

THE DUNHAM CHRONICLE

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THE PHANTOM RICKSHAW.

—BY— RUDYARD KIPLING.

May no ill dreams disturb my rest Nor powers of darkness injure me!—Evening Hymn. One of the few advantages that India has over England is a great knowability. After five years' service a man is directly or indirectly acquainted with 200 or 300 civilians in his province.

Globe trotters who expect entertainment as a right have, even within my memory, blunted this open heartedness, but none the less today, if you belong to the inner circle and are neither a bear nor a black sheep, all houses are open to you, and our small world is very, very kind and helpful.

Rickett of Kanartha staid with Polder of Kumaon some 15 years ago. He meant to stay two nights, but was knocked down by rheumatic fever, and for six weeks disorganized Polder's establishment, stopped Polder's work and nearly died in Polder's bedroom. Polder behaves as though he had been placed under eternal obligation by Rickett and yearly sends the little Ricketts a box of presents and toys. It is the same everywhere. The men who do not take the trouble to conceal from you their opinion that you are an incompetent ass and the women who blacken your character and misunderstand your wife's amusements will work themselves to the bone in your behalf if you fall sick or into serious trouble.

Heatherleigh, the doctor, kept in addition to his regular practice a hospital on his private account—an arrangement of loose boxes for incurables, his friend called it—but it was really a sort of fitting up shed for craft that had been damaged by stress of weather. The weather in India is often sultry, and since the tale of bricks is always a fixed quantity and the only liberty allowed is permission to work overtime and get no thanks men occasionally break down and become as mixed as the metaphors in this sentence.

Heatherleigh is the dearest doctor that ever was, and his invariable prescription to all his patients is, "Lie low, go slow and keep cool." He says that more men are killed by overwork than the importance of this world justifies. He maintains that overwork slew Pansy, who died under his hands about three years ago. He has, of course, the right to speak authoritatively, and he laughs at my theory that there was a crack in Pansy's head and a little bit of the dark world came through and pressed him to death. "Pansy went off the handle," says Heatherleigh, "after the stimulus of long leave at home. He may or he may not have behaved like a blackguard to Mrs. Keith-Wessington. My notion is that the work of the Katabundi settlement ran him off his legs, and that he took to brooding and making much of an ordinary P. and O. flirtation. He certainly was engaged to Miss Mannering, and she certainly broke off the engagement. Then he took a feverish chill, and all that nonsense about ghosts developed. Overwork started his illness, kept it alight and killed him, poor devil! Write him off to the system—one man to take the work of two and a half men."

I do not believe this. I used to sit up with Pansy sometimes when Heatherleigh was called out to patients, and I happened to be within claim. The man would make me most unhappy by describing in a low, even voice the progression that was always passing at the bottom of his bed. He had a sick man's command of language. When he recovered, I suggested that he should write out the whole affair from beginning to end, knowing that ink might assist him to ease his mind. When little boys have learned a new bad word, they are never happy till they have chalked it up on a door. And this also is literature.

He was in a high fever while he was writing, and the blood and thunder magazine diction he adopted did not calm him. Two months afterward he was reported fit for duty, but in spite of the fact that he was urgently needed to help an undermanned commission stagger through a deficit he preferred to die, vowing at the last that he was bag ridden. I got his manuscript before he died, and this is his version of the affair, dated 1885.

My doctor tells me that I need rest and change of air. It is not improbable that I shall get both ere long—rest that neither the redecoated messenger nor the midday gun can break, and change of air far beyond that which any homeward bound steamer can give me. In the meantime I am resolved to stay where I am and, in flat defiance of my doctor's orders, to take all the world into my confidence. You shall learn for yourselves the precise nature of my malady and shall, too, judge for yourselves whether any man born of woman on this weary earth was ever so tormented as I.

August Kitty and I were engaged. The next day I met those accursed "magpie" jhampanies at the back of Jakko and, moved by some passing sentiment of pity, stopped to tell Mrs. Wessington everything. She knew it already.

"So I hear you're engaged, Jack, dear." Then, without a moment's pause "I'm sure it's all a mistake—a hideous mistake. We shall be as good friends some day. Jack as we ever were."

My answer might have made even a man wince. It cut the dying woman before me like the blow of a whip. "Please forgive me, Jack. I didn't mean to make you angry. But it's true, it's true!"

And Mrs. Wessington broke down completely. I turned away and left her to finish her journey in peace, feeling, but only for a moment or two, that I had been an unutterably mean hound. I looked back and saw that she had turned her rickshaw with the idea, I suppose, of overtaking me.

The scene and its surroundings were photographed on my memory. The rain swept sky (we were at the end of the wet weather), the sodden, dingy pines, the muddy road and the black powder riven cliffs formed a gloomy background against which the black and white liveries of the jhampanies, the yellow paneled rickshaw and Mrs. Wessington's down bowed golden head stood out clearly. She was holding her handkerchief in her left hand and was leaning back exhausted against the rickshaw cushions. I turned my horse up a bypath near the Sanjowile reservoir and literally ran away. Once I fancied I heard a faint call of "Jack!" This may have been imagination. I never stopped to verify it. Ten minutes later I came across Kitty on horseback, and in the delight of a long ride with her forgot all about the interview.

A week later Mrs. Wessington died, and the inexpressible burden of her existence was removed from my life. I went to Plainsward perfectly happy. Before three months were over I had forgotten all about her, except that at times the discovery of some of her old letters reminded me unpleasantly of our bygone relationship. By January I had disinterred what was left of our correspondence from among my scattered belongings and had burned it. At the beginning of April of this year, 1885, I was at Simla—semidiverted Simla—once more and was deep in lover's talks and walks with Kitty. It was decided that we should be married at the end of June. You will understand, therefore, that, loving Kitty as I did, I am not saying too much when I pronounce myself to have been at that time the happiest man in India.

Fourteen delightful days passed almost before I noticed their flight. Then, aroused to the sense of what was proper among mortals circumstanced as we were, I pointed out to Kitty that an engagement ring was the outward and visible sign of her dignity as an engaged girl and that she must forthwith come to Hamilton's to be measured for one. Up to that moment, I give you my word, we had completely forgotten so trivial a matter. To Hamilton's we accordingly went on the 15th of April, 1885. Remember that—whatever my doctor may say to the contrary—I was then in perfect health, enjoying a well balanced mind and an absolutely tranquil spirit. Kitty and I entered Hamilton's shop together, and there, regardless of the order of affairs, I measured Kitty for the ring in the presence of the amused assistant. The ring was a sapphire with two diamonds. We then rode out down the slope that leads to the Combermere bridge and Peliti's shop.

While my waler was cautiously feeling his way over the loose shale and Kitty was laughing and chattering at my side; while all Simla—that is to say, as much of it as had then come from the plains—was grouped round the reading room and Peliti's veranda, I was aware that some one, apparently at a vast distance, was calling me by my Christian name. It struck me that I had heard the voice before, but when and where I could not at once determine. In the short space it took to cover the road between the path from Hamilton's shop and the first plank of the Combermere bridge I had thought over half a dozen people who might have committed such a solecism and had eventually decided that it must have been some singing in my ears. Immediately opposite Peliti's shop my eye was arrested by the sight of four jhampanies in "magpie" livery, pulling a yellow paneled, cheap, bazaar rickshaw. In a moment my mind flew back to the previous season and Mrs. Wessington with a sense of irritation and disgust. Was it not enough that the woman was dead and done with without her black and white servitors reappearing to spoil the day's happiness? Whoever employed them now I thought I would call upon and ask as a personal favor to change her jhampanies' livery. I would hire the men myself and if necessary buy their coats from off their backs. It is impossible to say here what a flood of undesirable memories their presence evoked.

"Kitty," I cried, "there are poor Mrs. Wessington's jhampanies turned up again! I wonder who has them now?" Kitty had known Mrs. Wessington slightly last season and had always been interested in the sickly woman. "What? Where?" she asked. "I can't see them anywhere." Even as she spoke her horse, swerving from a laden mule, threw himself directly in front of the advancing rickshaw. I had scarcely time to utter a word of warning when, to my unutterable horror, horse and rider passed through men and carriage as if they had been thin air.

"What's the matter?" cried Kitty. "What made you call out so foolishly, Jack? If I am engaged, I don't want all creation to know about it. There

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LANKETS AND YARNS ALWAYS ON HAND.

S. SCOTT.

was lots of space between the mule and the veranda, and if you think I can't ride—There!"

W. D. CONNOR

Whereupon willful Kitty set off, her dainty little head in the air, at a hand gallop in the direction of the band stand, fully expecting, as she herself afterward told me, that I should follow her. What was the matter? Nothing, indeed; either that I was mad or drunk or that Simla was haunted with devils. I reined in my impatient cob and turned round. The rickshaw had turned, too, and now stood immediately facing me, near the left railing of the Combermere bridge.

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"Jack! Jack, darling! There was no mistake about the words this time. They rang through my brain as if they had been shouted in my ear. 'It's some hideous mistake, I'm sure. Please forgive me, Jack, and let's be friends again.' The rickshaw hood had fallen back, and inside, as I hope and pray daily for the death I dread by night, sat Mrs. Keith-Wessington, handkerchief in hand and golden head bowed on her breast.

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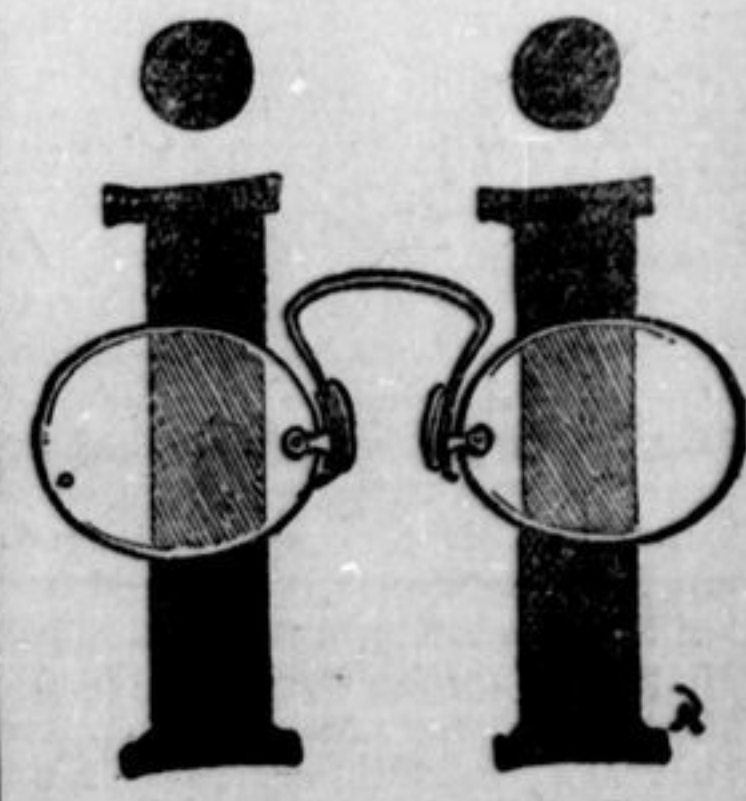
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[TO BE CONTINUED.]