

CAMBRIDGE CHARACTERS

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

CAMBRIDGE is pleasant and Cambridge is always full of little surprises. This town of a few lakh people has grown up around the University, which is the core of its being. The Cantabrigia of the Romans is the Cambridge of today. The top colleges dating from the 13th century onwards, along in pleasant meadows, mostly along the banks of the river Cam. The stone-cobbled market square is as ancient as the town itself and forms as in every English town, its very centre.

In one corner of the market square is the university Church of St. Mary's. The university regulations, interestingly enough provide that in order to be eligible for a degree one has to live within three km of St. Mary's. Within a few steps of the market square, the University Senate Hall as also the Great Chapel of Kings.

Saturday is market day in Cambridge. The ancient tradition of itinerant sales people, coming to the market on Saturdays to sell their wares, continues. The square is crowded with shoppers from all around Cambridge.

The stalls, with brightly coloured cloth-awnings, display everything from flowers, old books, records, fruits and vegetables to Indian handicrafts and clothes. The people are as colourful. Farmers from the neighbourhood, university boys, students and tourists all crowd the Cambridge Market square on Saturdays.

The day brings together some interesting Cambridge characters. Since the university is one of the great intellectual centres of England — and perhaps of the world — there is no shortage of geniuses and cranks. Alexander Pope put it thus long ago:

Great minds are to madness, near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

It is not difficult in Cambridge to bump into a Nobel Prize winner walking down King's Parade. In 1975, there were as many as 14 of them in residence in the town. The tremendous collection of the finest intellects working at high pressure in Cambridge, produces both geniuses and men full of idiosyncrasies.

Saturdays always brought forth some of these fascinating characters to public view. There was the town drunk, a gentle ageing man, who made it a point to come with a bottle of sherry, sit by the side of the ancient Roman Fountain in the middle of the market square and watch the world go by with wry amusement. Unlike

our drunks, in Cambridge people are not a nuisance. Albertson sat quietly, sipping his sherry, and when the bottle was empty, he would slip sideways and go to sleep.

In his own days, he had been a prominent man in the University, and but for the sudden and certain realisation of the futility of endeavour that he experienced on summer day, he might have ended up a Nobel Prize winner. However, he preferred to throw it all up and take to a life of contemplation. The welfare service, so thoughtfully provided by the Labour Government's after the War, took care of his limited needs, and an annuity left by a rich uncle paid for the sherry. For me, as long as I was in Cambridge, Albertson, by the side of the Roman Fountain, was always a cheerful sight.

Macbride a much younger man, provided the music in Petty Gury Lane for the Saturday crowds. A Scotsman, he had been a promising and brilliant organist. Doing a degree in music, he was one of the most brilliant players at the musical evenings held in King's College Chapel. People prophesied a great future for him, but something happened which changed all that. Macbride gave up his studies, his classical music, and his college. He became a street musician. Now he is a one-man band in himself. While he holds and plays the pipe instruments, he has a drum tied to his back with a string attached to his heels and the drum stick. Further up on the drum, he has cymbals fixed.

Under his elbow, he holds a castanet. By a clever manipula-

tion of all these instruments with his hands and feet, Macbride gives a beautiful one-man concert every Saturday for the pleasure of hundreds of children who come to market with their parents. The money that he collects—and people give generously because of his popularity — he gives away in charity. Looking at him, who could imagine that Macbride was yet one more Cambridge blue stocking who might have ended up as Sir John Macbride, the great Organist? But Macbride now prefers to play to the common people and, even more so, to the children and finds his joy in theirs.

My favourite Cambridge character, however, is Snowy, King of the Road. He gave up his real name long ago and nobody can recall it today. But every Saturday, Snowy wheels his little mobile exhibition to the market square in front of Heffers Bookshop. The cause he pleads for is that of blind guide dogs. He asks for charity for their sake. To attract people, he wears an interesting costume, with golden buttons and a maroon jacket. Around the brim of his 19th century stove pipe hat, he has white mice sitting about. On the top of it sits a beautiful brown and white cat. Would you ever believe that a cat and mice could play together? In Cambridge, on top of Snowy's hat, they do. So many times have I stood around, fascinated by the sight. While the mice squat around the brim of the hat, the cat leans over the top, gently and playfully nudging them.

Snowy too has a past. It is said in Cambridge that in the 1930s, he was a most brilliant biologist, who was studying the love life of butterflies. He too might have ended up with a Nobel Prize but for the fact that he became so distressed at what he saw that he chucked it all up. Snowy had seen faithlessness, adultery and promiscuity among human beings, but when he saw among butterflies simply appalling him. A good Christian, he did not want to see any more and just gave up his research, as well as his fellowship. He preferred the life of a hermit. If such a thing is possible, in an industrial society. Today he is happy with his life and the little service that he is able to do in the way of charity. If you ask him about his past in the University, he simply smiles it away.



SNOWY, KING OF THE ROAD: On his hat a cat and mice co-exist peacefully.