



A Passage from India

By

Brigadier-General
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The situation when we left Bombay was that Austria had declared war on Serbia, and that Germany and Russia, and from the telegrams probably France also, were mobilising.

There were a few Indian civilians and about a dozen army officers on board going home on ordinary leave, but the majority of passengers were Austrians and Germans with business connections in India, who had been recalled by cable to their respective countries.

About the only ship we spoke during the voyage through the Indian Ocean

"He looked a typical Englishman, and was wearing a well-cut grey suit"

was a big German steamer which signalled us that Germany was at war, and that she herself was making for a neutral port in Java.

This news filled our German and Austrian passengers with enthusiasm and martial ardour, and they spent every evening on the top deck, when the monsoon would allow them, marching up and down singing "The Watch on the Rhine" and other national hymns. They seemed to have plenty of money, which they spent freely; and they were, on the whole, quite agreeable.

One very pleasant German, who was travelling as "Mr. Johnson," gave me a complete story of his life in India during the preceding three years.

It was no doubt indiscreet of him, as will be seen hereafter, but like all his compatriots, he was quite convinced that the German army would be in Paris by Christmas, and even if England should join France against them, which he did not think likely, he was supremely confident that this would make little difference to Germany's ultimate success in a war which would all be over in six months.

On the night Mr. Johnson told me his story he had done himself very well at dinner, and afterwards, with the result that he was most communicative.

He was actually a captain seconded for Intelligence service from a crack Prussian cavalry regiment.

For this he was undoubtedly in some ways well suited, since he had all the appearance, manners, and speech of an Englishman.

He had spent the previous three years in India in the guise of a traveller for a well-known London firm of tailors which has branches in India.

He had been pretty well everywhere. All over the frontier, up the Khyber, and even to Kabul. I could hardly credit this, but he assured me that he had gone there with European clothes for the Amir and his household. The number of British officers serving in 1914 who had been to Kabul

FROM the outset a justifiable condemnation of the actions which form the substance of this story is that so much imprudence should be involved in attainment of so little.

It must, therefore, be pointed out that, apart from possessing no doubt a too impulsive temperament, the circumstances in which I was placed towards the end of July, 1914, were not such as to give much promise of my active participation in the Great War which was so soon to break out.

I was stationed with a battery at Peshawur, a most delightful spot and so situated as to give every prospect of frontier fighting, but which, for that very reason, was about the last place in India from which troops would be sent to take part in a European war.

On this account I, together with the other officers of the garrison, was at loggerheads with my fate, which apparently held me securely fastened there.

In regard to the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination Germany's attitude appeared so uncompromising that it seemed to all of us that Great Britain would inevitably be involved in a general military conflagration, in which we would have little or no prospect of playing a part.

Ours was not the accurate prescience credited to the late Lord Kitchener as to the duration of hostilities. We did not anticipate that the war, should it break out, would last more than six months or, at the outside, a year.

We realised that all leave to England would be stopped, and that those on leave would be recalled, so before this contingency could occur I applied for six weeks' furlough.

My application being refused on the excellent grounds that I had but recently enjoyed a similar privilege, I decided to take the no doubt most reprehensible step of attempting to return to England without leave, feeling quite convinced that if I did not succeed I should, so to speak, miss the war.

I applied for and obtained ten days' station leave, sufficient to enable me to reach Bombay and to be well on my journey thence before my leave was up and my absence reported.

Although, naturally, I did not announce my intentions, I fancy that a good many people at Peshawur guessed that I was proposing to attempt some such escapade.

I took very little kit with me, and found on arrival at Bombay that the P. & O. Messageries liners had just left.

There was, however, an Italian Florio Rubattino boat about to sail for Naples, and on this I secured a passage.



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The author of the amazing article on this page