

1888

A FRIEND'S FRIEND

Rudyard Kipling

Kipling, Rudyard (1865-1936) - An English novelist, short-story writer, and poet who spent most of his youth in India, and is best known for his children's classics. In 1907, Kipling was the first English writer ever to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. A Friend's Friend (1888) - From "Plain Tales from the Hills," a collection of stories of life in India. A traveler behaves shamelessly at a ball, is rolled up in a carpet, placed in a bullock-cart, and never seen again.

A FRIENDS FRIEND

Wherefore slew you the stranger? He brought me dishonour.

I saddled my mare Bijli. I set him upon her.

I gave him rice and goat's flesh. He bared me to laughter; When he was gone from my tent, swift I followed after, Taking a sword in my hand. The hot wine had filled him: Under the stars he mocked me. Therefore I killed him.

Hadramauti

THIS tale must be told in the first person for many reasons. The man I desire to expose is Tranter of the Bombay side. I want Tranter black-balled at his Club, divorced from his wife, turned out of Service, and cast into prison, until I get an apology from him in writing. I wish to warn the world against Tranter of the Bombay side.

You know the casual way in which men pass on acquaintances in India. It is a great convenience, because you can get rid of a man you don't like by writing a letter of introduction and putting him, with it, into the train. T. G.'s are best treated thus. If you keep them moving, they have no time to say insulting and offensive things about 'Anglo-Indian Society.'

One day, late in the cold weather, I got a letter of preparation from Tranter of the Bombay side, advising me of the advent of a T. G., a man called Jevon; and saying, as usual, that any kindness shown to Jevon would be a kindness to Tranter. Every one knows the regular form of these communications.

Two days later, Jevon turned up with his letter of introduction, and I did what I could for him. He was lint-haired, fresh-coloured, and very English. But he held no views about the Government of India. Nor did he insist on shooting tigers on the Station Mall, as some T. G.'s do. Nor did he call us 'colonists,' and dine in a flannel-shirt and tweeds, under that delusion, as other T. G.'s do. He was well behaved and very grateful for the little I won for him- most grateful of all when I secured him an invitation for the Afghan Ball, and introduced him to a Mrs. Deemes, a lady for whom I had a great respect and admiration, who danced like the shadow of a leaf in a light wind. I set great store by the friendship of Mrs. Deemes; but, had I known what was coming, I would have broken Jevon's neck with a curtain-pole before getting him that invitation.

But I did not know, and he dined at the Club, I think, on the night of the ball. I dined at home. When I went to the dance, the first

man I met asked me whether I had seen Jevon. 'No,' said I. 'He's at the Club. Hasn't he come?'- 'Come!' said the man. 'Yes, he's very much come. You'd better look at him.' I sought for Jevon. I found him sitting on a bench and smiling to himself and a programme. Half a look was enough for me. On that one night, of all others, he had begun a long and thirsty evening, by taking too much! He was breathing heavily through his nose, his eyes were rather red, and he appeared very satisfied with all the earth. I put up a little prayer that the waltzing would work off the wine, and went about feeling uncomfortable. But I saw Jevon walk up to Mrs. Deemes for the first dance, and I knew that all the waltzing on the card was not enough to keep Jevon's rebellious legs steady. That couple went round six times. I counted.

Mrs. Deemes dropped Jevon's arm and came across to me.

I am not going to repeat what Mrs. Deemes said to me; because she was very angry indeed. I am not going to write what I said to Mrs. Deemes, because I didn't say anything. I only wished that I had killed Jevon first and been hanged for it. Mrs. Deemes drew her pencil through all the dances that I had booked with her, and went away, leaving me to remember that what I ought to have said- was that Mrs. Deemes had asked to be introduced to Jevon because he danced well; and that I really had not carefully worked out a plot to insult her. But I realised that argument was no good, and that I had better try to stop Jevon from waltzing me into more trouble. He, however, was gone, and every third dance I set off to hunt for him. This ruined what little pleasure I expected from the entertainment.

Just before supper I caught him, at the buffet with his legs wide apart, talking to a very fat and indignant chaperone. 'If this person is a friend of yours, as I understand he is, I would recommend you to take him home,' said she. 'He is unfit for decent society.' Then I knew that goodness only knew what Jevon had been doing, and I tried to get him away.

But Jevon wasn't going; not he. He knew what was good for him, he did; and he wasn't going to be dictated to by any loconial nigger-driver, he wasn't; and I was the friend who had formed his infant mind and brought him up to buy Benares brassware and fear God so I was; and we would have many more blazing good, drunks together, so we would; and all the she-camels in black silk in the world shouldn't make him withdraw his opinion that there was nothing better than Benedictine to give one an appetite. And then... but he was my guest.

I set him in a quiet corner of the supper-room, and went to find a wall-prop that I could trust. There was a good and kindly Subaltern- may Heaven bless that Subaltern, and make him a Commander-in-Chief!- Who heard of my trouble. He was not dancing himself, and he owned a head like a five-year-old teak-baulks.

He said that he would look after Jevon till the end of the ball. 'Don't suppose you much mind what I do with him?' said he. 'Mind!' said I. 'No! You can murder the beast if you like.' But the Subaltern did not murder him. He trotted off to the supper-room, and sat down by Jevon, drinking peg for peg with him. I saw the two fairly established, and went away, feeling more easy.

When 'The Roast Beef of Old England' sounded, I heard of Jevon's performances between the first dance and my meeting with him at the buffet. After Mrs. Deemes had cast him off, it seems that he had found his way into the gallery, and offered to conduct the Band or to play any instrument in it just as the Bandmaster pleased.

When the Bandmaster refused, Jevon said that he wasn't appreciated, and he yearned for sympathy. So he trundled downstairs and sat out four dances with four girls, and proposed to three of them. One of the girls was a married woman, by the way. Then he went into the whist-room, and fell face-down and wept on the hearth-rug in front of the fire, because he had fallen into a den of card-sharpers, and his Mamma had always warned him against bad company. He had done a lot of other things, too, and had taken about three quarts of mixed liquors. Besides speaking of me in the most scandalous fashion!

All the women wanted him turned out, and all the men wanted him kicked.

The worst of it was, that every one said it was my fault. Now, I put it to you, how on earth could I have known that this innocent, fluffy T. G. would break out in this disgusting manner? You see he had gone round the world nearly, and his vocabulary of abuse was cosmopolitan, though mainly Japanese which he had picked up in a low tea-house at Hakodate. It sounded like whistling.

While I was listening to first one man and then another telling me of Jevon's shameless behaviour and asking me for his blood, I wondered where he was. I was prepared to sacrifice him to Society on the spot.

But Jevon was gone, and, far away in the corner of the supper-room, sat my dear, good Subaltern, a little flushed, eating salad. I went over and said, 'Where's Jevon?'- 'In the cloakroom,' said the

Subaltern. 'He'll keep till the women have gone. Don't you interfere with my prisoner.' I didn't want to interfere, but I peeped into the cloakroom, and found my guest put to bed on some rolled-up carpets, all comfy, his collar free, and a wet swab on his head.

The rest of the evening I spent in timid attempts to explain things to Mrs. Deemes and three or four other ladies, and trying to clear my character- for I am a respectable man- from the shameful slurs that my guest had cast upon it. Libel was no word for what he had said.

When I wasn't trying to explain, I was running off to the cloakroom to see that Jevon wasn't dead of apoplexy. I didn't want him to die on my hands. He had eaten my salt.

At last that ghastly ball ended, though I was not in the least restored to Mrs. Deemes' favour. When the ladies had gone, and some one was calling for songs at the second supper, that angelic Subaltern told the servants to bring in the Sahib * who was in the cloakroom, and clear away one end of the supper-table. While this was being done, we formed ourselves into a Board of Punishment with the Doctor for President. Jevon came in on four men's shoulders, and was put down on the table like a corpse in a dissecting-room, while the Doctor lectured on the evils of intemperance and Jevon snored. Then we set to work.

We corked the whole of his face. We filled his hair with meringue-cream till it looked like a white wig. To protect everything till it dried, a man in the Ordnance Department, who understood the work, luted a big blue-paper cap from a cracker, with meringue-cream, low down on Jevon's forehead. This was punishment, not play, remember. We took the gelatine of crackers, and stuck blue gelatine on his nose, and yellow gelatine on his chin, and green and red gelatine on his cheeks, pressing each dab down till it held as firm as goldbeaters' skin.

We put a ham-frill round his neck, and tied it in a bow in front. He nodded like a mandarin.

We fixed gelatine on the back of his hands, and burnt-corked them inside, and put small cutlet-frills round his wrists, and tied both wrists together with string.

We waxed up the ends of his moustache with isinglass. He looked very martial.

We turned him over, pinned up his coat-tails between his shoulders, and put a rosette of cutlet-frills there. We took up the red cloth from the ball-room to the supper-room, and wound him

up in it. There were sixty feet of red cloth, six feet broad; and he rolled up into a big fat bundle, with only that amazing head sticking out.

Lastly, we tied up the surplus of the cloth beyond his feet with cocoanut-fibre string as tightly as we knew how. We were so angry that we hardly laughed at all.

Just as we finished, we heard the rumble of bullock-carts taking away some chairs and things that the General's wife had lent for the ball. So we hoisted Jevon, like a roll of carpets, into one of the carts, and the carts went away.

Now the most extraordinary part of this tale is that never again did I see or hear anything of Jevon, T. G. He vanished utterly. He was not delivered at the General's house with the carpets. He just went into the black darkness of the end of the night, and was swallowed up. Perhaps he died and was thrown into the river.

But, alive or dead, I have often wondered how he got rid of the red cloth and the meringue-cream. I wonder still whether Mrs. Deemes will ever take any notice of me again, and whether I shall live down the infamous stories that Jevon set afloat about my manners and customs between the first and the ninth waltz of the Afghan Ball. They stick closer than cream.

Wherefore, I want Tranter of the Bombay side, dead or alive. But dead for preference.

THE END