A Single Yellow Headlight

MAL DUFF

(*Plate 17*)

I was wet. Very wet. I had in fact reached that level of saturation where further soakings had ceased to be a matter of concern. Rivulets flowed unheeded down the cleft of my buttocks, mixing with the swirling puddle in which I sat. The puddle swirled because we were both, me and the puddle, located on the roof of a lurching bus.

The rain of the last five hours had transformed my previously acquired thick coating of dust into a rich ochre pigment. This had gradually spread to all parts of my body. My watch spluttering under the deluge registered 3am.

After 21 hours I was bruised, battered and could quite easily have become bored. Life was temporarily so unpleasant that it was a perverse pleasure, a matter of stubborn pride, to remain unnumbed and alert.

The bus was of a variety and vintage long since deceased in all but the most exotic backwaters of the Asian continent. This particular specimen was of such remarkable decrepitude that it inspired awe for its unfortunate but exceptionally talented mechanic. Our passage through the night was illuminated by a solo headlight, the beam of which staggered ahead of us, bathing the sheeting rain in a sickly amber light.

The single-track road on which we travelled switchbacked high above the valley, cliffs fell vertically for 250m below us, terminating in a river of obvious malevolence. This, along with the absence of windscreen wipers, and the bus trundling on abstractly bald tyres, accounted for the palpably nervous atmosphere generated by our complement of passengers.

By contrast three goats and several baskets of chickens destined for the pot in Kathmandu didn't give a damn. One of the goats – a belligerent billy, showing remarkable presence of mind under the circumstances – devised an oddly symbolic pre-emptive revenge by biting a large chunk from the back of my partner's expensive fleece jacket.

Of course, being on the roof I was lucky. Inside was a hell which can only be imagined. Nepali hillpeople are unusually susceptible to motion sickness. Despite my good fortune I could only reflect on how different things had appeared when we started out nearly a day before.

For all expeditions (Asian bus journeys surely qualify for this exalted title) planning, preparation and reconnaissance are essential for success. Like true professionals, we had held a tactical discussion the night before our proposed departure. We felt confident of our Third-World body-swerving abilities.

Nepalese buses are all scheduled (at least this is the illusion portrayed) to



16. Rimo IV. Indian ascent (2nd) L of rocks in centre. (Doug Scott) (p 11)



17. 'The Bus'. (Mal Duff) (p 43)

depart at 6am, a manoeuvre performed with much gusto, horn-blowing, revving (black smoke is vital for effect at this point) and dog-barking, all underpinned by a chorus of cocks crowing in the nippy, soft light of dawn. Bus departures are exciting. Most of the villagers, babes in arms through to ancient crones, thrill to the symphonic ritual.

In the resulting mêlée a Caucasian with an imperfect mastery of the Nepali tongue is quite likely to get on the wrong bus, perhaps one which will never leave, trampled underfoot, or – worse – as pulling remorselessly away he notices that all the equipment so carefully stowed on the roof is now a swiftly diminishing and forlorn-looking pile residing at the side of the village street.

We had concluded that by entering the bus (illegally or otherwise) at dead of night, when all Nepal sleeps, and by lashing our baggage on the roof and occupying the prime seats, those in the glass cage beside the driver, we would – when eventually discovered – be able to announce a *fait accompli* and ignore all and every effort to displace us. This we achieved in the stealthy time before dawn, holding our places firmly as an endless struggle of passengers boarded. Our plan, founded on hard-won experience, looked good.

An hour later the bus started, stopped, took on water, fired up again (a complicated procedure, this), backed up to get oil, collected a repaired but dubious-looking tyre, throughout all of which we were involved in a fierce ritual battle repelling boarders from our comfortable and privileged positions. When the driver felt that he had caught the attention of a sufficient percentage of the population, we (the bus) – with a positive swagger of our overloaded suspension – departed for Kathmandu. Our collective sigh of relief was barely exhaled when we pulled up outside a particularly noxious teahouse, into which the driver and brakeman disappeared for breakfast. (When things go wrong, as they frequently do, the brakeman jumps off the bus and thrusts a huge wooden wedge under the wheels. A tyresome (sic) job with few prospects.) Having established their positions, the mobile pecking order if you will, the passengers disembarked (an extrusion which looked impossible to reverse), and following our driver's example took a light meal. Boiled rice and pepper tea have little fascination for me as breakfast, but as no alternative seemed likely I tucked in, with a reluctant grace. We kept an eagle eye on the driver at all times as, once he has finished, the bus leaves, often with no warning. It is prudent to eat swiftly on these occasions.

Progress was uneventful for some time after breakfast, although our defences slipped somewhat, allowing an extremely pretty girl, wonderfully built, to enter our privileged position. Our doctor, fresh from repelling boarders at the window ('Now chaps, just LET GO,' emphasized by a ski-stick jab to the throat) was all courtesy and grace, even trying but failing to come to his feet. For an ex-member of the Rhodesian SAS, the very thought was of the highest order of gallantry.

Six hours into the drive circumstances changed for the worse. Exiting from a narrow gorge, we noticed that an obviously vital bridge was missing, along with 90m of road. The river was of a type described as fearsome in the best travel literature, and on the opposite bank lurked an ancient bus, showing the scavenging tendencies of a vulture. Our SAS member, trained in quickness

of thought, realized that, as another overcrowded bus was only a few metres behind us, speed was of the essence in this daunting situation. Several factors caused concern. Our equipment was of tremendous variety and volume and, because of our initial tactics, was now buried at the bottom of an enormous scrummage of humanity. The Doc was elected to resolve this problem. Meanwhile, Andy, master of diplomatic relationships, started offering outrageous terms to all and sundry, hoping to corner the porter market, whilst I was to ford the river and secure sufficient space on the other bus.

As we slowed, a turbulent sea of humanity surged from the bus and foamed into the river. Scrambling and tumbling to reach the far shore the main pack, comprising the young and fit, picked up speed and with considerable tactical jostling swept ashore and pounded up the far hillside. An elongated tail of pregnant mothers, ancients, the lame and the sick, trailed behind. A microcosm of the human race!

Arriving a close second, I had only a moment to co-opt the roof area; this was the most logical option, being easily defended. I clambered up, shook off a strong grip on my left ankle and turned, ski-stick at the ready. In the far distance I could dimly perceive, through the rising dust of our recent charge, a commanding figure marshalling a stream of porters towards me. If I could hang on for a further few minutes, relief would be at hand.

A short while later, our gear on board, this relic – twice overflowing – chugged off towards Kathmandu. The roof, filled beyond possibility, shed passengers at every bump and corner until equilibrium was reached and the survivors, myself included, could get a grip. Some hours later it started to rain, monsoon-style, in lumps.

My reflections ceased abruptly as the bus lurched violently, clipped a house-wall, entered a sharp bend on the wrong side of the road, and collided with and partially demolished an ambulance going in the opposite direction. Violent altercations swiftly erupted. The goats, whose erstwhile owner had been a roof-falling casualty, took their chance and headed for the distant hills. When shortly thereafter a platoon of soldiers and numerous policemen appeared – for we had entered the outskirts of Kathmandu – it seemed politic to salvage our battered equipment and retire. As it became apparent that the surviving passengers were being arrested for 'necessary interrogation', this idea was implemented with some urgency.

The general confusion being considerable and the night tropically dark, our strategic withdrawal was accomplished with ease. The equipment was deposited in a nearby house, whose reluctant owner succumbed to Andy's financial approach. Thus unencumbered we stole away, crossing several acres of flooded paddy. Wading through knee-deep mud like an extra from a cheap Vietnam war movie can on occasion make one feel slightly foolish. This was one of those occasions. The Doc's SAS training was obviously a bit rusty: he demonstrated this by stepping into a metre-deep fishpond *en route*.

As the first glimmer of dawn lit the sky we clambered over the protective gate of our hotel, heartily congratulating ourselves on such a successful expedition.