

A piece of silk

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And when your wings beat the air no more,
and you lie cool and wet in the wake of the storm
that has passed,
awaken to me then—
and, if you would, tell me of your nightmare
and I will understand
and never bring you here again.

But if you waken slowly as from happy sleep,
with your eyes soft and rested,
and ask how we came here, and how we return—
as return we must —
Then, my Adonis, we will pass this way again.

A Piece of Silk

Gerry leaned on a wall overlooking Bombay. The shimmering heat made the city waver before his eyes. Before him he could see the great city spread out, with its white buildings, the bazar, and on the waterfront, that enormous arch of white marble which is the Gateway to India. His dark glasses were inadequate in the glaring sunshine, and he turned to a seat shaded by a huge palm; it was just the right place to relax until it was time to return to the city. Gerry loved this place where he stood by the Hanging Gardens, with their trimmed hedges, some of which were shaped like animals. They are on Malabar Hill, in the better quarter of Bombay, where most of the houses are large, and each has its own lovely garden.

He had been in Bombay for three weeks, and as he sat under the palm, the reluctant thought came to him that it was time to be moving on, possibly to Mombasa or some other African port. A month previously in London, on a very cold, wintry day, his thoughts had turned to ideas of lying in the sun, but not just ordinary sun. He wanted hot, tropical sunshine, such as India would provide. He had two reliable partners in his publishing business, with one of whom, Roger Marlow, he lived. He had not had a holiday for some time, so he booked a plane passage to Calcutta, and left the following day; within two days he stepped out under the scorching sun of the Far East. After six enjoyable days in Calcutta, he moved on to Bombay.

Today he felt that nothing could be better than to live in this wonderful city of heat and light. At the moment, the only discordant note was the sight of vultures over the nearby Parsee temple, on the roof of which the dead are placed at dawn, and their clean-picked bones are removed at dusk. He felt drowsy in the heat and slowly fell asleep. Then suddenly, he was wide awake, with an awareness that someone was near. At first he could see no-one, and then he noticed a youth of about eighteen or nineteen amongst the nearby shrubs. The youth was wearing the national costume which showed his shapely limbs under the twisted white cotton robe. He was walking along a path at a tangent to Gerry,

and then he disappeared among the trees. Gerry wondered casually why this lad's presence affected him so, but a moment later he forgot the incident. It was time to go back, so he made his way to the garden gate and walked down the hill to the city.

The next day he again walked to the Hanging Gardens and took the same seat as on the previous day. About half an hour later, he noticed the same youth sitting on the stone wall, looking down on the town. For some time the youth did not move; then suddenly, he slid from the wall, and without hesitation walked in Gerry's direction. As he passed, he turned his head and smiled, showing two rows of magnificent white teeth. Gerry smiled back; not to do so, was impossible. The boy stopped, turned, and standing directly in front of Gerry, asked, «Do you mind if I sit with you?»

«No», Gerry answered. «Sit down by all means.»

After a moment the youth spoke again, without any hint of shyness, and looking straight into Gerry's eyes. «Can I have you for a friend? You see, I have no friend.»

«Well», said Gerry smiling, «putting it like that, I have no friend either, or at least, not in this country. Why not? You'll have a friend, and I'll have a friend. That does no one any harm.»

«I want a friend so badly,» the boy continued. «I saw you yesterday, and the day before that, and I knew I liked you at once. You are so goodlooking with your fair hair and blue eyes.»

«That's very kind of you,» said Gerry, laughing in order to hide his embarrassment.

«My name is Rafi,» the boy went on. «May I ask yours?»

«Call me Gerry. Everybody does. Tell me Rafi, why do you want a friend so badly.»

Rafi looked sad as he stared back at Gerry, his large dark eyes like pools of wine. «You will think it strange, I suppose, but my father is jealous of my freedom,» he tried to explain. «It seems he allowed my mother every freedom, and not long after I was born she left him and went away with another man. He has other wives, but she was his favourite. He does not like me to be out of his sight. I have to sleep in the room next to his, and his servant watches all I do from daybreak to sunset. My only freedom is the walk from our home to my school, and that takes only a few minutes. I am watched at school and am not allowed to make friends with other boys. Some days ago I saw you as I passed through the gardens to my home, and this is my first chance ever of stealing half an hour, and I know in my heart I may never have another. Jawal would watch me now, but he cannot leave my father's wives, and he would not send an inferior servant after me.» Rafi looked at his watch. «I must go, or they will ask what I've been doing. Will you be here tomorrow so we can speak together?»

«O. K. Rafi,» said Gerry. «I'll see you here tomorrow at the same time.»

The following week they met each day. Rafi told Gerry of his sheltered life, and asked many questions as well, some of which almost made Gerry blush, so frank were they, and at the same time, so innocent.

Their friendship developed rapidly, and Gerry was not surprised when, on the fourth day, Rafi, quite naturally took his hand in his own. Gerry felt a stimulating inner glow when he was with Rafi, which made him wonder, and dream. Gerry knew it was time to move on to other parts, and had to tell Rafi.

«Why can't you stay always, Gerry?» the boy demanded. «I know you can't live on nothing, and I only wish I could provide you with money. We are so rich, but everything is bought for me, so I never see any money.»

«Even if you did, Rafi, I could not accept it from you,» Gerry tried to explain. «I'm fairly well off myself, but I've a business to look after, a book to write, and a home in England.»

Rafi sighed. «These last few days have been paradise. They have changed everything for me, and I've been happy for the first time in my life. I'd do anything to be with you always. I'd run away with you, if I could get away, but my father would stop me. He has much power.»

Gerry knew the next day would see their last meeting, but this, he decided not to tell Rafi. Otherwise the parting might be too much for both of them.

On that last day, shortly after Rafi arrived, he took Gerry's hand and folded his fingers around a small soft package, and said: «Gerry, please put this in your pocket without looking at it, and keep it always. It is something to remember me by. It is for you alone.»

Gerry felt the grip tighten on his hand until the the nails of Rafi's fingers cut into his flesh, but he made no sign except to answer with pressure from his own fingers.

«I'll always keep it Rafi, and I'll never forget you,» he promised.

Rafi got up, stood in front of Gerry, and touched his forehead. «Till tomorrow,» he said, his dark, liquid eyes alight, his white teeth gleaming in his smile, «if there is a tomorrow.» He turned away and was soon lost to sight, seemingly unaware that he would never see his new friend again. Gerry sat still for many minutes, his mind disturbed. During the seven days they had known each other, spending no more than two hours in all together, Gerry felt that it had been a very long-standing friendship. He was close to tears, his throat dry and lumpy. He could stay no longer in Bombay; if he did it would not be good for either of them. He slowly got to his feet and made his way, for the last time, out of the Hanging Gardens, and down the hill.

He sailed next day for Mombasa. As the ship left harbour he looked towards Malabar Hill and wondered what Rafi was doing at that moment. Out of sight of land he went below and opened his case in order to unpack. As he lifted the lid, he was aware of a strange, strong perfume, which he associated only with Rafi. He had forgotten the small present of the previous day until now. He took the small package and opened it. Wrapped in ricepaper was a bright square of pure silk, gold in colour, but without any pattern. It was a brilliant, shining gold, the brightest he had ever seen; it seemed to illuminate the cabin. On unfolding it, he was aware of a strange perfume all around him, very pleasant, and very strong. He crushed the silk in his hand and held it

against his face; it was almost overpowering, intoxicating, even aphrodisiac. He felt the blood rush to his loins as he remembered Rafi. He broke out into a cold sweat, as trembling, he threw himself on his bunk. The crisis passed, and a few minutes later he was again calm and relaxed. With gentle hands he folded the square of silk and put it away in the bottom of his case. The perfume was still there, but no longer strong. It was faint and pleasant, like jasmine on a gentle breeze.

Each day on the trip to Africa, and during the months after, he took out the square of silk. Each time the air became strong with the smell of India as his thoughts turned to Rafi. Each time the perfume exerted its strange effect, the blood rushing to his loins, stimulating him, and leaving him calm and relaxed when the crisis had passed.

Months later, Gerry returned to England. Roger met him at the airport, and together they returned to the Kensington flat. It was good to see Roger again; Gerry had not realised how much he had missed him. After several drinks and much talk, Gerry unpacked his bags. The square of silk was as lovely as ever, and its perfume as exotic. He was holding it in his hands when Roger burst into the bedroom.

«What's that?» he demanded.

«Just a scarf from Bombay,» Gerry answered. «It's rather lovely, but a bit strong smelling.»

«Show me,» Roger took the scarf. «It's beautiful, but I can't smell anything.»

«You can't?» Gerry demanded. He took back the silk and held it to his face, inhaling deeply. Roger was right. There was no longer any perfume coming from the scarf, except a faint silky smell, redolent of the silk bazaar.

«That's funny,» he said. «That's very strange. Maybe it doesn't work in England, but it did when I unpacked it.»

«Gerry, what on earth are you talking about?», Roger asked.

«I'll tell you some other time, Roger. Come on, let's go out and eat. I want to see London again. It seems so long that I've been away.»

Next morning, Roger went off to work, while Gerry stayed in bed. Later in the day he planned to go down to see his mother in the country for a few days before returning to the office. As he lay in bed he pondered over the strange behaviour of the piece of silk. He got up, and went to the drawer where he had placed it the previous night. There was the scarf, as lovely as ever, and coming from it, the perfume was as strong, as sensuous, and as erotic as ever. Why, he wondered, had it lost its sheen and its perfume when Roger had held it in his hands? With the piece of silk pressed against his face, Gerry made his way unsteadily back to the bed. For several minutes the old desires returned. Then, for a while, he slept.

When he awoke, he was still clutching the silk. What was he to do with it? Back in England he must return to reality. Bombay and the Hanging Gardens on Malabar Hill must be just a memory. He recalled his promise to Rafi, but he could not share Rafi with Roger, and Rafi too must become a memory.

The silk had had no effect on Roger when he had held it. What effect would it have on his mother, should he give it to her? He decided that he might do this. He raised himself from the bed, and taking the piece of silk into the bathroom, he washed it thoroughly with soap, in the hope that this would permanently destroy the perfume which he now knew was meant only for himself. This done, he walked out onto the roof garden, and with two pegs put it on a line to dry. It had never looked more beautiful, the silk so fine and pure, the colour not to be seen in any other country but India. As he walked back to the flat, his thoughts once again turned to his young friend, but later he forgot both the silk and Rafi.

It was late that afternoon when he remembered it again. He hastened out to collect it. On the roof he could see no sign of the silk, and on reaching the line, he found the two pegs, but not apart as they had been when he had put them there. They were close together as if they were one. Could someone have taken the silk, he wondered? That was impossible, for the only entrance to the roof garden was through the flat.

He released the pegs, and as he did so, a small golden fragment fluttered to the floor. Gerry cried out as he fell on his knees. For a long time he searched for it, but he could not find it.

By Catanach.

A Letter to Rolf

Dear Rolf,

It was a very great pleasure for me to spend some days in Zürich recently and to take part in your Club activities, which included an ordinary Wednesday night dance and your big spring carnival.

My job keeps me continuously travelling all over the world, and to a stranger in a strange land, life can be very lonely at times. One eventually accumulates a list of bars and cafés where one might meet congenial people to talk to, but nowhere else in the world have I found any place like your club in Zürich. Your members in Switzerland are indeed fortunate in having such a pleasant place in which to relax. I liked so much the friendly informality of your club, and the kind hospitality extended to me by your members is something I shall never forget. I also appreciate the way in which you organise the means by which only members and their friends are admitted, and undesirables excluded, so that one may really relax and enjoy one's self without fear of criticism and censure.

You, Rolf, have built up something very wonderful in your club, something which must surely be unique in the whole world and my best wishes are for your future prosperity. I hope that as time goes on, many more people from other countries will enjoy your hospitality as I have done.

Yours very sincerely
Subscriber No 3501, London.