

By RUDYARD KIPLING.

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Furrah! Hurrah! A soldier's life for me!  
Shout, boys, shout, for it makes you jolly and free!

—The Ramrod Corps

People who have seen state that one of the quaintest spectacles of human frailty is an outbreak of hysterics in a girls' school. It starts without warning, generally on a hot afternoon, among the elder pupils. A girl giggles till the giggle gets beyond control. Then she throws up her head and cries, "Honk, honk, honk!" like a wild goose, and tears mix with the laughter. If the mistress be wise, she will say something severe at this point to check matters. If she be tender hearted and send for a drink of water, the chances are largely in favor of another girl laughing at the afflicted one and herself collapsing. Thus the trouble spreads and may end in half of what answers to the lower sixth of a boys' school rocking and whooping together. Given a week of warm weather, two stately promenades per diem, a heavy mutton and rice meal in the middle of the day, a certain amount of nagging from the teachers and a few other things, some really amazing effects can be secured. At least this is what folk say who have had experience.

Now, the mother superior of a convent and the colonel of a British infantry regiment would be justly shocked at any comparison being made between their respective charges. But it is a fact that under certain circumstances Thomas in bulk can be worked up into dithering, rippling hysteria. He does not weep, but he shows his trouble unmistakably, and the consequences get into the newspapers, and all the good and virtuous people who hardly know a Martini from a Snider say, "Take away the brute's ammunition!"

Thomas isn't a brute, and his business, which is to look after the virtuous people, demands that he shall have his ammunition to his hand. He doesn't wear silk stockings, and he really ought to be supplied with a new adjective to help him to express his opinions, but for all that, he is a great man. If you call him "the heroic defender of the national honor" one day and "a brutal and licentious soldier" the next, you naturally bewilder him, and he looks upon you with suspicion. There is nobody to speak for Thomas except people who have theories to work off on him, and nobody understands Thomas except Thomas, and he does not know what is the matter with himself.

That is the prologue. This is the story. Corporal Slime was engaged to be married to Miss Jhansi McKenna, whose history is well known in the regiment and elsewhere. He had secured his colonel's leave, and being popular with the men, every arrangement had been made to give the wedding what Private Ortheris called "ecklar." It fell in the heart of the hot weather, and after the wedding Slime was going up to the hills with the bride. None the less, Slime's grievance was that the affair would be only a hired carriage wedding, and he felt that the "ecklar" of that was meager. Miss McKenna did not care so much. The sergeant's wife was helping her to make her wedding dress, and she was very busy. Slime was, just then, the only moderately contented man in barracks. All the rest were more or less miserable.

And they had so much to make them happy too! All their work was over at 8 in the morning, and for the rest of the day they could lie on their backs and smoke canteen plug and swear at the punkal coolies. They enjoyed a fine, full flesh meal in the middle of the day and then threw themselves down on their cots and sweated and slept till it was cool enough to go out with their "towny," whose vocabulary contained less than 600 words and the adjective and whose views on every conceivable question they had heard many months before.

There was the canteen, of course, and there was the temperance room with the secondhand papers in it, but a man of any profession cannot read for eight hours a day in a temperature of 96 or 98 degrees in the shade, running up sometimes to 103 degrees at midnight. Very few men, even though they get a pannikin of flat, stale, muddy beer and hide it under their cots, can continue drinking for six hours a day. One man tried, but he died, and nearly the whole regiment went to his funeral because it gave them something to do. It was too early for the modified excitement of fever or cholera. The men could only wait and wait and wait and watch the shadow of the barrack creeping across the blinding white dust. That was a gay life!

They lounged about canteens—it was too hot for any sort of game and almost too hot for vice—and huddled themselves in the evening and filled themselves to distension with the healthy nitrogenous food provided for them, and the more they stoked the less exercise they took and more explosive they grew. Then the tempers began to wear away, and men fell a-brooding over insults real or imaginary. They had nothing else to think of. The tone of the "repartees" changed, and instead of saying light heartedly, "I'll knock your silly face in!" men grew laboriously polite and hinted that the canteens were not big enough for themselves and their enemy, and that there would be more space for one of the two in a place which it is not polite to mention.

It may have been the devil who arranged the thing, but the fact of the matter is that Losson had for a long time observe, one thing to fire and another to be fired at.

Then the instinct of the chase flared up. The news spread from barrack to barrack, and the men doubled out in intent on the capture of Simmons, the wild beast, who was heading for the cavalry parade ground, stopping now and again to send back a shot and a curse in the direction of his pursuers.

"I'll learn you to spy on me!" he shouted. "I'll learn you to give me dorg's names! Come on the 'ole lot of you! Colonel John Anthony Deever, C. B.!"—he turned toward the infantry mess and shook his rifle—"you think yourself the devil of a man, but I tell you that if you put your ugly old carcass outside of that door, I'll make you the poorest looking man in the army. Come out, Colonel John Anthony Deever, C. B.! Come out an see me practice on the range. I'm the crack shot of the 'ole bloomin' battalion." In proof of which statement Simmons fired at the lighted windows of the messhouse.

"Private Simmons, E. comp'ny, on the cavalry parade ground, sir, with 30 rounds," said a sergeant breathlessly to the colonel. "Shootin' right an' left, sir. Shot Private Losson. What's to be done, sir?"

Colonel John Anthony Deever, C. B., sallied out, only to be saluted by a spurt of dust at his feet. "Pull up!" said the second in command. "I don't want my step in that way, colonel. He's as dangerous as a mad dog."

"Shoot him like one, then," said the colonel bitterly. "If he won't take his chance My regiment too! If it had been the Towheads, I could have understood."

Private Simmons had occupied a strong position near a well on the edge of the parade ground and was defying the regiment to come on. The regiment was not anxious to comply with the request, for there is small honor in being shot by a fellow private. Only Corporal Slime, rifle in hand, threw himself down on the ground and wormed his way toward the well.

"Don't shoot," said he to the men round him. "Like as not you'll 'it me. I'll catch the beggar lion."

Simmons ceased shouting for awhile, and the noise of trap wheels could be heard across the plain. Major Oldyne, commanding the horse battery, was coming back from a dinner in the civil lines: was driving after his usual custom—that is to say, as fast as the horse could go.

"A orficer! A bloomin' spangled orficer!" shrieked Simmons. "I'll make a scarecrow of that orficer! The trap stopped."

"What's this?" demanded the major of gunners. "You, there—drop your rifle!"

"Why, it's Jerry Blazes! I ain't got no quarrel with you, Jerry Blazes. Pass, friend, an' all's well!"

But Jerry Blazes had not the faintest intention of passing a dangerous murderer. He was, as his adoring battery swore long and fervently, without knowledge of fear, and they were surely the best judges, for Jerry Blazes, it was notorious, had done his possible to kill a man each time the battery went out.

He walked toward Simmons with the intention of rushing him and knocking him down.

"Don't make me do it, sir," said Simmons. "I ain't got nothin' ag'in you. Ah? You would?" The major broke into a run. "Take that, then!"

The major dropped with a bullet through his shoulder, and Simmons stood over him. He had lost the satisfaction of killing Losson in the desired way, but here was a helpless body to his hand. Should he slip in another cartridge and blow off the head or with the butt smash in the white face? He stopped to consider, and a cry went up from the far side of the parade ground. "He's killed Jerry Blazes!"

But in the shelter of the well pillars Simmons was safe, except when he stepped out to fire. "I'll blow your 'andsome' 'ead off, Jerry Blazes," said Simmons reflectively. "Six an' three is nine an' one is ten, an' that leaves me another 19 an' one for myself." He tugged at the string of the second packet of ammunition. Corporal Slime crawled out of the shadow of a bank into the moonlight.

"I see you!" said Simmons. "Come a bit furdur on, an' I'll do for you."

"I'm comin'," said Corporal Slime briefly. "You done a bad day's work, Sim. Come out 'ere an' come back with me."

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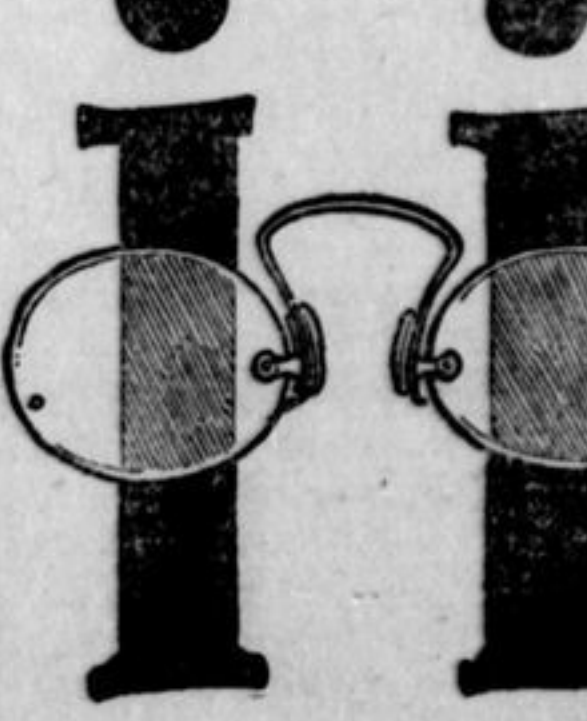
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