

1888

HAUNTED SUBALTERNS

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. Haunted Subalterns (1888) - From "Plain Tales from the Hills," a collection of stories of life in India. The story of two men troubled by ghosts.

HAUNTED SUBALTERNs

SO long as the 'Inextinguishables' confined themselves to running picnics, gymkhanas, flirtations and innocences of that kind, no one said anything. But when they ran ghosts, people put up their eyebrows. 'Man can't feel comfy with a regiment that entertains ghosts on its establishment. It is against General Orders. The 'Inextinguishables' said that the ghosts were private and not Regimental property. They referred you to Tesser for particulars; and Tesser told you to go to- the hottest cantonment of all. He said that it was bad enough to have men making hay of his bedding and breaking his banjo-strings when he was out, without being chaffed afterwards; and he would thank you to keep your remarks on ghosts to yourself. This was before the 'Inextinguishables' had sworn by their several lady-loves that they were innocent of any intrusion into Tesser's quarters.

Then Horrocks mentioned casually at Mess, that a couple of white figures had been bounding about his room the night before, and he didn't approve of it. The 'Inextinguishables' denied, energetically, that they had had any hand in the manifestations, and advised Horrocks to consult Tesser.

I don't suppose that a Subaltern believes in anything except his chances of a Company; but Horrocks and Tesser were exceptions. They came to believe in their ghosts. They had reason.

Horrocks used to find himself, at about three o'clock in the morning, staring wide-awake, watching two white Things hopping about his room and jumping up to the ceiling. Horrocks was of a placid turn of mind. After a week or so spent in watching his servants, and lying in wait for strangers, and trying to keep awake all night, he came to the conclusion that he was haunted, and that, consequently, he need not bother. He wasn't going to encourage these ghosts by being frightened of them. Therefore, when he woke- as usual- with a start and saw these Things jumping like kangaroos, he only murmured:- 'Go on! Don't mind me!' and went to sleep again.

Tesser said:- 'It's all very well for you to make fun of your show. You can see your ghosts. Now I can't see mine, and I don't half like it.' Tesser used to come into his room of nights, and find the whole of his bedding neatly stripped, as if it had been done with one sweep of the hand, from the top right-hand corner of the charpoy to the bottom left-hand corner. Also his lamp used to lie weltering on the floor, and generally his pet screw-head, inlaid, nickel-plated

banjo was lying on the charpoy, with all its strings broken. Tesser took away the strings, on the occasion of the third manifestation, and the next night a man complimented him on his playing the best music ever got out of a banjo, for half an hour.

'Which half hour?' said Tesser.

'Between nine and ten,' said the man. Tesser had gone out to dinner at 7:30, and had returned at midnight.

He talked to his bearer and threatened him with unspeakable things. The bearer was gray with fear:- 'I'm a poor man,' said he. 'If the Sahib is haunted by a Devil, what can I do?' 'Who says I'm haunted by a Devil?' howled Tesser, for he was angry.

'I have seen It,' said the bearer, 'at night, walking round and round your bed; and that is why everything is ulta-pulta in your room. I am a poor man, but I never go into your room alone. The bhisti comes with me.' Tesser was thoroughly savage at this, and he spoke to Horrocks, and the two laid traps to catch that Devil, and threatened their servants with dog-whips if any more 'shaitan-ke-hanky-panky' took place. But the servants were soaked with fear, and it was no use adding to their tortures. When Tesser went out at night, four of his men, as a rule, slept in the verandah of his quarters, until the banjo without the strings struck up, and then they fled.

One day, Tesser had to put in a month at a Fort with a detachment of 'Inextinguishables.' The Fort might have been Govindghar, Jumrood, or Phillour; but it wasn't. He left Cantonments rejoicing, for his Devil was preying on his mind; and with him went another Subaltern, a junior. But the Devil came too. After Tesser had been in the Fort about ten days he went out to dinner. When he came back he found his Subaltern doing sentry on a banquette across the Fort Ditch, as far removed as might be from the Officers' Quarters.

'What's wrong?' said Tesser.

The Subaltern said, 'Listen!' and the two, standing under the stars, heard from the Officers' Quarters, high up in the wall of the Fort, the 'strumty tumty tumty' of the banjo; which seemed to have an oratorio on hand.

'That performance,' said the Subaltern, 'has been going on for three mortal hours. I never wished to desert before, but I do now. I say, Tesser, old man, you are the best of good fellows, I'm sure, but... I say... look here, now, you are quite unfit to live with. 'Tisn't in my Commission, you know, that I'm to serve under a... a... man with Devils.' 'Isn't it?' said Tesser. 'If you make an ass of yourself I'll put

you under arrest... and in my room!' 'You can put me where you please, but I'm not going to assist at these infernal concerts. 'Tisn't right. 'Tisn't natural. Look here, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but- try to think now- haven't you done something- committed somemurder that has slipped your memory- or forged something...?' 'Well! For an all-round, double-shotted, half-baked fool you are the...' 'I dare say I am,' said the Subaltern. 'But you don't expect me to keep my wits with that row going on, do you?' The banjo was rattling away as if it had twenty strings. Tesser sent up a stone, and a shower of broken window-pane fell into the Fort Ditch; but the banjo kept on. Tesser hauled the other Subaltern up to the quarters, and found his room in frightful confusion- lamp upset, bedding all over the floor, chairs overturned, and table tilted sideways. He took stock of the wreck and said despairing:- 'Oh, this is lovely!' The Subaltern was peeping in at the door.

'I'm glad you think so,' he said. "'Tisn't lovely enough for me. I locked up your room directly after you had gone out. See here, I think you had better apply for Horrocks to come out in my place. He's troubled with your complaint, and this business will make me a jabbering idiot if it goes on.' Tesser went to bed amid the wreckage, very angry, and next morning he rode into Cantonments and asked Horrocks to arrange to relieve 'that fool with me now.' 'You've got 'em again, have you?' said Horrocks. 'So've I. Three white figures this time. We'll worry through the entertainment together.' So Horrocks and Tesser settled down in the Fort together, and the 'Inextinguishables' said pleasant things about 'seven other Devils.' Tesser didn't see where the joke came in. His room was thrown upside-down three nights out of seven. Horrocks was not troubled in any way, so his ghosts must have been purely local ones. Tesser, on the other hand, was personally haunted; for his Devil had moved with him from Cantonments to the Fort. Those two boys spent three parts of their time trying to find out who was responsible for the riot in Tesser's rooms. At the end of a fortnight they tried to find out what was responsible; and seven days later they gave it up as a bad job. Whatever It was, It refused to be caught; even when Tesser went out of the Fort ostentatiously, and Horrocks lay under Tesser's charpoy with a revolver. The servants were afraid- more afraid than ever- and all the evidence showed that they had been playing no tricks. As Tesser said to Horrocks:- 'A haunted Subaltern is a joke, but s'pose this keeps on. Just think what a haunted Colonel would be! And look here- s'pose I marry! D'you s'pose a girl would live a week with me and this Devil?' 'I don't know,' said Horrocks. 'I haven't married often; but I knew a woman once who lived with her husband when he had D.

T. He's dead now, and I dare say she would marry you if you asked her. She isn't exactly a girl though, but she has a large experience of the other devils- the blue variety. She's a Government pensioner now, and you might write, y'know. Personally, if I hadn't suffered from ghosts of my own, I should rather avoid you.' 'That's just the point,' said Tesser. 'This Devil thing will end in getting me budnamed, and you know I've lived on lemon-squashes and gone to bed at ten for weeks past.' 'Tisn't that sort of Devil,' said Horrocks. 'It's either a first-class fraud for which some one ought to be killed, or else you've offended one of these Indian Devils. It stands to reason that such a beastly country should be full of fiends of all sorts.' 'But why should the creature fix on me,' said Tesser, and why won't he show himself and have it out like a- like a Devil?'

They were talking outside the Mess after dark, and, even as they spoke, they heard the banjo begin to play in Tesser's room, about twenty yards off.

Horrocks ran to his own quarters for a shot-gun and a revolver, and Tesser and he crept up quietly, the banjo still playing, to Tesser's door.

'Now we've got It!' said Horrocks, as he threw the door open and let fly with the twelve-bore; Tesser squibbing off all six barrels into the dark, as hard as he could pull trigger.

The furniture was ruined, and the whole Fort was awake; but that was all. No one had been killed, and the banjo was lying on the dishevelled bed-clothes as usual.

Then Tesser sat down in the verandah, and used language that would have qualified him for the companionship of unlimited Devils. Horrocks said things too; but Tesser said the worst.

When the month in the Fort came to an end, both Horrocks and Tesser were glad. They held a final council of war, but came to no conclusion.

'Seems to me, your best plan would be to make your Devil stretch himself.

Go down to Bombay with the time-expired men,' said Horrocks. 'If he really is a Devil, he'll come in the train with you.' 'Tisn't good enough,' said Tesser. 'Bombay's no fit place to live in at this time of the year. But I'll put in for Depot duty at the Hills.' And he did.

Now here the tale rests. The Devil stayed below, and Tesser went up and was free. If I had invented this story, I should have put in a satisfactory ending- explained the manifestations as somebody's

practical joke. My business being to keep to facts, I can only say what I have said. The Devil may have been a hoax.

If so, it was one of the best ever arranged. If it was not a hoax... but you must settle that for yourselves.

THE END