

1888

CONVERSION OF AURELIAN MCGOGGIN

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. The Conversion of Aurelian McGoggin (1888) From "Plain Tales from the Hills," a collection of stories of life in India. A brilliant, yet boring civilian is stricken with aphasia and upon his recovery is a changed man.

AURELIAN MCGOGGIN

Ride with an idle whip, ride with an unused heel, But, once in a way, there will come a day When the colt must be taught to feel The lash that falls, and the curb that galls, and the sting of the rowelled steel.

-Life's Handicap.

THIS is not a tale exactly. It is a Tract; and I am immensely proud of it. Making a Tract is a Feat.

Every man is entitled to his own religious opinions; but no man- least of all a junior- has a right to thrust these down other men's throats. The Government sends out weird Civilians now and again; but McGoggin was the queerest exported for a long time. He was clever- brilliantly clever- but his cleverness worked the wrong way. Instead of keeping to the study of the vernaculars, he had read some books written by a man called Comte, I think, and a man called Spencer. [You will find these books in the Library.] They deal with people's insides from the point of view of men who have no stomachs. There was no order against his reading them; but his Mamma should have smacked him. They fermented in his head, and he came out to India with a rarefied religion over and above his work. It was not much of a creed. It only proved that men had no souls, and there was no God and no hereafter, and that you must worry along somehow for the good of Humanity.

One of its minor tenets seemed to be that the one thing more sinful than giving an order was obeying it. At least, that was what McGoggin said; but I suspect he had misread his primers.

I do not say a word against this creed. It was made up in Town where there is nothing but machinery and asphalte and building- all shut in by the fog. Naturally, a man grows to think that there is no one higher than himself, and that the Metropolitan Board of Works made everything. But in India, where you really see humanity- raw, brown, naked humanity- with nothing between it and the blazing sky, and only the used-up, over-handled earth underfoot, the notion somehow dies away, and most folk come back to simpler theories. Life, in India, is not long enough to waste in proving that there is no one in particular at the head of affairs.

For this reason. The Deputy is above the Assistant, the Commissioner above the Deputy, the Lieutenant-Governor above the Commissioner, and the Viceroy above all four, under the orders of the Secretary of State who is responsible to the Empress. If the

Empress be not responsible to her Maker- if there is no Maker for her to be responsible to- the entire system of Our administration must be wrong.

Which is manifestly impossible. At Home men are to be excused. They are stalled up a good deal and grow intellectually 'beany.' When you take a gross, 'beany' horse to exercise, he slavers and slobbers over the bit till you can't see the horns. But the bit is there just the same. Men do not get 'beany' in India. The climate and the work are against playing bricks with words.

If McGoggin had kept his creed, with the capital letters and the endings in 'isms,' to himself, no one would have cared; but his grandfathers on both sides had been Wesleyan preachers, and the preaching strain came out in his mind. He wanted every one at the Club to see that they had no souls too, and to help him to eliminate his Creator. As a good many men told him, he undoubtedly had no soul, because he was so young, but it did not follow that his seniors were equally undeveloped; and, whether there was another world or not, a man still wanted to read his papers in this. 'But that is not the point- that is not the point!' Aurelian used to say. Then men threw sofa-cushions at him and told him to go to any particular place he might believe in. They christened him the 'Blastoderm,'- he said he came from a family of that name somewhere, in the prehistoric ages,- and, by insult and laughter strove to choke him dumb, for he was an unmitigated nuisance at the Club; besides being an offence to the older men. His Deputy Commissioner, who was working on the Frontier when Aurelian was rolling on a bed-quilt, told him that, for a clever boy, Aurelian was a very big idiot. And, if he had gone on with his work, he would have been caught up to the Secretariat in a few years. He was of the type that goes there- all head, no physique and a hundred theories. Not a soul was interested in McGoggin's soul. He might have had two, or none, or somebody else's. His business was to obey orders and keep abreast of his files, instead of devastating the Club with 'isms.'

He worked brilliantly; but he could not accept any order without trying to better it. That was the fault of his creed. It made men too responsible and left too much to their honour. You can sometimes ride an old horse in a halter; but never a colt. McGoggin took more trouble over his cases than any of the men of his year. He may have fancied that thirty-page judgments on fifty-rupee cases- both sides perjured to the gullet- advanced the cause of Humanity. At any rate, he worked too much, and worried and fretted over the rebukes he received, and lectured away on his ridiculous creed out

of office, till the Doctor had to warn him that he was overdoing it. No man can toil eighteen annas in the rupee in June without suffering. But McGoggin was still intellectually 'beany' and proud of himself and his powers, and he would take no hint. He worked nine hours a day steadily.

'Very well,' said the Doctor, 'you'll break down, because you are over-engined for your beam.' McGoggin was a little man.

One day, the collapse came- as dramatically as if it had been meant to embellish a Tract.

It was just before the Rains. We were sitting in the verandah in the dead, hot, close air, gasping and praying that the black-blue clouds would let down and bring the cool. Very, very far away, there was a faint whisper, which was the roar of the Rains breaking over the river. One of the men heard it, got out of his chair, listened and said, naturally enough, 'Thank God!'

Then the Blastoderm turned in his place and said, 'Why? I assure you it's only the result of perfectly natural causes- atmospheric phenomena of the simplest kind. Why you should, therefore, return thanks to a Being who never did exist- who is only a figment-' 'Blastoderm,' grunted the man in the next chair, 'dry up, and throw me over the "Pioneer." We know all about your figments.' The Blastoderm reached out to the table, took up one paper, and jumped as if something had stung him. Then he handed the paper.

'As I was saying,' he went on slowly and with an effort- 'due to perfectly natural causes- perfectly natural causes. I mean-' 'Hi! Blastoderm, you've given me the "Calcutta Mercantile Advertiser.'" The dust got up in little whorls, while the tree-tops rocked and the kites whistled. But no one was looking at the coming of the Rains. We were all staring at the Blastoderm, who had risen from his chair and was fighting with his speech.

Then he said, still more slowly 'Perfectly conceivable- dictionary-red oak- amenable- cause- retaining- shuttle-cock- alone.' 'Blastoderm's drunk,' said one man. But the Blastoderm was not drunk. He looked at us in a dazed sort of way, and began motioning with his hands in the half light as the clouds closed overhead. Then- with a scream 'What is it?- Can't- reserve- attainable- market- obscure-'

But his speech seemed to freeze in him, and- just as the lightning shot two tongues that cut the whole sky into three pieces and the rain fell in quivering sheets- the Blastoderm was struck dumb. He

stood pawing and champing like a hard-held horse, and his eyes were full of terror.

The Doctor came over in three minutes, and heard the story. 'It's aphasia,' he said. 'Take him to his room. I knew the smash would come.' We carried the Blastoderm across in the pouring rain to his quarters, and the Doctor gave him bromide of potassium to make him sleep.

Then the Doctor came back to us and told us that aphasia was like all the arrears of 'Punjab Head' falling in a lump; and that only once before- in the case of a sepoy- had he met with so complete a case. I have seen mild aphasia in an overworked man, but this sudden dumbness was uncanny- though, as the Blastoderm himself might have said, due to 'perfectly natural causes.' 'He'll have to take leave after this,' said the Doctor. 'He won't be fit for work for another three months. No; it isn't insanity, or anything like it. It's only complete loss of control over the speech and memory. I fancy it will keep the Blastoderm quiet, though.' Two days later, the Blastoderm found his tongue again. The first question he asked was- 'What was it?' The Doctor enlightened him. 'But I can't understand it!' said the Blastoderm. 'I'm quite sane; but I can't be sure of my mind, it seems my own memory- can I?'

'Go up into the Hills for three months, and don't think about it,' said the Doctor.

'But I can't understand it,' repeated the Blastoderm. 'It was my own mind and memory.' 'I can't help it,' said the Doctor; 'there are a good many things you can't understand; and, by the time you have put in my length of service, you'll know exactly how much a man dare call his own in this world.' The stroke cowed the Blastoderm. He could not understand it. He went into the Hills in fear and trembling, wondering whether he would be permitted to reach the end of any sentence he began.

This gave him a wholesome feeling, of mistrust. The legitimate explanation, that he had been overworking himself, failed to satisfy him. Something had wiped his lips of speech, as a mother wipes the milky lips of her child, and he was afraid- horribly afraid.

So the Club had rest when he returned; and if ever you come across Aurelian McGoggin laying down the law on things Human- he doesn't seem to know as much as he used to about things Divine- put your forefinger to your lip for a moment, and see what happens.

Don't blame me if he throws a glass at your head.

THE END