

Heartstone

“I ain’t always been in England, yer know! Me ‘n’ the Guvnor travelled; we has! ‘Specially back in the dark days when that Austrian housepainter ‘ad ideas above his station. Everybody ‘ad ‘to do their bit’ for King and Country, didn’t we? ‘Course, it was difficult for the Guvnor then, ‘im being a pacifist an’ all. But being a “thespian, darling!” we were soon engrossed with the concert parties entertaining the troops all over the place, to boost morale, whatever that meant! It was while we was out there in Africa/ Burma/ Singapore, whatever; (I can’t exactly remember which nowadays), was when we first met up with that cove, Muisman. Strange geezer, he was. Reckoned on making ‘is living as a ‘writer’ when the war was over. Thought he’d use ‘is experiences for material if ‘e lived that is.

Came across this the other day, reminded me abat ‘im. Nice to see that ‘e finally got ‘is wish abat bein’ a writer!

* It must be thirty years now since I first heard this story. It was in a crowded carriage travelling on the long, long railway journey between what is now Mumbai and Madras. Back then, Mumbai was called Bombay, and the rail system was not anywhere as good as it is nowadays. It still is not all that clever, but back then conditions were a lot worse.

The carriage in which I found myself was truly packed to the rafters, the temperature outside of the train was pushing a hundred degrees, and this at a time when Centigrade was not in common use, which was just as well. Tempers were rising close to that level inside, when a man seated in a corner started talking to some children that were getting very restless with the boredom that such an age, made a vain slap for her effort gathered. Our fellow

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his narrative. As it happened, I was well within earshot, although multiple other conversations and the loud arguing of many of the other inhabitants of the carriage made it difficult at first to pick out his words. The incessant heat was making me drowsy and sleep began to beckon me. I thought that I was fast approaching restful slumber when I realised that I was aware of only the sound of the one man’s voice continuing to recite his tale to the children, the crowded carriage had come quiet as my fellow companions were ceasing their own dialogues in order to listen to this man’s voice telling his story. Within very few minutes you could have heard a pin drop in the ensuing quietness that had but shortly earlier a cacophony of sound. Everyone was listening to the stranger’s story. He finally finished his tale shortly before the steam engine pulled into our destination at Madras station to loud applause from all. Some people even gave him monies. He thanked all the passengers for the kindnesses and their patience, saying that the tale he had told so far was but a mere fraction of the full story and that he would be returning to Bombay later in the week and should there be any one of the assembled audience returning on the same journey, he would be more than happy to continue with his tale. Sadly, unbeknown to me then my business would keep me tied up in Madras for the next month, so I never did get to hear the continuance of his tale. Legend has it that a fellow passenger in the carriage on that journey that day did in fact write down their recollections of the story later. As for myself, as I said it is now thirty years on since then. I have children of my own and they have had their children. I have told the story to them all, and even their friends on many occasions and it continues to enthral audiences everywhere, with cries of tell us more about the characters further adventures. I have scoured every source that I can possibly find access to, but I can find