

The cigarette lighter

Autor(en): **Simpson, O.F.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **28 (1960)**

Heft 9

PDF erstellt am: **24.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570744>

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The Cigarette Lighter

by O. F. Simpson

I won't bother you with the mechanical details of the engine failure that caused me to force—land my Wellington on the airfield of that tiny Indian state—which I'll call Chitrapur because that wasn't its name. Indeed I've now forgotten the details, and remember only the fearful dust-storm we'd had to fly through, which nearly tore us apart in the sky. We were lucky to find Chitrapur at all, and luckier still, with no engines, to get down all in one piece on its rocky little landing-ground. This was June 1942, quite early in the war against Japan, when I was on a ferry job delivering Wellingtons with a scratch crew from the air parks near Karachi across to the squadrons in Eastern India. It was supposed to be a rest from operations in Europe. Rest my foot.

Nor will I bother you much with Peter, who was however the real reason for me being in India at all. Peter was all «take» from anyone who had anything to do with him, never gave you anything himself but got away with it every time by his charm and good looks. I guess I was just more of a fool than most, for he'd kept me successfully on the hop for longer than his other friends; I'd stayed the course with him on and off for the whole of the first two years of war through every kind of difficulty, till on our last leave together I conceived such a murderous hate for him I finally had to choose between breaking every bone in his terribly attractive body once and for all (which I'd have loved to do) or cutting clean away from him altogether. In December 1941 the Jap war came, just in time for me to apply for a posting to India, where I was already beginning to forget him a bit.

Well there we were, three of us R.A.F. types and one New Zealander, marooned in Chitrapur in the stifling pre-monsoon heat till the engine spares could be sent down from Delhi with a fitter to fit them. We were lodged in great luxury in the state guest-house, and I sent for my old bearer Hussain to come from Delhi, as I guessed that with the complete disorganization of those days we would have some time to wait, and the old man loved travelling; so I at least was comfortable enough. As captain, I had to show the rajah of Chitrapur all round the inside of my aircraft when he expressed a desire to see it one day; and this was such a success that the next day the whole airfield was put in «purdah» and the Indian guards politely turned their backs while I did the same for a party of the royal ladies from the palace (wives or mothers, I couldn't be quite sure): they twittered agreeably and asked a great many silly questions, their gay chatter and colourful clothes a pleasant contrast to the purposeful malevolence of the Wellington.

It was in return for these doubtful kindnesses that the next day I received a card: «R.A.F. Flying Officer Simpson requested to dinner at the Palace. Fireworks. Male Dancing.» I went, in the cleanest clothes Hussain could muster for me, rather pleased to escape for at least one evening the endless jazz-and-girls chatter of the rest of the crew. It was a merry mixed party of about twenty at dinner and I was made to feel very much the favoured guest—even the rice we ate was coloured red-white-and-blue in my honour. After the meal there was a short comic display of underwater fireworks operated by a very old man in an artificial tank much too close to our feet for comfort, though no-one

seemed as alarmed as I was. Then the ladies retired, some local nobles took their places and the dancing began.

I was not much impressed. The troupe was twelve strong, and a very mixed lot in size and type, from about 12 to 24 in age I'd say, the young ones too skinny and the older ones already running to fat as Hindus often do. They were garishly clothed, their evolutions rather elementary, and the tinny Indian music to my ears quite hideous. It was only after some minutes watching that I began to pick one boy out from the rest, not merely because he was working harder and seemed to be enjoying himself more than the others, but his face was alive and alert, and his whole physique had that deathless athlete's grace and poise which it is hard to describe but never hard to recognize. He had a slightly more elaborate headdress than the rest, and I was not surprised to be told he was the speciality «soloist» of the troupe. I put him down at 15 or 16, and when at last he appeared almost naked before us to take up position for his first solo dance, I was at once knocked backwards by the fine harmony and proportions of his body as a whole: so many dancers are all legs and no shoulders or arms, but this youth was firmly but lightly muscled all over—an entrancingly beautiful brown boy god. And he knew it.

Before he began the dance, as if part of some old forgotten ritual, he came and stood in front of each member of the audience who in turn touched his thighs or his chest somewhere quite lightly and perfunctorily, almost as a sort of blessing. When he reached me I slowly put one thumb on the outside of each leg. During the second or two I held him like that I tried to convey like a hypnotist something of that passionate adoration of ideal male beauty which had given me no peace ever since I could remember: I had always thought—and think still—that an athletic nude young male with a perfect body, serenely proud of it and able to use it properly, is the most wonderful thing on God's earth. On the boy's face for a fleeting moment I saw the usual fatuous ballet-dancer's grin give place to something deeper, and I felt a hint of sympathy and response in the willowy young body; but then he had twisted out of my grasp and was away to the man on my left, and I had no idea how far I had succeeded. The dance itself was mainly an affair of high-speed acrobatics done almost in the dark so that his brown limbs melted into the background, and one saw little but the whites of his eyes and teeth, and the glow reflected from his tiny jewelled cachesexes whirling over and over: it was covered in yellow and blue stones like topazes and sapphires—glass probably, though one never quite knew in India. He finished the dance hopping across the floor balanced upside down on one hand only—a feat I have never seen done before or since.

Small wonder I could hardly bear to sit through the next few items performed by others in the troupe which made up the first part of the programme. During the interval, for still more food and drink, the rajah seemed to like to keep me always by him. He was fascinated by flying, and I think terrified of it too. «Does it not bring much nausea?» he asked, and many other questions to which I did my best to give answers not fatal to the prestige of the Royal Air Force. He was also quite childishly proud of his dancers and told me of the rigorous traditional methods of training used to toughen the boys' bodies and make them supple: these included a weekly whipping—«It is quite lightly done, you understand,» the old man said solemnly, «I sometimes do it myself»—complicated oil and powder massages, being stretched on a wooden rack (quite lightly too, I hoped) and a plentiful diet of special honey from wild bees swarming in a

certain remote ancient temple in the hills. They were all vegetarians, but were never allowed to eat any kind of onion.

I could hardly wait for the moment twenty minutes later when the marvelous boy-god appeared again alone. This time the lights were suddenly made stronger and I was astonished to find that he made directly across the floor to me.

«You are to please make him naked» the rajah whispered to me in his curious stilted English. I chose the only obvious way to do so, which was to put my fingers into the front of his cachesexe and rip sharply till it came away in my hand. I gave it back to him and he tossed it lightly over the back screen, then skipped off to begin the dance, absolutely mother-naked expect for one temple-flower behind each ear. Someone had been rubbing him with oil behind the scenes so that he shone all over more brilliantly than ever, like a stainless steel statue.

I cannot hope to describe the passionate, abandoned beauty—or what the world would probably call the wanton wickedness—of what followed. The boy was Eros himself—beckoning, rejecting, venturing, recoiling, kind, cruel, alluring, disdaining, victorious, suffering—the whole gamut of love as we adults know it in ourselves and others. How so deadly clear an insight into the world's joy and sorrow came to be lodged in the soul and slim body of a 15-year old Hindu boy is a mystery I can never answer—the whole performance obviously owed far more to instinct than training, however careful. Hindus are a childish people and even after thousands of years have not progressed beyond a worship of the phallus; and if I tell you that every single part of that lad's body was slowly and fully brought into play under complete control to achieve the climax he intended, you will know what I mean. And you will understand why the Chitrapur nobles, though they had seen it often before, were now sitting forward in their chairs lost in rapt contemplation of the shining, flashing figure in front of them. The lights blazed at full brilliance, kissing his glittering limbs so that we could enjoy to the last ounce every triumphant pose, every thrilling snakelike undulation of his hips and torso, every loving caress of his hands moving up and down his own glorious body—until, at the exact moment when we could bear it no longer, the lights were suddenly snapped out altogether for a few seconds, then on again, and the boy had disappeared.

Drunk with the spectacle and without thinking, I asked the rajah if it would be in order for me to send a gift round to the boy. «It may be done,» he replied, but rather implying he hoped it wouldn't be. However, I had already realized, searching through my pockets, that I had nothing but money and a silk handkerchief to send, and I felt money to be quite inappropriate. Oh but yes, there was my cigarette lighter in the pocket of my shorts with my cigarettes. This was 1942—the lighter a gold-plated Swiss butane gas one of a new pattern I rather liked to boast about, probably unique in India anyway at that time. Peter had given it to me in one of his sudden bursts of generosity (it was when he began being suddenly generous to other chaps at my expense that I had first begun to wonder about him!). In a flash I fished the lighter out, and handed it, reposing on my silk handkerchief, to one of the palace servants who took it at once to the boy behind the scenes. That was that; I felt sure its new owner would enjoy it, though I had no way of telling.

I remember little of the rest of the performance. When it was over the servants began to pursue one around with enormous whiskies—that commonplace

of oriental hospitality for the European; so, not being much of a drinker, I soon took my leave and wandered back alone through the silent streets to the guest-house, the boy still dancing for me all the time in my mind's eye.

I don't know how long I lay on my bed dozing off to sleep before my nostrils were suddenly assailed by a hint of the one smell I would have recognized anywhere but never expected to smell again in India—the acrid fumes of the butane in my lighter. I had only just time to place it before I saw on the terrace outside my room the flickering blue flame typical of the lighter; this wobbled slowly across the dark room towards me, and in ten seconds I had discerned the outline of the boy dancer standing at my bedside with the lighter in his hand. He began to address me very softly and quickly, and though I caught nothing of his meaning except the word «sahib», his tone, and the fact that he let down his cloak, undid his turban and blew out the light almost in one motion so that he stood naked again before me, made his wishes clear enough. I raised the mosquito net and took him in with me.

In some way I find it hard to describe, he was still dancing all the time he lay on that bed. His sheer nervous and muscular energy was fabulous, and all his movements—the rolling of his hips and shoulders, the thrust of his legs—spoke still of dancing. It became clear to me—and I have since heard the same from a European dancer—that the act of dancing had so much exhilarated and inflamed him that the surrender of his body to a lover at the end of it all was for him the only completely satisfying close to the performance. My lips found his at once, but I could not kiss him into repose as I had hoped, and it was only by exerting quite a bit of sheer brute strength—and 24 is stronger than even the most athletic 15 in the end—that eventually I tamed him and brought about the slow lovely consummation for which we both so deeply longed. I hurt him, I don't doubt, but he fell asleep almost at once, curled round with his bottom pressed into my stomach, and in a minute or two I was asleep too.

And that was how Hussain found us when he brought my tea at 6.0 the next morning. Hussain was a sardonic old Punjabi Mussulman on whose resource and sturdy devotion I was finding myself relying more and more; he had also the grace, or the good sense, to ignore, or at least explain satisfactorily to himself, my unusual tastes: this was not, I fear, the first morning that he'd come on a strange brown body curled up beside mine, and dark hair next to his master's unruly yellow topknot on the pillow. He had got it into his head that this was how I was escaping the clutches of a difficult wife in England—for «wife» read «Peter» and he couldn't have been righter.

News travels fast in India, and Hussain knew already that the dancer had been missed in the palace, the hue and cry being put about by one of his deserted «regulars» no doubt. I could see Hussain preparing to enjoy the prospect of being able to reveal to others that he knew the missing boy's whereabouts; but when he made to wake him roughly and send him packing, I stopped him. Quite apart from the youth's breathtaking beauty as he lay there asleep in complete repose, he had certainly earned his «lie in.» Indeed it wasn't till long after I'd breakfasted with the others that he finally woke. I had been sitting quietly watching him and thinking back to my own time at school when at about his age for two years I myself had been mad keen on acrobatics and hand-balancing and had even got quite good at it till it suddenly all began to seem rather pointless and another craze took its place. He stirred, stretched once, and then like an animal was instantly fully awake.

He was an entirely different character from the electric eel I'd held in my arms the night before—relaxed, smiling, boyish and very shy. He allowed me to carry him and dump him in a hot bath, where my pleasure in soaping and sluicing down his gorgeous muscular young body was about equalled by his puzzled delight in the mysteries of the guest-house's European style plumbing. In the course of our halting exchanges of talk and signs, I gathered he was asking first to be allowed to come flying with us, and then to follow me and be my servant for the rest of my life. Of course I could hardly requite the rajah's hospitality just like that, nor was I prepared to supplant Hussain. Indeed I already knew deep down both that I should never see the boy again, and that it would actually be better so. Life is hard and I was already old enough to know that no second or subsequent repetition of a pleasure which stemmed so directly from plain ordinary physical desire could ever touch the first. By now I think he too will know the same; though that morning, without the benefit of a common language, it was beyond me to explain such a feeling to him, and there were tears warm on his cheek as I gave him a long, slow farewell kiss, and pressed his firm boyish contours to me in a last anguished embrace. After which, without another word he slung one leg over the balcony and dropped down like a cat into the street below, silently as he had come. I did indeed never see or hear of him again.

I wonder if I shall ever again make such good use of a cigarette lighter.

„All That Other Stuff“

by Howard Griffin

Two novels have recently been published in London which tackle as their subject the nature of homosexuality in the armed forces. One of these, *The Feathers of Death*, by Simon Raven, concerns a young officer in a snob cavalry regiment who, after having an affair with an eighteen-year trumpeter, shoots and kills the youth for disobeying orders during a campaign in an Empire outpost. The officer is courtmartialled for murder.

But the other, *At Fever Pitch* by David Caute, is a much more complex and intriguing book. Written by a man still in his early twenties, it is a curiously kaleidoscopic example of the *roman à thèse*. The author was born in Egypt, educated at Edinburgh University and his family live in London. His book appears to be the result of his service in the Gold Coast Regiment during 1956.

Very early in the novel we are introduced to Michael Glyn, a subaltern in the British forces stationed at Bada, which is the capital of an African country on the edge of self-government. He is an unathletic young man, nervously alive, self-conflictive, with a rather Jewish face and sallow skin. During long trains of inner argument, as Michael lies on his cot in the intense heat under the mosquito net, the reader is given portions and parcels of his rather chaotic past. We learn that, when called before a headmaster at school, he'd been warned that if he «persisted with the older boys, it might never stop and he might not marry and have bleeding brats.» Through the rather clumsy use of stream of consciousness, we are admitted into the protagonist's attitude, an oddly ambivalent one, fervent and saturated with guilt. He is half in revolt against what he thinks of as «government of the normal for the normal», though he does not define his idea of the norm. Deeply involved in his own emotions, reacting with his