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SECOND CITY OF THE EMPIRE is not as quiet as this now. But there has been a security ban on photographs from wartime Calcutta.

Four Million Plus

THE ASTOUNDING HUMAN SPECTACLE
KNOWN AS CALCUTTA

by Squadron-Leader H. E. Bates

NOT every Englishman could name the second largest city in the British Empire. I doubt whether one Englishman or one American in a thousand would know what is now the fourth largest of Allied cities in terms of population.

The answer to both questions is the same, and the answer is not Paris or Chicago or Glasgow or Sydney. The answer is the huge, sprawling, messy, sun-drunk, smelly, sensuous, fantastic anachronism of a city that lies at the mouth of the great Hooghli River in the Bay of Bengal.

The answer is Calcutta. It has a population of four million plus.

No one yet seems to have estimated or to have attempted to estimate exactly what this plus means. But it is clear that it is a wartime plus; it is accounted for by a huge mass of soldiery of half a dozen nations who but for the war would never be there.

This floating army has not only enlarged Calcutta. It has done much to revolutionise it, superimposing on it not only ways of life but an air that is at once disturbed, fatalistic, and volatile.

It has altered standards of living and pay in a city where those standards vary between extremes as violent and probably more violent than those of anywhere else on earth.

It has increased in the same degree the violence of its already violent contrasts: so that the jeep is parked in Calcutta's Piccadilly side by side with the calf that calmly sucks at the teats of its mother, and the three-mile convoy for the front roars past the ancient Hindu cab-driver who, half asleep, feeds his horse with a banana.

Above all, it has brought to it a powerful restlessness.

There is over all this city a certain clash of violence. Overcrowded, sun-charged, nervous, unsettled, it gives the impression of seething on the verge of an explosion.

It arises from the fact that Calcutta has been a sort of power-house on the edge of the Burma war.

Geographically, and for the fighting man psychologically, Calcutta has occupied the same position in relation to the Burma Front as London did to the Western Front. In the mind of the fighting man cut off from civilisation, far up in the jungle, in the hills, in the dusty forward airfields, it has exercised a magnetism only exceeded in magnetism by the thought of home.

It is not a junction for home, which is 7,000 miles away; but a terminus. And there he arrives, and there he stays, his green jungle battledress and his big Australian bush hat often unchanged,

his Ghurka knife in his belt and his revolver at his hip.

He carries with him, in fact, a certain air of the Wild West.

And that is precisely what, among other things, he finds in Calcutta.

If you want to picture for yourself Chowringee, Calcutta's equivalent of Piccadilly Circus or Broadway, all you have to do is to picture the main street of a Middle-Western town of 1880 brought slightly, very slightly, up to date.

It has the air of a film set. The period is perfectly kept by Calcutta's amenities.

This city of four million plus has only three hotels of European class, one of them closed to the public; it has less than half a dozen restaurants at which it is safe to eat, not counting the Chinese, most of which are excellent but out of bounds.

It has a bus service which would have made you laugh your teeth out if you had seen it in the Keystone comedies of 1915: a sort of relay of travelling mad-houses built in baroque style and all of them carrying ten times the number of Indians for which they were designed.

It has a train service of slightly later date and similarly overtried capacity.

It has horse cabs which would have appealed to Dickens, who would have adored the small haystack of feed carried on the dashboard and the situation in which the driver feeds bananas to the horse while waiting for clients to emerge from the palatial premises of the National Bank of India.

Yet all this is modern. Calcutta's triumph, as the second largest city of the Empire, is its public sanitation.

It goes far back beyond the Middle Ages; it mocks the lowest standard of Westernism that you know. Garbage piles up in vast, foul, fly-blown stacks along the kerbs of its main shopping streets, to be pawed over for scraps of

God knows what until the whole thing is too revolting for words.

The boy from Birmingham or Minneapolis or Montreal sees these things amazed. He brings to the whole place an immediate fierce disgust. He begins to call it, as even its own citizens have called it, the filthiest city on earth.

And if he penetrates to any of its suburbs he can only grow more amazed, more disgusted, and more bewildered by the violence of its contrast, the clash of modernism against standards that in the constitution of his own country are as far in the past as child marriages, duelling, and breaking on the wheel.

Probably the only phrase the Allied soldier has ever heard about India—India's teeming millions—hits him constantly in the face. Humanity clothes itself into a black mass about him.

Where do they live? What do they do? Where do they sleep? Who are they all?

They simply surge about him without meaning or identity. They are themselves not only Calcutta's problem, but India's problem: the huge numerical problem of her own people, created and re-created by a fanatical worship of human fertility.

The Indian has all the time in the world; to-morrow, as for the Spaniard, will always do. But the boy from the

front, whether he is an American gunner or a British Tommy or a Chinese pilot just in from Chungking, has only a few days to call his own, and wants to make the most of them.

And if he has enough time and can shake himself out of the amazed disgust of his first few hours, then he can find for himself another Calcutta.

Behind its main shopping streets there lies a Calcutta of sleepy, sensuous, opulent charm: a little reminiscent of Southern France or Spain.

A Calcutta of big, cool, cream, sun-bleached houses with windows shuttered by green jalousies standing in large gardens among flaming bougainvilleas of salmon and vermilion; of old back streets with deep walls of shade; of courtyards shadowed heavily by palm and

banana trees; of avenues of shrub trees, not crowded but always bright with Chinese girls, black-haired and lovely and serene and cool as ice-cream, riding in rickshaws.

Life here in days before Calcutta was invaded by the fighting man must have been exceedingly pleasant.

Even now the easy sun-steeped air of it remains: the link between Calcutta's garish and war-harsh modernism and that medievalism which covers

nine-tenths of it in a foetid and fantastic shroud.

And the die-hards of Calcutta, mostly Scots, will tell you that Calcutta is not what it was.

Jute has made the city a sort of second Dundee, peopled largely on the European side by Scots of proverbial outlook and the greatest kindness of heart.

Prices in Calcutta have risen preposterously and the days when you could buy the loveliest Tibetan silk for two rupees a yard have gone, the Scots say, for ever.

But the Scots still provide the sternest bargaining battle in the world: that between themselves and the Hindu, always ending, as I have seen it, in a victory for the north.

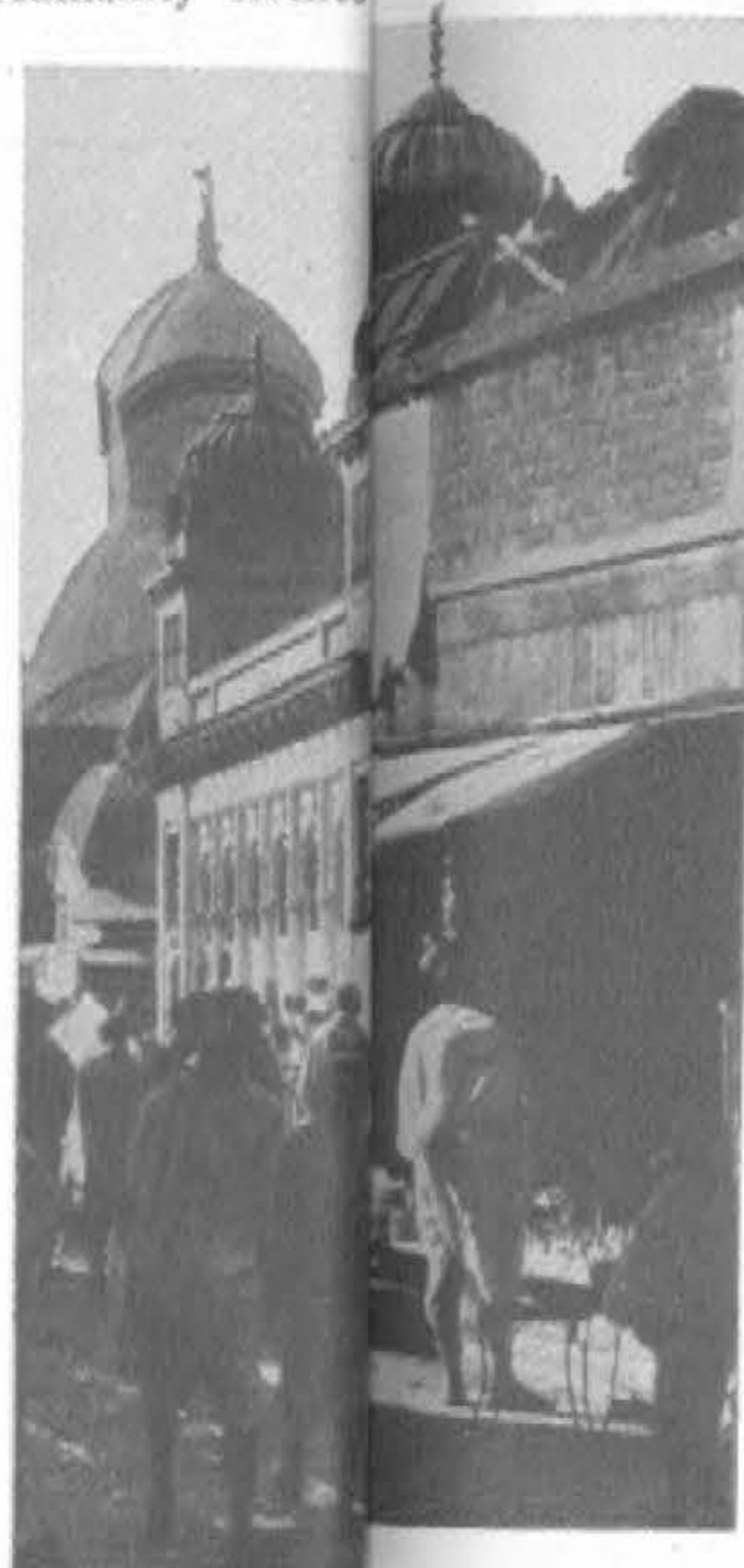
And the Scots stand amazed, perhaps a little shocked, by the way war has broken down and whipped up into a maelstrom all those taboos and creeds of society and colour that were once so clearly defined and rigidly observed.

The fighting man who walks into this city with the dust of Mandalay on his battledress has no time for the delicate webs of social distinction. He cannot be bothered with unwritten laws about the colour of a lady's skin.

This turns pukka sahibs grey with shame; and pukka memsahibs too.

But the lovely Anglo-Indian girls, whose status war has raised by degrees never possible in peace, and the still more beautiful Chinese, have a singular appeal to a man who has looked for weeks on dust and jungle and dead Japs and has heard no feminine voice except the voice of a solitary actress singing for him, sweet but untouchable, on the platform of an open-air theatre under the stars.

He has no time either for the problems of caste distinction, or for those fierce arguments about Hindu and Moslem,



SACRED SPOT: The temple from which Calcutta got its name.

Congress and Imperialism, a thousand religions and a million grievances, that bite you everywhere in India with the infuriating prick of mosquitoes.

He brings the clear, simple, powerfully direct attitude of a man who seeks ease after fighting.

It is he who really brings that curious brooding clash of conflict which hangs all day, throughout the hours of sunlight, over this city of cream and pink and green and terra-cotta plaster.

That brooding air of tension seems to lift at night. Conrad was fond of describing the East as sombre, and the word is exact for the dazzling and brooding light of day. But after darkness comes, rising very quickly off the smoky red horizon like a thick rim of gold, the whole city suddenly has a kind of delicate serenity.

By day rickshaws are just rickshaws; by night they prance along the streets, jingling small bells, like processions of orange fire-flies.

By day the kerb-sellers are just kerb-sellers, selling cheap books, bananas, pocket wallets, and shaving cream.

By night each of them brings out his little lamp, or even a candle screened by a paper bag or perhaps not screened at all, and sets it on a little pyramid of tangerines or among the books or among the slices of melon that it is now too late for anyone to buy, so that hundreds of these golden haloes light up every street.

From the centre of the city right out to the smallest suburban bazaar, they burn far on into the night, until even the rickshaw wallahs are asleep and the last possible customer has gone.

These thousands of little lights give the whole city, still warm and humid after the heat of day, a kind of Christmas-tree air of mystery and wonder.

And lights also move out of the city: long lighted supply convoys that pound up dusty roads past rows of dark sleepers

who have brought their beds into the open air if they are lucky enough to have a bed at all.

By the metal roads, on either side, run the dusty bullock-tracks and along them go the huge two-wheeled bullock-carts, always too heavily laden, making their night journeys out of the city.

And as the great 90-foot-long articulated trucks with their dazzling headlights roar past them, feeding the supply routes to Burma, you can look down on these heavy, swaying carts and see again and again the same sight.

The two bullocks or water buffaloes strain at the cart piled with sacks, the driver sitting behind the two with candle lamps swinging under the shafts. On the top of the sacks there is always a tired small boy. Half asleep and dazzled by the passing headlights, he rouses himself out of his drowsiness to give the bullocks a clout on the rump before he goes to sleep again.

In that small boy rousing himself, sleepy and startled, on a bullock-cart setting out on its journey in the dead of night, and in the noisy and powerful convoys going out to feed the air supply routes without which a Burma war would never have been fed or watered or munitioned, you have the crux of Calcutta's fantastic contrast.

Somehow it mocks all our Western conceptions of life and logic.

It eludes analysis. Didn't someone once say of an Irish politician that he was like trying to pick up mercury with a fork?

Calcutta is also like that. The glitter of its mercurial contrasts never seems to solidify. It shocks and surprises and dazzles you and can never be grasped by the hand.

It stands apart, with its crowded and inscrutable millions, from what we fondly call the progress of time.