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KIM.

By RUDYARD KIPLING.

CHAPTER XIV.

My brother kneels (so saith Kabir)
To stone and brass in heathen-wise,
But in my brother's voice I hear
My own unanswered agonies.
His God is what his Fates assign—
His prayer is all the world's and mine.
KABIR

At moonrise the cautious coolies got under way. The lama, refreshed by his sleep and the spirit, needed no more than Kim's shoulder to bear him along—a silent, swift-striding man. They held the shale-sprinkled grass for an hour, swept round the shoulder of an immovable cliff, and climbed into a new country entirely blocked off from all sight of Chini valley. A huge pasture-ground ran up fan-shaped to the living snow. At its base was perhaps half an acre of flat land, on which stood a few soil and timber huts. Behind them— for, hill-fashion, they were perched on the edge of all things—the ground fell sheer two thousand feet to Shamlegh midden, where never man has yet set foot.

The men made no motion to divide the plunder till they had seen the lama bedded down in the best room of the place, with Kim shamponing his feet, Mohammedan fashion.

"We will send food," said the Aochung man, "and the red-topped kilt. By dawn there will be none to give evidence, one way or the other. If anything is not needed in the kilt—see here!"

He pointed through the window— opening into space that was filled with moonlight reflected from the snow—and threw out an empty whiskey-bottle.

"No need to listen for the fall. This is the world's end," he said, and swung off. The lama looked forth, a hand on either sill, with eyes that shone like yellow opals. From the enormous pit before him white peaks lifted themselves yearning to the moonlight. The rest was as the darkness of interstellar space.

"These," he said slowly, "are indeed my Hills. Thus should a man abide, perched above the world, separated from delights, considering vast matters."

"Yes; if he has a chela to prepare tea for him, and to fold a blanket for his head, and to chase out calving cows."

A smoky lamp burned in a niche but the full moonlight beat it down; and by the mixed light, stooping above the food-bag and cups, Kim moved like a tall ghost.

"Al! But now I have let the blood cool my head still beats and drums, and there is a cord round the back of my neck."

"No wonder. It was a strong blow. May he who dealt it —"

"But for my own passions there would have been no evil."

"What evil? Thou hast saved the Sahibs from death they deserved a hundred times."

"The lesson is not well learnt, chela." The lama came to rest on a folded blanket, as Kim went forward with his evening routine. "The blow was but a shadow upon a shadow. Evil in itself—my legs weary apace these latter days!—it met evil in me—anger, rage, and a lust to return evil. These wrought in my blood, woke tumult in my stomach, and dazzled my ears." Here he drank scalding block-tea ceremonially, taking the hot cup from Kim's hand. "Had I been passionless, the evil blow would have done only bodily evil—a scar, or a bruise—which is illusion. But my mind was not abstracted, for rushed in straightway a lust to let the Spiti men kill. In fighting that lust, my soul was torn and wrenched beyond a thousand blows. Not till I had repeated the Blessings (he meant the Buddhist Beatitudes) did I achieve

calm. But the evil planted in me by that moment's carelessness works out to its end. Just is the Wheel, swerving not a hair! Learn the lesson, chela."

"It is too high for me," Kim muttered. "I am still all shaken. I am glad I hurt the man."

"I felt that sleeping upon thy knees, in the wood below. It quieted me in my dreams—the evil in thy soul working through to mine. Yet on the other hand—he loosed his rosary—I have acquired merit by saving two lives—the lives of those that wronged me. Now I must see into the Cause of Things. The boat of my soul staggers."

"Sleep, and be strong. That is wisest."

"I meditate: there is a need greater than thou knowest."

Till the dawn, hour after hour, as the moonlight paled on the high peaks, and that which had been belted blackness on the sides of the far hills showed as tender green forest, the lama stared fixedly at the wall. From time to time he groaned. Outside the barred door, where discomfited kine came to ask for their old stable, Shamlegh and the coolies gave itself up to plunder and riotous living. The Aochung man was their leader, and once they had opened the Sahibs' tinned foods and found that they were very good they dared not turn back. Shamlegh kitchen-midden took the damage.

When Kim, after a night of bad dreams, stole forth to brush his teeth in the morning chill, a fair-coloured woman with turquoise studded head-gear, drew him aside.

"The others have gone. They left thee this kilt as the promise was. I do not love Sahibs, but thou wilt make us a charm in return for it. We do not wish little Shamlegh to get a bad name on account of the accident. I am the Woman of Shamlegh." She looked him over with bold, bright eyes, unlike the usual furtive glance of hillwomen.

"Assuredly, but it must be done in secret."

She raised the heavy kilt like a toy and slung it into her own hut.

"Out and bar the door! Let none come near (till it is finished)."

"But afterwards—we may talk?"

Kim tilted the kilt on the floor—a cascade of survey instruments, books, diaries, letters, maps, and queerly scented native correspondence. At the very bottom was an embroidered bag covering a sealed, gilded, and illuminated document such as one King sends to another. Kim caught his breath with delight, and reviewed the situation from a Sahib's point of view.

"The books I do not want. Besides, they are logarithms—survey, I suppose." He laid them aside. "The letters I do not understand, but Colonel Creighton will. They must all be kept. The maps—they draw better maps than me—of course. All the native letters—oh!—and particularly the murasla." He sniffed the embroidered bag. "That must be from Hilar or Bunar, and Hurree Babu spoke truth. By Jove! It is a fine haul. I wish Hurree could know. . . . The rest must go out of the window." He fingered a superb prismatic compass and the shiny top of a theodolite. But after all, a Sahib cannot very well steal, and the things might be inconvenient evidence later. He sorted out every scrap of manuscript, every map, and the native letters. They made one softish slab. The three locked ferril-bucked books, with five worn pocket-books, he put aside.

"The letters and the murasla I must carry inside my coat and under my belt, and the hand-written books I must put into the food-bag. It will be very heavy. No. I do not think

there is anything more. If there is, the coolies have thrown it down the khud, so that is all right. Now you go too." He repacked the kilt with all he meant to lose, and hove it up on to the window-sill. A thousand feet below lay a long, lazy, round shouldered bank of mist, as yet untouched by the morning sun. A thousand feet below that was an hundred year old pine forest. He could see the green tops looking like a bed of moss when a wind eddy thinned the cloud.

"No! I don't think anyone will go after you!"

The wheeling basket vomited its contents it is dropped. The theodolite hit a jutting cliff ledge and exploded like a shell; the books, inkstands, paint-boxes, compasses and rulers showed for a few seconds like a swarm of bees. Then they vanished; and though Kim, hanging half out of window, strained his young ears, never a sound came up from the gulf.

"Five hundred—a thousand rupees could not buy them," he thought sorrowfully. "It was verree wasteful, but I have all their other stuff—everything they did—I hope. . . . The deuce am I to tell Hurree Babu, and what the deuce am I to do? And my old man is sick. I must tie up the letters in oilcloth. That is something to do first—else they will get all sweated. . . . And I am all alone!" He bound them into a neat packet, swedging down the stiff, sticky, oil-cloth at the corners; his roving life had made him as methodical as an old hunter in matters of the road. Then with double care he packed away the books at the bottom of the food bag.

The woman rapped at the door. "But thou hast made no charm," she said looking about.

"There is no need." Kim had completely overlooked the necessity for a little patter talk. The woman laughed at his confusion irreverently.

"None—for thee. Thou canst cast a spell by the mere winking of an eye. But think of us poor people when thou art gone! They were all too drunk last night to hear a woman. Thou art not drunk?"

"I am a priest," Kim had recovered himself, and the woman being aught but unlovely thought best to stand on his office.

"I warned them that the Sahibs will be angry and will make an inquiry and a report to the Rajah. There is also the Babu with them. Clerks have long tongues."

"Is that all thy trouble?" The plan rose fully formed in Kim's mind, and he smiled ravishly.

"Not all," quoth the woman, putting out a hard, brown hand all covered with turquoise set in silver.

"I can finish that in a breath," he went on quickly. "The Babu is the very hakim (thou has heard of him) who was wandering among the hills by Ziglar. I know him."

"He will tell for the sake of a reward. Sahibs cannot distinguish one hillman from another, but Babus have eyes for men—and women."

"Carry a word to him from me." "There is nothing I would not do for thee."

He accepted the compliment calmly, as men must in lands where women make the love, tore a leaf from a note book, and with a patent idelible

pencil wrote in gross Shikast—the script that bad little boys use when they write dirt on walls: "I have everything that they have written; their pictures of the country, and many letters. Especially the murasla. Tell me what to do. I am at Shamlegh-under-the-Snow. The old man is sick."

"Take this to him. It will altogether shut his mouth. He cannot have gone far."

"Indeed no. They are still in the forest across the spur. Our children went to watch them when the light came, and have cried the news as they moved."

Kim looked his astonishment; but from the edge of the sheep-pasture floated a shrill, kite-like trill. A child tending cattle had picked it up from a brotler or sister on the far side of the slope that commanded Chini valley.

"My husbands are also out there gathering wood." She drew a handful of walnuts from her bosom, split one neatly, and began to eat. Kim affected blank ignorance.

"Dost thou not know the meaning of the walnut—priest?" she said, coyly, and handed him the half-shells.

"Well thought of." He slipped the piece of paper between them quickly. "Hast thou a little wax to close them on this letter?"

The woman sighed aloud, and Kim relented.

"There is no payment till service has been rendered. Carry this to the Babu, and say it was sent by the Son of the Charn."

"Al! Truly! Truly! By a magician—who is like a Sahib."

"Nay. Son of the Charn: and ask if there be any answer."

"But if he offer a rudeness? I—I am afraid."

Kim laughed. "He is, I have no doubt, very tired and very hungry. The Hills make cold bed-fellows. Hai, my"—it was on the tip of his tongue to say Mother, but he turned it to Sister—"thou art a wise and witty woman. By this time all the villages know what has befallen the Sahibs—eh?"

"True. News was at Ziglar by midnight, and by to-morrow should be at Kotgarh. The villages are both afraid and angry."

"No need. Tell the villages to feed the Sahibs and pass them on, in peace. We must get them quietly away from our valleys. To steal is one thing—to kill another. The Babu will understand, and there will be no after-complaints. Be swift. I must tend my master when he wakes."

"So be it. After service—thou hast said?—comes the reward. I am the Woman of Shamlegh, and I hold from the Rajah. I am no common bearer of babes. Shamlegh is thine; hoof and horn and hide; milk and butter. Take or leave."

She turned resolutely uphill, her silver necklaces clicking on her broad breast, to meet the morning sun fifteen hundred feet above them. This time Kim thought in the vernacular as he waxed down the oilskin edges of the packets.

"How can a man follow the Way or the Great Game when he is eternally pestered by women? There was that girl at Akrola by the Ford; and there was the scullion's wife behind the Dovecot—not counting the others—and now comes this one! When I was a child it was well enough, but now I am a man and they will not regard me as a man. Walnuts indeed! Ho! ho! It is almonds in the Plains!"

He went out to levy on the village—not with a begging-bowl, which might do for down-country, but in the manner of a prince. Shamlegh's summer population is only three families—four women and eight or nine men. They were all full of tinned meats—and mixed drinks, from ammoniated quinine to white vodka—

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