

1888

IN THE PRIDE OF HIS YOUTH

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. In the Pride of His Youth (1888) - From "Plain Tales from the Hills," a collection of stories of life in India. A secretly married man goes away to work but cannot afford to bring his wife who then meets another man.

PRIDE OF HIS YOUTH

'Stopped in the straight when the race was his own! Look at him cutting it- cur to the bone!' 'Ask, ere the youngster be rated and chidden, What did he carry and how was he ridden? Maybe they used him too much at the start; Maybe Fate's weight-cloths are breaking his heart.' Life's Handicap.

WHEN I was telling you of the joke that The Worm played off on the Senior Subaltern, I promised a somewhat similar tale, but with all the jest left out. This is that tale.

Dicky Hatt was kidnapped in his early, early youth- neither by landlady's daughter, housemaid, barmaid, nor cook, but by a girl so nearly of his own caste that only a woman could have said she was just the least little bit in the world below it. This happened a month before he came out to India, and five days after his one-and-twentieth birthday. The girl was nineteen- six years older than Dicky in the things of this world, that is to say- and, for the time, twice as foolish as he.

Excepting, always, falling off a horse there is nothing more fatally easy than marriage before the Registrar. The ceremony costs less than fifty shillings, and is remarkably like walking into a pawnshop. After the declarations of residence have been put in, four minutes will cover the rest of the proceedings- fees, attestation, and all. Then the Registrar slides the blotting-pad over the names, and says grimly with his pen between his teeth, 'Now you're man and wife'; and the couple walk out into the street feeling as if something were horribly illegal somewhere.

But that ceremony holds and can drag a man to his undoing just as thoroughly as the 'long as ye both shall live' curse from the altar-rails, with the bridesmaids giggling behind, and 'The Voice that breathed o'er Eden' lifting the roof off. In this manner was Dicky Hatt kidnapped, and he considered it vastly fine, for he had received an appointment in India which carried a magnificent salary from the Home point of view. The marriage was to be kept secret for a year. Then Mrs. Dicky Hatt was to come out, and the rest of life was to be a glorious golden mist.

That was how they sketched it under the Addison Road Station lamps; and, after one short month, came Gravesend and Dicky steaming out to his new life, and the girl crying in a thirty-shillings a week bed-and-living-room, in a back-street off Montpelier Square near the Knightsbridge Barracks.

But the country that Dicky came to was a hard land where men of twenty-one were reckoned very small boys indeed, and life was expensive. The salary that loomed so large six thousand miles

away did not go far. Particularly when Dicky divided it by two, and remitted more than a fair half, at 1-6 $\frac{7}{8}$, to Montpelier Square. One hundred and thirty-five rupees out of three hundred and thirty is not much to live on; but it was absurd to suppose that Mrs. Hatt could exist for ever on the L20 held back by Dicky from his outfit allowance. Dicky saw this and remitted at once; always remembering that Rs. 700 were to be paid, twelve months later, for a first-class passage out for a lady. When you add to these trifling details the natural instincts of a boy beginning a new life in a new country and longing to go about and enjoy himself, and the necessity for grappling with strange work which, properly speaking, should take up a boy's undivided attention- you will see that Dicky started handicapped. He saw it himself for a breath or two; but he did not guess the full beauty of his future.

As the hot weather began, the shackles settled on him and ate into his flesh.

First would come letters- big, crossed, seven-sheet letters- from his wife, telling him how she longed to see him, and what a Heaven upon earth would be their property when they met. Then some boy of the chummery wherein Dicky lodged would pound on the door of his bare little room, and tell him to come out to look at a pony- the very thing to suit him. Dicky could not afford ponies. He had to explain this. Dicky could not afford living in the chummery, modest as it was. He had to explain this before he moved to a single room next the office where he worked all day. He kept house on a green oilcloth table-cover, one chair, one bedstead, one photograph, one tooth-glass very strong and thick, a seven-rupee eightanna filter, and messing by contract at thirty-seven rupees a month. Which last item was extortion. He had no punkah, for a punkah costs fifteen rupees a month; but he slept on the roof of the office with all his wife's letters under his pillow.

Now and again he was asked out to dinner, where he got both a punkah and an iced drink. But this was seldom, for people objected to recognising a boy who had evidently the instincts of a Scotch tallow-chandler, and who lived in such a nasty fashion. Dicky could not subscribe to any amusement, so he found no amusement except the pleasure of turning over his Bank-book and reading what it said about 'loans on approved security.' That cost nothing. He remitted through a Bombay Bank, by the way, and the Station knew nothing of his private affairs.

Each month he sent Home all that he could possibly spare for his wife and for another Reason which was expected to explain itself shortly, and would require more money.

About this time Dicky was overtaken with the nervous, haunting fear that besets married men when they are out of sorts. He had no

pension to look to. What if he should die suddenly, and leave his wife unprovided for? The thought would lay hold of him in the still, hot nights on the roof, till the shaking of his heart made him think that he was going to die then and there of heart-disease. Now this is a frame of mind which no boy has a right to know. It is a strong man's trouble; but, coming when it did, it nearly drove poor punkah-less, perspiring Dicky Hatt mad. He could tell no one about it.

A certain amount of 'screw' is as necessary for a man as for a billiard-ball. It makes them both do wonderful things. Dicky needed money badly, and he worked for it like a horse. But, naturally, the men who owed him knew that a boy can live very comfortably on a certain income- pay in India is a matter of age not merit, you see, and, if their particular boy wished to work like two boys, Business forbid that they should stop him. But Business forbid that they should give him an increase of pay at his present ridiculously immature age! So Dicky won certain rises of salary- ample for a boy- not enough for a wife and a child- certainly too little for the seven-hundred-rupee passage that he and Mrs. Hatt had discussed so lightly once upon a time. And with this he was forced to be content.

Somehow, all his money seemed to fade away in Home drafts and the crushing Exchange, and the tone of the Home letters changed and grew querulous.

'Why wouldn't Dicky have his wife and the baby out? Surely he had a salary- a fine salary- and it was too bad of him to enjoy himself in India. But would he could he- make the next draft a little more elastic?' Here followed a list of baby's kit, as long as a Parsee's bill. Then Dicky, whose heart yearned to his wife and the little son he had never seen,- which, again, is a feeling no boy is entitled to,- enlarged the draft and wrote queer half-boy, half-man letters, saying that life was not so enjoyable after all and would the little wife wait yet a little longer? But the little wife, however much she approved of money, objected to waiting, and there was a strange, hard sort of ring in her letters that Dicky didn't understand. How could he, poor boy? Later on still- just as Dicky had been told- apropos of another youngster who had 'made a fool of himself' as the saying is- that matrimony would not only ruin his further chances of advancement, but would lose him his present appointment came the news that the baby, his own little, little son, had died and, behind this, forty lines of an angry woman's scrawl, saying the death might have been averted if certain things, all costing money, had been done, or if the mother and the baby had been with Dicky. The letter struck at Dicky's naked heart; but, not being officially entitled to a baby, he could show no sign of trouble.

How Dicky won through the next four months, and what hope he kept alight to force him into his work, no one dare say. He pounded on, the seven-hundred-rupee passage as far away as ever, and his style of living unchanged, except when he launched into a new filter. There was the strain of his office-work, and the strain of his remittances, and the knowledge of his boy's death, which touched the boy more, perhaps, than it would have touched a man; and, beyond all, the enduring strain of his daily life. Gray-headed seniors who approved of his thrift and his fashion of denying himself everything pleasant, reminded him of the old saw that says: If a youth would be distinguished in his art, art, art, He must keep the girls away from his heart, heart, heart.

And Dicky, who fancied he had been through every trouble that a man is permitted to know, had to laugh and agree; with the last line of his balanced Bankbook jingling in his head day and night.

But he had one more sorrow to digest before the end. There arrived a letter from the little wife- the natural sequence of the others if Dicky had only known it and the burden of that letter was 'gone with a handsomer man than you.' It was a rather curious production, without stops, something like this- 'She was not going to wait for ever and the baby was dead and Dicky was only a boy and he would never set eyes on her again and why hadn't he waved his handkerchief to her when he left Gravesend and God was her judge she was a wicked woman but Dicky was worse enjoying himself in India and this other man loved the ground she trod on and would Dicky ever forgive her for she would never forgive Dicky; and there was no address to write to.' Instead of thanking his stars that he was free, Dicky discovered exactly how an injured husband feels- again, not at all the knowledge to which a boy is entitled- for his mind went back to his wife as he remembered her in the thirty-shilling 'suite' in Montpelier Square, when the dawn of his last morning in England was breaking, and she was crying in the bed. Whereat he rolled about on his bed and bit his fingers. He never stopped to think whether, if he had met Mrs. Hatt after those two years, he would have discovered that he and she had grown quite different and new persons. This, theoretically, he ought to have done. He spent the night after the English Mail came in rather severe pain.

Next morning, Dicky Hatt felt disinclined to work. He argued that he had missed the pleasure of youth. He was tired, and he had tasted all the sorrow in life before three-and-twenty. His Honour was gone- that was the man; and now he, too, would go to the Devil- that was the boy in him. So he put his head down on the green oil-cloth table-cover, and wept before resigning his post and all it offered.

But the reward of his services came. He was given three days to reconsider himself, and the Head of the establishment, after some telegraphings, said that it was a most unusual step, but, in view of the ability that Mr. Hatt had displayed at such and such a time, at such and such junctures, he was in a position to offer him an infinitely superior post- first on probation and later, in the natural course of things, on confirmation. 'And how much does the post carry?' said Dicky. 'Six hundred and fifty rupees,' said the Head slowly, expecting to see the young man sink with gratitude and joy.

And it came then! The seven-hundred-rupee passage, and enough to have saved the wife, and the little son, and to have allowed of assured and open marriage, came then. Dicky burst into a roar of laughter- laughter he could not check nasty, jangling merriment that seemed as if it would go on for ever. When he had recovered himself he said, quite seriously, 'I'm tired of work. I'm an old man now. It's about time I retired. And I will.' 'The boy's mad!' said the Head.

I think he was right; but Dicky Hatt never reappeared to settle the question.

THE END