

An Extract from *Come, Tell Me How You Live*

Taken from CHAPTER 4: First Season at Chagar Bazar

But our first night at Amuda is an experience I shall never forget.

No sooner have the lamps been extinguished than mice in their scores—I really believe in their hundreds—emerge from the holes in the walls and the floor. They run gaily over our beds, squeaking as they run. Mice across one's face, mice tweaking your hair—mice! mice! MICE! ...

I switch on a torch. Horrible! The walls are covered with strange, pale, crawling cockroach-like creatures! A mouse is sitting on the foot of my bed attending to his whiskers! Horrible crawling things are everywhere! Max utters soothing words.

Just go to sleep, he says. Once you are asleep, none of these things will worry you.

Excellent advice, but not easy to act upon! One has first to get to sleep, and with mice taking healthy exercise and having their field sports all over you, that is hardly possible.

Or it is not possible for me. Max seems able to do it all right! I endeavour to subdue the shrinkings of the flesh. I do fall asleep for a short spell, but little feet running across my face wake me up. I flash on the light. The cockroaches have increased, and a large black spider is descending upon me from the ceiling!

So the night goes on, and I am ashamed to say that at two a.m. I become hysterical.

When morning comes, I declare, I am going into Kamichlie to wait for the train, and I am going straight back to Alep! And from Alep I shall go straight back to England! I cannot stand this life! I will not stand it!

I am going *home*!

In a masterly fashion Max deals with the situation. He rises, opens the door, calls to Hamoudi.

Five minutes later our beds have been dragged out into the courtyard. For a short while I lie gazing up at the peaceful starlit sky above. The air is cool and sweet. I fall asleep.

Max, I rather fancy, breathes a sigh of relief before falling asleep himself.

You aren't really going back to Alep? Max inquires anxiously the next morning.

I blush a little over the remembrance of my hysterical outburst. No, I say; I wouldn't really go for the world. But I *am* going to continue to sleep in the courtyard!

Hamoudi explains soothingly that all will soon be well. The holes in the bedroom are being stopped up with plaster. More whitewash will be applied. Moreover, a cat is coming; it has been loaned out. It is a super-cat—a highly professional cat.

What sort of night, I ask Mac, did *he* have when he and Hamoudi arrived? Did things run over him all the time?

'I think so,' said Mac, calm as always. 'But I was asleep.'

Wonderful Mac!

Our cat arrives at dinner-time. I shall never forget that cat! It is, as Hamoudi has announced, a highly professional cat. It knows the job for which it has been engaged, and proceeds to get on with it in a truly specialized manner. Whilst we dine, it crouches in ambush behind a packing-case. When we talk, or move, or make too much noise, it gives us an impatient look.

'I must request of you,' the look says, 'to be *quiet*. How can I get on with the job without co-operation?'

So fierce is the cat's expression that we obey at once, speak in whispers, and eat with as little clinking of plates and glasses as possible.

Five times during the meal a mouse emerges and runs across the floor, and five times our cat springs. The sequel is immediate. There is no Western dallying, no playing with the victim. The cat simply bites off the mouse's head, crunches it up, and proceeds to the rest of the body! It is rather horrible and completely businesslike.

The cat stays with us five days. After those five days no mice appear. The cat then leaves us, and the mice never come back. I have never known before or since such a professional cat. It had no interest in us, it never demanded milk or a share of our food. It was cold, scientific and impersonal. A very accomplished cat!

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