

One Winter in the Himalayas

by Sylvia Vetta

Before reaching the door he collapsed with exhaustion. When his eyes next opened, Campbell saw a kind brown face leaning over him. He tried to ask 'Where am I?' when a bowl of steaming soup was gently placed to his frozen lips. The warm fluid was like fire in his icy body. It hurt but felt good. He fell back and slept. The monk covered him with a thick blanket and left him to sleep. Twelve hours later, he woke to the sound of a tinkling bell looked around and wondered if he stumbled on a Buddhist shrine? He was lying on a brick Kang heated from underneath by a pipe which led to a log fire beneath a brick oven with a large wok on top.

The man returned and smiling said 'Ab Thekhai? You are awake. How do you feel?' Campbell sat up and held out his hand.

'I think I have you to thank that I am still alive.'

'How did you get here at this time of year?' asked the monk.

'That is a long story but how is it you speak English?' asked Campbell changing the subject.

'I was a teacher in Moossourie.'

Campbell continued his questions. 'So, what brought you here?'

The answer was given in unemotional tones.

'My wife and baby died of typhoid fever. I departed that life to sit at the feet of a wise old Guru in Rishikesh. When I was ready I came here, to Himachel Pradesh, and chose this spot in the Valley of the Flowers to build my ashram. Visitors come between June and October. Then the passes are snowbound so you are, indeed, an unexpected pilgrim. Alas, you may find our hospitality rather poor. We need very little to sustain us.'

'You said 'We'??'

'I have a Chela myself now, Vishwa. He is meditating. You will meet him shortly.'

'I wondered how you managed to get me in here.'

'It is true Vishwa helped me lift you. It is him you need to thank. In the winter we melt snow for our water. He it was who found you just ten feet from our door. I shall ask him to warm some so you can wash. Here are some fresh clothes. Not what you are used to.'

Campbell looked at the kurta pyjamas. He pictured himself wearing them and realised that in his other life he would not have given anyone dressed like that a second glance. The wearer would be a 'boy' even when a grandfather. He had escaped that self contained world of Burra Sahibs spending the evenings in exclusive clubs where the only Indians were servants, well-dressed servants not the way he would soon appear.

Vishwa, a boy of about fifteen, came towards him and bowed. He gestured to a small tiled room with a wooden tub and a metal jug. Campbell was an old India hand and knew how the locals washed. He stripped off, filled the jug with water and poured it over himself. He took the hard soap from the wooden block and scrubbed. Then he rinsed himself with more jugs of water until his body felt clean. Finally he washed his straggly hair. A towel hung from a nail on the door. He dried and dressed putting on the padded jacket over the pyjamas. The ashram was surprisingly warm; the log fire under the brick oven was never allowed to go out.

The three of them sat on the floor and ate chilli-hot lentils. A rush of guilt came over him. He, a rich man, was using up their precious stores.

'What should I call you?' he asked the guru. Although at first he had thought this was a Buddhist sanctuary, now he understood that it was a Hindu ashram. He glimpsed the anteroom

where Vishwa slept. It was also the puja room. A bronze figure of the goddess Parvati stood in a small alcove garlanded with paper marigolds. Joss sticks burned in brass vases giving a warm scented atmosphere.

‘Vishwa calls me Maha. I think you may be here for some time so I suggest you join us in our daily routines.’

‘But, I cannot impose on your hospitality. I see how it is for you. I cannot take your food. Perhaps I may stay a few days while I build up my strength? Then I shall be on my way and I can leave some money to repay you.’

‘On your way where? Where were you heading? Above us is home to the gods only.’

‘A good question. I do not really know the answer myself.’

For a while Maha gazed in silence and then spoke slowly

‘My friend, your journey is your dharma. It is your mind that hungers for travel and not your body. Here you will have no distractions. Stay until Vishwa and I descend to Richikesh in May when we must replenish our stocks of grains and pulses. Do not expect hot showers again. Vishwa and I wash ourselves in the snow. You will find it invigorating.’

Days passed and Campbell tried to participate in the life of the ashram. The yoga he found amenable but the chanting and the meditation made him feel restless and his mind churned with images of his once active life. He took it on himself to keep the fire alight and cleaned the ashram, menial tasks that were new to him. Helping Vishwa to prepare their simple meals, he began to find pleasurable. The valley’s name was not a fiction. In the brief summer months, the ashram’s store was filled with sweet smelling herbs but the Englishman grew anxious wanting more activity. He decided to leave next week when the snows lower in the valley began to melt.

But when April came he was still in the ashram. His old life looked less attractive. He had struggled with the food. The daals, beans and roti tasted good but he was used to meat. How could a meal be satisfying without meat? Then he found his stomach felt light and his head clear and knew that man did not need the luxuries of his old life to find contentment. His palate began to taste the subtle flavours of the herbs and spices the pulses were simmered in. He needed one thing and that was love. After burying Isobel in the churchyard at Moussoree he had gone mad with grief. Now he wondered how he had managed to shake hands with the mourners and thank them for coming, shedding not a tear. When they had left, he could not face his life which felt as empty as his house.

Maha had not asked him questions but he owed him an explanation. Despite his upbringing, he knew this man could help him. Campbell did a very un-English thing and let his agony scream. Maha understood. He had lost a child as well as a wife. Marriage to Isobel had been a revelation. He had uncovered tenderness he did not know he possessed. That knowledge hung over him like a curse. Maha’s explanation was that life and death are part of a constantly turning wheel that encompasses all forms of life. He said he had learned from Krishnamurta how to control his body through yoga and his emotions through meditation and deep breathing. He offered to teach Campbell but added a note of caution.

‘I must warn you it is no more an easy journey than the one that brought you here.’

Six weeks later Maha’s disciple, now called Mela Ram, namaste-d and bowed thanking the teacher who had led him on his inner journey. He took the path back to his old life but he would not resume it. He could now think of Isobel without rage. Mela Ram became a teacher and founded a school that taught the best of east and west. For him that was the mathematics of India,

the science and engineering of Britain, the poetry and philosophy of both, cricket and yoga. Instead of the physical punishments practiced in English public schools, he used the methods of deep breathing and meditation he had learned to help his pupils control their behaviour as he continued to plough his own path towards enlightenment.

On July 8, 1913, the death of Peter Campbell was announced. As a mark of respect for his illustrious family, the Cantonment were prepared to attend his funeral en masse despite Peter having 'gone native'. Attitudes changed on the 9th when the District Officer reported the deceased's instructions for his body to be cremated. There was general agreement that the proof of Hindu lack of civilised values was their practice of burning the dead. This unspeakable horror meant there were few white faces among the crowd when Peter Campbell turned to ashes. Those who attended looked each other in the eye and understood the fragility of life and certainty of death. The flames from the ghat rose into the vast sky and the smoke drifted upwards like the spirit of the universe. His many friends and pupils past and present scattered the remains of Mela Ram on the Ganges at Hardwar where the river rushes icily from the high Himalayas.

