

Pompeii evokes memories of Imperial Rome; Istanbul of the Caliphs and Pashas who are no more. Where is one to find the ghost of Imperial Britain? Some say in London. But like Vienna, the city is one vast museum of vanished history. It does not evoke memories of a lost empire, of captains and conquerors. London is the soul centre of a drab industrious, God-fearing, mercantile people. The merchant rulers of Britain were wise. They allowed the captains their hour of glory; their Plassy or Khartoum, but maintained a healthy scepticism of Caesars. In fact the Nabobs, as they were called, with their Eastern Opulence, were distinctly resented. So where is one to look for the spirit of the Raj, for shades of the Caesars?

Simla is the place, not Delhi. In spite of Luytens, New Delhi is after all Dilli, the city of the slave kings, of the Mughals, of Chandni Chowk and the Red Fort, of the Kutab and Nagam Bodh ghat. Luytens succeeded only in making a small skin graft on it.

Not so Simla. Simla was British. It was the product of the creative impulse of the empire builders; an attempt to recreate Hampstead Heath in India. It was the refuge of the merchant princes of India. To Simla they retired from the turmoil of the plains, carrying their aches, agues and fevers, and waited patiently for this "fair valley of Avillion to heal them of their grievous wounds."

Happy Sundays

On Sundays the good men of Simla and their noble ladies gathered on the Ridge for their weekly communion with Jelovah. Frock coats, top hats, hooped skirts, scarlet livered rickshaw-walahs, revelled in the glorious winter sun. The men lifted their hats and gently cheered the laird of the castle—Dalhousie, Curzon, or whoever he was—as he arrived for service. Duty done, they strolled in leisurely

Shades Of Caesars' In Simla

fashion to the club for a gin before lunch. The afternoons were given over to tennis parties among the pine trees, followed by tea and crumpets.

The Englishman cannot live for long without a theatre. Gaiety Theatre was built and cherished with loving care. They came in dinner jackets to see handsome Aide-de-camps and merry grass-widows flirt in public. Once in a while they even caricatured 'the pillars of society', all of course in the best manner of a public school prize day. It was indeed a 'Vanity Fair' and many a Becky Sharp must have revelled in it.

Evocative Symbol

Suddenly one fine morning it all vanished, like the monsoon mist around the Ridge. It seemed as if Thackeray had packed his box of puppets and rolled down the hill. They have gone but the ghost of the Empire lingers about the pine-clad ridges. The castles, Dales, Woods and other old names remain. The new masters have built a few 'Bhavans' and 'Niwasas' but they have not defiled old memories. In Delhi people can knock down a statue. In Simla they dare not change a name.

In these mansions one lives with history. Vast banquet halls, white painted wood-work, rows of outhouses and stables, and of course the inevitable tennis court. On a single walk I counted a dozen tennis courts. Today they stand abandoned and desolate. The crumbling hillsides have covered many, the rest are given over to weeds, grass and little hill cow. Only the posts and bits of the wirenet fencing remain. To me there is no more evocative symbol of the passing of the Raj.

The Lower Bazar was always there. But now it has crept up and claimed the Mall. 'Paan' and 'chaat' shops have sprouted on the Ridge. Gaiety Theatre, its Gothic front cracked and peeling, is given over to beer and Tambola. Young men in drain-pipes and side-locks leer over its balcony at the surging crowds below. No theatre now. The nearest such event has been the shooting of Shakespeare Wallah—a haunting commentary on the passing of the Raj—in its ever empty hall.

The Mall is no longer a promenade. It is a commando assault course. Down it flows a jostling, pushing, mass of humanity determined "to enjoy themselves." Once sucked into it, one is carried willy nilly like timber logs in a flood. The valiant manage to fight their way to the shore for a quick round of snacks at a propular restaurant.

The brave stand at Scandal point to see the logs—shapely ones—go hobbling bye!

Smell Of Decay

Suddenly on all this bursts the blare of a powerful motor horn. A new Nabob is on his way! The drivers press on, regardless. They enjoy seeing people cling to the hill-side to avoid being crushed. A motor permit for the Mall is a status symbol in Simla. Unfortunately, like Lloyd George's peerages, these can be had fairly easily! A walk on the Mall is now a test of one's nerves. Any man who can last a round obviously has a steel set!

Simla is slowly crumbling. One has only to walk away from the Ridge to see this. Ancient mansions still bravely sport the old names but they are slowly sinking into oblivion like the men

who built them. The plaster is crumbling, the wood-work is rotting, and a smell of decay hangs about them.

The sanitation, originally meant for limited numbers, has also given way. Central Simla now is Mandi Fenton Ganj of Jullundur come to the hills. People talk wistfully of the old Health Officer "when he used to come on a horse all sweepers were afraid. Alas! No one is afraid now."

But Simla comes into its own at night. A cool breeze acts like a soothing balm. The holiday crowds have returned to their homes or hotels. Only the myriad lights twinkle, like the necklace of some fairy princess. In the dark pine shaded lanes, the spirits are abroad. One might chance to meet the lady in white, or the headless colonel on horseback, going clip-clop. The pine trees stir gently in the breeze and whisper tales of the days gone by.

—M. S. GILL