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• "You see, sah, India is India," a thin clerk told me in Bombay as he thumped a large purple inkpad with a rubber stamp for his own reasons. He was wearing what looked like a tinfoil suit cut for someone built along the lines of Carl Eller.

"Yeah," I muttered, "India is India," and struggled back out onto the street. For some mysterious reason I was in the Pet Bird section of the Bombay Bazaar. In a couple of hours I would be on my way to Bangalore, and I could hardly wait to get out of this steaming city. Around me, 500 cages filled with carnivorous-looking mynah birds screamed and yelled and squirted mynah dung at anyone coming within twenty feet of their perches. *Dung! Dung! Dung!* Gunga Dung, Gunga Dung, you cursed son of India, Gunga Dung! The heat was obviously getting the best of me by this time.

For the past four hours I had been struggling through the bazaar, searching for a simple battery for my tape recorder which, due to the heat or humidity or something, had taken to devouring batteries like a starlet popping Bennies on Oscar Night. I finally gave up and bought myself a pair of sandals, because my feet were cooking. It was one of those days that any traveler in what are called by tourist brochures "exotic lands" inevitably struggles through, the day when you've finally had it, when some unsuspected side of your nature demands just one sight of something—*anything*—familiar, home. I've been pretty much around the world, and India has to be the one country that is unique on this planet. The smells, the heat, the birds, the food, the chattering, yammering, tinkling street sounds, the unbelievable constantly moving rivers of people are like nothing anywhere else. Nor will you find such extremes anywhere else. In Bombay, I swear I could actually hear the hinges of Hell creaking open to let in yet another blast of bone-searing heat. Close to the other end of the spectrum was Bangalore.

The minute I stepped out of the plane, I

knew Bangalore was another ball game. The air was crisp and cool and, after thousands of miles of struggling down the western coast of India and the withering heat of the Indian Ocean, Bangalore felt like I had died and awakened in heaven . . . or at least in San Francisco. It is a beautiful city. The altitude is high, something like 7000 feet; the air is thin and clean, and everything stands out to the eye in sharp, bright, shimmering colors of high intensity.

The clerk at the desk of the little English hotel I was staying at made arrangements for a car. In India you can't just call up Hertz and say "Send over a Pinto." And even if you could, you'd have plenty of trouble getting around in Bombay or Calcutta if you weren't an Indian. You may think you're a pretty good driver and have fought Hell's own brew of traffic successfully, but you haven't seen anything until you buck the incredible horde on any Indian street in any Indian city; donkeys, oxen, camels, lepers, buzzards, peacocks, monkeys, hooded cobras, trillions of people going God knows where with no discernible order, pushcarts, beggars—everything in motion and ready to hurl itself under your wheels.

"Sah, you are visiting India, sah?" (All male Indians seem to call any Westerner over the age of ten, of the male sex, "Sah." They call women "Mem," or something that sounds like that.)

I lolled on the back seat of the made-in-India Ambassador. (This is a car that is not exported and which looks like a curiously

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bloated, cast-iron Morris Major of about 1948 or so. Time really has stood still in the land of Gunga Din. The British influence is everywhere and, in some ways, the Indians out-pukka the *Sahibs* themselves.)

It was quite a trip. Along the way you go through some of the most lushly exotic scenery the world has to offer, with long green rolling hills, unusual in India. We rushed through small towns—just a few buildings, some huts, a temple—clustered around the road. We stopped to allow a wandering herd of goats to cross, in a town in which the entire population for generations has done nothing but make beautiful little hand-carved religious dolls.

With an unknown-quantity driver, we barreled along toward Madras in the rattling car, which appeared to have flooring made of old Sears Roebuck linoleum, which gave

it a distinctly hometown Indiana chumminess. I could see the driver eyeing me in the rear-view mirror, and it was obvious he was trying to figure out just what the hell I was, since I had no cameras, wore a sweat-stained T-shirt under a likewise sweat-stained denim jacket. It was obvious I was not a typical American tourist.

"Do you like India, sah?"

"Yeah," I answered, searching in my dufflebag for a Lifesaver. I had been living on them for about a week now, and I was running low. They seemed to help the incipient dysentery, and at least they weren't curry. I was telling the truth. I did like India.

"You go to Madras, sah. May I inquire why you go, sah?"

"I want to see it."

"A very good reason, sah. I enjoy seeing Madras too, sah. Did you come just now from Calcutta, sah?"

"No. Cochin."

He eyed me narrowly in the mirror, neatly dodging a giant ox which was using the center of the road for its own intimate purposes.

"What's the flower and the ribbon hanging from the starter button?" I shouted over the din of the lurching Ambassador.

"Thank you, sah. It is our holiday, sah. We honor our faithful machines on this day, sah. I have given to my car a flower, sah, with ribbon, for faithful service rendered."

This was a new twist. Every taxi driver I knew in the world hated his cab.

"You mean you have a national holiday where everybody thanks the machines for what they do?"

"Oh yes, sah. Indeed, sah. Everyone celebrates it, everywhere, sah."

"You mean secretaries with their typewriters? Streetcar conductors? And ladies with their vacuum cleaners?"

"Indeed, sah. Everyone gives a gift to the faithful machines. They do much to help us in our work, sah."

He wasn't kidding. In India where man is everywhere a slave to brutal, hard physical work, machines are true luxuries. It suddenly hit me how much for granted we in the West take machines and how much easier they have made life for all of us. Sure as hell we have forgotten what it's like, for the most part, to spend 18 racking hours under a blazing sun just trying to move a boulder maybe 18 inches. The Indians haven't, so every machine is a treasured friend.

"I am fortunate to be privileged to drive such a fine car, sah." He was indeed. In the teeming millions of India, few have even ridden in a car, much less driven one. We rolled noisily on.

"Do not think I am overly familiar, but you are no tourist, is this true?" He was warning up. Indians, generally, are very formal but, when they loosen up, they are among the world's funniest and warmest people.

"No, I'm not a tourist."

"I could tell that, sah." He grinned into the mirror at me.

"Sometimes I wish I was," I shouted, "it

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would be easier. Just sitting there in the Hilton drinking long gins and taking pictures."

He laughed. A Vespa darted across our bow, narrowly missing the left front fender. It whipped by carrying what looked like an entire Indian family, including several in-laws clutching one another.

"Ah, a Vespa," I yelled.

"Indeed. I have ordered one for my own personal use, sah." The driver answered, his voice dripping pride.

"You mean you don't use the Ambassador for your own use?"

"Oh no, sah," he seemed surprised that I would ask. "It is far too expensive to merely drive. It is my business. I shall be getting my Vespa. Delivery is promised by the maker in only seven years, sah."

I couldn't believe I'd heard right.

"Seven years? Did you say *seven years*?"

"Yes. I am on the list, sah. It is very expensive, sah, and I pay for it every month out of my earnings from the Ambassador."

"You mean you're paying for your Vespa before you even get it?"

"Indeed. Is it not so everywhere?" I didn't have the heart to break the truth. Most guys at home have damn near worn out their cars long before they're paid for. In India you pay first and then, maybe, you'll get the Vespa.

The two of us by now were friends. In India, as in few other parts of the world, it always goes that way. Either the relationship between two strangers hardens into cold stiffness or a casual deep empathy builds. I liked him and he liked me.

"Sah, you are a writer, is it not so?" He asked as we rode along.

"That's true," I answered.

"I would someday enjoy reading your work, sah. My favorite writer, sah, is an American. My friends and I read his work over and over and have long discussions, sah. I believe also he is from your home state, sah, Indiana, is it not?"

We had talked about Indiana earlier on the trip because some of the countryside reminded me of parts of my home state. I thought, his favorite writer is from Indiana? Who the hell could that be? Booth Tarkington? George Ade?

"Who's that?" I hollered. "Who's your favorite writer?"

"A most profound man, sah. You no doubt also admire him. Wendell Wilkie."

Wendell Wilkie, I thought, the guy who once ran for President?

"His book, *ONE WORLD*, is a very fine work, sah. No doubt you are well familiar with it. I would like to hear your observations on this great man, sah."

Good God, I thought, Wendell Wilkie comes up sometimes in trivia contests, but here in India where they really know something about Life, he's an honored American. We talked about Wilkie as the Ambassador rolled on toward Madras... and I became more firmly convinced that no matter what else, India is, indeed, India. •