

# A matter of sixpence

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

IT was a wet winter evening in Cambridge. The rain dripped gently on the college lawns. The fog, as T.S. Eliot might say, curled about the ancient buildings. The yellow street lights gave everything an eerie appearance.

My wife and I had gone to Wolfson College to dine with some Pakistani friends. At about 11 p.m. we walked down from the college to the main road to catch the last bus to our flat. Only an old lady was standing under the cold bus shelter at that late hour.

After a while the red double-decker came along. There was no passenger in it. We got in. The old lady took a seat somewhere in the front. We preferred the rear seats. The conductor, a short brown

man, in an ink-blue uniform, smiled at us.

As the bus moved off he came and sat in the next seat. I could see that he was from our subcontinent and wanted to talk. I asked him where he had come from. He replied, wistfully, in chaste Punjabi that he came from Dharam-sala.

## FORCED TO MIGRATE

"Are you an Indian?" I asked.

"No", he replied. "I come from Pakistan. In 1947 we were forced to migrate".

"Where did you settle, and how did you get here?" I asked again.

"We first moved to a place near Gujranwala. But after the Kangra hills we did not like the dusty hot Punjab

plains. It was also difficult to make a living, so we migrated here."

"How do you like it here?" my wife asked.

## SMILED SADLY

He smiled sadly, thought for a while, and then said in chaste Punjabi: "Jee taan na Pakistan lagda hai, na Walait. Saanoon taan Kangre dian paharian har waqt yaad an-dian han."

He talked on for a while, of the green fields, the snowy hills and the sparkling streams of Kangra, all set against the beautiful snowy backdrop of the Dhauladhar range. His memories of a Hindu class-fellow were emotional.

After a while he got up to go and collect his fares. The old lady paid hers. When I

took out sixpence to pay ours he refused it firmly. I was a little embarrassed, but he would not relent. As we were getting off he shyly invited us to come to his home sometime.

The man's homesickness was obvious to us. Having known the beauties of the Kangra hills, both of nature and of the people, I could understand the utter loneliness of this bus conductor, in the soggy, wet and depressing winter evening of Cambridge.

His generosity in not allowing us to pay was a typical Punjabi gesture of friendship.

I wondered whether, like some Punjabi bus conductors, he had decided to debit our sixpence to the bus company, or, like an Englishman, pay the fare from his own pocket.