

London to Bombay 1939

Faye Sharpe

About This Book

This book is the true story of a man, his wife and two daughters who, in the summer of 1939, drove from London to Bombay. They raced to cross borders before they closed. They raced for home.

It is an adventure story based on the memories of three of the protagonists and a cache of evidence found after their deaths - a diary, photographs, maps, a travel guide and itinerary, travel notes, and correspondence - however, during its research and reconstruction, the story revealed matters of greater depths: the complexities of identity, the transience of status and the innate, fragile nature of belonging.

About The Author

“Be yourself, every one else is already taken.” Oscar Wilde

I was born in Toronto in 1953. My father was born in Kendal; my mother, in Calcutta; my brother and sister, in Bombay. One grandmother was born in Northumberland; the other, in Mandalay. One grandfather was born in Cumberland; the other, in Uttar Pradesh. My great grandparents were born in Germany, Ireland, England and India.

I have lived in the United Kingdom since the mid-1970's. When meeting me for the first time, many people hear my voice and respond with a slight frown and a shy smile. The smile signifies no intended threat. The frown belies curiosity, sometimes anxiety. The acquaintance, who can't quite place my accent and, therefore, cannot quite place me, guesses: "You're not from here, are you?"

A writer, when asked what his book was about, replied, "I don't know yet. I haven't written it." It is true that we often don't know what we are about until our lives are lived and we can reflect upon it with hindsight. Everyone is a stranger, even to themselves. Who are you? What are you? To whom, to what, to where do you belong? Lifelong questions.

*In loving memory of Barbara, Joan, Queenie
and the legendary Hugo*

*and of Andrew,
who has gone fishing with his great-grandad.*

Part I

*'There's no place like home.'
- from 'Home Sweet Home';
lyrics by John Howard Payne,
music by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop*

Chapter 1

“I know how men in exile feed on dreams.”

- *Aeschylus*

Home is a place, on earth or in mind, where all things flourish. Suffering the pangs of growth, receiving the grace of fulfilment, life thrives there, spirits blossom, happiness hums and the buds of faith, the belief in oneself to do the right thing, burgeon.

An exile, for whatever reason, feeds on dreams of home. If left to gather, these dreams cloud his judgement and obscure her confidence. They cling to hearts, turning faith to hope. They fall on fair spirits in disquieting mists and blur the clarity of understanding. Banishment, imposed or self-imposed, settles a hunger on a soul for a place or a time where there is the feeling of belonging. And dreams of home, untamed imaginings of paradise, cause a homesickness that drives a person to desire what never was and never can be.

Home, then, becomes an instinct, a place to which every outcast must return or die in the trying. An outsider aches to return home and the ache grows into a lust and the lust will not be satisfied until he has reached his yearning and he is again filled with peace and can rest.

The road home, however, is a dusty one.

When India is that home, where spirits flower and souls soar by the shifting colours of the light, the soul becomes aware of the dust. Constantly, secretly, grinding, gathering and accumulating at different times of the day, into hues of turmeric, cinnamon and cayenne. He sees it. He breathes it. He smells it. He tastes it. He feels it. Everywhere. Like a dream. And to deal with all this dust, a great deal of sweeping goes on. The people are very graceful sweepers but they are hopelessly ineffectual. They only disturb the dust, whisking it up into little devils, revolutions of dust. Eventually, they and the dust and the dreams settle into a film of wretchedness to cover the people and the country, until a Diaspora of dreams permeates the world again.

In May 1939, moderate, sensible winds blustered across the Arabian Sea to blow away the dust. The sky started to pale and the clouds began to gather in high puffs. This intermediate weather, neither spring nor summer, so suitable to a European constitution, was, in fact, debilitating. The playful sea breezes teased and the people's dreams could not descend.

June was a breath held; a judgement suspended. The people anticipated, eagerly, the coming of the monsoons, to have the corrupting dust of their cities swept out to sea leaving the streets

washed, the sewers cleansed, the parks and gardens refreshed, their faith restored. The people became watchers of the skies, waiting to spot the herald that preceded the attack.

It rains hard in most parts of India. 'But it is different in Bombay,' so they said. 'There is ferocity in this first meeting of the rain-laden clouds with the land,' the old India hands told the visitor. They smiled and nodded. 'The monsoons will lash the parched land and pouring torrents will form inland seas!' they exaggerated. "Bombay, then, is not inert, consumed by dusty dreams. She will become elemental, dynamic, changing, like the two faces of Kali, light and dark,' they extolled. 'India returns to herself, returns home to the wholeness of life: beautiful and ugly, nurturing and destructive, life and death. No place for dreams,' they assured.

A few showers came. 'This is nothing,' the people said. 'Wait! The monsoons have yet to come.' Heavier rains followed. 'Ignore them,' the people said. 'Wait! Something extraordinary will happen.' But the Arabian breezes continued to soothe and to calm and to sedate.

And then, when June was half gone, like a thief in the night, the monsoons came to Bombay, just as they might come to Allahabad or Simla or Calcutta, with no pomp, no circumstance, no clashing of lightning cymbals. Just rain, rain and more rain until every static thing began to float, rise gently on the tide, drift on the water of a ditch turned stream, stream turned to river as high as a man's waist. And dreams were washed away. Faith was buoyed up. Best leave now, before the monsoons.

In England, that other Home, by the darkening mood of the people, there were no dreams of peace. There would be a war, a nightmare war. A trance-like grime settled on the railways, the ports and the harbours, the factories, the houses, and the people. Little hungers lined up on the doorsteps. The people scrubbed them from their paths. They would not let them in. Houses were shut up tight. Blackout cloths, around doors and windows, were wedged. And yet, the war would descend quietly, thickly, darkly. Women, in overalls and kerchiefs tied around their hair, with handkerchiefs spread over their noses and swimming goggles sucking out their eyes, trained to arm the men. The men with tin hats and gas masks planned their patrols.

Until then, farmers in their fields raked hay while the sun shone. Its summer scent showered them as they forked it up high onto their wains and the dusty haws itched their way twixt collars and necks, cuffs and wrists, belts and waists and eye lashes. Horses tossed their heads. Martingales and face pieces flashed brass until the farmers raised their heads too and saw and

heard and smelt the puffing clouds from a passing train and tipped their caps in salute to waving children who vanished to destinations and destinies unknown.

By July, clouds moved up from the Bay of Biscay, storm clouds, thunderheads. A raw sting in the air whipped up fervour, hoisted old enmities and bolstered a nation's resolve. Steady flows of people, a couple of million from this island, millions from other nations, packed up, moved out and cleared off. Banished. Exiled. Privately, furtively, they crossed borders and fled frontiers. Some were kissed by their old friends and blessed. Others were cursed by them and turned their faces away. Best go now, before the war.

August was that time *entre chien et loup*, that dusky time when summer thinks of autumn and days contract with night. Dancers still danced, drinkers still drank, singers still sang but lovers selfishly longed for the exhilaration and exhaustion of the creeping dark. It was a time before modernity faded, just before the world gained a twilight name: 'Post-Modern'. A time of after-thoughts, yet to come.

And the last summer before the war, like the spell before the monsoons, was an intermediate season of sensible precautions, practiced evacuations, diplomatic negotiations and underplayed provocations. It was an ordinary cool, damp English summer. Not the everlasting sunny days of secure childhood.

And those that left, those that were best gone before the monsoons, sailed on. They lay in their berths far out at sea. They climbed out of their bunks, went to the rails and felt the fresh, salty spray of new worlds. Those that were best gone before the war, rattled on. They sat in their carriages and touched the rain as it drizzled down the panoramic glass of their passing lives. Those that were best gone, drove on. They lay in a tent on the side of a road, listening. Listening to the stillness. Listening for tanks rumbling the earth and the air. Listening for highway robbers. Listening to tired thoughts and worn-out dreams. They wanted the morning. They wanted to keep moving, to cross borders before they closed. They wanted to shake the dust from their lives, get behind the wheel and drive on. The people on the road bent low out of their tents and smelt the dusty air. They covered their noses from it.

The people with no homes, no berths, no tents, the people banished from the cities without means, without transport, without friends, clambered from their hedgerows, their ditches and their culverts. They wanted to keep moving but with no home, direction is meaningless.

Without dreams, they famished. At a fork in the road a menhir stands. The inscription reads: *If you ride to the right, you will lose your horse, if you ride to the left, you will lose your head.* Pack up. Move on. Nearly there. Time to go. The days wore on. The weeks wore on. The

road wore on, sometimes singing beneath the tires, sometimes rattling beneath the wheels. The road moved beneath them twisting, turning, lunging and lurching. And so, this is how children were whisked away to free the women to work. Women were whisked away to free the men to fight. Men were whisked away to free the people from dreams. Whisked like dust. When, finally, September dawned, families were empty. It was no grey dawning. It was a sunny sunrise, a gin-clear harvest home kind of day. The people, lying in their beds in England heard the cockerel's crow. The prime minister spoke. The king spoke. A little family, drinking a morning glass of Persian tea, read the headlines of a newspaper three days old. Will we make it? The girls asked. No doubt, the father said. We must, the mother answered. Plucky children of the Raj. They drove on to find the path, to find the pass, to find the road Home. In October, the monsoons blew themselves out. The rains eased. Kali rested from her work of confident cleansing. And the light began to colour again. And dreams began to settle once more. And the comforting, endless sweeping began anew.

Chapter 2

Thursday 20th April, 1939

Light to moderate variable wind, becoming south to southwest later; fine; local morning fog; warm inland for the time of year during the day; rather cold at night. High 61F. Outlook: Less settled in the North; fair in the South.

*The Daily Weather Report
of The Meteorological Office,
London. Air Ministry.*

In the semi-darkness of early morning, Bombay's harbour lights still twinkled, faintly. A single passenger ship hogged the quay. A thin line of grey smoke trailed upwards from its single black funnel, her engines set at idle. RMS Britannia was homeward bound, a home to which at least one of her passengers had never been. Strings of colourful bunting fluttered in a rising breeze to give her departure a jolly send off. At the top of the gangway an immigration officer checked passports in the stolid, sturdy way of a man born and bred in Liverpool. Like the ship, he was homeward bound. Outward, he had passed through the ports of Suez, Aden, Karachi and now Bombay. Soon he would pass through them again, in reverse order. All his working life he had been amongst the turbulence of people on the move. But now there was turmoil. And it unsettled him. A clanging bell sounded. The ship's purser processed the deck. "All visitors to shore please. Fifteen minute warning."

A stately looking woman made her way up the boarding ramp. She limped slightly and held the rail as she climbed. Trailing behind her were two willowy young women. The sound of the ship's engines changed their pitch and, without concern, the immigration officer waited for the three to present their papers. The mother, keeping her eyes fixed ahead, stepped over the gap between the gangway and the ship. She saw the sign 'Tourist Class' and led her children forward. For a moment, she wondered if they were doing the right thing and she had a sudden urge to look back, to the dock, the harbour, the city, to home. Instead, she calmly handed over three passports, new and pristine, their paste board covers stiff, their papers crisp, the gilt stamped insignia of the British Empire on their covers, bright.

The immigration officer checked the photograph and saw a woman who looked straight at him. *Hayes, Wilhelmina Mary; British India Citizen; Born 11th June 1900; Fort Dufferin, Mandalay; Height: five feet, four inches; Eyes: blue; Hair: dark brown. Married. Also known as 'Queenie'.* More imperious than imperial, the official mused.

"What is the purpose of your journey?"

"We're looking forward to a summer's holiday in England."

"Have you not read the newspapers? Aren't you worried about the imminence of another European war?"

"It will never happen, not after the last time. If we're worried," she reassured him and herself, "we'll get on the next ship home."

The immigration officer raised a doubting eyebrow and thumbed the woman's papers.

"Where is your husband?"

"We will meet him in London."

He opened the girls' passports. *Hayes, Barbara Thérèse; British India Citizen; Born 30th September 1921, Calcutta, Bengal; Height: five feet, six inches; Eyes: blue; Hair: dark brown.* He compared her face with the one in the passport. A haughty beauty made her look older than her stated age. *Hayes, Kathleen Joan; British India Citizen; Born 1st January 1923, Calcutta, Bengal; Height: five feet, eight inches; Eyes: blue; Hair: dark brown.* A moon face made her look younger than her stated age.

In these people the Immigration Officer saw a fading class of person, once familiar, soon to be rare, White Indians. European by race, British by education, Indian by birth. Socially, economically and culturally they were Indian. They were not 'ex-pats', civil servants on temporary assignment who called England 'home'. England was never home. To Indians, of all shades and hues, England was the 'mother-country', a distant land under whose protection and influence they fell. Their distinction was not due to race or colour but to geography and language. Where they were born, where they grew up, where they lived, where they would be laid to rest, that was what defined them. English was not their first language. That was the language of their ayah's. English was the language of schooling and education. At home, they spoke any one of the myriad languages of India. In the street, in company, they spoke English.

The Immigration Officer weighed up their chances and finally stamped all three passports.

"Best go now before the monsoons, and," he added, "before the war."

"If there is a war," the mother insisted.

Over their heads, a cloud of diesel smoke drifted languorously.

Around them, passengers and visitors made fond farewells. Shy kisses. Hurried hugs. Fine cotton lawn hankies to dab at tears. Sturdy broad white handkerchiefs to wave from a receding dock. A dark-skinned, slightly built man dressed in crisp, white livery, had been

waiting patiently during the immigration inspection. Now he stepped forward. He palmed his hands and bowed deeply in Hindu greeting.

“On behalf of the Anchor Line, Mrs. Hayes and Misses Hayes, let me be the first to welcome you on board RMS Britannia. She is a very fine ship. I am honoured to be your steward for the entire journey.” He tipped his head from side to side in self-satisfaction, bowed again and led the way to their cabin.

The bell clanged once again and this time the final order was given, ‘Visitors to shore!’ The steward led them past the main lounge, the dining salon, the cocktail bar and the smoke room, informing them of their attractions like Ports of Call. He led them down a narrow companionway to B deck. At last, at the far end of a long passageway, he fumbled a key into a cabin door and flicked on the stuttering fluorescent tube of light. It was an inside cabin in the bowels of the ship. No porthole. The gentle ticking of the idling engine roused into a rumbling, grumbling pulse like that of a blocked drain. The vibration penetrated their bones. And their steward, incessantly cheerful, smiled a wide toothy grin. ‘We’re off!’

The steward stood in the passageway, leaned a scrawny arm across the spring-loaded door and held it open a little, inviting the women to inspect their accommodation. The mother said irritably, “Don’t stand in the way, man! Either go in or come out.”

“Memsahib,” the steward murmured, tipping his head to one side, stepped through and held the door open for the women.

At nine feet by nine feet, the cabin was a brightly lit steel box, painted in pale yellow gloss, floored in grey linoleum. It was flanked by a single pull-down bed on one side and a set of bunks on the other. The linen was white and crisp, the pillows plump. Three white bath towels and three white face cloths hung stiffly from their hooks beside a porcelain washbasin which had a mirror above it and a fluorescent light above that. A vase of clove scented carnations trembled on a small bureau. Propped up against it was a white card with a note printed in copperplate. *Bon Voyage from American Express!* For two weeks, this was to be their home.

“Showers and lavvy at the end of the hall,” the steward said.

“Well, at least we won’t hear flushing all night,” said the older girl.

The steward lifted an electric fan from the floor and pushed the vase aside. He flicked the switch and the triple blades began to rotate slowly, swirling a stew of air. The steward chewed his moustache nervously. The woman caught an image of herself in the mirror and took off

her hat. She sighed, then dug deep into her purse for a few pice for the steward. She made it more of a bribe than a tip.

After the girls made claim to the bunks and explored the bathrooms and lavatories, the trio climbed the companionway to take a last look at Bombay harbour, Malabar Hill, India, a place for all they ever knew as home. The mother clung tightly onto the rail and kept her eyes on the spot where their foamy slipstream slipped over the horizon. The younger girl brushed a coil of hair from her mother's face and asked, "Are we doing the right thing, Mummy?"

"Darling, that's how all officials look. Officious. He was just doing his job."

The older girl said, "No. He thought we shouldn't be going to England, not now. And I'm beginning to wonder if he isn't right. Mummy, the news isn't good."

The mother considered their options. She knew she was caught between her doubts and her husband's career. And she knew that she wanted to be a generous wife more than she wanted to be a sensible mother. They could disembark at Karachi and take a steamer back. They could carry on and keep the promise of a family holiday in a place people called 'home'. She didn't want to disappoint but she did want to feel safe. "Come on. We'll have some breakfast," she decided.

As the little family ate kippers and kedgereee, bacon and eggs, Adolf Hitler was being toasted with Austrian *halbtroken sekt* at the Kehlsteinhaus, Obersalzberg. As a 50th birthday present, this 'Eagle's Nest' had been designed and was being presented to him by his personal secretary and head of the Nazi party, Martin Bormann.

Friday 8th June, 1939 - New York City

To a valley of ashes in the city of New York, delegations from around the world flocked to see and be seen as participants in a vision of an improved tomorrow. The eyes of the world watched hopefully, hungrily, desperately. People massed to a park craftily carved out of a dump of manure and garbage and depression, to consume the '*democricity*' of science, that delusion of the poor that translates into self-service and mirage of the rich that manifests as self-serving.

In the first days of June, in a year of recession and depression, the world's faith in its leaders was tested. A President and his First Lady and a King and his Queen swept through the gloom in a cavalcade of Cadillacs. They charged the atmosphere with radiant good hope and eager anticipation for a better future. Even the Atlantic hurricanes held their breath. And British

royalty, as only they are qualified to do, expertly and diplomatically sewed the seeds of American sympathy and support should efforts to avoid a European war fail.

It was a busy time of ticker tape parades and excited presentations. In the twilight of early Friday evening, New York was lit up in anticipation of a jam-packed weekend. A different queen hugged the harbour wall. Broad plumes of black smoke trailed upwards from her iconic triple black and red funnels, her engines set at idle. Ensigns fluttered in a rising breeze to give her departure a dignified send off. At the top of the gangway an immigration officer checked passports in the stolid, sturdy way of a man born and bred in Southampton. He was keen to be homeward bound.

A clanging bell sounded. The ship's purser processed the deck. "All visitors to shore please. Fifteen minute warning." A tall man climbed up the boarding ramp. The sound of the ship's engines changed their pitch and, without concern, the immigration officer waited for the man to present his papers. The man, keeping his eyes fixed ahead, stepped over the slight gap between the gangway and the ship. He saw the sign saying 'Cabin Class'.

Not for a moment did he wonder if he was doing the right thing. This man rarely doubted because he believed that a doubting man is often a suspicious man and a suspicious man often becomes unkind. So, without fuss, he handed over his well-used passport. The immigration officer looked at a rather melancholic, middle aged man, balding, with a toothbrush moustache. *Hayes, Hugo Basil; British India Citizen; Born 11th May 1891; Jhansi, United Provinces; Height: six feet, three inches; Eyes: blue; Hair: dark brown; Married.*

"What was the purpose of your visit to the United States?" the Immigration Officer asked.

"I've been accompanying the Indian delegation to the World's Fair," the man replied.

"And what is the purpose of your journey to Great Britain?" came the next question.

"I am looking forward to a brief holiday with my family before returning home to India," came the reply.

"Have you not read the newspaper reports about another European war?"

"It will never happen, not after the last time."

The immigration officer raised an eyebrow in response.

"If we're worried," the man reassured the officer, "we'll get on the next ship home."

The immigration officer observed a familiar class of confidence and checked the man's ticket.

"Beg pardon, sir!," he muttered and immediately flipped through the dog-eared pages,

searching to find a space to place his stamp in the man's passport. "Best go now before the weather turns, and before the war if I may say so, sir," he advised.

"If there is a war," the man reassured him.

Over their heads, a pall of diesel smoke fumed. Around them, passengers and visitors made fond farewells. Sloppy, lip-sticked kisses. Big bear hugs. Broad white handkerchiefs unfurled, ready to wave.

A smart liveried steward waited patiently during the immigration inspection and stepped forward once the man's documents were returned to him. With one hand behind his back and the other outstretched to take the man's brief case, he bowed stiffly in greeting. "On behalf of the Cunard Line Mr. Hayes, let me welcome you on board RMS Queen Mary. She is a fine ship, sir and I am delighted to be at your service for the entire journey." The man jutted his chin forward to indicate his readiness and the steward-cum-valet led the way through a wide, carpeted companionway.

The bell clanged once again and, this time the final order, "Visitors to shore!" The steward led the man past the main lounge, the dining salon, the cocktail bar and the smoke room, reminding him of their attractions like Ports of Call. He led him along the silent corridor of M deck, Main deck. Arriving mid-ship, he placed a key into the brass plated, mahogany door of cabin M120, a port side cabin, a cabin of the Royal Suite.

In the bowels of the ship, the ticking of the idling engines roused into a gentle pulse, a vibration of which the man was barely aware. And the steward, calmly and quietly announced, "We're away, sir." Then he stepped forward smoothly into the air-conditioned stateroom and stood to attention while he held the door wide, inviting the man to inspect his accommodation. It was a large room with two square windows, a double bed, the linen white and crisp, the pillows plump, a green marble topped dressing table and a double wardrobe with integral drawers. The man's steamer trunk was already in place, waiting to be unpacked by the steward. Two tub chairs and a small round table nestled under one of the windows. At twenty feet by fifteen feet, the cabin was a comfortable bedroom, panelled in varnished deal, floored in sound muffling, pale blue, bulkhead-to-bulkhead wool carpeting. The man looked into the full-length mirror in the en suite bathroom and sighed. The steward lowered his eyes discreetly, noticing the man dig into his inside jacket pocket and pull out the key to his trunk. With a 'Thank you' he passed it to him. He left the steward to unpack his clothes and made his way to the starboard rail for one last look at the glamour that was New York City's skyline at night. It was a balmy evening. The salty tang of the sea rode on the wind. The man

breathed deeply. He was exhausted and relieved to be alone, at last. His assignment and responsibilities were over. That afternoon's reception and presentation to their majesties, his last duty, went well. The job was done.

Hugo Hayes was a travel agent with American Express, a dream job that took him around the world and which offered him a great deal of adventure. He remembered a similar trip in 1935 when he took a delegation of Indian business men and politicians on a round-the-world tour to celebrate the late King's Jubilee. On that trip, as on this, he worked in a frenzy, organising the day trips, the hotels, the transportation and during the 'quiet' times in between cities, on board ships and trains, he cropped photographs and wrote by-lines and cabled American Express with instructions for their publication. As the skyline diminished and turned to a glow in the night sky, his thoughts turned to his wife and his anticipation of their reunion in five days time.

And he remembered what a team they made in the early days of his career. He remembered fondly the time, in 1931, he and Queenie hosted a 'tiger shoot', in the Western Ghats of India, for Barbara Carstairs, the colourful American heiress. While Hugo hired the beaters and organised the guns, Queenie directed the servants and made domestic arrangements. Tents, cots, washbowls and a fire, with a game pot hanging by a chain over it, materialised in a well-practised routine. Tables were erected and laid with damask linen, glass and china. Servants, in white livery, waited upon the guests. There were tea chests filled with provisions, naphtha gas stoves and kerosene lamps. Canteens of cutlery, sandwich boxes, flasks of coffee, bottles of chilled water and soda to go with the Johnny Walker whisky that preceded every meal. The crates spilled their bounty, miraculously, each and every time they moved camp in pursuit of pleasure and possibly the killing of a tiger. Queenie, he reflected proudly, could make anywhere feel like home within half an hour.

The ship was about two hours out of New York harbour and the powerful engines throbbed as she pushed her way through the leading edge of a Caribbean storm. Hugo sat in the empty smoke room. He'd eaten early and now looked forward to enjoying a private, solitary smoke before retiring to bed. As he lit up, a man tottered over to Hugo's table. It was only a matter of feet, but the chap swayed like a drunk. Hugo stood up, pulled out a chair and the man flopped down gratefully. The man screwed up his eyes, as though trying to hold a single thought still, long enough to think of it. He swallowed hard and licked his lips. The pain in his eyes eased. "How do you do?" he said. "My name is Fletcher, Conrad Fletcher. I'm the ship's," he paused, "social secretary. Welcome aboard." Hugo disliked clubmen, but he shook the proffered hand,

sweaty as it was. The man apologised. "I'm so sorry," he smiled weakly. He took from his top pocket a large handkerchief and wiped his palms. "Not a good sailor, I'm sad to say."

Fletcher was well dressed, eye-catchingly so. His suit was Savile Row. His shirt and shoes were Jermyn Street. His tie was Piccadilly Arcade. His cufflinks were Albemarle Street. "You seem alright?" he inquired. Not waiting for Hugo's response he pressed on, "I suppose one really ought not to travel in June. But better than in hurricane season!" Hugo smiled sympathetically and offered the man one of his cigarettes and leaned forward with his lighter. Fletcher accepted. "You know they say there'll be a war soon? But I don't pay any heed. Been long in India?" Fletcher didn't miss a beat. Hugo was surprised, expecting him to ask how long he'd been in New York. How did he know he was from India? Hugo didn't answer at once wondering if the man would expand his question; get to the point of his interrogation. He took a drag of his cigarette. He waited for him to carry on. But Fletcher didn't carry on. He left a wide gap in the conversation. A gap Hugo chose to bridge as concisely as possible.

"All my life," he said and to turn the conversation and give it the air of a friendly game of ping-pong, he asked, "And you?"

Fletcher let the question pass. He looked up at the chandelier. It swayed, almost imperceptibly but enough to make his head swim again. He swallowed hard and dabbed his face. "All your life," Fletcher repeated. "Ever been home? To Blighty?"

"Yes, a couple of times," came back the reply.

"School was it?"

"No, no it wasn't."

"People are leaving India quickly now. Soon there won't be anyone left. The bolshies will move in. The Germans and Fenians are giving them ideas." Fletcher turned pale. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down his thin neck. "How, do you think, are we to hold on?"

A waiter appeared with a white napkin and a silver tray. Fletcher waved him away as he would a fly, but Hugo asked him to bring a brandy and ginger for Fletcher and a whisky and soda for himself. He said, "Well, I'm not sure it's a case of holding on. I am no politician but I think India is quite capable of self-rule when the time comes."

"You work for the Yanks." It was a statement. The game of give and take never got started.

"Yes." Hugo replied, honestly.

"I know. I've seen the list." He closed his eyes and blew sour breath and fought to keep down a knot of nausea. "You're American Express. Tourism Section. I bet not many 'travel agents,' he spoke the term with inverted commas around it, "stay in the Royal Suite. That's privilege, Mr. Hayes. Privilege is something to use to your advantage. In times like these, perhaps to ours."

The steward returned with their drinks. Fletcher took a sip of the fizzy, iced drink and hiccupped. He held the glass up against his forehead. Condensation trickled down the side of the glass. Sweat trickled down the side of his face.

"To 'our' advantage, Mr. Fletcher? What do you mean?" Hugo supposed that it was the job of social secretaries to know in which cabins their clients were berthed but he was annoyed by this man's intrusion. "Who are you?"

"I'm sorry, old man. Don't get upset."

"I'm not upset Mr. Fletcher. I'd like to know who you are and why you're so interested in what I do for a living."

"I can see that you're upset. I'm sorry. It's my job to notice things."

"Notice things. What things?"

"Well, that you are at ease on board ship for one thing. Well travelled, I'd say, but you don't like holidays. What I mean to say is that travel for you is a job, not really a pleasure." He stopped and looked straight into Hugo's eyes and what he saw there made him blush. Fletcher's shame, at the revelation of his ham-fisted presumption and conjecture, brought only a little colour to his grey and pasty face. He squeezed his eyes tight. He spoke breathlessly, "That I really know nothing about you. I'm sorry."

"You should just ask, Mr. Fletcher. I will tell you."

Fletcher mopped his brow and sipped his drink. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry. I am with the War Office, Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence, Geographical Section. We stay in close touch with military attaches and missions abroad," he said as explanation. "But we are more interested in general information - historical, economic information. Topographical information." He brought out his cigarette case and offered one to Hugo. "Try one. They're Balkan." Before Hugo could reach his lighter, Fletcher helped himself to it. When the air had cleared a little he continued, "We've not been having much luck, I'm afraid. They know we're watching and listening. So, we've had to sit back until we can find a way to get some eyes and ears on the ground, as it were." Fletcher's seasickness seemed better.

“So you’re not the ship’s social secretary,” Hugo decided.

“Oh, that? Yes. I am, actually. It’s my little hobby while travelling. I meet such interesting people.” He glanced to see whether Hugo was surprised or curious. Hugo was neither. He was looking out of the open window, watching a solitary gull, a ghostly bird in the ship’s lights, keeping pace. Soon it would give up and return to shore. “Funny thing,” Fletcher continued, “I joined the navy in ’26, just after the Germans applied to the League of Nations for membership. All bon hommie and good will to all men. Thought I’d see a bit of the world.” An officer and a gentleman, thought Hugo, cynically. “But as it happens I’m not a very good sailor. As you see! So I was transferred to a desk job. Naval intelligence. Since things have started to hot up, I am now with the War Office. It is very interesting work. Maps and things. Sea lanes and overland routes. Logistics. How to get from A to B via D, that sort of thing. I’ve just spent six months in India. Fascinating country. Roads, railways and canals. That was my job. Mapped them all. Need to know the pinch points of supply routes in the event of war.” His voice trailed off. “Should there be a war.” His eyes searched Hugo’s.

“I don’t suppose there’ll be a war in India, Mr Fletcher,” Hugo said flatly.

“Oh! God willing we’ll stop the Germans from marching over the Khyber Pass. But there’ll be a war,” he insisted. He paused. “You don’t agree.”

“No, I don’t,” said Hugo.

“Well, I’ve read the reports. Hitler is using some pretty big words. Of course Chamberlain looks like he’s trying the appeasement tack, but behind the scenes, I can tell you, we’re scrambling. It would be madness for Britain to stop rearming until we were convinced that other countries would act in the same way.” The ship lurched. The ashtray slewed to the raised lip of the table.

Hugo retrieved it and placed it between them again. “Should you be telling me all this?”

Fletcher was satisfied. He knew that Hugo was listening, now. “As I was saying,” he went on. “My job is intelligence, logistical and topographical intelligence. I’m going back to England to find out how Germany is preparing for war and just how they’re getting men, supplies and information across Europe and into the East.” He stubbed out his cigarette, leant back and flicked ash from his trouser leg. “Independence is their goal. Without India, the Empire is dead. Britain will have lost.” He looked at Hugo. “Everyone’s attention is on Europe at the moment. If Germany invades Poland, Britain will declare war on Germany. India is British, so India will also be at war with Germany. And Germany and her allies, including the neutral Irish, will have the excuse they need to finish the job of sedition they have already begun there.

We could prevent open warfare in India if we find out the overland routes they are using and stop them.”

Hugo was astonished. Of course there were rabble-rousers letting off the odd firecracker, but all out war in India, with Germany as the enemy?

“Overland routes, you say?” Hugo asked.

“Yes, transcontinental routes through the Balkans, Asia Minor, the Middle East, Persia, the Khyber Pass. We reckon they’ll enter through the north. We’re not worried about a few insurgents. It’s a German tank invasion that we fear.”

“Tanks?” Hugo was fascinated now. “By road? That’s impossible! No one has moved an army overland to India since, well” he had to think, “since Alexander!”

“Of course it’s possible. We need to know if it is probable.”

Hugo suddenly felt that he was being lured into something he would prefer not to know about. “Should you really be telling me all this?” he repeated.

“I just thought you’d be interested, being a professional traveller, as it were. You must know one or two people in the region. Local men. American Express fixers. Men who know the condition of the roads, the state of the bridges, the local terrain, the lie of the land.”

Hugo needed time to think, so he called the steward over and asked Fletcher, “Coffee?” He kept his voice courteous and neutral.

“No, thanks,” said Fletcher. “I’ll have another brandy. By the time we get to Southampton I should just about get my sea legs.” Diners from the second sitting started to arrive.

Hugo said, “You seem to think that I can help you with, well, I don’t know what exactly.”

“I’m not sure that I do. But I’ve had an idea for a while now and when I saw your name on the list, I thought I’d have a word.” He continued. “While we’ve been looking to secure the harbours and railways lines we’ve overlooked the roads. We assume it’s too far or too arduous to move troops overland. And yet for centuries, millennia really, the overland routes have been the main trade routes east and west. It wasn’t just camels that passed over them. Armies did and information too.” He warmed to his notion. “Just suppose someone were to drive from London to Bombay? I know,” he held up his hand against any skepticism. “But just suppose. We know it can be done. We know the Germans are already using the roads to transport small arms. They infiltrate revolutionary factions all along the route, supplying them with arms and giving them weapons training. But we don’t know whether it would be

feasible to move troops overland. If someone were to drive the distance, we'd learn whether new bridges were being built, whether old ones were being reinforced. We'd learn which roads were being widened, where the pinch points are." Hugo swigged the last of his coffee. He swilled the grounds at the bottom of the cup. With nicotine stained forefinger and thumb, he stubbed out his last cigarette in the now full ashtray. The man's theory seemed implausible. And he let the thought of long distance travel and the suggestion of the road overtake him. Would it be possible? His blue, calm eyes smiled as he stared at the man sitting opposite him. He saw a bad sailor in a Savile Row suit. Fletcher returned his gaze and saw a determined romantic.

At last Hugo's suspicions were aroused. He asked, "Why are you telling me all this? And what were you doing in New York?"

Weakly, Fletcher smiled evasively. "We would know their intentions – to attack by sea or by land."

Hugo smiled. It widened for a moment and then to hide his realisation, he wiped his moustache with the large damask dinner napkin that came with his coffee, first one side and then the other. "You're an amusing son-of-a-gun, Fletcher. I'll give you that. You've had me marked as a fool all along. When was it? When I boarded the ship?" The ship rolled and Fletcher gripped the arms of his chair so tightly his knuckles turned white, as white as his face.

"Oh!" realised Hugo. "Before."

"When you booked your passage," Fletcher said, then added, "Your passage from India, to the United States and to England."

Hugo frowned in mild surprise. "You've been watching me." Fletcher was silent. "You have," Hugo insisted.

"Yes," Fletcher finally admitted. "A business trip to New York is one thing. Followed by a three month holiday in England for a family of four, in turbulent times, is quite another. For a start that's expensive for a travel agent, an *assistant* manager of the American Express Bombay Office." He emphasised the word assistant. "How can you afford it Mr. Hayes, on your salary?" Hugo noticed the seagull was gone. It had given up, flown back to shore, seeking the safety of the bright lights of New York City, turning from the dark seas of the Atlantic Ocean. He imagined it had flown back to pursue a life less exciting, less daring. He envied the bird. He crushed out his last cigarette and let it fall into the glass ashtray.

“You think I’m keeping secrets?” he said. “I’m not. I’ve worked for American Express since ‘31. My manager, to whom I was assistant, died earlier this year. Suddenly. He shot himself. He was my best friend. The firm offered me and my family a holiday, a perk, after a trying time and a busy schedule.” He pursed his lips ruefully. “Though not as big a perk as my wife would have liked. My daughters are starting school in England in the autumn term, so we thought it would be lovely to have a last summer holiday together as a family. Then my wife and I will return to our empty nest in Bombay. You doubt me, Mr. Fletcher?”

“No” he paused. “I don’t doubt you.”

“You should.” Hugo teased the man. “Because I’m on India’s side.” He paused for the statement to take effect. “But that suspicious nature of yours is going to get you into trouble. You can’t go around accusing people of things when you don’t know all the facts.”

Fletcher’s face softened. “I didn’t mean to...”

Hugo’s hardened. “No, I don’t suppose you did. But you jump to conclusions. Too many people do. I’ve got an interesting though not very well paid job, I’m travelling Cabin Class, in the Royal Suite no less and you couldn’t help but put two and two together and come up with five.”

“It’s my job to be suspicious, Mr. Hayes.”

“But that’s the least part of intelligence work Mr. Fletcher. Finding out the truth is the greater.” Hugo calmed. “Now look. I know you’re just dying to figure me out but the truth will disappoint.” The ship had altered its course to north by northeast and the diminishing lights that were the Eastern Seaboard twinkled weakly from astern. The ship rode the cross swell in a rhythmic pitch and roll. Hugo stood up and prepared to leave. The sway barely affected his stance. He leaned towards Fletcher and said in a whisper, “You tried your best but I’ve dealt with English snobbery all my life. I can hear the question before anyone asks it, ‘Are you one of us?’ That’s what you want to know, isn’t it?” He paused for Fletcher’s confirmation but got a stony faced silence. He added, “You just have to ask.” Hugo turned and walked purposefully away.

Fletcher called out after him, “Bon voyage, Mr Hayes!” Hugo heard nothing. The roar of the wind deafened his ears as soon as he stepped on deck. And the ship ploughed on through heavy seas.

A doubting man is often a suspicious man. And a suspicious man is often an unkind man. Though his face and body showed the consequence of a life lived, Hugo Hayes had never forgotten who or what he was.

Chapter 3

‘Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.’

- *Mark Twain*

The telegraph poles were a highly strung network of taut, tight, tense wires and electric pulses crackled with grave reports to capture a nation’s imagination, and announcements to detain a man’s attention, and words of advice to lock up an hysterical woman’s fear. Sonorous words snaked along them, anxious to take flight and fly apart, every statement primed with messages of war. Communiqués queued to be dispatched. Grabbing headlines and inky by-lines waited for the newspapermen and the teletype, for the newsagent’s poster and the basket of the paperboy’s bike. All waited, grounded for the time being. Declarations armed and aimed, their pins pulled.

Rain dripped from the wires and they sizzled in the mist and at the ends of the wires, the people listened to their wirelasses. Wives and shopkeepers waited to receive the news, local authorities to transmit the orders and factory floor supervisors to command workers to work as model soldiers, stamping, hammering, welding weapons of war.

In a field in France, a grey pigeon perched on a slack wire, homing, gauging its flight, bobbing its head up and down. Its thick neck and iridescent green ruff flared wildly with each bob, not really knowing but hunching and guessing its way home. The electric drum beneath its feet pulsed and the dit-dah transmissions arced in time with the bird’s bobbing dance. For a moment it halted, its neck stretched to the zenith of its rhythm. Its pointy beak was tightly shut and the amber beads that were its eyes, gazed, gazed into the drizzling sky. It blinked once and resumed its bobbing. At last it launched itself into the sky. Flap-crack wings shattered the silence and it was airborne. It circled once to set its course, clearing the telegraph poles and their invisible tangle of words and as its rate of climb increased, its wings beat, thrashing, to find its natural rhythm. The bird’s instincts grew stronger and drove the pigeon along, and the marble-sized head reached out as far as it could stretch. Bit by bit, the bird climbed through the clouds until at last a blue sky, an infinite sky, appeared above them, a circular horizon without signpost, a world devoid of any bearing except for the shining sun. A rising current of warming air lifted the bird. Through thinning clouds the amber beads that were its eyes saw a wide channel of water. Now the tail fanned broadly to stall the flight, turning the wind to still air, causing the bird to sink, to glide towards a small village on the

Normandy coast, to land on a garden wall. The bird rested. A housewife came into her yard, a cinder grit yard, a dirty yard, and suddenly a flapping sheet harassed the world of her small compound. A flap-cracking clatter resounded round the walls and the angry woman shooed the bird away. But a great grey spat fell from the sky onto the white sheet. The pigeon circled once then settled on a rooftop and the head bobbed, homing, and the amber beads that were its eyes gazed, and the iridescent feathers round its wild neck ruffled. Without warning, the bird hefted its plump body into the air. Its strong wings went to work, flap-clapping like a noisemaker, and the heavy body rose up so that the scrawny legs could no longer grasp the ridge tile. Hard and harder it flailed until, at last, the bird balanced its centre of gravity at the cross formed by each broad wing, between marble head and fanned tail and rose up, higher and higher into the air. And the little yellow capsule with its coded message inside remained clamped round its lizard-skinned leg.

Now the flying was easy. The bird's wings worked in tandem. It soared aloft on surging streams of sky. A bi-plane, flown by a young pilot, returning from a training sortie to France, loomed. He saw the bird at the last possible moment to save them both and banked to the right, altering his course. The engine misfired spluttered and black smoke belched from its two exhaust pipes. The parallel wings, which had lifted for a moment, levelled out and the plane flew on with the pilot's heart beating faster. The pigeon, oblivious to the near miss, flapped on, unwaveringly, resolutely, for its route was fixed, for home.

And then a fighter plane bolted. The pilot, flying so fast, could not see the bird, could not swerve away. The tip of his right wing clipped the pigeon, flipped its body over and over, bowled it off its way, making it tumble, a ball of feathers. The aircraft continued its course ignorant to the anguish it left behind. Backwards, the pigeon fell. It tumbled and toppled and plunged down for a long way. With great effort its wings spread, caught the slipstream, stretched to restore its centre. Its neck reached out. Its wide tail fanned and from its dive the pigeon pulled up and soared adamantly. The little yellow capsule stuck tightly and the curl of coded paper nestled in its pod. And the pigeon flew beyond the coastline, its loose feathers falling, descending over The Channel, into the choppy waves that danced and sparkled in the sunlight. The bird reached land and spied its destination, a white wooden loft. It pushed its head and shoulders through a twin wire one-way trap. And a soldier gently picked up the bird, unclipped the capsule and withdrew the message. The soldier telegraphed a signal. The test was complete.