



VINTAGE

A MEETING BY THE RIVER

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

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About the Book

Breaking a long silence Oliver, a young Englishman, writes to his elder brother, Patrick. Oliver, the idealistic younger brother is living in a Hindu Monastery and has decided to take his final monastic vows. Patrick, a successful publisher and a married man with a skeleton in his cupboard, decides to visit Oliver to persuade him not renounce the world.

First published in 1967, *A Meeting by the River* delicately depicts the complexity of sibling relationships and dramatizes the conflict between sexuality and spirituality.

About the Author

Christopher Isherwood was born in Cheshire in 1904. He began to write at university and later moved to Berlin, where he gave English lessons to support himself. He witnessed first hand the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany and some of his best works, such as *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, draw on these experiences. He created the character of Sally Bowles, later made famous as the heroine of the musical *Cabaret*. Isherwood travelled with W.H. Auden to China in the late 1930s before going with him to America in 1939 which became his home for the rest of his life. He died on 4 January 1986.

Also by Christopher Isherwood

All the Conspirators
The Memorial
Mr Norris Changes Trains
Lions and Shadows
Goodbye to Berlin
Prater Violet
The Condor and the Cows
The World in the Evening
Down There on a Visit
A Single Man
Kathleen and Frank
Christopher and His Kind
My Guru and His Disciple

With Don Bachardy
October

With W. H. Auden
The Dog Beneath the Skin
The Ascent of F6
On the Frontier
Journey to a War

TO GERALD HEARD

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

A Meeting by the River

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

To give this story an authentic background, I have set it in a real place, on the Ganges near Calcutta. But the story and its characters have no connection whatsoever with any existing monastery or monastic order, in India or elsewhere.

C. I.

Dear Patrick,

I suppose you'll be surprised to hear from me after this long silence—almost as surprised as I should be to hear from you. We seem tacitly agreed on one point at least, that there's no sense in exchanging letters just for the sake of chatter. I know you're a very busy man and I shouldn't dream of bothering you, if a situation hadn't arisen which threatens to become awkward.

Yesterday I got a letter from Mother telling me that you're in the United States on business and that you may be going on from there to some part (unspecified) of southern Asia. She ends by saying wouldn't it be nice if you were able to come to India and visit me.

Of course this may be just Mother's usual vague talk. She is utterly vague as always, says you're in Los Angeles but doesn't give your address there, which is why I'm sending this letter to your home address in London, to be forwarded. She doesn't even seem to know what this business of yours is. Ordinarily I'd take it for granted that it was to do with your publishing firm, but do they publish books in Los Angeles? Didn't you once tell me that that was all done on the East Coast? And southern Asia sounds even more unlikely. However, I'm probably out of touch with the march of progress in this as in so many other ways. I certainly have no wish to pry into your affairs.

I'm only writing because of a stupid misunderstanding which has now got to be cleared up without further delay. I

admit I was responsible for it in the first place, though I must say I don't see why I or anyone else should be expected to account for his actions to people they don't really concern. The point is, Mother is still under the impression, and I suppose you and Penelope are too, that I'm here working for the Red Cross in Calcutta, just as I actually was working for them in Germany, up to a year ago. Well as a matter of fact I'm not. I'm in a Hindu monastery a few miles outside the city, on the bank of the Ganges. I mean, I am a monk here.

I won't bore you with the whys and wherefores of all this. I doubt if they could possibly interest you. I'm well aware that my reasons for doing what I've done must seem hopelessly subjective and personal to anyone looking at them from the outside. In any case, reasons cease to be important as soon as a decision has been made that can't be altered. In a little more than two months from now I shall be taking my final vows.

I simply want to ask you a favour. It's a big one, I know. Will you tell Mother about this for me? I have let things slide so long that it has become almost impossible for me to tell her myself. From me she'd expect a lengthy explanation and that would involve me in all kinds of oversimplifications and rationalizations in order to make her understand, or imagine she understood. Whereas the very fact that you know almost nothing about the situation should make it relatively easy for you. I'm not asking you to tell any actual lies, but it would be good if you could make her feel that I haven't done anything so very outlandish or extraordinary from your point of view, and that you know I'm all right. Assure her that I'm in perfect health, which is true, and getting enough to eat. The food here is absolutely adequate, though perhaps not by her standards. Those are the only two things she really cares about. If you can manage to reassure her somehow then she'll soon lose interest in the whole business. You always used to be so

clever at calming her down and getting her to accept accomplished facts.

Sorry to be such a nuisance.

Don't bother to answer this.

Oliver

My dear Oliver,

Well, of course this is a tremendous surprise. It's something one simply can't react to quickly—except by saying, which I hope you take for granted, that I wish you well with all my heart in your great new change of direction. It would be impertinent of me to claim that I understand, even dimly, what made you do it. How could I? I just have to trust your judgement and believe that you've done what you had to do and followed your vision of the truth to its logical conclusion.

I don't want to embarrass you, but I feel that this is the right moment to tell you I have always admired you enormously, far more than perhaps you realize. (In fact I'm willing to bet you don't realize it at all!) When we were both boys, I must have seemed to you a very usual, cold and stand-offish sort of elder brother, part of an Establishment against which you naturally rebelled. I was probably stuffier than I shall ever be again in my life, and in a way older; when I look back on that public school persona of mine nowadays I feel positively juvenile by comparison! And, alas, I know only too well that I brought that persona with me whenever I came home. Throughout the holidays I remained a prefect, acutely conscious that you were both my junior and A Junior. If we'd been at the same school—thank God we weren't!—I'd have had the power to order you around and even beat your backside with a cane. No doubt I asserted myself all the more because you were a good deal bigger than I was, even then. I am sure I greatly resented that, though I would never have admitted it!

I think you'll agree that my attitude did change, after we grew up. I know I did my damndest to make you feel that it had. If I didn't altogether succeed, it was because I was secretly in awe of you, which made me shy and sometimes tactless. You always appeared to be so strong and self-sufficient. You made no compromises. You didn't even seem to know there were any compromises one could make! You felt a call to do something—your friends The Friends call it a 'concern' if I remember rightly—and so you went straight ahead and did it. As I watched you, I couldn't help feeling awfully corrupt and shop-soiled, because I'm so different.

But it's really a waste of time, apologizing for the Past. Let's look ahead! You know, there's one great advantage that you and I have now—that it's been such an age since we last saw each other, more than six years! So when we do meet again—if we ever do!?—we should be able to talk to each other pretty objectively. Any little frictions we may have had will have become unimportant. I can only speak for myself, of course, but I know that's how I shall feel.

Naturally I'll do my best to reassure Mother, as you ask me to. But, Oliver, I must say you don't give me much to go on! I know there are aspects of your new life which I couldn't hope to understand, and you are right not to even try to explain them to me. I do protest, though, against your assumption that I'm not interested in what you call the whys and wherefores. I am *deeply* interested, and on my own account quite as much as on yours.

It would help me enormously with Mother if you wouldn't mind answering just these four questions (very crude ones, I'm afraid, but bear with me!): How did you come under the influence of your new beliefs? How long ago did it happen? (Not very long, I assume, since I know you've only been in India a year at the most.) You speak of taking your 'final vows'. Will that mean that you'll then become incommunicado? Is there any hope of our ever seeing you again in England?

If you could scribble some kind of answers on a postcard, no matter how brief, I should at least know better how to break the news. But if you prefer not to, I shall respect your silence, of course. And if I don't hear from you I'll cope with the situation as well as I can, relying on my (not inconsiderable) powers of invention!

And, dear Oliver, I can't tell you how glad I am to have had at least this word from you. As you rightly say, we are neither of us very communicative. But perhaps I might add in self-excuse that Penelope and I stopped writing because we honestly felt you didn't want to be bothered. I must remind you that you paid two or three visits to England during those years you were working over in Munich. No doubt you were on Red Cross business and pressed for time. Still, you managed to travel all the way up to Chapel Bridge and see Mother. But you never once looked us up while you were in London, or even telephoned!

Affectionately, as always,
Patrick

Dear Patrick,

Thank you for your letter. It makes me feel I owe you an apology. I see now how cold and superior my letter must have sounded. It was insufferable of me to write to you in that tone, and at the same time burden you with telling Mother. My curtness and rudeness were due to the fact that I felt terribly embarrassed to be asking you to do this for me. When you wrote back so nicely, I was ashamed. It's obvious that I at least owe you a proper explanation, in place of that ultimatum, and now I'll do my best to give you one, though it won't be easy. No, of course I didn't really think you wouldn't be interested! I only said that in self-defence.

The first thing I have to correct is your quite logical supposition that my decision to become a monk is

something very recent, made since my arrival in India. Which would mean that it was an impulsive, not to say hysterical act, prompted no doubt by the influence of the Mysterious Orient! Anyone who knows Hindu religious life will be able to assure you that I couldn't conceivably be taking my final vows within a year of becoming a monk, at least not in any reputable monastic order. But how could you be expected to know that?

No, this isn't a recent decision, or an impulsive one. The whole thing started long ago. In fact, it had already started when I last saw you all in England in 1958. If you remember, I'd been offered the German job through the International Red Cross in Geneva, and I'd flown on from there to interview the people in the Munich office about it and had then decided to take it.

It was while I was in Munich that first time that I got to know a Hindu monk who'd been living there for some years. He'd formed a small group who used to meet with him several times a week to practise meditation and study Vedanta philosophy. I ran across this monk quite by accident—as it then seemed to me, anyway—in a public library, and we began talking. Something about him fascinated me, from the first moment; it was his very quiet unemphatic air of assurance. What I mean is, nearly all the other people who had ever struck me as having great assurance were also self-assertive and complacent, in fact downright stupid. So I felt I was meeting a new sort of human being, almost. He wasn't at all impressive physically. He was small and frail and skinny, with untidy grey hair cut rather short, and he can't have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. He was in his middle fifties but looked older, except that his eyes were young, very clear and bright.

He had, as I say, this extraordinary calm assurance, without being in the least aggressive. It was I who was aggressive—as you may well imagine, knowing me! When I

found out in a general way what he believed, I told him without making any bones about it my opinion of people who try to save their own souls while neglecting the ills of their neighbours' bodies. That was how I saw the human situation then, and it seemed awfully simple to me. You only had to choose between social service and private selfishness. The very idea of mysticism set my teeth on edge—I was even privately critical of the Quakers because they wasted valuable work-time on their silent periods—and Hindu mysticism seemed the last straw!

I can see clearly now, looking back, that my attitude was too simplified to be absolutely sincere and that I wasn't nearly as sure of it as I imagined I was. If you do the kind of work I'd been doing, you keep getting your nose rubbed in the fact that for millions of people in many parts of the world life is basically hell. Sometimes the sheer horror of this blots out everything else, and your efforts to do something about it seem futile and idiotic and almost indecent, a form of self-indulgence. What's the use of it all, you think. Aren't I merely using these wretched people to salve my own conscience? I had been through quite a few of these bouts of desperation myself, but I had always got over them by working extra hard and then tried to forget them altogether.

So perhaps I was actually less unwilling than I realized to be receptive to this strange little man. Anyhow, as we went on talking, he somehow made me start questioning the very thing I thought I was most certain about, my work and why it was worthwhile. I began defending it even though he wasn't attacking it, and whenever I found I couldn't make my defence hold water I looked at him in dismay and he smiled!

I don't mean, of course, that all this happened the first time we met. It's impossible for me now to remember our conversations separately, because they were really all parts of the same conversation, which kept being dropped and