“And therefore think him as a serpent's egg,
Which, hatch'd, would as his kind grow mischievous, And kill him in the shell.”

-- William Shakespeare, “Julius Caesar” Act 2, scene 1 (1599)

"Either the human being must struggle and suffer as the price of a more searching vision, or his gaze must be shallow and without intellectual revelation. "

- Thomas de Quincy (1785-1859)

In the plush new year of 1880 Doctor Edwin Charron was a dapper, compact man of self-consciously upstanding character who understood who was Who and what was What and he had enough generosity to allow everyone to perform his role in the world as well as he was able. He apprehended the distinctions between aid and in- terference, grace and slickness, polish and gloss, and he appreciated the same in others. In brief: he was a sort of Gentleman that Britain no longer bred in the New Century of interchangeable “Jolly Good Fel- lows.”

At University, Charron had substituted the study of Medicine for the Philosophy he had desired. He had feared he lacked the capac- ity to generate the One Big Thought of such undeniable worth that its value might outweigh whatever goodness his medical endeavors might accomplish.

In the Nineteenth Century, the physician’s job consisted of waiting with a patient while the body healed itself, or of trying to con- sole its survivors when it had failed. Rarely did a doctor achieve a benefit by applying a technique he had learned. Overall, thought Charron, repairing flesh was inferior to crafting one perfect argument that turns the listener toward becoming something better than what he had been.

Charron had been unhappy attending to humans whose com- pany he

could not choose and, he feared, his patients sensed this. This further reminded him of the discrepancies between the Good Man of his aspiration and the merely serviceable one he had become. In real- ity, he was more highly regarded than he thought himself to be. He would not have believed it had he been told.

Visiting Edinburgh, while listening to his Mother's touching, nearly accurate, eulogy delivered by a minister of an alien land, who had mispronounced her Bengali name twice on both attempts, and en- tirely avoided any mentioning of her race, Charron's attention had wafted to the tortured corpse on the crucifix above the alter. What sensitive person would not exchange his belief in the dry inflexibility

Baby Snakes

Demarest Campbell

---

of Christian iconography for the sensual, spangled, rainbow deities of the East who transubstantiated into the patterns of one's dreams? The Hindu Meek could afford to wait to inherit the earth when they saw saviours propped and costumed to do battle for one's soul with super- numerary knife-wielding limbs. Could any superstitious person remain exclusively Christian in proximity to such seductive iconogra- phy? He reckoned that in India, Christian clergymen prayed with their fingers crossed.

It occurred to him during the soporific sermon, that one is loved by default. The Christian God must love sinners as aged people regard children they themselves have not born, as though their fawn- ing could redeem mistakes they suspected they had committed elsewhere. Without the craving for such absolution, man would re- quire no gods. Man thinks of the relationship between God and himself as love because that is his context for defining the least threatening form of control over him. Through guilty gratitude one perceives greater obligation to those who

love one than to those he loves. Earning God's love is not the best for which one can hope. It is possible to love a thing well enough to wish to save it for selfish rea- sons, however, it is necessary also to respect its integrity in order to wish to save it from pain. The physical world is defined by pain and efforts to control it.

His mother had died of a cancer six months after becoming a sort of Presbyterian. Within a week of his arrival, bearing more guilt than luggage, Charron and his mother had achieved a certain peace between themselves. Then she, the pretty, wealthy *Bengla* girl, se- duced and maintained by a noble barrister, the tiny woman who, for all his childhood years, had passed herself off to Charron's school ac- quaintances as the family servant, had died.

A Scottish associate of Morcomb, Morcomb, and Dodge, London Solicitors, had attended to the conventions: tidied, sold, shipped, and set aside the physical clutter while Charron took lengthy walks to sort through the emotional furniture. He did so very well and felt clear about many of the vagaries that had passed for as understood between uncommunicative parent and shy child.

He had decided that upon his return to Calcutta, that he would accept the post of Police Coroner. To his surprise, he actually looked

---

forward to it. First, he had a favour to perform. Before his departure from India, the socially elite Morans had approached him about es- corting their little girl and the child's maid on the ship from Marseilles to Cal. He did not look forward to this.

Charron had schooled with the delicious Mrs. Moran's younger brother. "Poor Rupert" Trefelt had been the subject of a noto- rious incident at their College. Charron had shared a tutor with him, but had known him only well enough to have been friendly, not to have been friends. It was unlikely that Rupert had had friends. He had been awash in morbid,

adolescent self-absorption, and, as everyone knows, melancholy is contagious. An attitude of failure clung to him like stink, spoiling the very atmosphere surrounding him.

Rupert had worked so hard at being tragic that there had been no energy left for his studies and he was sent down without complet- ing his third term. The following week, on his mother's birthday, he

---

hanged himself from a

rafter in the attic.

3

Demarest Campbell

Chapter Two

"The heaviest object in the world is the body of the woman you have ceased to love."

-- Marquis de Luc de Clapiers Vauvenargues (1715-1747)

The port of Marseilles hummed with the music of security and order. Men and women of a certain Class, and all their worldly goods, were upholstered, pleated, and swagged in earthbound tweeds, damasks, and cut-pile velvets; waxed and crimped, tufted and padded, bolstered and bustled, painted and passementaried into behemoth symbols of robust health, sta- bility, and rectitude. People were courteous, and as kind as they remembered to be, but easily were befuddled by conflict- ing facts, the types that accumulated in unscrubbed corners and gathered malevolently in the dark behind the doors.

Charron was at a very good hotel whose string quartet was inescapable. He was supposed to meet his young charge there. The most exquisite and angry child Charron ever had seen wound among potted Kentia

palms and subdued conver- sations in the hotel's lobby. She was aiming for him. Closer, he realized the *bijou* was a tiny young woman of about twenty. He waited for her to extend her hand, when she did not, he removed a grey glove and offered his own. At whispering dis- tance she appeared not to have slept for days. She shook hands like an eel.
"Good evening. I am Doctor Charron. I am glad-"
"-Sir, Miss Moran is indisposed. She sends her regrets. She

will meet you for breakfast." The woman was having a hellish time holding some private emotion at bay. Fearing she might collapse, Charron led her to a chair and tried to minister to her as discretely as was possible within the crowd.

"Young lady, should you be out of bed? Where is your room? We must get you to rest."

Nearby guests appeared concerned. The Bell Captain ap- proached.

Baby Snakes

"*Excusez moi*, Bernd," said a tall, fair-haired gentleman, inter- cepting the approaching man. "Everything is under control." The hotelier smoothly veered away as though recalling another errand elsewhere. "Doctor 'Sharrone'?" The newcomer pumped Charron's hand. "I am Doctor Robert Laurier. Miss Moran is under my care..."

The tiny ill young woman sniffed in a way Charron was un- sure had been entirely necessary.

"...as is her maid, Miss Rafferty, who you have just met. The coach trip from Lausanne was exhausting and Miss Moran is recover- ing from a *Scarletina*. They both should rest another few days." The man also appeared fatigued, with a tight mouth and sore-looking eyes. "I shall see to her, myself. You need not be bothered yet." He grabbed the female storm cloud's arm, preparatory to dragging her back up- stairs. "You will sail on Friday; all should be well by then. Good night to you, sir."

One hour and fifteen minutes later, Doctor R.A. Laurier checked out of the hotel and hired a wagon to drive him to his married sister's house in Bruxelles. He informed no one. His sister's solicitors sold his house in Lausanne and wired the money to a blind account in Aix. Thus, he prepared for a new life in France.

Charron retired with a book and awakened to a nightmare of someone pounding his door. Immediately he thought, "Fire." How- ever, he was not so fortunate.

A tall young woman stood before him, wearing an expensive nightdress soaked with hot water, smeared with blood. "Help her," she said, indicating the bathroom down the hall. "She has cut herself."

Beryl Rafferty sat naked in a tub of rosy water. The two new acquaintances wrestled her onto the floor of the bathroom and wrapped her tiny frame in a blanket.

They hauled her to her room and shifted her onto the bed. The slices on her wrists had been superficial. Charron bandaged her, forced a packet of valerian down her throat, and offered a packet to the tall young woman from the hall who refused.

"There is supposed to be a little girl with her. What of her?" enquired Charron, glancing about the room anxiously.

The young woman extended a hand. "Moran," she snapped with military precision.

"Mary Cordelia?"

5

Demarest Campbell

"I answer to 'Delia'," she corrected kindly. "'Mary' is my mother's

name."

Charron could not think straight. "'Cordelia' is the more ele- gant name. Among the greatest heroines of Elizabethan lit-"

"-Whose stubborn self-righteousness alienated her family and got her murdered. Not because of whom she was, but because of property other people coveted. Where is the heroism in that?" Charron suspected that was sherry on her breath. "Did you realize that Shake- speare intended the Fool and her to be the same character?.. I hope I am not a fool, Doctor."

"No... However, you are a very unexpected person, Miss Delia Moran." Charron accepted her damp hand.

"Shared honours, I think, Doctor... Until tomorrow."

The remaining week was uneventful, except that Miss Rafferty refused to speak to any but her young mistress. Long after the three had boarded the ship to Calcutta, the maid remained unnecessarily bedridden and maintained her silence. It gave Charron and Delia something to discuss besides the weather and Delia's surreptitious sherry consumption.

They sailed through Suez into an interesting phenomenon: gradually, all the European women slipped from their swaddling of wool and fur and blossomed into exotic orchids on the Promenade. Everyone, including the men, eventually had become very pretty in- deed. They were, for perhaps the first time in their bundled up, restrictive lives, reveling in perpetual tropical balm; none more than Charron and Delia, conversing, reading, cheating each other at chess.

One morning he asked her why she drank so much. She re- plied, "'*Je ne bois guère plus qu'une Éponge*:' I drink no more than a..."

"...You certainly do. And you certainly are too green to be quoting from anyone as sordid as Rabelais."

She reminded him that when she was Delia's age, Jeanne d'Arc already

had led a French army for two years.

“And look what happened to her,” snorted Charron.

Baby Snakes

“Such a shame,” thought Charron, “that a couple of years from now they will bring out this delightfully unexpected creature at the beginning of the Season. Eighteen months thereafter, marry her off to some crack-voiced young nit-wit and she would spend the rest of her existence making fat babies and orchestrating adulterous pratfalls fit for a boulevard farce, just like everyone else, until she grew obese, depressed, diseased, abandoned, mad, just like everyone else. If only one could freeze her in time.”

This was similar to what Dr. Laurier had thought of Delia’s maid one year earlier. At school, a town girl had been allowed to en- roll in exchange for her mother’s, aunt’s, and grandmother’s taking in faculty laundry. None of the students associated with her, her being a bit of a ninny not withstanding. Her only genuine fault was in having been born a native of a place whose economy was dependent upon an academy for upper class foreigners, making her guilty of insufficient rarity in what was essentially an English colony. Even the Switzer instructors assigned her low marks without having read her exercises, which was curious because, occasionally, they had been cribbed from a girl who generally won Firsts: Delia.

Gheisella Schliemann had been a comely twit of seventeen. She had been inadequate at associating any action with its equal and opposite reaction. For instance, having announced to her seducer, a professional man who should have known better, that without a swift change of surname to Laurier, his and her reputations soon would lay in ruins around his bed, she failed to anticipate the consequence of Laurier’s erstwhile heir’s remaining less than apparent by their first anniversary. After another six months of recriminations, she took to whining and

guzzling port. Dr. Laurier took another mistress: Beryl.

Gheisella had been no more fortunate in her choices of friends. The best among the other students was Miss Moran, who felt badly for her, but not sufficiently badly to betray her own adulterous maid. Greedy, reckless Beryl simply was worth more to Delia than the pa- thetically parasitic Gheisella.

When the young wife's discovery of her husband's betrayal produced an embarrassing corpse, Mary Cordelia would help as she could: cleaning the death scene, dragging the body downstairs from the help's dormitory to Gheisella's own bedroom, purloining the in- criminating suicide note, perjuring herself to exonerate Laurier,

spiriting away her maid before Beryl could be called to testify at the inquest. None of the three dared return to Switzerland.

Charron was aware of none of this. He knew only that he was a middle-aged man who, for years, had resided in someone else's country under an assumed name and race. He lived in a house that he did not own, where no one was waiting to welcome him home. He had just buried the last of his known family in the city of his birth, which now was foreign to him, but, at that exact moment, he had de- cided that he was relatively happy. He also decided he should grow a moustache.

Baby Snakes

Chapter Three

"Rosy apple, lemon and pear, Bunch of roses she shall wear, Gold

and silver by her side,
I know who shall be my bride. Choose one, choose two,
choose the nearest one to you. Take her by her lily-white hand, Lead her across the water,

Give her kisses one, two, three, Mother's runaway daughter."

-- Traditional Children's Song

"I am about to say something very serious to you. And I hope you will recall it in years to come: Do not waste your life in Calcutta. Get out as early as you can manage. Unless you are working for the Foreign Office, Colony life is unsuited to anyone with a functioning cerebellum. And never, never, ever get married," said Charron, in- stead of "Goodbye."

"*Bien sur*." Delia already had witnessed Laurier's marriage of attrition. "I do not ever expect to become that lonely."

She had expected his farewell embrace to feel like a coat draped over a chair back. Her new friend, Charron, should have felt like a bundle of crumpled linen in her arms. Instead, within the light layers of cloth, muscle wrapped tightly about good bones and it all fit well against her. She presumed that what she was thinking was that it felt nice, and unexpectedly creepy, like a python coiling about venison. It was a ploy to distract herself from poking at the sticky ideas seeping from emotional baggage he had begun to occupy in her mind. Life could be simple, if one could avoid examining such things.

During a great battle, the Goddess Kali was chopped to sliv- ers and cast into the holy river that distributed her sacred pieces throughout Bengal. *Kalikata* means "Kali's cut-off-left-little-toe." The City's patron goddess is her sinister manifestation, Durga-the-

Destroyer, whose name means “Inaccessible.” In Art, she is repre- sented as a young woman, serene of face, with wind milling beweaponed arms, riding a tiger into combat against a shape-shifting daemon.

A few years after the British shooed Portuguese military mis- sionaries from North East Hindoostan, Job Charnock, a junior council member of the astonishing East India Company, while witnessing a *sutee* in Patna, instantly fell in love with the young widow, abducted her from her husband’s cremation bier, renamed her “Maria,” which at least he could pronounce, and took her to become his wife. He had to leave Patna.

Appointed Governor of the Bay of Bengal, during much skir- mishing with local Muslim princes, Charnock encamped 22’33” North 88’23” East, where the three sister villages, Hooghly, Govin- pur, and Kalikata traded indigo and saltpeter on the East bank of Ma Ganga, the sacred River Mother. Cal is among the few cities with a known birth date: 24th August 1687, at the back end of the sign of Cancer and the opening of Virgo, harsh and stubborn.

The Elizabethan chartered Company designed a pale and re- fined metropolis to house the bureaucratic clock-works with which its private army and well organized constabulary policed one fifth of the civilized world. Its city plan, traffic, water, and sanitation systems had been designed with sufficient forethought to accommodate five times its population at the time: a brain-bursting half-million humans and their livestock. Enlightened Eighteenth Century travelers hailed Cal- cutta as the Rome of the East. By the turning of the Eighteenth into the Nineteenth Century, the City was a century junior to New York and crammed with one-and-one-half times New York’s population. Hostile cities within cities were isolated by scores of dialects, and a dozen incompatible casts of five barely compatible religions, at least two of which were older than stone. In 1877, twenty years after the Sepoys mutinied, Mister Disraeli convinced Queen Victoria to declare herself Empress of all this and more.

Wilted grey men called Bertie kept shops. Switzers named Emile ran

restaurants. Changs clipped and curled light brown mutton- chops and moustaches. Indiras came to the gate to grind the *garam* spices or to restring the pearl collar snapped at the eleven o'clock in-

---

augural supper the Thursday before. Francises published utopian broadsides and returned to Perth penniless and syphilitic. Nevilles administrated. No Gentleman and few Ladies felt entirely well in the morning. Sidewalks, even in the fine neighbourhoods, steamed with sixty-proof vomit before nine. Even junior civilian bureaucrats re- tained a minimum of five household staff. No servant ever married. Soldiers had women. Non-commissioned officers wed other non- commissioned officers' spinster daughters when on leave, thereby limiting their visits to the bordello to twice weekly. The Officer Class sent for their ladies with New Testament names and Old Testament dispositions, discontinued sponsoring *nautch* parties and moved to great houses advertised in the newspaper with detached sesame white *bungalows* behind for their black mistresses. After six years, the offi- cers' Ladies took sick and died, or went off their heads, or ran off to the Hill Stations or Home, or committed suicide. Most spouses remar- ried; some often. No one ever divorced. All the healthy men reproduced. Few white women were well enough.

No one ever saw a European between seven and sixteen years of age. Every white man packed his children Home to be inoculated against wildness. The family reunited every four or six years on Home Leave rotation. Some of them minded.

The half-caste *chichi* children lived at the Church School. All of them were between the ages of two and eight years and graduated into middle management positions within the Indian Civil Service. Everyone knew his place and prayed to prevent it from eroding.

One must be mad to like Calcutta. It is an enigma wrapped in decay and a good place to go insane unnoticed. Nothing withstands; not stone, nor

government, not belief. Eternity here is defined in terms of quantity: of drought, flood, heat, and humanity. Not a thing is strong enough to endure being milled beneath these. Those the Gods wish to destroy, they first send to Calcutta. Everyone who exists there leaves bits of himself in its dust.

It was ineffable and osmosed, the realization that, for the Brit- ish, Calcutta was the proverbial End of the World. Calcutta was the furthest place one could go while remaining English. No one made a stand in Calcutta; one gave in and gave up. The old joke had it that a European's life span in Asia was two monsoons; another example of epiphany worn down to cliché. Old expats did not acknowledge any-

one fresher than five monsoons; to do otherwise would have squan- dered one's emotional investment upon the temporary. Its climate was punishing, its alienness, disorienting; its mystery, seductive. It was desperate and glamorous at once.

Delia liked Calcutta very much. This was not the most omi- nous thing about her, but it was the most revealing. Rot fascinated her, and the way things worked, and why they broke, and precisely what it took for any opposite and equal reaction to pass undetected.

Trefelton, the great Moran place on Russell Street, was tended by seventeen nameless servants, insufficient by a at least a dozen for a house of its size and a family of such stature. Below stairs, the Raf- fertys held court. Rafferty had been Moran's batman, now the family's driver. His wife, the former Mrs. Cooke, was Mrs. Moran's nurse/ housekeeper. Their promiscuous elder daughter, Ruby, and her little son, Richard, of indeterminate fatherhood, bossed the upstairs staff in the absence of a mistress, as Mrs. Moran lay indisposed. Moran usually was

on campaign in Afghanistan, or playing politics in London, or playing bridge at the Club. Nothing ever happened at Tre- felton.

Delia, Beryl, often called “Devi” for her deviousness, and Beryl's nephew, Richard, made up their own family unit within the great house. They lived as they pleased. It had taken Delia no time to suspect that the youngster was her own father's youngest child. Fur- thermore, there had been rumours of a precedent bastard only a few years’ Richard’s senior conceived in London.

After two years, Delia, indeed, made her society debut. In- stead of marrying, as Charron had feared, she applied to the medical college at the University of London, however they had not liked her lack of aptitude for Classical Greek or Mathematics. Instead, she was forced to enroll at the Université de Paris with an eye to reading natu- ral history and medicine.

Baby Snakes

Chapter Four

“The intelligent man finds almost everything ridiculous, the sensible man hardly anything.”

-- Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749-1832)

Europe had become smaller and harder since Delia’s child- hood. Its light had dulled to a pewter gleam. Collectively, its cities were half the age and twice the height of the Sub-Continent’s and every street now seemed under-populated by comparison.

Some fortunate people are born with a core of “home;” an in- nate understanding of their relationship to the rest of a world furnished with evidence of their belonging. Delia never had met any- one of this sort. All the furnishings of her life belonged to someone else, and Delia did not belong among them. Unimaginative people so strongly identify with

a literal locale they must retreat to the physical place to replenish themselves. Delia had no sense of having had any place other than between her two familiars, and she gained no conso- lation from knowing that they all were having the same dream of rootlessness. The trio seemed not to belong in the cramped fifth floor flat they had taken in the tiny, Fourteenth Century Rue de Gregoire de Tours off the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Regardless of the season, they burned the wood stove twenty hours each day for warmth. None knew how to cook. Devi's disappointment at no aristocrat's having been beheaded there was palpable.

Paris was the clammiest place young Richard ever had been. It had a stuttering type of rainstorm that made up in selectivity that which it lacked in intensity. It only rained where he ran his morning fetch of milk, cheese, and baguette, half a dozen waxy white peaches, *macarrons* for Devi, and several gazettes for Delia. He presumed all the people must be living outside the city.

In Europe, Delia's height was only half as conspicuous as in India. At five-and-one-half feet, she towered above most of the older men and all the Parisian women. She always was at a canter across the wet pavement in a swooping of damp subfusc.

When Devi scolded her for her thinness and lack of colour, and the way she poured milk into the teapot and suckled directly from its spout, Delia stopped running home so often. On days when Delia

did not come back for milky tea, Devi would not bother leaving her bed. Richard spent most of his day paging through Delia's books, or watching for her from their flat's tall windows until Delia hired tutors for him. Later, when Beryl refused to rise even to do the marketing, or

haul away the laundry, Richard gladly did that, too.

Ninth in a class of forty-seven and first, and youngest, among the six women, all of whom were daughters of physicians, Delia felt herself inadequate and dilatory. She pushed herself harder and forgot more than all the rest. Occasionally she dosed herself with slivers of *nux vomica* to restore the energy that sometimes flagged after several nights' sleeping on her forearms, a practice akin to massaging the tender machinery of coronary muscle with a sledgehammer, and pro- ducing similar results. She chronically was lightheaded and feverish. The school lacked the speed to fill her brain's capacity, so she took on extra work, substituting in the laboratory for dozier students, some- times even sitting their exams for extra cash.

When scrubbing with carbolic had roughened and bleached her hands and her fingernails had turned thick and jaundiced from contact with formaldehyde, she purchased kid gloves instead of food for herself. As her body began digesting her muscles for sustenance her breath and perspiration developed the tang of acetone. She ceased menstruating, even though lumbered with all the attendant physio- logical symptoms, and gladly would have hired some other woman's period, just for its catharsis. Her own degeneration fascinated her.

After three years Delia began coughing blood. Her Paris doc- tor consigned her to the countryside, to the Lestinguois Sanatorium in Provence, with a touch of pulmonary consumption. Thus, she had achieved guiltless relaxation in her body's failure.

By unhappiest of coincidence, Dr. R.A. Laurier was half of her consulting physicians. He avoided her.

Beryl avoided the entire situation by staying in bed at the inn in town most days, as though she had been the invalid. Her durable nephew connected both women with the world and with each other. Richard was startled by the large number of English transplants at hospital, and how old they all seemed, and how good-looking, even the sickest among them, compared with the Brits he had known in In- dia, and how many

of their offspring had survived, and how many of

---

their children actually resembled their erstwhile fathers. To be admit- ted as “visiting family,” he claimed to be Delia’s nephew. They looked so much alike that no one doubted him.

In addition to the months of “quiet and bed rest” Laurier had prescribed a risky Pneumopertoneum: they were going to collapse Delia’s right lung until its tissues began to knit themselves.

Delia knew perfectly well that she never would regain con- sciousness and said her farewells. The next morning following the proceedure, she astounded herself by having been proved both wrong and relatively alive and subsequently was pleasantly surprised every morning thereafter for weeks.

Beryl still could not bring herself to visit. Young Richard be- came a side ward factotum. He sniffed at Delia as he bussed her cheek in greeting. Her change of scent confused him. She no longer ponged of carbolic acid and formaldehyde, she smelled like meat.

Although comfortable, the Lestinguois was not the Paris Voisin; but, in those days, not even Voisin’s was “THE Voisin.” Delia’s room was Spartan, however, she shared a bright parlour with a Mrs. James, whose health was so conspicuously perishable that the *Gestion* held aside the same suite for her annually.

The Jameses were the archetypal English couple abroad, well intentioned and moderately well heeled. Joan was short, soft in voice and manner, having been granted a genteelly superficial education by her recently bourgeoised family. She was as friendly as her affliction permitted and Delia liked her rather better than she did Delia. Joan had been fortunate in her choice of husband: a decent, genial gentle- man, far older and more intellectual than herself. To compensate for his wife’s internal discomfort, her husband had had her quarters fur- nished in

distracting luxury.

Mister James had tired navy blue eyes, and a voice of dark caramel, formal, but with a residual lilt. He had looked boyish for forty years. Now his short beard had gone grey. His wife was aware that he was a more attractive man than she was a woman and the knowledge made her prickly toward Delia in his presence. He did not notice. His chronic proximity to invalidism had imbued him with a therapeutic nonchalance regarding his wife's sometimes difficult moods. From their introduction, he and Delia safely took one an- other's presence for granted. It had taken weeks for Delia to

distinguish between his natural smile and the hyperbolic one he con- jured to cheer the sick room.

He visited his wife twice daily, whether or not she felt well enough to entertain him. His devotion had made her last years bear- able, and, probably, had multiplied their number. For her sake, he had sold his family's townhouse in London and taken a villa near the hos- pital. As he was an Englishman, it was impossible to discern how painful this loss might have been for him. All he had retained of his English home were two side chairs originally built for it. He had them placed in his wife's room. They were by Adam; Mrs. James silently loathed them.

This year had been different: Mrs. James had been unable to return home between relapses. Five weeks after Delia's admittance to the Sanatorium, Mrs. James had been removed to a very small white room to die.

Toward the end, when Joan's eyes would not focus, Delia bul- lied her attendant into admitting her between Mister James' visits to read aloud

from novels he had brought to his wife. As the woman in the tiny room faded, Delia began editing as she read, doing for Mister Dickens what Doctor Bowlder had done to Mister Shakespeare. In Delia's extemporized coda, Copperfield, redeemed by his contrition, was pleasantly surprised to discover that Dora Spenlow had shammed her own demise and moved away with good new friends to build a fresh life "in the Tropics," which, in Delia's description, sounded the way Muslims romance gardens in poetry and painted miniatures.

Overhearing, Mister James had been impressed at Delia's gen- erosity of effort. Joan James thought her "stupid."

After Mrs. James' death, Mister James, having no greater de- mands on his time, continued to visit Delia. As his wife had for years, to him Miss Moran had taken on the identity of her illness with its comfort of predictability. It was not one of Delia's particular vanities to confuse his not wishing to be alone with his desiring her company. He was yet too weary to feel more specific attraction.

Delia never could recall his actually having invited her, and occasionally wondered if it had been she who had initiated it, but it seemed natural that, upon her release from the Sanatorium, she should recuperate at his home. Devi was catatonic with resentment.

Baby Snakes

The villa was Mister James translated into architecture: stable, upright but rounded by wear, handsome, large-hearted, and private. "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*," read the sign on the gate without irony. It was James' literal motto. He had read for the Bar, but had defected to botany. He spent all day, every day of the discreet six months of his widowhood gently tending the gardens behind the villa he had pur- chased to give his ailing wife a Good Place in which to die. Half the landscape had been given over to his moonlit hybrids of artemisia and lavenders grown for local perfumers.

Delia actually saw him at home less often than at Lestinguois'. He aimed to be an undemanding host while his guests recuperated to- gether. The Band of Three seldom encountered him within the house, loosing track of him for days. Delia and young Richard dwelled in his astonishing library, and Devi began to relax a bit.

They attributed his diffidence to innate Middle Class vague- ness. Instead, Mister James was an intelligent man no longer much given to complex thought since years of observing creeping mortality had taught him that sometimes Ontology did not get the Necessary accomplished. Delia liked him for it for selfish reasons: it relieved her of the burden of being evasive about why a woman, residing in a lo- cale inhabited by dozens of her childhood school friends, would avoid venturing anywhere she might have been recognized. Lying to such a nice man would have seemed ungracious.

Once, while searching Mister James' night stand, Richard came across an expensively bound edition of *La Dame aux Camellias*, leading him to conclude that their host was attracted to wasting women in general and probably had begun a collection of them. In- discriminate loyalty prohibited his speculating as to what Delia might be collecting. Other than that, he liked Mister James and was prepared to enjoy their stay with him if only the Jameses had not had a young son.

Alistair James was a sour little bundle of angry four year old. All the stupid foreigners, except for the willowy, coolly distant older lad, made him sick. Richard enthralled him and the awful little boy adhered to Richard like a coat of paint.

Mister James revived in his gardens. Old acquaintances wel- comed his returning vigour, however, after having glimpsed his

young, female houseguest, left him alone to spend his period of mourning in his own questionable way.

Gradually, he began lingering by the fire in the East Parlour each morning to wish Delia a good day before her entourage de- scended from their second floor bedrooms. She began lying to Devi about the hour she rose and uncharacteristically spent more time out of doors.

One Wednesday she failed to appear at tea. Richard predicted that Mister James was going to marry Delia. Devi cuffed him. Alistair waddled to the Nursery for an extended pout.

Baby Snakes

Chapter Five

“I am a hardened and shameless tea drinker, who has for twenty years diluted his meals only with the infusion of this fasci- nating plant; whose kettle has scarcely time to cool; who with tea amuses the afternoon, with tea solaces the midnight, and with tea welcomes the evening.”

-- Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Delia’s first thought, on the night Mister James slid into her bed, was that he must have been sleepwalking. That impression did not last. She told herself that she could afford to be charitable, and allowed him to continue. In truth, from her arrival, she had presumed, with unexamined mixed feelings, that he had not desired her.

In general it had not mattered to her much, and it was not as though she had been a virgin, which had not mattered to him. Delia, who already had resigned herself to having half a life, now was half of a handsome couple. “Just in case,” and because they were comfort- able together, and because neither wanted him to be alone, they were married the next

month.

Young Richard spent two days depressed in bed. Devi re- treated to hers for more than a week and then began sulking in the garden furthest from the house.

Mister James, having been a Public School boy, was aware complex, undefined attachments could exist between friends of the same gender, but, nevertheless, was relieved when Stapleton, his moody Estate Manager, began keeping serious company with Delia's overly possessive maid. Devi, craving retribution, wed Stapleton out of spite.

Stapleton, who claimed to have substantial prospects among English relatives, insisted Miss Rafferty elope with him to Gibraltar. He resisted bringing along her wily nephew, agreeing to send for him when the pair had settled, which everyone understood to imply over his dead and rotting corpse. That, coincidentally, was the only manner in which anyone could have wrested the lad from Delia's custody.

19

Demarest Campbell

Richard had been delighted. Mister James welcomed him with his customary generosity. Delia and Alistair were relieved; the ser- vants, resentful. Secretly the first separation of their lives broke both women's hearts.

Young Richard set about earning his keep by keeping Delia amused, spying and lying for her, and defending her against the in- cumbent downstairs staff of crabby, dank cousins from the outskirts of Aix who always appeared to have slicked back their hair with their own sputum. The lot of them still was loyal to the years of indolence of having worked for a distracted master and absent mistress.

The benign Mister James befriended the lad, and excused Richard's over

protectiveness because he, also, had begun to suspect the youngster's complaints against the servants were valid. On New Year's Day, following a particularly extravagant row with one of the senior maids, at breakfast, Mister James had knighted Richard with the sterling butter spreader.

"Your guardian informs me that the Hindus deem the sighting of a mongoose on New Year's Day as a favourable omen." The *nom de guerre* clung. At that age the boy had enjoyed the idea. From childhood, Richard, the Mongoose, had seemed to be brushed by the wing of something extraordinary. He was Delia's creature: Mongoose in name, Mongoose in manner. For years there had been talk about their relationship. Sleek and wily, he was Delia's secretary in the word's original meaning: he was keeper of her secrets and was loyal to his marrow. In most other matters he was quite sane. Of course, most mongeese would not have entertained themselves in Delia's brief absences by daubing on enough of her scent to knock a fly off a wall or twirling about in her dresses.

"*Le petit bifteck! Ce salaud de mustla*!" spat the parlour maid each time she retreated below stairs, whether or not anyone was there to listen.

Alistair despised his new stepmother as unmaternal in thought, word, and deed. She was all angles and hollows and did not even ap- pear mammalian until her first pregnancy. She had a disturbingly strange scent. It was not only perfume, her human chemistry had been altered by queer spices and over-bathing in un-Christian foreign lands. One of the servants sneered as how, "all that scrubbing going

to make her wrinkles years more soon than normal lady." Delia made Alistair bathe nearly daily, whether it was necessary or not.

She was too young and not plump as real mothers were sup- posed to be. She kept strange hours with sharp friends who did not care to ingratiate

themselves with him. She was always correcting him. He did not know what she wanted him to be. She twisted words like wires together in aphorisms that prickled as they slid into his ears. He was careful never to say her name so her thoughts could not get in through his mouth. Briefly he attempted to avoid uttering all words beginning with her initial. She was making his life complex.

His father took her side in every dispute. It was not "fair;" a word Alistair could stretch over two octaves and four syllables. How- ever, he knew that if you said short things grown people did not hear you.

"A little whine with your meal?" she had asked his father, and they had laughed at him together. They were all stupid. It was obvious that she was, as they had said downstairs, insane.

Delia fed cats that did not even belong to anybody, which made Alistair's flesh crawl. A cat had scratched him once, a big or- ange one that squinted through rancid butter-gold eyes. Even the recollection of it stung. He threw stones at all cats and missed by a mile. No one had guessed that he required spectacles. Delia had. She made him wear them, too, but he still missed beaning the cats. She addressed all strays sweetly by daft names: "Poor Tom," "Dim," "The Snark." In July, for four calico reasons, Tom had been rechristened "Tomara." The Snark always looked at Alistair as if he wanted to bite.

He hated Delia-esque things, their sly, stupid, foreignness. And he hated the colour yellow, which was unfortunate for him since he was colour-blind. He perceived only grey contaminated green and yellow, growing up, therefore, hating half of everything in sight. His real mother's name had been Joan, which Delia had called a "Franco- ironic near pun." Alistair had not gotten it.

He could tell that Delia longed to return to India. He hoped she did and prayed that she might die along the way.

Early in her second year of marriage, Delia miscarried in her fourth

month. It had been sudden and quickly over. The Mongoose

forced Alistair to present her with a fistful of Columbine and to tell her he was sorry that she felt bad.

“He said I had to or no one would like me,” Alistair added.

“That might be a trifle overstated,” she replied kindly, “never- theless, at such times, it usually is wise to observe the conventions. People feel better at ease when others show some consideration and behave as one expects. Remember: it is wise to be kind. You want to be wise when you grow up, don’t you? You are wearing some garden on your chin. Come here. Where is your wipe? Dip the corner in the flowers’ water for me.” She mopped the smudge of soil from his face.

He wrenched aside: what if her madness were contagious from touch? “Isabeau says you lost the baby because you’re bad. It wouldn’t have happened except you’re not even a Christian.”

“Ally!” the Mongoose snapped. ‘That’s why nobody likes you. I TOLD you that was as heartless as it is ignorant...”

“Richard, he’s too young to comprehend. Do not shout in the house, please... Alistair, you realize that some people have stronger eyesight than other? And some people run faster because their mus- cles are stronger? It does not mean that such a swift person is a better human being; it means only that he was more fortunate in having in- herited his particular eyes or legs. Horses are stronger than men and they are not better people because of it. Owls see better at night, but it is not because they are worth more than we are. Well, some women’s insides are stronger than others’, they can adapt to strain more easily. It has nothing to do with superiority of anything but luck. I was un- lucky in this aspect

of my life, but I am not a bad person for having been unlucky. Nor was I unlucky because I was bad. The maid is mis- taken. Do you understand?"

The little boy scowled at his shoes in confusion and boredom. "Go out and play," she said as he scampered out the door past the Mongoose.

"And Ally would look better if he had lips," Richard mocked her patronizing delivery. "How long have you been rehearsing that speech?"

"It seemed likely one of them would spit out a toad over this, sooner or later. I'd have been a fool not to have prepared something. And there's nothing amiss with the child's looks."

Baby Snakes

"You try so hard to like him," the Mongoose stood shyly just inside the door. "Deeley? Will you be alright now?"

"Don't worry: I am well on my way to becoming a burden to you in my old age. Where is Mister James?"

"I saw him at the bottom of the lavender garden...I think he was crying...He probably had been looking forward to having a son and heir instead of that rehearsal for one. Ally's more like an amal- gam between a pilchard and a rat."

"You've been polishing that one for awhile, haven't you, my Mongoose? Shameful waste of cleverness. Were we ever cruel to you when you were his age? Then where ever did you learn to be such a bully? If you must grow up mean, at least select targets strong enough to shoot back."

"Charlatan, you'll laugh when I'm not watching...Think he's more like his father or his mother?" Alistair did not resemble Mister James in the least, for a good reason.

"What an appalling thing you've become." Mongoose smirked to cover

having swallowed everything she had said. She scribbled on the back of a letter from the bedside table. “Here. After dinner, hand this to Mister James... Don’t open it!”

The Mongoose read, “’Isabeau has upset Alistair. Please give her severance in lieu of notice.’ Finally! I told you: she’s been having at you all the while we’ve been here.”

“Earlier it would have been self-indulgent. One cannot penal- ize a person for not liking one. But it is insupportable to permit anyone so ignorant to contaminate a small child.”

“Damn all those hirelings,” he groused.

“Please. Servants have raised most people we know... I’m sorry; Laurier has given me a sleeping potion. I’m fading. *Oust*! *Allez*!”

He squeezed her cold hand. “Deeley? You look fine.” The hair loss was hardly perceptible. “You’re lucky I’m here watching out for you.” He fanned himself with her note. “No one else could have deci- phered your handwriting, except maybe Champollion...and he’s been dead for years, m’dear.”

“You’re too tender an age to be so arch. You’re putting dec- ades on me.” She was nearly eleven years his senior. “Christ. I wouldn’t be young again to save my life.” It was two days before her

twenty-sixth birthday and, during the years following, her opinion never changed.

From the bedroom window the Mongoose saw Alistair kick at one of the cats. After tea he pounced.

Mongoose pinned the younger boy's arms to the carpet with his knees and straddled his chest. His left hand cupped Alistair's open mouth; his right forefinger and thumb pinched his nose.

"Alright, you little turd. Your father's just in the next room. I'm going to remove my hands. You have two choices: do you want to scream, or do you want to breathe?"

Alistair began crying silently. "You're never to go below stairs again. Do you hear me? Never. And, if you overhear any of the servants gossiping about Delia, you are to report them to your father.

Immediately. And stay the Hell away from those cats." Alistair nod- ded in agreement and went his way. Unbeknownst to himself, Mongoose had inherited the Morans' ruthless efficiency.

Baby Snakes

Chapter Six

"No thought, no action, no movement, total stillness; only thus can one...at last become one with heaven and earth."

-- Lao Tzu (6th Century B.C.)

The next year's pregnancy nearly killed her. While Mister James was away on business, Delia lay haemorrhaging from dawn Sunday until Wednesday noon. She refused to allow Richard to sum- mon a local physician. "Discretion," was her only explanation. Richard nodded as though he understood what she had meant by that.

On Monday the chambermaid and both laundresses quit in disgust over the bloody linens. Below stairs there were jokes about fetching the knackers.

The room smelled funny. By the door, behind a needlepoint screen wrestled from the dressing room, was a sheet covering a lav- abo heaped

with blood-soaked Turkish towels because no one grown up was there to order the gruesome mess to be taken away and burned. On one corner of the bed was a pile of fresh linens with hems too tatty to be set out for the guests who never visited anymore.

Alistair held on to her toes through the sheet. It was four in the morning and he had been frightened awake by a dream. If Delia died while his father was in England, Alistair would be alone. “Mummy?” he whispered to her. Wherever she was, she was not listening to him. Obviously Delia was going to die, proving herself as unreliable as his real mother. Women simply were not built to last, not the ones who were nice to you. He wandered back to his bed. The sun would be up in two hours, if she was better by that time, he promised God he would be a good boy forever. It was an important promise and the weight of it kept him awake. He almost was relieved that she spent the next day unconscious.

At dawn on Tuesday, the Mongoose pocketed some house- keeping cash and hired a carter to haul him back to the Sanatorium where he calmly haggled for an “important” doctor to attend to her at home. Impressed, Lestinguois, himself, condescended to drive the eight kilometers twice daily, but Mongoose insisted on Doctor Laurier

because, without comprehending its particulars, he had sensed Delia’s inexplicable leverage over him.

The resentful Laurier came with a woman to attend Delia for the next week because the Mongoose refused to allow any of the household staff near her rooms. The doctor moved into the large guest room down the hall and spent three days and nights slamming doors and shouting at the staff, after which Delia seemed to rally. After- ward Laurier fled to

Belgium for good.

The boys were allowed to see her for five minutes each morn- ing and at teatime. “Is she going to die?” enquired Alistair.

She looked grotesque beneath white muslin wrapping her hair and forehead. She had a pair of deeply pink, rabbity tooth marks where she had bit through her lower lip during the worst of it two days earlier and sharp lines cut a wedge between her brows as though she were thinking very hard. The marks would never disappear.

Her eyelids were mauve and her teeth seemed to have grown, only because they matched her ivory lips and gums. “Shush...she can hear you,” she murmured and tried to smile which was a mistake be- cause it opened up a dry gash in her lower lip. Alistair could not pull his gaze from it.

“You smell wrong.”

“It’s only blood, Ally. Blood cannot hurt you. Not other peo- ple’s blood, especially if you were not the one to let it out.” It was difficult to pull in enough air to propel the words from her face and Alistair wished to come no nearer.

“You’re always ill,” he complained.
“Come on. She needs to rest to get better,” said Richard.
“You mean she isn’t going to die?”
“What’s wrong with you? Come outside. You’re making

things worse. You’re such a baby.” “Am NOT!”

“Are!” They continued bickering their way outside.

Delia refused to succumb. She simply would not have it. Other women must have recuperated from puerperal sepsis, so would she. She was certain she had heard of someone’s having recovered. If not, then she would be the first, she decided. She slept heavily.

Baby Snakes

Next morning Alistair decided he, too would be ill. He tugged the top sheet over his lips and squeezed his eyes shut waiting for someone to discover him. His brain refused to shut off. The Mon- goose was not speaking to him. His Nanny was pre-occupied. No one seemed to miss him. He was growing bored.

The house was silent. No one had laid out his tea. It was not fun. He was drawn to the voices from Delia's room. The Mongoose sat on the chair beside the bed where Mister James should have sat. He knew Mongoose had heard him enter and was refusing to greet him just to get his goat.

"And here he is. Good afternoon, Alistair. Where are your spectacles?" asked his stepmother. The child shrugged. "Alright, to- day you don't have to. Tomorrow you will wear them and you'll do an extra chapter in Lamb. Agreed?"

Yesterday she had been dying. Today she was back to dictat- ing terms. She made him sick, but, today, she was the only person who would pay him any attention.

The child stammered a question he barely believed had slipped out of his face. "Can I call you 'Mummy'?" he mumbled.

"'May' not 'can'."

"Leave it alone, Richard," she snapped. "Alistair, I am very flattered...but...I am not a mother. It would confuse me. I am sorry. I should like you to call me 'Delia.' Just like friends... Now I need to nap for a while." Her eyes had begun to leak and she closed them to disguise it. "Will you come see tomorrow when I'm feeling more my- self?"

"Yeah." Alistair accepted the clammy hand formally pre- sented, a pond-life handshake. He scuffed out of the room and never felt quite all right around her again.

The Mongoose busied himself needlessly tucking covers, top- ping up

half-filled tumblers, clucking over her like his now absent aunt, Devi, used to do. He held out her water glass as an excuse to linger. She cared for none. She wanted a cognac and needed an injec- tion, but kept the discomfort to herself.

“Every time I see him, I cannot help thinking of Samuel Col- eridge... “ said the Mongoose. “What are we going to tell Mister James when he returns?”

Demarest Campbell

“Spare him any details, alright? He will not ask. Do not volun- teer... The fashionable medical term for it this year is ‘muscular incontinence.’” Actually, it was “incompetent uterus,” but one could not say such a thing aloud in polite company. “And, for God’s sake, try to keep the scullery gossip from polluting the upstairs if you can.”

At the Sorbonne, Delia had been most taken with an enchanted being, a brilliant former protégé of Breuer’s. He had the personality of Turkish coffee laced with Benedictine: a cultivated, handsome, ebul- lient Viennese Jew, effortlessly likable and universally admired. His religion had made him inaccessible, but no less desirable, to her. Delia had interested him not at all, thereby perpetuating that appre- hensive hunger which mimics Romantic yearning among the English.

While conducting a post-mortem, the young student had con- tracted blood poisoning through a quarter-inch gash on his ungloved thumb. After a time, the entire hand had gone septic, requiring multi- ple surgical excisions, the pain of them leading him to morphine addiction for relief. A friend had suggested cocaine as an expedient to weaning himself from the narcotic. As a result, he had grappled with debilitating cross-dependencies, then alcoholism, eventually narco- psychosis. At last he had taken his own life. The entire episode had wound through the

final eight of the fourteen months Delia had known him. The recollection of it lay coiled atop her current heap of dreads.

Delia hoped the Mongoose comprehended less about her medical situation than she suspected he did. She wondered, as she in- jected herself and sank deeply into the stale pillow, if he had been reading Coleridge's "Mariner" or "Christabel." Actually, the refer- ence had been to the infamously inconvenient "Person from Porlock."

Baby Snakes

Chapter Seven

"The more joy we have, the more perfect we are." -- Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677)

Recovery took weeks. Delia refused ever again to eat the flesh of animals, fowls, or fish. The Mongoose followed her example. Alis- tair thought they were stupid and were likely to starve to death. He fretted over it.

It required months for her to walk correctly, longer to forswear the narcotic. Refusing crutches, she forced herself to limp through the grounds with Richard prancing about her, like a crone walking her pup. It had not been easy, not with her pelvis so damaged. On the Bad Days she relented to use of a cane, and, rarely, the needle.

Often on the warm terrace Mister James smiled observing his young wife and her ward climbing back from the bottom of the gar- den. The boy was touchingly attentive to her, and he was growing sleekly handsome. She was the sort of woman who inspired devotion, Mister James thought. He thought he should have felt guilty for en- joying Joan's absence, but he only felt gratitude for it. It was difficult to think of his having passed several years with the sour and conven- tional first Mrs. James, who, had they met when he had been more self-assured, or

had she not gotten pregnant, he would have passed by.

Mongoose tried whirling Delia about in an abrupt waltz and had to catch her up by the waist as her stout cane spun into the shrub- bery, which had been the whole idea behind the maneuver in the first place. “This is what she must look like when she is happy,” thought Mister James, watching from uphill. It was not. It was the way she looked when her clockwork brain was shut off.

Recently James had ceased regarding Richard as Delia’s pageboy, and, he thought, so had Richard. Physical contact between the two no longer seemed childishly casual. Mister James was tolerant and indulgent, but never naïve, and he recently had been reading Racine.

“Fine, promising lad,” thought Mister James, watching them dance nose to nose. Having been unlucky in producing sons of his own, Alistair’s suspect origin notwithstanding, he felt fortunate in be-

ing able to shape this exotic foundling. He thought Mongoose de- served the advantages of a thoroughly English education to civilise the mysterious Easternisms out of him; give him the opportunity to associate with people his own age. In short: it was time to find him a place at a first-rate school abroad.

That evening James was surprised at the detachment with which his wife agreed with his decision. Delia was not naïve, either. The older Richard became, the more exactly the two looked alike.

She had been awaiting a reply to a letter of enquiry she had composed to a friend of her mother’s at Eton. She would have pre- ferred Mongoose to attend Harrow because she liked the shapes of the syllables better. Then again, perhaps his childhood had been harrow- ing enough.

Meanwhile Richard's Aunt Beryl returned to her friend. Her marriage having lasted less than two years, everyone but Delia pre- sumed her to have been widowed. Only Delia ever learned that Stapleton had brutalized his wife and proved himself a criminal in un- specified ways, just as only Devi suspected that Delia had not miscarried the second pregnancy naturally.

Much embittered, Devi shunned the society of everyone but Delia. She was vague about her husband's fate and refused to discuss her situation other than to make it clear that she and her mistress were re-attached for good and ever.

The two women squabbled now. Each had endured too much during the past two years to be recast by the other in her childhood role.

During one of Mister James' absences, acting upon the Mon- goose's debriefing, Devi had sacked half the staff, replacing only the Cook and scullery. She herself did a fine job running the household with the more discrete, flexible, realistic few servants remaining. Upon his return, the only changes Mister James acknowledged were his gratitude for the increased efficiency with which Mrs. Stapleton now ran the villa and for the care the Mongoose had taken of his wife.

Anticipating Lestinguois' future delicate and self-conscious admonitions about the precautions required to preserve his wife's health, James quietly shifted his belongings into the guest room across the hall and presumed his wife realized that his concern for her well-

---

being outstripped the value he placed upon the physical satisfactions of marriage. He was mistaken.

The next year Mister James experienced a mild myocardial in- farction. Two months later he was discovered dead in his bed. He would have been forty-eight the following week.

Delia was left wealthier and depressed in the chilly Provencal Spring, in a house that her late husband had acquired for a sick woman Delia had not really liked, and for the sick woman's child, begun by another man. What she felt was regret.

She spent five weeks in Paris selling the property, leaving the others to pack. At some internal imperative, she gathered her hangers- on, and Mister James' fifteen volumes of Caxton, and took everything home to India where, awake, or asleep, at least she could get warm.

It was the crisis of Devi's life. She loathed Calcutta and con- sidered Delia a fool for returning to it, but felt that keeping her opinion secret repaid her debt for the lengths to which Delia had gone for her years before in Switzerland.

Alistair remained in silent shock until mid-Summer. When he revived, he was terrified at his new situation. He hid himself from the Eastern world behind Devi's skirts for the next several years.

Distraught, the Mongoose sailed for England, alone.

31

Demarest Campbell

Chapter Eight

"For who can always act? but he,
To whom a thousand memories call, Not being less but more than all
The gentleness he seemed to be,
But seemed the thing he was, and join'd Each office of the social hour
To noble manners, as the flower
And native growth of noble mind;
And thus he bore without abuse

The grand old name of Gentleman."

-- Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

After Delia had sent him away, Enid became the second woman to break the Mongoose's heart. He encountered her on the Channel crossing as he prowled the less suave areas of the boat, searching for distraction.

Third Class was filled with Welsh-Irish families returning from decades in the Malaysian or Australian Great Gamble. Enid had been a mammoth angel soprano who knew five wistful ballads all the way through and sang them to her two silent sons who must have looked exactly like their jug-eared, sheepherder father. A line of ad- mirers draped themselves over the First Class deck rail hoping to hear more from her.

Mongoose surmised that her limp, unresponsive offspring must have been deaf and that she sang only for God and herself. The thought made him giddy with sentimentality. In reality, both boys were poor sailors and she had dosed them liberally with paregoric; when land-locked, and sober, they jabbered like gibbons.

Awaiting her turn on the gangplank, Enid felt a hand on her elbow and a handsome man-child spoke some Anglo gibberish at her. She was conversant only in Welsh and Latin and was illiterate in both. Based upon her husband Ifan's rule of thumb, that all Englishmen had complexions like boiled turds, she decided that the Mongoose must have been French. Her only thought was that France was where per-

---

fume grew and she had been traveling in stinking steerage from Wel- lington harbour.

She and the elegant Mongoose smiled at one another shaking their heads and shrugging the universal "no speakee" gesture of lin- guistic helplessness. A few rough women behind her gave her bulky shoulder a

little shove to prompt her to move forward.

Mongoose pressed his fingers to her lips then tapped them against his heart. For some reason, the gesture brought her tears of pride. He kissed her ruddy cheeks and waved farewell.

For her twentieth birthday, just before being delivered of her third jug-eared son, Enid asked for, and received, a book in the French language from the indulgent Ifan. Its subject was anthrax and she never learned to read a word of it. Merely holding occasionally it nourished her.

She named son number three something that sounded like “Fronswah.” It was written “Xx.”

33

Demarest Campbell

Chapter Nine

In England there are sixty different religions and only one sauce.”

-- Francesco Caracciolo (1752-1799)

Britain was disagreeable and it was on probation with the Mongoose. He, who had dismissed the South of France as drafty and depressing, regarded the English climate a suitable habitat only to whelks. He felt no kinship with fellow Etonians who had a barbaric pecking order and ate only white foods. He found most to be impa- tient and parochial, obsessively fondling the emotional trinkets of their adolescent grievances preserved in bile from school terms past. The native and colonial contingents stared rudely at one another. Each misattributed shyness of the other to rejection. He thought that they deserved no better than their raw little island.

At first, Delia had sent him a flurry of smudgy letters from France that

stopped once she and the others sailed for India. Instead, her solicitors from Morcomb and Dodge's London office had sent him great wads of cash and a good bottle of port on each birthday.

He was consumed with jealousy over Alistair's being with them all "back home." His resentment never waned.

Unexpectedly, the next year, once he graduated to University, things improved. He smiled his way into a band of self-styled "Impe- rial Orphans," other young men whose emotional ties were tethered off-island, several of whose backgrounds out did Mongoose's in quantity of continents occupied and quality of melodrama survived. He, himself, had little compunction about romancing his personal his- tory, enhancing its exoticism. Often he introduced himself as "Rajiv." He had been pleased with the "Tyger burning bright" ambience of the name.

He always adhered to the letter, if not the spirit, of the truth. He hinted at having been maintained by an Older Woman who, her- self, had read at University, making Delia seem something like a talking dog compared with his mates' demurely normal mothers.

Baby Snakes

At age twenty, the Mongoose lost his virginity. Rather, he had left most of it in a vacant flat with a chubby second cousin of a class- mate. The girl had been endearing, but, afterward, her relative had taken on a patina of smarmy condescension toward Mongoose and Richard never saw either again by choice.

At twenty-one, he informed Morcomb's that he would require a steamship ticket to Calcutta. Within the week he had had a telegram from there instructing him not to come. As far as he knew, he was not wanted anymore.

Demarest Campbell

Chapter Ten

“If a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he next comes to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination.”

-- Thomas De Quincy (1785-1859)

Some villainy is more about failure than immorality. Often evil merely is the espousal of an idea too narrow to elicit popular sympathy. Every zealot can be defined by his superfluity and self- importance, every defeat by miscalculation and bad timing. One cru- sades with purpose, but looses by mistake.

The pen is mighty because its ability to convert the enemy over-reaches that of the sword’s ability to reduce his quantity, and because the type of damage it inflicts seldom obliges the onlooker to avert his eyes: in order to persuade someone, one must retain his at- tention. On the other hand, to conduct a dispute with weaponry one need not rely upon the intelligence of one’s opponent, who, if reason- able, would have chosen the correct side from the outset.

Wars are fought in obscure places with flesh and second- guesses, but are won or lost in numbers printed on a page. Any fool can squeeze a trigger, however, he who controls the labels, wins the war. Victory is tribal and self-referential and never consults outside the Winners’ Circle.

Reality is what the majority are willing to believe. And, as it is easier to be told than to think, truth becomes “The Truth” only in its official version. The Truth is subject to popular fashion.

The Russian Man had most of the qualifications to have been a hero in this section of the story; however, his friends did not write this book. They restricted their literary efforts to peevish socio-economic harangues and extortion notes, whereas Delia’s cohorts, being bent for

fiction, always had the final word.

Having chosen the wrong side for the right reason, having committed the Necessary for the wrong ones, Shevchenko would have

been astounded to find himself so miscast. Any reasonable man would be. No man is a villain to himself; however, one is only what others describe him as being.

Therefore, I shall tell you that Captain D'mitri Oleksander Petrovich Shevchenko was the most seductive man engaged in the most sinister commerce in East India and God loved him. Nothing else explained his astonishing success in surviving, much less thriving above suspicion. Everyone liked him; you would have, too.

Chapter Eleven

"Mothers are fonder than fathers of their children because they are more certain they are their own."

-- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

Shevchenko stood a conspicuous six feet and two inches tall; seemingly more, if encountered unexpectedly in the stews at the deadly end of Lower Chitpore Road where he anonymously kept him- self busy. He had been blessed with a catalogue of appealing attributes and a realistic degree of gentlemanly conceit about them. Decades of warming himself on the middle gentry had polished him as sunlight smoothes the visible one-eighth of a glacier. His style was elegant, never standing when he

could lean, sitting if he could loll, quibble when he could extinguish.

Like his mother, he was a carnal glutton. Serpentine courtli- ness enabled him to subvert the Battle Between the Sexes from both sides, often. He made acquaintances feel wickedly sophisticated and he gave other men's wives the sensation of flirting with danger, which, in a sense, was so, but not always in the manner they had an- ticipated. He was a meticulous lover in the way vain men frequently are: performing for their own third eyes, anticipating how their per- formances would translate on the page. No one ever complained.

All verifiable personal history indicated his having been born in Camden Town to the wife of a feckless Ukrainian diplomat and an importantly decorated British officer encountered during one of the more than three dozen festive functions at the London Embassy the year of Olek' Petrovich's conception. His mother had had an erotic weakness for coloured ribbons and festoons of gold braid.

Despite the wishful thinking of politicians, clerics, and other speculative reformers, Shevchenko's mother's romantic susceptibili- ties were remarkable neither in their shallowness, nor their frequency among her class. What had been unusual was her compulsion to con- fide them to her only child while brushing her hair at bedtime.

As a bride, she had had affairs of various durations with Sir Augustus Moran and each of his dashing sons, all in the same season.

Baby Snakes

Thus, the Moran family, often hailed among the "New Athenians" in the brown-tongued articles in "The Express," eternally fascinated the young Shevchenko.

Fifty minutes after Count Shevchenko's physician had diag- nosed his cankers as The Pox, the old man cast his young wife out of their house on Welbeck Street with her three corsets, a German- English dictionary, the cheap pearl dog-collar her mother had loaned her for their wedding,

a silver-handled button-hook which he believed went with the corsets, six party gowns, and her eleven year-old bas- tard son who resembled a stranger.

Passing for a widow, Nethalia Schenkova took one of the thousands of mingy Battersea cottages thrown up in the eighteen- twenties and – thirties for workers in the Great Wen South of the Thames. Their street smelled of fry-oil and cats' piss. Olek' Petrovich was more ashamed of their ferociously unfashionable address than he was of the obvious purpose of his mother's over-night absences. At first they could not afford even one maid, and young Olek' Petrovich had been obliged to attend a Town School.

Prior to the advent of Madame Shevchenkova's flush New Friend, she had paid for their up-keep with forged letters of credit and introduction, and occasionally, when she had got drunk enough, with her body. She was twenty-nine and drink had not yet dissolved the figure of a newly poor woman with her appetites who could barter for the male attention she craved. However it had robbed her of her dis- crimination involving those into whose beds she decanted herself. As years passed, she began competing with her son over some of his "special" friends. Her own jealous New Friend struck upon the happy solution of buying Oleksander Petrovich into Sandhurst.

Too embarrassed to have school mates home on holiday, he was reduced to taking only lovers whose families left town between social Seasons, or weekended in their country houses: the only decent places to retire the old furnishings they had inherited. His friends' places in Town contained nothing older than their parents' wedding gifts. His own mother's old stuff were mutts discarded by richer folk in the Year Dot.

One Christmas, thinking his Mater elsewhere, the seventeen- year-old Olek' Petrovich brought home a classmate to seduce. They

found her awaiting one of her beautiful young men who never materialized. Between New Year and the attempt on Shevchenko's life by his cuckolded Latin Master, his mother and his friend eloped, leaving a ten-pound note for Olek' Petrovich to live off for the rest of his life.

It was time for the young Shevchenko to pursue his fortune. He began by climbing the family tree. The eldest Moran son, Sir Charles Augustus Junior, had died of appendicitis years earlier in Per- sia. The second, Robert Joseph, was in the Argentine, making the lad's capitalization from a possible family relationship too geographi- cally remote to exploit.

The youngest son, John James Sebastian, had left for Persia at age eighteen, however, as India emissary for Lord Roberts, he had resurfaced in Whitehall often enough to have made his opportunities at clandestine fatherhood plausible; and he was here now in London.

The man was magnificent. The great family haemorrhaged cash. None of the Colonel's legitimate male heirs had survived birth. Purchasing an introduction to him seemed realistic. Shevchenko stud- ied to become him.

"Adopt, adapt, improve." From King Louis' delicately rouged lips to Shevchenko's ears. The Russian sold everything he could, in- cluding much which was not his own, to change his barber and tailors to Moran's. He adopted a Moran moustache and his brand of cologne of metallic lime peel warmed by rosemary to become the more perfect ghost of the ersatz father's youth.

He purchased a formal introduction to Moran from a Foreign Office clerk for a borrowed fiver and permitted Moran's notorious noblesse oblige to overwhelm his sense of self-preservation.

It was the Done Thing for "good" families to host, even sup- port, if it were within their means, any "poor relation" with demonstrable

hereditary connections, however tenuous. It was a pe- riod when question of paternity was resolved on the Honour System and the majority of adult males were in a position neither to ask nor answer without chagrin. “A distant relative on the father’s side” was a gentle euphemism for bastardy, which often incorporated a form of social extortion, overt or implied. The research of Brother Mendel later contributed much to curtail some of the more flamboyant abuses, but, at a time of rudimentary genetic study and spotty international

communications, information disseminated more slowly than oppor- tunism. It was an age of convenience to the exploitative, when shame was not discussed aloud among the Quality, nor needed to be, so pan- demic was it.

The Moran clan lived by the conviction that those with suffi- cient position and power to commit indiscretions with impunity were too well bred to try. It was admirable in theory but feasible only among the like- minded. They had been born to be used.

Unable to swear to his innocence in the accident of Shevchenko’s conception, Moran felt that he had no honourable re- course but to respond in kind to the young man’s overtures and extend his cool hospitality. In truth, Moran, with a wife and a daughter abroad, had been a solitary man who recently had realized he also was lonely.

After he had got used to the idea of him, Moran occasionally enjoyed Shevchenko’s company as much as everyone else did. He demonstrated this by purchasing a commission for him in the prestig- ious 1st Bangalore Pioneers of the Indian Army to which Moran originally had been dispatched from Hyderabad in 1879 to fight in Victoria’s second unofficial Afghan War against the Russian backed Sunnites in the arid uplands of the Hindu Kush. The English wielded tight little Scottish regiments as the thin blade of the broad axe sepa- rating Afghanistan from the influence of Imperial Russia. Britain would win, for a while,

but victory would be painful and expensive.

The Scots soldiered as though bred as Britain's martial caste. They had an archaic sense of honour and legendary loyalty to their Highland tribes, all of whom distrusted one another only slightly less than they detested everyone else. So what if they were so bloody iras- cible that, following Culloden in 1745, Parliament defeated a measure advocating the forced sterilization of all Highland women by a shamefully wee margin; arguments against their quaint brutality and snarly wind instruments also being conjured in their condemnation. Opposition to that aspect of the Highland Clearances went thus: dra- conian measures were expensive and there were all those little wars to feed. Besides, Scottish fecundity was curtailed naturally by anhedonic Presbyterianism and cirrhosis; otherwise they already would have overrun the colonies like fire ants. Reason prevailed. England stayed the harvest of the Highlands until the cannon fodder got ripe.

Demarest Campbell

Realistically, even in wartime, Shevchenko could not have re- tained any military rank that he had not merited. In truth, he was ideally suited to leadership, and Moran was never a fool; Moran's in- fluence might have got him promoted earlier than his lack of seniority had warranted, but never exceeded his capacity. Nevertheless, surrep- titiously, Moran had him re-assigned to the ersatz safety of the provincial river fort at Chitral under Colonel Sir Mortimer Durand, whose name eventually was awarded to the perpetually troublesome boundary between North West Frontier of India and Afghanistan.

Moran reasoned that for a lad with a Russian surname, Chitral was bound to be safer than Kabul where one fifth of all the military men Moran ever had known were buried. He was unaware that mere days earlier the demise of the ruling *Mehtar* had afforded Chief Umra Khan

the opportunity to transform the tribal court of Chitral into the House of Atreus, another family with whom Shevchenko would have felt at home.

Since the Mughal invasion of Tudor times, the area has popped with small wars, meaning wars in which no body one person- ally knows has been killed in action. Britain fought over a hundred such wars during Victoria's reign.

Baby Snakes

Chapter Twelve

"There are persons to whom we never think of applying the ordinary rules of judging. They form a class by themselves, and are curiosities in morals, like nondescripts in natural history. We forgive whatever they do or say, for the singularity of the thing, or because it excites attention. A man who has been hanged is not the worst subject for dissection, and a man who deserves to be hanged may be a very amusing companion or topic of dis- course."

-- William Hazlitt Characteristics: In the Manner of Rouchefoucault's Maxims (1823)

As he was packing his bags in Mangalore, Moran visited Shevchenko. Moran was being dispatched as an emissary to the rebel- lious *Sennaputti* of Manipur. His reasoning behind his accepting such a hazardous commission was that, eventually, it would lead him back to his home in Bengal; still, one never knew how such things might turn out.

The Colonel opened a morocco and silver photographic cabi- net and pushed it into Shevchenko's hands. "Keep this safe until my return. Or... see to it for me." The left side held a wedding portrait with his exquisitely aristocratic bride. Unmistakably the infant on the right was a baby-doll Colonel, legitimate, and potentially a problem. What if, after all these years, the little girl had ripened into a breeder of grandsons? "It

is important for family to know that they have been in one's thoughts...Well, I hear that you are damned fine officer. Carry on."

Shevchenko's orderly returned with rope to tie his broken va- lise. "What was 'Colonel Excalibur' doin' 'ere, Sir?" Like most non- coms, he was addicted to gossip and was not finicky.

"Damned if I know, Sergeant Grimes-of-Kidderminster. Where is Kidderminster, anyway?" replied Shevchenko examining the photographs.

"When you're standin' in Birmingham, it's way the Hell be- hind back there, Sir."

"Miss it, Sergeant?"

43

Demarest Campbell

"Naw, Sir. Hopes it dies an' goes t' Hell...Pretty li'l girl, Sir. She yourn?"

"Yes." Shevchenko tucked the frame into his tunic.

Moran's horse fell and Moran damaged his back. He was re- turned home to Calcutta to recuperate. In Manipur, in his stead, Frank St. Clair Grimmond; James Wallace Quinton, chief commissioner of Assam; and Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Skene were murdered at the Imphal Palace. Grimmond's widow, Ethel, in patent leather dancing shoes, led their Gurkha troops and remaining British officers through the jungle and a thousand feet up a mountain toward the safety of As- sam before being rescued by an additional party of astonished Gurkhas. British troops found Imphal deserted, but discovered the *Sennaputti* in disguise, tried and hanged him and replaced him on the throne with a compliant six-

year-old boy. Ethel Grimmond, the “Heroine of Manipur” received the Royal Red Cross and a pension for life. The surviving British officers who had escaped with her were sacked.

Baby Snakes

Chapter Thirteen

"Everything in Asia,--public safety, national honor, personal reputation,--rests upon the force of individual character...The officer who forgets that he is a gentleman, does more harm to the moral influence of this country than ten men of blameless life can do good."

--Lord Stanley (1827-1903) -to the Students at Addiscombe

Shevchenko arrived in Kashmir in 1892. For the next two years he distinguished himself in valour with intelligence gathering forays that often cost the lives of his less resourceful cohorts, and in the Black Market two miles in every direction until the minor massa- cre of some of their chaotic Kashmiri musketry men forced the remaining five hundred or so combined British, Kashmiri, and Sikh troops, their retainers, “vital” camp followers, and one diabolically subversive pet rhesus monkey to be gated within the fort, two- hundred-forty feet square with twenty foot high mud walls eight feet deep and four corner towers double the height of the walls. On half ration, there could be food for ten weeks. They had thirty-thousand rounds of ammunition for the eighty worthy Sikh soldiers who could hit where they aimed their Martini-Henrys, twice that amount of am- munition for about three-hundred-fifty Kashmiri with rudimentary training and atrociously insufficient “gas-pipe rifles.” There were fifty or so Chitrali of indeterminate abilities and unknown loyalty who had only what they carried in with them. The vegetable garden, latrines, and water supply lay outside the fortification. The hospital already was full and contained

the one competent senior officer.

Command descended to an ambitious, banjo-picking, aspiring bon vivant, who, by a chain of trade-ups throughout unrelated North African, Middle Eastern, and Indian regiments, finally had attained belated Captaincy at age thirty-one. Thus, at age thirty-four, C.V.F. Townshend, sarcastic son of an insignificant marquess, found himself in command of a pile of dissimilar troops with whom he had no com- mon bond of experience, sentiment, nor devotion, and among who he

---

Demarest Campbell
was less popular than the monkey that bit.

The tiny fortress fell under siege on 4th March 1895. At once Townsend quarreled with the civilized and restrained Robertson.

Under cover of darkness, the British breasted the mud walls with stone sangers and Sher Afzal's forces inched their siege equip- ment nearer. Each day saw emissaries from both sides escorted back and forth with tenders of personal safety in exchange for possession of a fort that no one actually wanted, and counters of offers of am- nesty against reprisal from Her Majesty's Government in India if the native forces withdrew, countered by replies that the fort was not IN India, and so forth.

Meanwhile, on 5th of March, two young officers, sixty troops and one-hundred-fifty porters bringing scheduled food stores and ammunition set out from Mastuj, sixty miles North-East, unaware of the two additional Lieutenants leading sixty trained Sikhs in answer to Roberts' dispatch requesting support. Of the thirteen survivors who escaped the ambush of the relief column, ten were badly wounded. Oblivious to the foregoing, the second supply column had been duped and slaughtered halfway along their route. Its two officers were taken hostage.

The Asian *Jezail* rifles were obsolete, unreliable, and so heavy as to

require steadying on forked supports. They required careful and time-consuming muzzle-loading, but those which did not explode in the musketeers' faces came with several important advantages: their long barrel length enhanced accuracy and range, and it took ridiculous amounts of wadding and a heavy charge of coarse black powder which spat an amorphous pellet of immense size and destructiveness and such a quantity of opaque grey smoke that the entire firing line could shift position several meters down wind, assured of remaining invisible within its choking cloud. They were present among the Khan's forces in seemingly infinite numbers.

Some of the Indian "Territorials" had finely crafted modern breech-loading Martini single shots, others Greener's new Lee- Enfield Mark I . 303 bores which never exploded in a man's hands and took an utterly reliable percussion-pin cartridge which was virtually smokeless. The troops were well trained, well organized, and were

---

upholstered in glistening red and white tunics rendering them majestically visible against any background, in any light. They were severed from supplies and communications.

By 22nd March rations consisted of gruel made from pea-flour and the officers' mounts, which all had been impounded and were condemned by lottery so as to spare any individual horse's owner's queasiness.

By bribing the watch on the River Tower guarding the ninety feet of enclosed walkway to the water and picking his way to a wide but shallow ford downstream, Shevchenko and others were able to visit the village of Chitral almost nightly and return to the fort by dawn with foodstuffs and hand weapons suitable for sale. It was common belief that First Lieutenant Shevchenko kept the most beauti- ful "clean" Kashmiri women in the town. Two of his mistresses were sixteen, the third had not

known her age. All three were married to local Strong Men.

One night, during his own watch, another junior, named Ar- thur, informed him that Shevchenko's side occupation of supplier of Afghan opium, which he had vended to the infirmary for astronomical profits and flogged among the infantrymen for thrice even that, al- though not yet illegal, was immoral, and un-English, and violated army regulations. It was his intention to see to it that the enterprise would, at the least, cost Shevchenko his commission.

The lavender hour before the dawn of the second day of the Khan's second month of siege, having fought thirty-eight unflinching hours beside Arthur and five dead or nearly dead comrades, Shevchenko lightly tapped the man's scarlet shoulder. "Excuse me, Arthur?" He put a pistol shot through the man's pale blue left eye. During the next surge of attack Shevchenko took a *Jezail* ball to the gut.

The windowless icehouse warehoused mostly brown men, na- ked except for a few tan bandages salvaged from corpses to tie life inside the dying. They sat, or, where there was room, lay on red and black crusted blankets cloaked in the smell of putrefaction and urine. Sitting was preferred; it allowed the army surgeon and orderlies to walk around the wounded, and one was less likely to be mistaken for

dead and carried out of the soothing shade to be left on a heap of meat in a trench in the sunny snow. There was no disinfectant and blessed little anesthetic.

By this time, the invalid Miss Florence Nightingale had retired to England to teach and consult. Twenty-four years earlier, descrip- tions of hospital conditions during the Sepoy Mutiny had moved her to

undertake practical recommendations for standardized moderniza- tion of every military station in India. Unfortunately, the best of intentions, invention, and energy can extend only so far and frontier field units, stranded, depleted by repeated, prolonged sieges in hostile territories with extreme climate, bad terrain and without communica- tion lay beyond her evangelical influence. The army took the same proportion of casualties in the field surgery as on the battle field due to shock; septicemia; endocarditis; dehydration from chronic diar- rhoea; malnutrition from alcoholism; surgeon fatigue, incompetence, or inadequacy; alcohol poisoning; salmonella; suicide, neglect, and murder. Statistically, it would have been seven times safer for Shevchenko to have fought all three days in the Civil War of the Americas at the Battle of Gettysburg a generation earlier than to have been taken to a field hospital anywhere with so little as a fractured arm.

In Shevchenko's corner of what served as the officers' ward, the man in the bed to his left had had a bullet smash through his geni- tals on its way to shattering his left hip. He died, mercifully drugged beyond realization of what damage had been done to him and stinking to Heaven. On Shevchenko's other side lay a man whose lower jaw had been shot away. In order to conserve resources for those with more optimistic prognosis, the attendants had ceased trying to feed him. In the middle of the night, one smothered him. Shevchenko real- ized that he had been warded in the corner with the terminal cases.

By 18th April Chitral was relieved by a small expedition led by Colonel James Kelly from Gilgit. Another expedition of fifteen thou- sand led by Major-General Sir Robert Low from Peshawar did the mopping up *sans* incident. Kelly and Low shared the fort's last bottle of brandy.

Baby Snakes

For four agonizing weeks of warding where he lay, and two additional months at Lahore, Shevchenko refused to die. The visiting Surgeon-Major Robertson listened, fascinated, to the litany of the young officer's

medical history, any element of which would have been one too many for any normal man. However, D'mitri Olek- sander Petrovich was an entirely unexpected person, a Gentleman, and in some way related to Moran, one of the heroes of the last action Robertson had seen before Chitral, when he had been attached to the Kabul Field Force in 1879 through 1880. The Surgeon-Major in- valided Shevchenko out of the service with a Captain's rank, half a stomach, a damaged pancreas, an addiction to post-surgical morphine, and a touch of syphilis.

Thus pensioned off, Shevchenko quartered himself alone, spending fifteen days crawling out of Hell by millimeters until his ad- diction had subsided. After that ordeal, he knew he had the will to surmount anything. He was very nearly correct.