Opening Extract from...

Night Train to Jamalpur

Written by Andrew Martin

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Author's Note

This is a work of pure fiction. No allusion is intended to any person who might actually have worked on the East Indian Railway in the 1920s, or lived in Calcutta or Darjeeling at that time.

Chapter One

I

'What *now*?' said the man at the far end of the dark carriage corridor.

The night train to Jamalpur, an express in theory, had come to a stand a minute before – the third time it had done so in half an hour. I had been trying to work out whether the man was English or Indian, but as he turned a little way towards me, I saw that he was both: a Eurasian, although it was politer to say 'Anglo-Indian'.

'Where are we?' I asked him.

'God knows,' he said.

Even though this fellow was probably born and raised in Calcutta, not more than sixty miles back, he was proud to know as little about our present location as I did.

The Indian trains gave the appearance of being armoured against the sun. They had overhanging roofs, and the windows were small, and fitted with venetian slats that could be controlled by a lever. A second lever allowed the raising or closing of the window glass. The Anglo-Indian was at one of the windows in that hot, dark corridor, I stood at another. I worked my levers, so as to try and see between the slats. In the smoky gloom, I made out paddy fields, the silhouette of a parked bullock cart, a block house.

The carriage lurched, and we were off again. A dark palm tree slid past the window; then a signal post.

The Anglo-Indian had abandoned his own window; he was eyeing me.

'Signals,' he said. 'Junction with . . . somewhere or other.'

He was minded to talk. In a minute he would ask me what I was doing in India, and I would have to tell him a lie. The compartment from which he had emerged was behind him: the one at the far end of the corridor, the rearmost one. I could tell because its sliding door was open. My own compartment was the next one along, and I too had left my door open. It occurred to me that I might have left my loaded revolver in plain view on the seat. Some yellow light spilled from those two open doors, but it was too weak and sickly to progress very far, and all the light bulbs in the ornamental, serpentine light fittings of the corridor itself were busted.

'They're replacing the opposite track up towards Jamalpur,' the Anglo said, 'so that'll be single-line working – expect a bad delay there.' He was approaching me, and holding out his hand. 'I'm John Young,' he said.

'Jim Stringer,' I said, since I didn't have to start lying quite yet.

We shook hands.

'You look tired, Jim Stringer,' he said, smiling. 'Perhaps a drink is called for.'

I had been thinking much the same myself.

'I have a dozen of soda in my compartment,' he continued, rather disappointingly.

He turned and walked along the corridor towards his compartment. He did not look into mine on the way there, but I did and, yes, the Webley was there for all to see on the red leather seat. Alongside the piece was the Calcutta daily paper that I'd been reading: that day's *Statesman*, the date on the paper Monday 23 April. I slipped into the compartment and pulled the newspaper

over the gun. I then glanced quickly under both seats. I stepped back into the corridor, dragging the compartment door shut behind me. John Young was standing by his own door, waiting to usher me in.

His of course was a repeat of mine: two red leather couches facing each other, three photographs of Calcutta scenes behind each; in between the photographs fancy electric lamps on curving stalks, giving a low, yellow glow. Opposite the sliding door was another door, the one by which John Young would step down on to the platform when we reached the great railway colony of Jamalpur at seven in the morning. This door was presently locked from the inside. Set into it was another of the shaded windows, and I saw darkness going past beyond the half-closed slats – darkness punctuated by whirling points of light that might have been fireflies or sparks from the track. To either side of the window was a cloth panel with a stitched design of fading pink flowers and green leaves. At the cloth panel end of the seat to the left was a four-foot-high cabinet with door closed. There was no cabinet in the corresponding place on the opposite side, but a heavy curtain of the same faded flower design as the panel. If you walked through that you came to the thunderbox and shower bath, both operated by dangling, knotted chains.

Contemplating the compartment, I was worrying about the shadowy spaces beneath the seats. Somebody had been leaving poisonous snakes in the first class compartments of the East Indian Railway, and this was a first class compartment of the East Indian Railway. I had checked every corner of my own compartment before settling down, and I only hoped that Mr John Young had done the same. I had a phobia of snakes.

On both seats were neat piles of newspapers and work papers

and these last, I saw, displayed the crest of the East Indian Railway: locomotive, palm tree and elephant, enclosed by a circular track – like a child's attempt to sum up India in a single drawing. There was also a carton of cigarettes: John Young smoked the same brand as me, Gold Flake, and the compartment smelt of these cigarettes and what I supposed was John Young's cologne.

We sat down opposite each other. John Young reached under his seat and I nearly said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you.' However, he pulled out nothing more dangerous than the zinc tray in which the porter at Calcutta had placed an outsized block of ice. It was mainly water in the tray now, with some bottles of Evian rolling with the motion of the train. John Young handed me one, and we drank from the necks of the bottles. We both fell to staring at the electrical fan above our heads. It was revolving too slowly – slower even than the one in my own compartment, which was next door.

'It is doing its best, you know,' said John Young, smiling.

The indications were that he was a railwayman, so my lie would have to come in soon. The Anglos were all over the railways. As a rule they were loco men (drivers or firemen), or what they called 'traffic birds' (train guards, ticket collectors). But John Young was evidently a superior officer of the railway, and most of *those* were British. It sometimes seemed to me that almost all the first class passengers on the East Indian Railway were British officers of the Railway. Generally speaking few people travelled first class on the East Indian Railway. It was said you couldn't afford to grease the axles of the first class carriages from the receipts they earned. No, the third class man was the important one. Ninety per cent travelled third, paying about a third of a penny per mile, one-fifth the price of a British third class fare; and the first class numbers must have had fallen off still further as a

result of the snakes.

John Young was smiling at me, wondering about me. There was a sheen of sweat on my face, and drops would periodically form and race towards my collar. John Young showed me up by his high-laced, well-dubbined boots, blue-and-white-spotted bow tie, and general smartness. He was about of an age with me – in the late thirties or early forties. He looked like me in other ways: a skinny sort, centre-parted dark hair, medium moustache. But he was semi-black, and he had a certain manner . . . Jovial – that was the word. It was how an Englishman was *supposed* to be.

I kept thinking about the bloody snakes. Several had been discovered in the past fortnight, and there had been two fatalities. First to die had been a Mr Herbert Milner, an Assistant Auditor with the Railway. On Tuesday 10 April he'd been bitten by a common krait when he entered an empty first class compartment at a spot called Asansol. That was about a hundred and forty miles from Howrah station in Calcutta, and on a different line to the one John Young and I were presently riding upon. Whereas we were heading north-westerly, Asansol was on the main, directly *westerly* line from Howrah, the 'Grand Chord' as it was known. Continue on that stretch, and you came to the capital, Delhi. Asansol was a place of railway works and coal mines – also great fuming mountains of stored coal, from photographs I'd seen. Herbert Milner had not closed his compartment door, and after killing him, the snake had moved into the corridor of the carriage, where it had been discovered by a train guard at the next-but-one stop, Dhanbaid, where the train had terminated.

The other fatality had occurred at Howrah itself. An Englishwoman, a Miss Schofield, had stepped into a first class compartment and the snake was waiting for her. She had not booked the

compartment into which she had stepped, just as Mr Milner had not booked his. So neither she nor he was the intended target. Nobody in particular could have been the intended target, only the general category of first class passengers.

Miss Schofield *had* closed the sliding door on entering, so the snake was still in with her when she was discovered. The snake was a hamadryad, a king cobra. It was twelve bloody foot long, and it was possible that it had reared up a good five feet when she entered the compartment, so that its head would have been about level with hers. Being a king cobra, it would then have widened its ribcage below the head, extending its 'hood' as a warning. But it had not bitten her. It hadn't needed to. Miss Schofield had died of fright, which was most unusual, but she had had a weak heart. She was from Leamington Spa. She had come out to India to visit her brother, who was a managing agent for the British Indian Tobacco Company, and travelled about the country a good deal. I could not remember where her train was bound for, but that seemed hardly to matter, since no two of the snakes had been put on the same service.

John Young said, 'What do you say to a peg, Jim Stringer? I have a bottle somewhere about.' And I held my breath as he reached under his seat again.

II

'Do you know Leamington Spa at all, Jim?' enquired John Young, because we had been discussing the snakes as we drank our pegs.

He had produced from beneath his seat a bottle containing about five inches of Indian whisky, that is to say distilled molasses,

that is to say *rum*. The label read 'Loch Lomand', whereas 'Loch Lomond' would have been closer to the mark. He had summoned his bearer from the servants' compartment – the foremost one in the carriage – and the fellow had equipped us with two glasses. John Young had asked where my own man was, and I had said I preferred to travel without, which he obviously found irregular. The lie was beginning to loom.

He had jokingly suggested that, in view of the snake attacks, we were brave men to travel in first class on the East Indian Railway. He had been reading about the attacks in *The Statesman*, and had been particularly interested in the case of Miss Schofield from Leamington Spa:

'It is in the county of . . . ?'

'Good question. Not sure.'

'But not in Yorkshire.'

'No.'

'. . . That being your own county.'

'That's right,' I said. 'I'm from York.'

'Now York, I believe, is the plum. I have read about the fine cathedral there.'

'The Minster, yes. Not a patch on yours in Calcutta, if you ask me.'

'Also the beautiful railway station. Principal junction of the . . . North Eastern Railway . . . ?

'*London* and North Eastern. There was an amalgamation.'

John Young said, 'A very great railway, I believe.'

'*Fairly* great,' I said, grinning.

I was determined John Young should not overrate 'the homeland'. He would be happier if he settled for what he had: namely India, and the mighty enterprise whose metals we were riding

upon: the East Indian Railway. It was not to be sniffed at.

The London and North Eastern Railway came in at six thousand five hundred route miles, making it the second biggest show in Britain after the London, Midland and Scottish, which had about seven thousand eight hundred. True, the East Indian was only half that in route miles: there was not the British density of branches. But the Grand Chord of the East Indian – extending as it did from Calcutta to Delhi and beyond – covered a tract of country half as long as the distance from Land's End to John O' Groats, and its gross receipts from passenger and freight traffic far exceeded that of any British railway. This was mainly because of the coal traffic, since the East Indian sat atop the Bengal coalfield, which had begun to be exploited in earnest during the war, and had sufficient reserves to supply almost the entire world east of Suez.

But my companion was still dreaming of Blighty . . .

'I tell you what, Jim,' he said, leaning confidentially towards me, 'I would like to drink a fine glass of Scotch whisky in the dining room of York station.'

'You'll be lucky,' I said, picturing the dusty bottles of Bass on the shelf behind the buffet counter.

It wouldn't quite do to ask whether he had actually visited Britain. Some of the Anglo-Indians would speak of it as 'home' in a heart-breaking sort of way, even if they had never been. But John Young was not a typical case. He was a gazetted officer of the East Indian Railway, and he must have been a very bright spark to get so high.

He was taking out his pocket book.

'My wife and my boy,' he said, indicating a photograph, and handing the whole pocket book over to me. There were a number of hundred-rupee notes inside – at least four – but I was supposed

to be looking at the photograph. John Young's wife was plumpish, pretty, looked perhaps less Indian than he did. The boy was rather wild-eyed, with a great deal of hair. He looked a bit delinquent.

'Anthony,' said John Young as I contemplated the picture. 'He prefers Tony, of course.'

'Good-looking chap,' I said.

'I daresay. But the boy is a worry.'

'On the railways, is he?'

'Regrettably, yes.'

Then the boy wasn't at one of the railway colleges; was not on course to be a gazetted man like his father. I wouldn't have pressed the matter, but John Young volunteered the information: 'He is a travelling ticket inspector,' he said, with some contempt. 'I am going up to Jamalpur to see if I can find a course of training for him.' He added that he himself was on the Commercial side, the department that solicited custom for the Railway.

I still held John Young's pocket book. I was now examining the metal warrant badge, set into the leather, and had put on my reading glasses to do so. This token entitled him to travel in first class on the East Indian Railway without payment. It was about the size of a half crown. The elephant and the circular track were engraved upon it, with John Young's name engraved above. I carried the equivalent in pasteboard, as befitted a temporary holder of the same privilege.

'A beautiful thing,' I said, handing back the pocket book.

From my own pocket book, I produced a photograph of my wife – Lydia by name – our daughter Bernadette and myself. It had been taken on the maidan – the main park – of Calcutta, on our first full day in the town: Saturday 7 April. Both Lydia and Bernadette wore cotton shirts and jodhpurs, and they had

removed their sola topees so as to show off their hair: Lydia's was tied up in her usual quick but complicated way. Bernadette's blond hair was modern – that is, short. They were off for a riding lesson, and laughing about it for some reason. I was not off riding, only paying for the lesson; I was also beginning a really good 'go' of tertian malaria, and so my smile was rather dazed compared to those of the females, who were excitedly poised at the start of their Indian adventure.

Lydia's aim was the liberation of the Indian nation. Or – if that should seem a tall order for one person – the liberation of Indian *womanhood*. To that end, she'd spent the weeks before our departure corresponding with Indian or British women who ran the sorts of organisations that corresponded to the British Women's Co-Operative Guild, of which she was a paid-up official.

I indicated Lydia and Bernadette, adding, 'We have a son, but he's at the London University, and he didn't come out with us.'

Pointing at Lydia, John Young said, 'She looks almost . . .'

'Almost Indian? I said, 'Or Anglo-Indian?'

'Do you mind if I say that?'

'Not in the least. She'd take it as a compliment.'

I didn't much care for this conversational turn. It was becoming rather sticky.

'But the girl is not at all dark,' said John Young, concentrating now on Bernadette. 'What age?'

'Sixteen, nearly seventeen.'

'Trouble?' he said, looking up.

I nodded. 'Has been since she was about eleven. That was when she decided to change her name. Well, she took her second name, and made it her first.'

'And what was she first called?'

'Sylvia.'

'Why the change?'

I shrugged. My theory was that the name Sylvia was too like the name Lydia. The girl wanted to strike out on her own. Lydia had not approved. She had chosen Sylvia in honour of Sylvia Pankhurst, the famous feminist, whereas if any Bernadette was famous for anything . . . then I dreaded to think what it might be. I said something of this to John Young, and he rather shamed me by saying, 'Of course, there is St Bernadette of Lourdes, who had visions of the Virgin.'

I had forgotten about her. It struck me that John Young might easily be Catholic. Many of the Anglos were.

'In India,' John Young continued, 'people have lots of names.'

He resumed his examination of the photograph. Bernadette was rather cat-like in features, and her hair gave off a beautiful light, as could be seen even from the picture.

'A clever girl, no doubt,' John Young said.

'She got into the high school on a scholarship,' I said.

'Our boy, too,' said John Young. 'We thought it would be the making of him,' he added, but he was still studying Bernadette. 'And she's left the school now?'

I nodded again.

'Has she been finished off?' he said, grinning. For a moment I was minded to clout him, until I clicked that he was referring to finishing school.

I shook my head. 'We don't go in for things like that in York.'

Bernadette's new friend Claudine Askwith, whose father was top brass in the traffic department, and came from Hampshire . . . she'd been to finishing school. Apparently, the main thing it had taught her was how not to appear educated.

The train was slowing again, and none too smoothly. From beyond the closed curtain came a repeated clanging: most likely the flush chain on the thunderbox clashing against the carriage side. Presently we came to a complete stop.

'Is this the single-line working?' I asked after a while.

John Young was at the window. 'No, we've come into a station.'

He invited me to look out.

'I am using the term loosely, Jim.'

The only sign of life was the haze of insects around each platform lantern. Nobody at all in the waiting shed. As a rule, you could expect some sleeping Indians, and any number of pi dogs. Then again, nobody had boarded or alighted from our carriage at *any* of the dozen or so stops we had made since Howrah. Someone out of sight blew hard on a pea whistle and we lurched away. I glanced down at my watch. Midnight, dead on.

John Young said, 'Are you in India on business, Jim?'

III

This was John Young's own country, and it was only fair I should provide some explanation as to what I was doing in it. To buy time, I offered him a Gold Flake. I lit it for him, and lit my own. I sat back. John Young was a likeable fellow, and so he would get the truth; but not the whole truth.

Some years before, the government of India had contracted the management of the biggest of the Indian railways – the East Indian Railway, headquartered in Calcutta – to a private company. Now the government was minded to run the show directly. The Company would be nationalised, this being the up-to-date