

Allyson was a raw-boned young woman, with a long smiling face which most times showed white teeth to match her size. She loved to work all day from dawn to dusk with her hands, handling by choice the heaviest jobs, pushing back wispy brown hair to assure Sharmaji that she was fine, couldn't be better, just loved it here, and she better get on with the job or it would never be done. Ally, 'the Aussie Volly,' as she laughingly called herself, had read a glowing report about Sharmaji in an Australian newspaper that did a series of Op-Eds on developments projects that would change the next century, and had decided to be a volunteer at his Rural Centre during summer break.

Sharmaji was long accustomed to foreign volunteers breezing through his campus, and spending most of their week or so there making unreasonable requests for medicines that could only be obtained in North America, or trying to reorganize everything to everyone's distress. But Allyson was very different. She was not only physically stronger than all his helpers, but amazingly loved to work hard, moving manure, building walls, cleaning latrines, planting vegetables faster than a whole row of women, and for relaxation building a large fish pond, or chicken coop. She never fell ill, was not scared of cobras, actually catching one with a forked stick to show Sharmaji how the fangs operated, saying lightly to his horror that many Australian snakes were far more dangerous than a mere cobra. She played with all the little children whenever she could, and cleaned their noses, or washed them if she felt they needed a clean-up. She assured the mothers that their children were far better behaved, and responsible for each other, than the primary class she taught back home in Brisbane.

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before relaxing with several cups of tea, their duty done to their satisfaction. Sharmaji watched all this from a safe distance; he was glad she was bringing discipline into the group, but carefully never volunteered himself to pitch in, as all the official paperwork, the bane of his life as he explained to her over lunch, kept him indoors in his unit, fretting to get out and work, work with his body for the people. Allyson understood, squeezed his arm sympathetically, and carried on. The women began to take a quiet liking for her, and would form a circle round her at night after dinner to talk many things over. Allyson was remarkably communicative, with her hands and the few simple English words she would use clearly, and she quickly picked up key words in Hindi and Telugu as well. As a primary school teacher she used symbols quite a lot and this mode of communication, and the patient attitude that goes with it, she explained, had helped her be quite at home, whether on the high Andes or up river on the Blue Nile.

So, it was a considerable shock to everybody when this paragon of strength, good humour and conspicuous self-reliance was brought to her guest room on a stretcher groaning in pain. Two afternoons earlier an agitated cyclist had informed an alarmed Sharmaji that Allyson Memsahib was lying by the roadside semi-conscious after an accident. She had been hit by a truck or bus, which had driven off at high speed, but luckily villagers had heard the screech of the accident and run quickly to her aid. Ramulamma as the most qualified person on campus had been rushed to the scene in a jeep. She had found the tight-lipped Allyson thrown on the shoulder of the road, bathed in the powdery dust that had cushioned her fall. Clearly a fast-moving vehicle had come wide round the bend and brushed against her before she or the driver could