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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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Mark and Evelyn Go To India (Part 1) (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Mark and Evelyn were not always as you see them now. Yes, we were the good looking devils you see them as today, but they were also intrepid world travelers. We planned an extended trip to India on our own and set out on our own. We kept an extensive log co-authored by ourselves. I just recently ran across the log of that trip. I decided to publish my log of just one day of this of this 25-day trip. Even then we have to break it into four parts and publish each separately in the VOID.

October 14, 1993: This was the day we saw the Taj Mahal, some of the best of India and also this was the day we were kidnapped. As the day started we were in Agra, the home of the Taj Mahal.

The bathroom is laid out very well at the Sunrise. In our last hotel you had to do a lot of balancing with the night case. This place had very well designed facilities with a nice counter around the sink. It is the sort of thing you don't think much about until it isn't there.

Mark noted, "Another thing that has proven very useful is a photo vest. I expected it would be about as good as a knapsack, but it is much more convenient. All my valuables are right on my chest and with one zip-up they are secure."

Our morning wake-up alarm was the so-called "Government of India" man trying to sell us a tour at 7 AM and ringing us on the phone. That seems to be how everyone in the hotel wakes up from the sounds of the other rooms' phones. (At least he didn't call early enough to ask us if we wanted to see dawn at the Taj.)

Agra is cooler than the last two towns we visited. There looks to be a little more greenery than Khajurao. That last city seemed to have a little more open space but not so many trees. The temperature in the morning was pleasant. By all accounts afternoon at the Taj Mahal is pretty hot.

We ordered breakfast. Mark had stuffed paratha and curds; Evelyn had her usual porridge. People often ask Mark how a fun, "stuffed paratha" sort of guy like him can get along so well with a plain porridge sort of woman like Evelyn. Well, he'll tell you: "The woman makes a damn fine cup of coffee." Mark says he lives in fear of the day somebody points out that he doesn't drink coffee because he may have to make some difficult life decisions that day.

Moona came to talk with us over breakfast and discuss our plans. He also had to speed up our breakfast, which took over a half-hour to get served. We had intended to go to the Tourist Office to book our tour, but decided to go directly to the railway station, since it actually leaves from there and can be booked there as well. So we took an auto-rickshaw that Moona arranged to the railway station from the hotel for Rs25.

But first we had to stop and get gas. The same thing had happened in Varanasi. It's as if they're worried about the gas going stale and won't buy any until they have a passenger. We still made the station in plenty of time.

The Agra Cantonment railway station looks like something out of *THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING*. If you haven't seen John Huston's *MAN WHO WOULD BE KING*, put this log down and go find a copy on videotape or something and see it. It's wonderful. Or you can go find the story by Rudyard Kipling. It is pretty good too, perhaps better than the film, but the film is a great adaptation. That's better than anything you'll read in this log.

The station is chaotic even when little is happening. The auto-rickshaw went into a corral with about a hundred other auto-rickshaws waiting for passengers. Outside homeless dogs and people sleep; beggars and hawkers ply their trade. You cannot go more than a few feet without hearing someone say, "Hello," trying in some way or another to make money off of you. We like the country and the culture and most of the people, but we are getting very tired of people barraging us in attempts to make money off of us. Although we are having a great time, but we have very strong reservations about recommending India to anyone who looks American or European. We are meeting a lot of Indians we like, but we are finding much too often that we are more interested in the Indians we meet than they are interested in us. They see us as a source of revenue first and foremost. And for the majority of these, it is "exclusively," not even "foremost." It is a serious problem for Indian tourism. India is the only country where it might be anywhere near a serious consideration. And in India it is a very serious consideration. In New York City, nobody gets into your taxi to give you a sales pitch. Someone who jumps into taxis in New York City very soon gets shot. New York City is civilized. But seriously, if your skin is white, expect that you will look to a lot of the locals in India like a bag of money with running shoes. While we are having a heck of a good time, if you are reading this log to decide if you want to come to this country, take the attitude of the locals into consideration. It is not difficult to avoid crime, and it is tough to run into terrorism even if you want to, but the chasing of the tourist dollar oblivious to any consideration for the tourist himself or herself makes this country one that is pretty tough to recommend to others.

The booking office for the tour was easy to find, though at first Evelyn thought it was the wrong one because it said "Uttar Pradesh Tourist Office" instead of "Government of India Tourist Office," but it turned out to be the right one anyway. Tours are now Rs60 (not the Rs120 that the man was telling us--although it's conceivable he meant for two) or the Rs75 Moona had said. We bought tickets for the city tour and went out amid the hubbub and chaos of beggars and hawkers and found our bus, an old non-air-conditioned type with rather torn headrest covers. It was pretty hot sitting there (Evelyn notes, "I had foolishly picked the side of the bus in the sun, though for riding it was the better side, being nearest the side of the road"). In addition, hawkers kept trying to sell us postcards and other items. We did buy a liter of water (at the price listed in fine print on the side of the bottle rather than higher, which was initially asked) and two wire puzzle bracelets for Rs5 each. The vendor was asking Rs8, but willing to sell two for Rs10.

At about 10:30 AM we finally headed out. Most of the passengers were Indians; there was a New Zealander we talked to a bit and three or four other non-Indians. As the books indicated, everything was conducted in English.

The Lonely Planet guide recommends the "Tourist Guest House" in Agra. It also says that there are several other places claiming to be the Tourist Guest House that aren't, including the Kapoor Tourist Guest House, which it says is a "real dive." "No matter what they say, if you're opposite the Central Methodist Church, you're at the Kapoor." Well, we passed the Kapoor and it now has painted above its name "Recommended by: Lonely Planet Publications"! We assume there are no laws about truth in advertising here.

On our way to Fatehpur Sikri, the bus was stopped at a checkpoint by the police for a random traffic check. Someone said the driver's license had expired, but he got back in and started driving again anyway. Maybe he got a temporary one. Then again, maybe not.

The road to Fatehpur Sikri goes through countryside and a few small villages, but you can still tell it's a road that tourists travel. There was a man with a couple of camels with spots painted on them sitting by the side of the road, and another with a bear on a leash. These are what are known as "photo ops." We had never thought there were bears in India, but there one was. Mark was thinking it probably wanted to shake us down for rupees. Evelyn said that the Lonely Planet guide says that the bear has been trained to dance in the road blocking traffic until the driver pays the bear's owner baksheesh. It was a scam so that he would be paid to remove the bear from the road. What a country!

Next week I will continue on to the Taj Mahal. [-mrl]

Lewis and Clark and the Paradox of Induction (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

"Past performance is no indication of future results." You see or hear this on all those financial ads. This is "the paradox of induction" (scientific induction, not mathematical induction). That paradox is that we assume there are physical laws that are permanent: when Isaac Newton comes up with the Laws of Motion and verifies them with experimentation and measurement, he assumes that his discoveries will remain true--that if gravitational acceleration was 32 feet per second per second today, it will be 32 feet per second per second tomorrow. But why does he (and why do we) assume that? Well, because that has always been true in the past, which is of course just circular reasoning.

And how does this apply to Lewis and Clark? They were told there were big mountains ahead of them. Okay, they knew about mountains--they were familiar with the Appalachians, and so they were not intimidated by these "big mountains"; they expected them to be at most equal to the Appalachians. As they approached the Bitterroot Mountains and started to climb the closest one, they figured they would get to the top and see a gentle slope down the western side and be able to put their canoes into a river that would carry them quickly to the Pacific Ocean. When they reached the top of the first ridge they saw, not a gentle slope to an easy river, but mountains twice as high as the Appalachians stretching as far as the eye could see.

Past performance indeed is no indication of future results.

Two other notes:

When the Corps of Discovery was trying to decide where to winter in 1804, they took a vote. All the "official" expedition members voted, of course, but so did York (a slave) and Sacagewea (a Native American and a woman). One wonders what the thought process was that led to Lewis and Clark asking for their votes, particularly since on their return Clark refused to free York until several years later.

And this three-year journey thousands of miles through uncharted territory was achieved with only one casualty--and that was from something (a burst appendix) that would have killed this person even if he had stayed in St. Louis with dozens of doctors available to him. [-ecl]

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS (letter of comment by Gwen Karpierz):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS](#) in the 04/13/18 issue of the MT VOID, Gwen Karpierz writes:

Re: THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS quote "'But it is not human to be without shame and without desire", [Evelyn wrote, "As we have learned more about human sexuality, it has become clear that there are humans who are asexual."]

As someone who is asexual myself, I don't think the existence of asexuality invalidates that quote at all. In fact, it's one of my favorites in the book. Although the paragraph at hand is primarily focused around sexuality, I think taken out of context, the quote holds just as much weight--perhaps more. It can be applied to sexual desire, but it is equally applicable to the human tendency to want in ways that exceed necessity and survival. There is a yearning inherent to being human that is never really satisfied, and it goes far beyond sex." [-gk]

Evelyn responds:

I thought of this, but it seemed as though the conversation was focused on sex/gender, so I sort of ruled that out. [-ecl]

Gwen replies:

Even if it is mostly focused on sex and gender, I wouldn't say that I'm completely without shame and without desire in regards to those things. At the very least, there's the fact that plenty of aces out there enjoy sex--asexuality is simply the lack of sexual attraction, not necessarily the complete absence of it. Although I personally am not interested in sex, we live in a society too centered around it for it to not exist as something in the consciousness around which to have thoughts and emotions. [-gk]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

EX LIBRIS: STORIES OF LIBRARIANS, LIBRARIES & LORE edited by Paula Guran (ISBN 978-1-60701-489-8) is an anthology of 23 stories about, well, librarians and libraries (obviously). The first surprise is that it does **not** include Jorge Luis Borges's "Library of Babel". Guran does mention it in her preface. Another classic (which she doesn't mention) is Kurd Lasswitz's "Universal Library".

(Actually, I suppose the first surprise is that this is not an "original anthology" in the sense of having the stories specially written for it. Rather Guran has collected stories dating as far back as 1988, which means that the stories have been "vetted" by other editors as well.)

The stories are more a mixed bag than one usually finds in a theme anthology. In my experience most theme anthologies focus on a particular type of "fantastika" (e.g., all science fiction stories, or all fantasy stories). But EX LIBRIS has science fiction, fantasy, and horror. It also has some stories in which the library aspect was incidental to the story.

As with most anthologies, some stories will appeal to a given reader more than others, but I think for those who love books and libraries there is more than enough to make this a must-read. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Although present on the occasion, I have no clear
recollection of the events leading up to it.
--Winston Churchill,
on his birth, recalled on his death 24 Jan 1965

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