigarettes but, not being a good soldier, I had to do the best I could with a large pocket handkerchief, and when I had managed to clear the blood from his face I could see that he was indeed a very old Indian and I was beginning to get more than a little worried. He had evidently taken a severe beating and I didn't want to move him because I did not know what internal injuries he might have; on the other hand I didn't feel I could leave him where he was while I drove on to the Camp for help. In fact, I didn't know what to do-and on that he stood up! Quite simply, like that - he stood up. I was left squatting on the ground, and while I was hastily trying to muster my sketchy knowledge of Urdu to ask him if he was all right he gave me my second surprise of the evening thanking me in perfect English for my 'timely intervention'. Those were the words he used, and you can imagine how incongruous

they sound coming from a ragged, bare-foot Indian whose worldly possessions seemed to be tied in the usual mysterious bundle somewhere in his dhoti.

He then went on to tell me that his assailants had been two Anglo-Indian youths but he had not suffered too greatly at their hands because he had known that I would be coming along shortly and would stop, and he had therefore covered his face with his hands and pretended to be unconscious. When I asked him why the two youths had beaten him up he brushed my question aside, so I didn't press the point. I then asked him how he had known that I would come to his rescue but the only reply I got to this question was, 'Some things are known to all, sahib, others to only a few', or words to that effect.

I was trying to work out a tactful way of asking him how he came by his excellent knowledge of English, when he stopped me in my tracks by remarking: 'How the body is covered is of no importance, compared with how the mind behaves'.

Most of this conversation was going on while I was giving him a lift in the truck. I had managed to get a straight answer out of him when I asked him where he was headed for, and as this turned out to be Firozguda, which was not far out of my way, I had invited him to hop in and travel in comparative comfort at the expense of the British Army.

We soon reached his destination, whereupon he thanked me once again and said that he would return my handkerchief after it had been cleaned, next time we met. I was about to ask him how he proposed to arrange our next meeting when he didn't even know who I was or which part of the huge Sapper Camp I was in, but before I could begin he had faded into the night.

A few weeks later my posting came through to General Head-quarters at New Delhi, and the night before I was due to leave coincided with the arrival of fresh supplies of Canadian canned beer at the camp. It also coincided with the visit to the camp of a remarkable troupe of Indians, led by a gentleman known as Professor Rao, who were said to perform amazing feats of strength. Entertainment at the camp was practically non-existent at that time and therefore this show which had been laid on by the welfare officer was something not to be missed; so, after having celebrated well but not all that wisely, we went along to watch it. In actual fact, we went along with the intention of taking the mickey, but after a while, like everyone else there, we stayed to wonder.

It was truly an amazing performance. When we arrived, the Professor, who looked nothing like a strong man, had just called for twelve volunteers from the

audience whose task it was to bend an iron bar around his neck. The iron bar provided from the camp store was about twelve feet long and the Professor held it horizontally with the middle of it pressed against his throat. He then arranged the volunteers six on either side of him. On the Professor's signal the volunteers began to push with all their might and the iron bar was bent into a U shape around his neck.

Other feats followed, but the Professor's closing act was un-forgettable, and before he performed it the Welfare Officer announced that on his insistence the Professor had signed a document to the effect that if anything happened to him the British Army could in no way be held responsible. It was only on these terms that the Professor was allowed to perform his closing act.

A five-ton army truck was then driven into the centre of the circle formed by the audience, which was the only stage the Professor used. He lay down under the truck so that his chest was in line with one of the rear wheels and an old railway sleeper was placed alongside his chest to form a crude ramp up which the truck could be driven. The truck was then driven quickly forwards so that the rear wheel went up the railway sleeper and across the Professor's chest. As simple and as crude as that. The back of the truck, incidentally, contained as many men as could possibly crowd into it.

There was another Indian with the Professor and his troupe who took no part in the strongman acts but spent the entire time digging a shallow trench about ten feet long and two or three feet wide. By the time the Professor had finished his act, this trench had been filled with red-hot coals from the cook-house. There was no funny business about this fire-trench either-We gathered around it and the heat from it was intense. This Indian, rather an elderly gentleman, then stood at one end of the trench, splashed water from a nearby bucket over his bare feet, and then proceeded to walk over the red-hot coals along the whole length of the trench. It was an incredible spectacle - we could see the low flames from the red-hot coals licking around his bare feet as he slowly walked to the end of the trench. When he reached it, as if not satisfied, he turned around and walked back the same way. He then squatted down on the ground, gestured to his feet, and invited us all to inspect them. We did, and there was not so much as a blister anywhere to be seen. I had pushed forward through the crowd to get a closer look at this amazing character's feet, and as I knelt down beside him I felt something thrust into my hand. It was a handkerchief, and it was then that I recognized him.

He had looked at me once, briefly, as he passed the handkerchief to me, but when I went to speak to him he looked away again so I kept my mouth shut. If he wanted to pretend that he didn't understand English then that was all right by me. Obviously it amused him to listen to the comments of the admiring crowd gathered around him. The Professor had by now recovered from his encounter with the five-ton truck and

he came over to say in halting English that the fire-walker would take a volunteer with him across the fire-trench. This, of course, produced a big laugh, but I didn't join in. I knew then that I was going across the fire-trench, although the very thought of it made me go ice-cold with fear.

I walked over to the fire-walker and stood in front of him. He placed his hands upon my shoulders and said, very quietly, so that none but myself could hear: 'When you put aside your boots, sahib, put aside your fear- the fire will not harm you.' I sat down on the ground and took off my gaiters, boots and socks. Strangely enough, having done this, I no longer felt afraid, only intensely curious.

I walked across to the beginning of the trench and the fire-walker splashed water over my feet and also over his own. He then spoke to me very softly and told me to close my eyes and think hard of green fields and the peaceful English countryside. I was to imagine that I was walking along a country lane and all the while I was to concentrate on green fields. He then stood in front of me with his back towards me and told me to place my hands on his shoulders. He repeated his instructions to me once more and then, with eyes closed and concentrating hard on green fields I felt him begin to move slowly forwards.

I was back in England. To be precise I was walking along the Rockfield Road just outside Monmouth near Hendre Park. It was a stretch of road which I had walked along many times when I was living at Rockfield in the early part of the war. On either side of me were green fields and the scene was infinitely peaceful. It was a lovely summer day and I could feel the warmth of the sun's rays penetrating my clothing. My mind was wonderfully and completely at rest and never before, nor since, have I achieved that state of mind.

Suddenly I felt myself go cold as though the sun had disappeared behind a cloud. I opened my eyes and I was back, as before, standing behind the fire-walker, with my hands still resting upon his shoulders. He turned around and faced me and it was then that I realized that I was now standing with my back to the fire-trench. We had walked the length of it and back again to our starting point.

I never saw the fire-walker again. I was completely bewildered by what had happened, and in the excitement that followed when everyone came crowding around me I lost sight of him. Later, when just about everyone on the camp had inspected my feet which were completely unmarked and I was once again allowed to put my boots on, I went looking for him, but he had disappeared. I tackled the Professor about him but he could not or would not tell me anything.

The following day, as soon as it was light, I borrowed a truck and went across to Firozguda to see if I could find him, but it was a hopeless task and a few hours later I was on my way to New Delhi.

- A.D. Smith

About the Lesson:

Born at Birmingham, A.D. Smith studied Engineering at Cambridge University. 'A walk Through the Fire' by him was broadcast on BBC London.

This lesson is a realistic account of the author's own experiences as a British army soldier during his posting at Hyderabad in India. He recounts here how an elderly Indian whom he found lying wounded by the roadside gave him several surprises one after another by way of his mysterious behavior, remarks and above all his walk through the fire. The narrative also describes how it was difficult for the writer to believe his own eyes when he suddenly discovered this old Indian to be the same person whose incredible walk through the fire he had just witnessed. The feat performed by the Indian fire walker was surprising for the Englishman as there was no burn mark left by the fire on his body. The fire walker soon after also made the narrator walk with him through the burning flames without causing any harm to him. During this incredible walk with the Indian fire walker the author experiences a mysterious state of mind which he suggests can also be experienced and shared by others by mastering the art of Indian Yoga, meditation and concentration.

GLOSSARY:

sort out(v)	- put in order, arrange systematically
loft(n)	- a space under the roof often used for storing things
slacks(n)(plural)	- trousers
souvenir(n)	- memento or something which you keep as a reminder of some person, place or occasion
Sapper(n)	- Army Engineering Camp, a soldier of the Royal Engineers
fork(n)	- a place where a road, path, or river divides into two parts to form a shape like 'Y'
mad(adj)	- in great haste
muster(v)	- gather, to try to produce as much feeling or effect as one can
sketchy(adj)	- giving only a rough outline, not detailed or complete
incongruous(adj)	- absurd, out of place
assailants(n)	- persons who physically attack some one

brush aside(ph.v.)	- dismiss an idea or opinion , reject, not pay attention to
putting the boot into	- kicking someone who is already on the ground
coincide(v)	- happen at the same time as something else
taking the mickey(adj)-	mocking at, making fun of
insistence(n)	- an act of insisting that something must be done or something is true; resolution
crude(adj)	- primitive, made by using simple methods or material, not refined
incredible(adj)	- amazing or surprising but difficult to believe
spectacle(n)	- a striking or impressive public event or sight
blister(n)	- a small bubble on the skin filled with watery fluid and caused by heat or friction
gaiters(n)	- a piece of leather or cloth to cover the leg from the knee to the ankle
penetrating(v)	- getting through something or breaking through, entering
bewilder(v)	- perplex, confuse

ACTIVITY- 1: COMPREHENSION:

A. State whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false.

1. The story 'A walk Through the Fire' refers back to the year 1947.
2. The narrator did not like the food at the Chinese Restaurant in Secunderabad.
3. Driving back from Secunderabad to the army camp the narrator happens to meet Prof Rao .
4. The old man who was lying injured on the road was the narrator's old friend.
5. The old man's English was flawless.
6. The Indian fire walker had not given any instructions to the narrator before he made him walk through the fire.
7. The narrator completed his walk through the fire without any damage.
8. The old man's answers to most of the narrator's questions were in yes/No.
9. Professor Rao was not the leader of the cultural troupe.

B. Answer the following questions in about 25-30 words each:

1. What was the narrator's profession and where was he posted when he witnessed the entertainment show?
2. Where did the narrator eat a nice meal one evening and how did he feel after eating?
3. Where and in what condition did the narrator meet the old man while driving

back to the army camp in the evening?

4. Whom did the narrator see dissolving in the darkness of the night? Why did they seem to be in a hurry?
5. What did the object lying on the fork road look like? What did it turn out to be on the narrator's reaching there?
6. Who were the assailants, according to the wounded man?
7. What did the writer do instantly to help the wounded old man? Was his condition as serious as the narrator had thought of?
8. When and where was the entertainment show organized?
9. Name three important feats performed in the show.
10. How was 'the next meeting' between the old man and the narrator a big surprise for the latter? Where was it?

C. Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. Describe the narrator's first meeting with the injured old man.
2. Who was Prof. Rao and how did he perform two great feats of strength?
3. What did the narrator feel before, during and after the walk through the fire?
4. Where and when does the next meeting of the author and the old man take place? How does the author recognize him?
5. What does the old man mean while saying to the narrator, 'Some things are known to all Sahib but others only to a few' and "How the body is covered is of no importance compared with how the mind behaves"?
6. Why does the author go in search of the old Indian fire walker after the show? What efforts does he make to find him out? Does he succeed in finding out the old man and the secret of his powers?
7. Why does the author describe his experience of witnessing and then performing the walk through the fire as 'incredible'?
8. What picture of the old fire - walker gradually emerges during the course of the narrative?

ACTIVITY - 2: VOCABULARY:

A. Use in sentences of your own each of the following words with its meaning which should be different from the meaning in the context of this lesson:

state, fork, mad, want, trunk, lift, country, leave, press, watch, feet, chest, fire, place

B. Use the following phrasal verbs in your own sentences:

come across, hold over, drive back, swing into, shine across, get on with, turn out to be, brush aside, work out, come by, head for, fade into, come through, laid on, called for, put aside, splash over, tackle about

ACTIVITY -3: SPEECH ACTIVITY:

Draft a short speech on 'Benefits of Meditation and the Art of Concentrating' and read it before the prayer assembly of your school.

ACTIVITY -4: COMPOSITION:

1. Prepare a report to be published in your school magazine on the performances given by a South Indian cultural troupe at the 'Inter-State Cultural Festival' held at your school in Ajmer.
 2. Draft an advertisement for the magic show to be organized by the cultural society/committee of your school.
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