

THE THING TO DO

The British did at least one thing right in India.

Along the craggy ridges of the lower Himalayas, they created towns to which they could flee during the Hot Season. These were small enclaves where roses bloomed, fir trees scented the cool air, and pretentious clubs served Scotch and soda. A half-day's bus ride northeast of Delhi lay one such "hill station," Mussoorie, where Joe and I joined Steve and Gerry for May and June. At 6500 feet, Mussoorie was indeed a cool oasis, and happily it possessed a language school, just perfect for us. We rented a small cottage outside of town and soon became accustomed to living in an area where almost no roads were level for more than twenty feet. Our mornings were spent at the language school, evenings found us studying our Hindi lessons, and afternoons were for hiking in the fresh mountain air—a schedule that appealed to all of us.

On the paths that crisscrossed the mountainside, I was surprised to encounter a number of Americans, mostly Protestant ministers, who were "old hands" in India. They possessed secure resident status, as well as quite circumscribed religious views. One of them, Mrs. Smith, wife of a thin-faced minister, liked to gather other expatriate Christians around her table for luncheons of chicken salad, boiled peas, and white potatoes.

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During our second week in the mountains, we attended one such event. In the dining room Mrs. Smith seated me next to a young American, David, and his Vietnamese wife, Mei Ling. David revealed that, although a newcomer to India, he had recently obtained a visa to work with leprosy patients. I had just begun to ask him the details

when Mrs. Smith, returning from a discussion with the cook, took her place at the head of the table and asked us to hold hands while she closed her eyes and said grace aloud.

Mrs. Smith was not an unpleasant looking woman, though she had a rather large nose that almost, but not quite, blended with her broad shoulders and matronly figure. She prayed, as only ministers' wives can, in a velvety voice that praised the Almighty, congratulated all of us on having the True Faith, and begged mercy for the hapless heathens who surrounded our enclave. She then leaned forward to direct the table conversation. After asking Gerry how he as a former chef liked "that overly-spiced Indian food," and after telling Steve he looked a bit "peak-ed," Mrs. Smith looked at me and exclaimed, "It's so good to have you boys here. We need new blood to continue making Christian inroads in this country."

"Actually," I began, "our focus is more..."

"Of course I know you must be careful because of your situation, but be courageous, India is in great need, these people are in such a wretched state." Turning to Mei Ling, she added, "Don't you agree, my dear?"

Mei Ling spoke softly. "Yes, our poor cook has a very sick wife who needs hospitalization, and he has hardly any money."

"Well...yes, a terrible physical state too," Mrs. Smith said, and barked over her shoulder for the bearer to bring more water.

Mei Ling said her cook was so distressed that she had given him extra pay and a day off to take his wife to the hospital.

"Why, Mei Ling, how good of you," Mrs. Smith said, her fork poised over a boiled potato. "What a Christian thing to do."

"I'm Buddhist," Mei Ling replied.