

Overcoat

(Ghulam Abbas)

One evening in January a well-groomed young man having walked up Davis Road to the Mall turned to Charing Cross. His hair was sleek and shining and he wore side burns. His thin moustache seemed to have been drawn with a pencil. He had put on a brown overcoat with a cream coloured half opened rose in his button hole and a green flat hat which he wore at a rakish angle. A white silk scarf was knotted at his neck. One of his hands was slipped into a pocket of his overcoat while in the other he held a short polished cane which every now and then he twirled jauntily.

It was a Saturday evening in mid-winter. The sharp icy gusts of wind struck like steel, but the young man seemed to be immune to them. So, while others were walking briskly to keep warm, he was ambling along obviously enjoying his promenade in the bitter cold.

He looked such a dandy that tonga-wallas on catching sight of him, even from a distance, whipped up their horses and raced towards him. With a wave of his stick he turned them away. A taxi also drew near him and the driver looked at him enquiringly. He too was turned off. This time with a "No, thank you."

As the evening advanced the cold became more intense. It was a cold that induced people to seek comfort in pleasure. At such times it was not only the profligate who ranged abroad, but even those who were usually content to live with their loneliness, emerged from their hide-outs to join the gaiety of the streets. And so people converged on the Mall where they amused themselves among the variety of hotels, restaurants, cafes and snack bars, each according to his means. Those who could not afford the pleasures inside, were content to gaze at the coloured lights and brilliant advertisements outside. Up and down the main road there was an unending stream of cars, buses, tongas and bicycles while the pavement thronged with pedestrians.

The young man seated on the cement bench was watching with interest the people passing on the pavement before him. Most of them were wearing overcoats which were of every kind from the astrakhan to the rough military khaki such as are found in large bundles at the secondhand clothes' shops.

The overcoat the young man himself was wearing was old, but it was well cut and the material was of good quality. The lapels were stiff and the sleeves well creased. The buttons were of horn, big and shiny. The young man seemed to be very happy in it.

A boy selling pan and cigarettes with a tray of his wares passed by.

"Pan Walla,"

"Yes, sir"

"Have you change for a ten rupee note?"

"No, sir, but I'll get it for you."

"And what if you don't come back?"

"If you don't trust me sir, you can come with me. Anyway, what do you want to buy?"

"Never mind ... Here, I have found one anna. Now give me a good cigarette and be off with you."

As he smoked he seemed to relish every puff.

A small lean white cat shivering with cold rubbed against his legs and mewed. He stroked it and it leapt up onto the bench. Smoothing its fur he muttered:

"Poor little mite."

After a few minutes he got up.

By now it was past seven. He started off again along the Mall. An orchestra could be heard playing in one of the restaurants. Many people had collected outside. Mostly they were passers by, a few drivers of the waiting taxis and tongas, labourers and beggars. Some fruit vendors having sold their fruit were also standing around with their empty baskets. These people outside seemed to be enjoying the music more than those who sat inside, for they were listening in silence though the music was foreign.

The young man also stood and listened for a moment or so, then walked on.

A few minutes later he found himself outside a large Western music shop. Without hesitation he went in. There were musical instruments of different kinds arranged on shelves around the walls. On a long table, attractively displayed, were the latest hit songs. A Spanish guitar was hanging on the wall. He examined it with the air of a connoisseur and studied the price label attached to it. Then a huge German Piano diverted his attention. Lifting the cover of the key-board he played a few notes and closed it again.

One of the salesmen came up.

"Good evening, sir," he said, "Can I help you, sir?"

"No thank you," the young man said with an air of indifference. Then suddenly as if remembering something he called out.

"Oh yes ... Could you let me have a list of this month's gramophone records?"

He slipped the list into one of the pockets of his overcoat and resumed his promenade on the Mall.

He stopped next at a book stall. He picked up one or two magazines and after a hurried glance at the contents carefully replaced them. A few yards further on, a large Persian carpet, which was hanging outside a shop attracted his attention. The owner of the shop, wearing a long robe and a silk turban, greeted him warmly.

"I just wanted to see this carpet" the young man said to the carpet dealer.

"With pleasure, sir."

"Oh, don't bother to take it down. I can see it quite well as it is. How much is it?"

"Fourteen hundred and thirty-two rupees, sir."

The young man frowned as if to suggest, "Oh so much."

"You have only to select, sir," said the carpet dealer amiably, "and we will reduce the price to the minimum."

"Thank you so much," the young man said approvingly. "A fine carpet indeed, I'll come again some time," and he walked away.

The cream colour rose which adorned the lapel of his overcoat had slipped and was about to fall. He adjusted it with a peculiar smile of satisfaction.

He was now walking along the pavement near the High Courts. He had been roaming about for quite a long time, but his spirits were still high; he was neither tired nor bored.

At this part of the Mall the crowd of pedestrians had thinned down and there were quite long stretches of empty pavement between one group and the other. The young man as he went along tried to spin his cane around one finger, but in this attempt he dropped it.

"Oh, sorry," he exclaimed and bending down picked it up.

Meanwhile a young couple who had been walking behind him passed by and went ahead of him. The youth was tall and was wearing black corduroy trousers and a leather jacket with a zip. The girl wore a floppy shalwar of white satin and a green coat. She was short and bulky.

The young man was delighted to watch this spectacle and kept on walking behind them.

So far the young man had found little to interest him among the persons he had observed that evening. He had been, perhaps, too deeply engrossed in himself.

He followed them closely hoping to get a glimpse of their faces and to hear more of their talk.

By now they had reached the big cross-roads near the General Post Office. The pair stopped for a moment, then after crossing the Mall headed toward McLeod Road.

When the couple had walked some hundred yards ahead of him, he hurriedly moved after them. Hardly had he reached half way across the road when a truck full of bricks came from behind like a gust of wind and crushing him down speeded off towards McLeod Road. The driver of the truck had heard a shriek and had actually for a moment slowed down, but realizing that something serious had happened, had taken advantage of the darkness and had sped away into the night. Two or three passers-by who had witnessed the accident shouted: "Stop him take the number," but the truck was no more to be seen.

In a short while quite a large crowd had collected. A traffic inspector on his motor bike stopped. The young man was badly hurt. There was a lot of blood about and he was in a very precarious state. A car was stopped and he was loaded into it and taken to a nearby hospital. When they reached there he was just alive.

On duty that night in the casualty department were assistant surgeon Khan and two young nurses, Shehnaz and Gill. He was still wearing his brown overcoat and the silk scarf. There were large stains of blood all over his clothes. Someone had, out of sympathy, placed

the young man's green felt hat on his chest so that it should not be lost.

"Seems quite well-to-do." Nurse Shehnaz said to Nurse Gill, to which she replied in a lower tone:

"All toggged up for Saturday night, poor chap."

"Did they catch the driver?"

"No he got away."

"What a pity!"

In the operating theatre the assistant surgeon and the two nurses with their faces concealed behind masks, were attending the young man, only their eyes were visible. He was lying on a white marble table. His hair was still smooth against his temples. The strong scented oil with which he had dressed it earlier that evening still gave out a faint odour.

His clothes were now being taken off. The first to be removed was the white silk scarf.

Beneath the scarf there was neither a tie nor a collar nor even a shirt. When the overcoat was removed it was found that the young man was wearing underneath only an old cotton sweater which was all in holes. Through these holes one could see the dirty vest which was in an even worse state than the sweater. Layers of dirt covered his body. He could not have had a bath for at least two months. Only the upper part of his neck was clean and well powdered.

The shoes and the socks now came off. The shoes were old but brightly polished. As to the socks, in colour and pattern the one was quite different from the other. There were holes at the heels, and where the flesh showed through the holes it was grimed with dirt. He was by now dead and his life-less body lay on the white marble slab.

The following were the few things which were found in the various pockets of his overcoat:

A small black comb, a handkerchief, six annas and a few pies, a half smoked cigarette, a little diary in which the names and addresses of a few people were noted, a list of gramophone records and a few handbills which distributors had thrust upon him during his evening promenade.

Alas, his little cane, which was perhaps lost at the time of the accident, was not included in the list.

About the Author

Ghulam Abbas was born in 1909. He got associated with the Radio and also worked for the BBC in London for several years. He earned a lasting reputation as a short story writer. He died of heart attack in November 1982.

Theme

This story is about a young man who conceals his poverty by dint of his overcoat. By wearing his overcoat he seems to be a respectable young man going out on the Mall on

Saturday evening but when he's crushed by a truck and dies in the hospital, the doctor and the nurses come to know what a destitute he was.

Reading Notes

sleek	smooth and glossy
icy gusts	biting cold puffs of wind
ambling	move with gentle gait
promenade	pleasure walk
dandy	fashionable
profligate	recklessly extravagant
lapels	part of either side of coat
well creased	well ironed
mite	very small object
connoisseur	expert, one who can appreciate
amiably	respectfully
thinned down	became less
togged	dress, garment

EXERCISES

1. **Choose the correct answer.**
 - i. What was the colour of the overcoat of the young man?
 - a) It was red.
 - b) It was brown.
 - c) It was green.
 - d) It was black.
 - ii. What happened when the evening advanced?
 - a) The weather became pleasant.
 - b) The cold became more intense.
 - c) The pleasant air began to blow.
 - d) The sky was covered with clouds and it started raining.
 - iii. What was the condition of the overcoat, which the young man was wearing?
 - a) It was old.
 - b) It was new.
 - c) It was ragged.
 - d) It was full of dust.

- iv. When the young man visited the music shop what did he find?
- There were musical instruments in the shop.
 - There was nothing in the shop.
 - He found many people in the shop.
 - There were books in the shop.
- v. When the young man died in the hospital after the accident what amount of money was discovered on him?
- rupees 200 only
 - only six annas and a few pies
 - Nothing was found in his pocket.
 - only rupees 51
- vi. What were the names of 2 nurses who were on duty in the hospital?
- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| a) Nasreen and Jamila | b) Shehnaz and Gill |
| c) Zakia and Surraya | d) Zahida and Kausar |
- vii. What was the owner of the shop wearing on his head?
- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a) a cap | b) silk turban |
| c) wearing nothing | d) a handkerchief of green colour |
- viii. After accident when the driver sped away what were the words which were uttered by the passers-by
- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| a) catch him | b) stop him |
| c) kill him | d) follow him |
- ix. After the accident what was the state of the young man?
- He was in a very precarious state.
 - He was in a stable state.
 - He was in a normal state.
 - He bled profusely.
- x. After the accident what was the first thing removed from the body of the young man?
- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| a) overcoat | b) shoes and socks |
| c) white silk scarf | d) an old cotton sweater |

2. Answer the following questions.

- What was the colour of the overcoat of the young man?
- How did he look like?
- Why did the people come out on the Mall?

- iv. Who were the people wearing such dress and had come on the Mall?
- v. Why was the cat shivering?
- vi. Why did the driver of the truck speed away after the accident?
- vii. Who took the young man to the hospital?
- viii. What kind of music was played in one of the restaurants?

3. Answer the following questions in not less than 100 words.

- i. Give the list of the articles, which were found from the coat of the young man.
- ii. What is the moral of the story?
- iii. Write a gist of the story in ten lines.
- iv. What is the theme of the story?