



The past does not welcome trespassers, this famous novelist found during a bittersweet visit to her childhood home



By RUMER GODDEN

Author of "Battle of the Villa Fiorita," "The Greengage Summer," "Black Narcissus," "The River," and "Bengal Journey"

One would have to have been a child in India fully to understand that stench: a smell mixed of sun, the honey scent of the yellow fuzzbuzz flowers of the thorn trees, and, heavier, of the champac or temple flowers; of human sweat and ordure; of cow dung burnt for fuel; of mustard cooking oil and, strongly, of the coconut hair oil Indians, men and women, put on their hair; a little of incense from the temple; of ghi (butter) frying from the cookshops; and of dust again, a smell more alive than anything in the West.

The peon and the babu guided me, but I knew the way the road went past the Institute, where the babus had their club, and one could see them on the verandah or playing a dignified game of badminton; portly figures in white dhotis and chemise shirts, colored shawls, socks, colored sock suspenders showing on their bare legs, patent-leather pumps.

I KNEW THE CLUSTER of wicker huts that made a bustee (hamlet) where once I had run away and hidden. There was the familiar little temple, its roof made of beaten-out kerosene tins that shone in the sun, and where, at dusk, cymbals would sound, a conch be blown, and incense come out into the road as evening prayers were chanted in honor of two jointed dolls that sat, crowned with tinsel, in a silver swing. They were Rama and Sita, the celestial lovers.

The dolls still sat in the swing, and men and little boys were fishing, as they had always fished, in the wide water tank with its hyacinth.

If I had met one European, one person in Western dress, the illusion would have been shattered because their clothes would have changed. But Indians have no fashions; a sari, a dhoti, a shirt, a turban belong to all time. The Works peons were in the same loose khaki shirts, leather brass-plated belts, yellow turbans. The coolie women, pushing the trucks or cooking in the bazaar, wore the same dingy strings. I might have been walking backwards down the years, back into my own childhood.

And so I came, as in a dream, to the high green-paneled gates of our house with the arch of a bridal creeper above them. The bridal creeper was in flower; my eyes were blinded with sudden tears, and I fled.

I do know what would have happened had I gone in. The gates had started to roll back with a jarring iron on iron, a noise that, for us children, had always meant excitement: our father, Fa, coming back from work, or a visitor. But now I would have been the visitor; there were strangers in our house. I was right to flee.

But the morning was not all.

The mail steamer, one of Fa's steamers, was a large paddle wheeler with a high upper deck, of which the European, the first-class section, took

up the forward part. Always, when the steamers pulled away from the dock, they would make a half-circle sweep before turning to go upstream away from the town. That day, as I stood by the rail looking, the steamer cast off and started back—I did not know the reason—but it backed into midstream and went on slowly backing away so that the town grew smaller and smaller until it was like looking down the wrong end of a telescope; smaller and smaller until I could not see it any more.

THEY SAY one can never go back into the past: I had been back as surely as if 30 years had been rolled away. It was not a remembering—I had actually been there—and, as a writer, knew that I must try and catch those vouchsafed hours while they were fresh.

As the steamer turned, I went to my cabin and wrote: "The river was in Bengal, India, but for the purpose of this book, these thoughts, it might as easily have been a river in America, in Europe, in England, France, New Zealand, or Timbuctoo, though they do not of course have rivers in Timbuctoo. Its flavor would be different in each . . . and the flavor of the people who lived by the river would be different."

(Editors' Note: These were the opening sentences of *The River*, which turned out to be one of Miss Godden's most successful books.)

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