Ten Rupees

The afternoon the shipping orders are posted, the men struggle aboard the narrow gauge railroad cars, their barracks bags bulging, and settle in for the trip from Bombay to Calcutta. The Americans are assigned to the last ten cars, the British to the first ten. Bunks in the sleeping sections are long wood slats; the men wake up each morning with stiff and slotted backs.

The train stops many times. At each pause, the British jump off and rush to the locomotive. The Americans discover that the boiler is a source of steaming water. "The Limeys can't do without their tea!"

They pass through villages, one scattering of huts after another. In the fields scraggily-looking farmers, their thin oxen pulling wooden plows, labor across the rocky land.

In the pale light of morning at the first stop on the third day, a soldier steps down to stretch. "Sahib, sahib," calls a woman's voice. In the dim light, he squints to see her arms held out toward him, holding a ragged bundle. "Ten rupees, sahib, ten rupees." The bundle moves. A baby whimpers. "Ten rupees."

Harry Spigle