
Opening Extract from...

The Far Pavilions

Written by M. M. Kaye

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TO

all those officers and men of different races and creeds
who, since 1846, have served with such pride and devotion
in

THE CORPS OF GUIDES

among them
Lieutenant Walter Hamilton, V.C.,
my husband Major General Goff Hamilton,
and his father Colonel Bill Hamilton

'*We are the Pilgrims, Master: We shall go*
Always a little further. It may be
Behind that last blue mountain topped with snow
Across that angry or that glimmering sea,
White on a throne, or guarded in a cave
There lives a prophet who can understand
Why men are born . . .'

James Elroy Flecker

'*T'is not too late to seek a newer world.*'

Tennyson

Book One

The Twig is Bent

I

Ashton Hilary Akbar Pelham-Martyn was born in a camp near the crest of a pass in the Himalayas, and subsequently christened in a patent canvas bucket.

His first cry competed manfully with the snarling call of a leopard on the hillside below, and his first breath had been a lungful of the cold air that blew down from the far rampart of the mountains, bringing with it a clean scent of snow and pine-needles to thin the reek of hot lamp-oil, the smell of blood and sweat, and the pungent odour of pack-ponies.

Isobel had shivered as the icy draught lifted the tent-flap and swayed the flame in the smoke-grimed hurricane lamp, and listening to her son's lusty cries had said weakly: 'He doesn't sound like a premature baby, does he? I suppose I – I must have – miscalculated . . .'

She had: and it was a miscalculation that was to cost her dear. There are few of us, after all, who are called upon to pay for such errors with our lives.

By the standards of the day, which were those of Victoria and her Albert, Isobel Ashton was held to be a shockingly unconventional young woman, and there had been a number of raised eyebrows and censorious comments when she had arrived in the cantonment of Peshawar, on the North-West Frontier of India, in the year of the Great Exhibition, orphaned, unmarried and twenty-one, with the avowed intention of keeping house for her only remaining relative, her bachelor brother William, who had recently been appointed to the newly raised Corps of Guides.

The eyebrows had risen even further when a year later she had married Professor Hilary Pelham-Martyn, the well-known linguist, ethnologist and botanist, and departed with him on a leisurely, planless exploration of the plains and foothills of Hindustan, unaccompanied by so much as a single female attendant.

Hilary was middle-aged and eccentric, and no one – least of all himself – was ever able to decide why he should suddenly have elected to marry a portionless, though admittedly pretty girl, less than half his age and quite unacquainted with the East; or, having remained a bachelor for so many years, married at all. Isobel's reasons, in the opinion of Peshawar society, were more easily explained: Hilary was rich enough to live as he pleased, and his published works had already made his name known in scholarly circles throughout the civilized world. Miss Ashton, they decided, had done very well for herself.

But Isobel had not married for the sake of money or ambition. Despite her forthright manner she was both impetuous and intensely romantic, and

Hilary's mode of life struck her as being the very epitome of Romance. What could be more entrancing than a carefree nomadic existence camping, moving, exploring strange places and the ruins of forgotten empires, sleeping under canvas or the open sky, and giving no thought to the conventions and restriction of the modern world? There was also another, and perhaps more compelling consideration: the need to escape from an intolerable situation.

It had been frustrating in the extreme to arrive unheralded in India only to discover that her brother, far from being pleased to see her, was not only appalled by the prospect of having his sister on his hands, but quite incapable of offering her so much as a roof over her head. The Guides at that time were almost continuously in action against the Frontier tribes and seldom able to live peaceably in their cantonment at Mardan, and both William and the Regiment had been dismayed by Isobel's arrival. Between them they had managed to arrange temporary accommodation for her in the house of a Colonel and Mrs Pemberthy in Peshawar. But this had not been a success.

The Pemberthys were well-meaning but unbearably dull. Moreover, they had made no secret of their disapproval of Miss Ashton's conduct in travelling to the East, unchaperoned, and had done their best by advice and example to erase the unfortunate impression created by her arrival. Isobel soon discovered that she was expected to behave with stultifying decorum. She must not do this and it was inadvisable to do that . . . The list of prohibitions seemed endless.

Edith Pemberthy took no interest in the country where she and her husband had spent the greater part of their lives, and looked upon its people as uncivilized heathens who by the exercise of patience and strictness might be trained to become admirable servants. She could not conceive of there being any real communication with them on any level, and could neither understand nor sympathize with Isobel's eagerness to explore the bazaars and the native city, to ride out into the open country that stretched south to the Indus and the Kabul River or northward to the wild hills of the Khyber.

'There is nothing to see,' said Mrs Pemberthy, 'and the tribesmen are murderous savages – entirely untrustworthy.' Her husband had fully endorsed this view, and eight months under their roof began to feel like eight years to poor Isobel.

She had made no friends, for unfortunately the ladies of the garrison, discussing her over the tea cups, had decided that Miss Ashton was 'fast' and that the most likely motive for her journey to India was the desire to snare herself a husband. A verdict that from constant repetition came to be generally accepted by the station's bachelors, who, much as they might admire her looks, her unaffected manners and her excellent seat on a horse, had no wish to figure as gullible victims of a husband-hunter, and consequently fought shy of her. It is therefore hardly surprising that Isobel should have been heartily sick of Peshawar by the time Professor Pelham-Martyn appeared in the station, accompanied by his long-time friend and

travelling companion Sirdar Bahadur Akbar Khan, a motley crew of servants and camp-followers, and four locked *yakdans* containing botanical specimens, the manuscript of a treatise on the origins of Sanskrit and a detailed report, in code, of a variety of official, semi-official and unofficial happenings in the dominions of the East India Company . . .

Hilary Pelham-Martyn bore a strong resemblance to that amiable and equally eccentric gentleman, the late Mr Ashton, and Isobel had adored her father. Possibly this may have had something to do with her immediate interest in the Professor, and the comfortable feeling of security and ease that his company gave her. Everything about him – his mode of life, his intense interest in India and its people, his grizzled, crippled friend Akbar Khan, and his total disregard of the rules that governed the conduct and outlook of such people as the Pemberthys – appealed strongly to Isobel. Paradoxically, he represented both escape and safety, and she had embarked on matrimony as buoyantly, and with as little regard as to the hazards of the future, as she had embarked on the S.S. *Gordon Castle* at Tilbury for the long voyage to India. And this time she had not been disappointed.

Hilary, it is true, treated her more as a favourite daughter than a wife, but this was pleasantly familiar and provided a comfortable leavening of stability and continuity to the haphazard camp life that was to be her portion for the next two years. And, having never previously fallen in love, she had no yardstick by which to measure the affection she felt for her vague, easy-going and unconventional husband, and was as completely content as any human being has a right to be. Hilary permitted her to ride astride, and for two happy years they travelled up and down India, exploring the foothills of the Himalayas and following the Emperor Akbar's road to Kashmir, and returning to spend the winters in the plains among the ruined tombs and palaces of lost cities. For most of that time Isobel had been without any feminine companionship and had not felt the lack of it. There were always books to read or Hilary's botanical specimens to be pressed and catalogued, and she would occupy her evenings with these while her husband and Akbar Khan played chess or argued hotly on involved questions of politics, religion, predestination and race.

Sirdar Bahadur Akbar Khan was a grizzled, crippled, ex-officer of a famous cavalry regiment, who had been wounded at the Battle of Mianee and had retired to his ancestral acres on the banks of the Ravi River to spend the remainder of his days in such peaceful pursuits as cultivation and the study of the Koran. The two men had met when Hilary was camping near Akbar Khan's home village, and had taken an instant liking to each other. They were, in many ways, very similar in character and outlook, and Akbar Khan had become restless and dissatisfied at the prospect of remaining in one place until he died.

'I am an old man, wifeless now; and childless too, for my sons are dead in the service of the Company and my daughter is married. What is there to

keep me? Let us travel together,' said Akbar Khan. 'A tent is better than the four walls of a house to one who has had his day.'

They had travelled together ever since and become boon companions. But it had not taken Akbar Khan long to discover that his friend's interest in botany, ruins and the dialects of the country provided an admirable cover for another activity: the compiling of reports on the administration of the East India Company, for the benefit of certain members of Her Majesty's Government who had reason to suspect that all was not as well with India as official sources would have them believe. It was work of which Akbar Khan approved, and to which he had given invaluable assistance, as his knowledge of his fellow countrymen enabled him to weigh the worth of verbal evidence with more accuracy than Hilary. Between them, over the years, they had compiled and sent home folio after folio of fact and warning, much of which was published in the British press and used in debate in both Houses of Parliament – though for all the good it did they might as well have confined themselves to botany, for the public, it seemed, preferred to believe that which disturbed it least and to ignore troublesome information. Which is a failing common to all nations.

The Professor and his friend had worked and travelled together for five years when Hilary unexpectedly added a wife to the caravan, and Akbar Khan had accepted her presence with a placid matter-of-factness that recognized her place in the scheme of things, without considering it particularly important one way or another. He had been the only one of the three who was not disagreeably surprised by the discovery that Isobel was pregnant. It was, after all, the duty of women to produce children, and of course it must be a son.

'We will make him an officer of the Guides, like his uncle,' said Akbar Khan, brooding over the chess board, 'or the Governor of a Province.'

Isobel, like most of her generation, was abysmally ignorant of the processes of birth. She had not discovered her state for some considerable time and then had been startled and more than a little annoyed – it had never occurred to her to be frightened. A baby was going to be a distinct complication in the camp; it would need constant attention, and a nurse and special food and . . . Really, it was too annoying.

Hilary, equally surprised, suggested hopefully that she might be mistaken as to her condition, but being assured she was not, inquired when the child would be born. Isobel had no idea, but she attempted to cast her mind back over the past few months, and having counted on her fingers, frowned and counted again, she ventured an opinion that proved to be wholly inaccurate.

'We'd better make for Peshawar,' decided Hilary. 'There'll be a doctor there. And other women. I suppose it will be all right if we get there a month ahead? Better make it six weeks to be on the safe side.'

Which is how his son came to be born in the middle of nowhere and without the aid of doctor, nurse or such medicines as science possessed.

Apart from one or two sweeper's wives and several veiled and anonymous female relatives of the camp-followers, there was only one other woman in the camp who could be called upon to help: Sita, wife of Hilary's head syce (groom) Daya Ram, a hill-woman from Kangan way who had doubly disgraced herself by bearing and losing five daughters in the past five years – the last of whom had died the previous week, having lived less than three days.

'It seems she cannot bear sons,' said Daya Ram disgustedly. 'But the gods know she should at least have come by enough knowledge to help one into the world.'

So it was poor, shy, bereaved Sita, the groom's wife, who had acted as midwife at Isobel's lying-in. And she had indeed known enough to bring a man-child into the world.

It was not her fault that Isobel died. It was the wind that killed Isobel: that cold wind off the far, high snows beyond the passes. It stirred up the dust and the dead pine-needles and sent them swirling through the tent where the lamp guttered to the draught, and there was dirt in that dust: germs and infection and uncleanness from the camp outside, and from other camps. Dirt that would not have been found in a bedroom in Peshawar cantonment, with an English doctor to care for the young mother.

Three days later a passing missionary, trekking across the mountains on his way to the Punjab, stopped by the camp and was requested to baptize the baby. He had done so in a collapsible canvas bucket, naming him, by his father's wish, Ashton Hilary Akbar, and had left without seeing the child's mother who was said to be feeling 'poorly' – a piece of information that hardly surprised him, since the unfortunate lady could have received no proper attention in such a camp.

Had he been able to delay his departure for another two days he would have been able to officiate at Mrs Pelham-Martyn's funeral, for Isobel died twenty-four hours after her son's christening, and was buried by her husband and her husband's friend on the summit of the pass overlooking their tents, the entire camp attending the ceremony with every evidence of grief.

Hilary too had been grief-stricken. But he had also been aggrieved. What in the name of heaven was he to do with a baby now that Isobel had gone? He knew nothing about babies – apart from the fact that they were given to howling and had to be fed at all hours of the day and night. 'What on earth are we to do with it?' inquired Hilary of Akbar Khan, staring resentfully at his son.

Akbar Khan prodded the infant with a bony finger, and laughed when the baby clung to it. 'Ah, he is a strong, bold boy. He shall be a soldier – a captain of many sabres. Do not trouble yourself on his account, my friend. Daya Ram's wife will feed him as she has done from the day of his birth, having lost her own child, which was surely arranged by Allah who orders all things.'

'But we can't keep him in camp,' objected Hilary. 'We shall have to find

someone who is going on leave and get them to take him home. I expect the Pemberthys would know of someone. Or young William. Yes, that's what we'd better do: I've got a brother in England whose wife can take care of him until I get back myself.'

That matter being decided he had taken Akbar Khan's advice and ceased to worry. And as the baby throve and was seldom heard to cry, they came to the conclusion that there was no hurry about going to Peshawar after all, and having cut Isobel's name on a boulder above her grave, they struck camp and headed east towards Garwal.

Hilary never returned to Peshawar; and being deplorably absent-minded, he failed to notify either his brother-in-law William Ashton, or any of his relatives in England, that he was now a father – and a widower. The occasional letter (there were not many) that still arrived addressed to his wife would from time to time remind him of his obligations. But as he was always too occupied to give them his immediate attention, they were put aside to be dealt with at some later date and invariably forgotten; as he came to forget Isobel – and even, on occasions, the fact that he had a son.

'Ash-Baba',* as the baby was known to his foster-mother Sita, and to the entire camp, spent the first eighteen months of his life among the high mountains, and took his first steps on a slippery grass hillside within sight of the towering peak of Nanda Devi and the long range of her attendant snows. Seeing him toddling about the camp you would have taken him to be Sita's own child, for Isobel had been a brown beauty, honey-skinned, black-haired and grey-eyed; and her son had inherited her colouring. He had also inherited a considerable proportion of her good looks and would, said Akbar Khan approvingly, make a handsome man one day.

The camp never remained long in one place, Hilary being engaged in studying hill dialects and collecting wild flowers. But sterner matters eventually called him from this work, and leaving the hills behind them the camp turned southward and came at last, by way of Jhansi and Sattara, to the lush greenery and long white beaches of the Coromandal Coast.

The heat of the plains and the humidity of the south did not suit Ash-Baba as the cool air of the hills had done, and Sita, herself a hill-woman, longed for the mountains and would tell him stories of her home in the north among the great ranges of the Hindu Kush. Tales of glaciers and avalanches, of hidden valleys where the rivers teemed with snow trout and the ground was carpeted with flowers; and where fruit blossom scented the air in spring and apples and walnuts ripened in the lazy golden summers. In time these became his favourite stories, and Sita invented a valley which was to be theirs alone and where, one day, they would build a house of mud and pinewood, with a flat roof on which they could spread corn and red peppers to dry, and a garden in which they would grow almond and peach trees and keep a goat and a puppy and a kitten.

*baby; child