

The Visible Helpers

By Samuel Collins

This is a story about one man's journey in India, in search for answers, and along the way, he meets great souls who helped him in ways that he may never pay back. For him, they were the Helpers, the Visible Helpers.

"I had come for a few days, but now find that I myself cannot endure for any length of time the stifling magnetism even of my own countrymen. I have seen some of our proud old Sikhs drunk and staggering over the marble pavement of their sacred Temple.

I have heard an English-speaking Vakil declaim against Yog Vidya and Theosophy, as a delusion and a lie, declaring that English Science had emancipated them from such degrading superstitions, and saying that it was an insult to India to maintain that the dirty Yogis and Sunnyasis knew anything about the mysteries of nature; or that any living man can or ever could perform any phenomena!" These are the words of one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, after a brief visit from his mountain abode.



Varanasi

Varanasi-- the city of mysteries-- is well-known for its role in Indian spirituality, and yet has become the hotbed for tourism in India. There had been times when I wondered whether India is in danger of becoming over-run by Western influence. And the question that keeps coming up concerns the attractions that bring thousands of tourists here on a daily basis, whether the tourists have direct connections to these ceremonies, or the riverside massages, or the weird-looking, but interesting men who stand alongside the riverbank all day. And of the kind who daubed their faces

with chalk and then sit between corners of bygone centuries of faded buildings while whispering to tourists in broken English. Could it be the fat bearded astrologers who would accept any amount to do your reading? No, I refused to accept this; that India will be totally over-run by outside influence, though it has successfully forged—even in the midst of this very Indian city—a strong presence. I refused to accept that Western profanity alone can and will render India bereft of the spirit of its ancient sages. Verily, “the world was never evolved between two monsoons” a great man once said. I trust the first generations of Indians and their philosophy, and I believe that even today, their prophecies remain as potent as before. This, to me makes Western influence more of a caricature, a modern day Sisyphus. I say it’s a vain labor, and it’s no empty hyperbole when I say so, that those saintly men who once laid her cornerstones must have known quite well what storm was coming.

Lacking the resources to come in by air, I usually enter Varanasi by train, which I see as opportunity to observe and engage directly the several aspects which make up the daily struggle in the life of the ordinary Hindus. Besides the countless other fancies within the rank of an Indian train, he who ventures gets that rare opportunity to witness the kindness of spirit and sacrifice only an Indian knows how to give.

Standing outside, opposite the Varanasi station, and looking just over the busy streets before the market, where millions gather every day to make their living; you hear the weird medley of Asiatic tongue that contributes to the cacophony. You see the stark difference between the ancient city and the western world. The streets are narrower, crowded, and full of impatient drivers. – You sense the tension amongst motorists which seems to stimulate and keep them honking for passengers. You notice how they are able to narrowly dodge pedestrians and animals alike with their vehicles. And, for the first time you also see, that in the midst of this conundrum, there exist an order, and then you see how beautiful that order is.

The Ganga River sees a big crowd of people every evening when the priestly class comes together to repeat a ceremony, which dates back thousands of years. This powerful ceremony calls on the duty of the ablest and the finest of the men of the city, and then they gather all about the River on low pedestals to perform the special Puja. If you’re new to Varanasi, then for the first time and in true heroic fashion, you see the display of lightning, musical instruments, costumes depicting Indian royalty— hence, you get an idea of the old India.

I returned my Kindle back in its pouch and carefully stepped off the train, on to the now populated platform. I moved slowly amongst the crowd towards the exit, struggling under the weight of my own luggage. Then I decided to stand for a while to study the mob. Near me, I see a well-dressed Indian man, probably in his mid-twenties, about 5' 8." He gave me a friendly smile before asking to know where I was from. Towards the exit sign, I see the moving crowd-size, appeared still the same. Impatient, I move forward, still fumbling with my huge bags amongst the crowd, which I now felt more like a powerful ocean wave against my body. Then it happened! And I screamed! My wallet was gone!



police report

People came rushing! I could hear a man was screaming near me; "What happens?" "What happens?" Another man led me to the Police Station. I felt drowsy and confused, but I answered their questions. The police were very professional, kind and helpful. After writing the police report, one of the officers recharged his cellphone, which he gave me to make a phone call back to the States to cancel credit cards and debit cards left inside the wallet.

Inside my barely furnished hotel room, I composed myself before contacting friends back in the U.S. and this was a really hard work -- to ask for money-- I reached out to a friend from North Carolina and another friend from Philadelphia. To my surprise, although more to my delight, the one in Philadelphia received the news as quite a shock, and within hours, she was on her way to the Western Union.

The next day I had my breakfast at the Tel Aviv Hotel, a tall, colorful building with features that makes it outstanding on the block. The food was tasty. I ordered hot chapatti with unsalted butter, a bowl of cold cereal with fresh organic milk, and some fruits, including a pot of hot lemon tea. I sat back and consumed my food like a man with little to worry about. And when I finished my food, I signaled the waiter, who came-- dressed in a brown tailored suit that makes him fit for a servant at the Buckingham Palace-- He handed me the bill, which I took from him, and studied. After a few seconds, I walked over to the cashier, and handed him a 1000.Rupee note. I took my change, tipped the waiter, and left.



With Lily

Later that day when I arrived at my guest house, I meet Lily, a young, and soft spoken tall Jewish woman, who had taken a room next to mine. I was immediately stunned by her openness when we first met. With the same kind of matter-of- factness that's reserved between two good friends, she asked me whether I could accompany her to the restaurant. I confess! For some reason I felt uncomfortable with the approach. After all, I am a black man with some western education on

race-relations-- -- Her manner has triggered something inside me, because my mind went ruminating over all kinds of ideological, mainstream racial perceptions—worrying that these bizarre concepts might be what motivated her to ask me the way she did. Meanwhile however, I finally conceded to my better judgment. I agreed to take her.

The restaurant stands prominently in plain sight on a small foothill overlooking the River. I remember the last time I had dinner here was with a Canadian gentleman about two years back. We were four; which included a French couple who had been traveling for two years. The main dining hall was crowded with tourists when we entered. A tall, middle aged man greeted us with smile from behind a giant kitchen table before coming forward to take the orders. We sat outside where we could see the boats with their human cargo, gliding over the River under the bright moonlit which lights up the night sky. I turned away to say something to Lily but she wasn't there. Some few feet away, I see the Jewish woman was now heartily talking to someone, and the other woman was smiling. I adjusted my eyes, and I could see a cheerful face behind a set of thick reading glasses.

Lily was still picking at her meal when the Indian lady joined us. She said her name is Alpa Mewawala. I immediately found her voice amusing. I listened while she spoke, her manner and appearance showing something of an aristocrat, and much to her credit, she has the grace that goes with it. After a moment, she asked politely about what we thought of her City-- her voice, again, giving out that distinct note of 'good character.' I imagined thinking that day, that I was fortunate to have in my midst the ideal daughter of India. Ms. Alpa slowly ate her meal, staring now and then at the River from behind her eyeglasses, still waiting to hear our opinions.

Surprisingly, I found myself having trouble speaking; whether I should say that everything was okay, or just yell and say I need help! "I like Varanasi," I finally blurted! "Including the history, the ceremonies, and the River. Hence, how could I not like it, when, for years I had sought the company of your learned Brahmins?" I paused for effect. Alpa was now paying close attention. Then I mentioned something about my stolen wallet before pausing again to pick up the fork. "Here, take this!" I looked, and the Indian was holding in her right hand a small stack of twenty dollar bills. "I have some money here, take this." She repeated. I have been keeping it for sometimes now." She said. I tried in vain to persuade the Indian that earlier during the day I had spoken to two of my friends in the U.S., and I was expecting some money, hopefully soon. When the Indian spoke

again, her voice was firm and philosophical, insisting that I shouldn't stop her from doing the "good work." I was totally taken by surprise with her determination. Feeling embarrassed, I looked across the dining table at my Jewish friend, checking for approval, but she seemed unconcerned. I turned back to the Indian, still feeling embarrassed. I accepted the money, straightened up and thanked the kind lady.

It was about midnight before we left the restaurant. Holding her one free hand, I helped Lily climbed down the narrow stairway, which brought us back to the River bank.

Once inside my hotel room, I started to wonder; Who were these women? Why did I meet them? Why was I unable to say no to them? I asked myself these questions over and over. Then I remember a story Lily had told me one night. She painfully recounted an incident that happened in Jerusalem, where an arranged marriage between a young, eloquent Palestinian man and a Hebrew girl went wild. I listened as she explained how the marriage was interrupted by the bride's parents. She talked about the violent reactions that ensued because the groom is Palestinian. Then suddenly, she veered off, and her voice became grave. I look again, and for the first time she seemed withdrawn, her soul wrapped in thoughts. At that moment, her personality impresses me again, as being provocatively interesting and decidedly attractive. Eyes, dark and flashing, reveal a keen mentality; voice, soft and sympathetic, reflects a kindly heart. Oh, I feel anew that I liked her. From that brief moment, Lily and I forged a simple bond. We began sharing everything, daily expenses, planned trips, dinning together and temple visits; I even learned a little Hebrew secret.



Seeing Lily Off

Days later, I accompanied Lily to the main road to find her an Auto-Rickshaw driver who would take her to the train station. We hugged briefly before an audience of street vendors, who were already clearly involved in the trust eroding habit of gossip, and perhaps even getting voyeuristic in my business with Lily. I turn away from the fools who were still smiling broadly, as I watched Lily's vehicle swiveled around the corner one last time, and then out of sight. I left Varanasi on the following day, still wondering over the role of these saintly women who had touched my rather poor life.